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NOTE



No effect of partisan framing on opinions about the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Media critics frequently complain about the tendency of reporters to cover political news using partisan conflict or partisan game frames, which describe policy disagreement as sites of partisan conflict where the parties can score “wins” or “losses.” Such frames, thought to decrease trust and increase partisan polarization, may be particularly dangerous when used in the coverage of public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We report a survey experiment where 2,455 respondents were assigned to read coverage of the pandemic that was framed in non-partisan terms, in terms of partisan conflict, or as a game where one party was winning and the other losing. Contrary to expectations, we find no effect of these frames across a broad range of opinions about and actions related to the pandemic, with the exception of a small negative effect of partisan game-framed coverage on the desire to consume news about the pandemic. These results suggest that partisan framing may not have negative effects during a public health crisis or, alternately, that such effects are difficult to detect in real-time using traditional survey experiments.

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Introduction

Political communications scholars have long noted – and generally bemoaned – the tendency for the media to cover political issues using “partisan conflict” or “game” frames (Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 2015). Partisan conflict frames describe political events as sites for conflict between the two parties (Han and Wackman 2017). Partisan game frames take this a step further, describing political events in terms of who “won” or “lost,” instead of in terms of the events’ substantive importance (Patterson 1993). Game frame coverage has been blamed for producing a less-informed public, creating cynicism, reducing public interest in government, biasing the public agenda towards controversial issues, and increasing

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affective polarization (Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Han and Federico 2017). Apologists for game frame coverage argue that emphasizing conflict produces journalism that is more compelling, increasing news consumption (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004).

What happens, however, when the journalistic tendency to frame issues as in terms of conflict runs into a global public health crisis such as the one created by COVID-19? While in many countries the response to COVID-19 has been guided by scientific experts, in the United States the pandemic has been the occasion for partisan in-fighting. These conflicts provide the opportunity for journalists to employ game or partisan conflict frames in their coverage of the pandemic, turning the crisis from a global health threat into a partisan issue. If fears about these frames are correct, such coverage might account for some of the sizable gaps between Republicans' and Democrats' opinions about the pandemic (Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2020a).

In this article we use a pre-registered survey experiment to evaluate the effect of game or conflict frames on public responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ We hypothesize that conflict framing, and especially game framing, will exacerbate the partisan divide in concern about the pandemic, beliefs about its harms, support for mitigation policies and personal actions to reduce the coronavirus's spread, and approval of the two parties' responses to the pandemic. Further, we test whether these frames increase cynicism about and reduce trust in the government's response to the pandemic, and increase general affective polarization. Finally, we test the hypothesis, suggested by defenders of game framing in political campaigns, that these frames increase interest in the issue, as compared to coverage that does not frame the pandemic in game or conflict terms.

Hypotheses

We expect partisan conflict and partisan game frames to increase the gap between Republicans and Democrats on concern about coronavirus, support for mitigation strategies, willingness to engage in personal health behaviors, approval of policymakers' actions, and beliefs about pandemic effects. We expect the partisan game frame to have a larger effect than the partisan conflict frame, though our expectations here are weaker. Importantly, we do not make a directional prediction about the overall effect for these dependent variables, but simply predict that there will be a difference in effects between the two partisan subgroups and that the average treatment effect for Democrats will be greater than the average treatment effects for Republicans. As these are hypotheses about heterogeneous treatment effects we cannot interpret differences between partisan subgroups as

¹Anonymized version of preregistration available at https://osf.io/6aehg/?view_only=74ef5c4f09fc4f37a70cfd88098373e6.

a causal effect of partisanship *per se*, as partisanship is not randomly assigned (Kam and Trussler 2017); instead, these hypotheses describe the pattern of results we expect to find.

H1: Compared to the non-partisan frame condition, the partisan conflict frame will increase concern about coronavirus, support for mitigation strategies, willingness to engage in personal health behaviors; will decrease approval of actors' actions; and will worsen beliefs about the pandemic's effects more among Democrats than among Republicans.

H2: Compared to the non-partisan frame condition, the partisan game frame will increase concern about coronavirus, support for mitigation strategies, willingness to engage in personal health behaviors; will decrease approval of actors' actions; and will worsen beliefs about the pandemic's effects more among Democrats than among Republicans.

Additionally, we expect that for all voters the partisan conflict and game frames will decrease trust, increase cynicism, increase affective polarization, and, following the claim advanced by advocates for game-framed coverage, increase interest in consuming pandemic news.

H3: Compared to the non-partisan frame condition, the partisan conflict frame condition will decrease trust, increase cynicism, increase affective polarization, and increase interest in consuming pandemic news.

H4: Compared to the non-partisan frame condition, the partisan game frame condition will decrease trust, increase cynicism, increase affective polarization, and increase interest in consuming pandemic news.

Experimental procedure

We conducted a three-condition experiment between April 10 and April 14, 2020 to evaluate the effect of conflict and game-framing on attitudes and beliefs about the COVID-19 pandemic. In each condition respondents read three news stories about the pandemic. These were framed in non-partisan, partisan conflict, or partisan game terms, according to the randomly-assigned condition. After reading these stories, respondents answered several batteries of questions measuring concern about the pandemic, support for mitigation strategies, approval of various actors' responses to the pandemic, personal health behaviors adopted in response to the pandemic, trust in political actors to manage the pandemic going forward, cynicism about the government response, and interest in consuming news about the pandemic.

Treatments

All respondents first read a short article describing a brief timeline of COVID-19 related events going back to the first detection of the disease in Wuhan,

China. This article was intended to set common expectations about the purpose of the experiment; further, time spent on this article served as a pre-treatment attention check, since all respondents read the same article. After this article, respondents read three treatment articles whose framing was manipulated to reflect a non-partisan framing, a partisan conflict framing, or a partisan game framing. The first was about the passage of the two trillion dollar “phase three” stimulus package in March of 2020, the second about President Trump’s decision to extend social distancing guidelines through the end of April 2020, and the third about the apparent leveling off of infections in early April 2020.

To maximize external validity while maintaining informational equivalence across treatments, all treatments were based on real news article about these three events, shortened to 250–300 words. We selected one about each event from a database of pandemic-related news articles that we collected collected as part of a related content analysis of coverage of the early days of the pandemic (Myers 2021). Drawing on our reading of this corpus, we re-framed each article in three ways using the following procedure, which manipulates features of these articles that reporters commonly use to frame articles (Patterson 1993; Andrew 2007; Dahl 2015):

- For the non-partisan treatment, we removed references to political parties, changed references to individual politicians to include their title but not their party, changed descriptions of disagreement so that they referred to disagreement between government officials or experts instead of between partisans, and removed language that suggested that one side was winning or losing.
- For the partisan conflict treatments, we change the articles’ headlines to describe the news event in terms of partisan fighting, added references to the partisanship of individual politicians where these were missing, changed descriptions of disagreement so that they referred to disagreement between partisans or parties, and added a short paragraph or quote describing an incidence of sharp partisan conflict over the issue.
- For the partisan game treatments, we changed the articles’ headlines to describe news event as a “win” for one or both parties, added references to the partisanship of individual politicians where these were missing, changed descriptions of disagreement so that they described one side as gaining an advantage and the other as falling behind, and added a short paragraph suggesting that this “win” would help the winning party in the November elections.

This procedure mirrors those used to create treatments in other studies of the effects of partisan conflict and game frames (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Lee, McLeod, and Shah 2008; Han and Federico 2017). Table 1 shows the

Table 1. Article headlines by experimental condition.

	Stimulus bill	Extended social distancing	Infections leveling off
Non-Partisan Condition	After Intense Negotiations, Senate Approves a \$2 Trillion Virus Response	Trump Extends Social Distancing Guidelines Through End of April	After Policy Missteps, Infection Rate Leveling Off
Partisan Conflict Condition	After Intense Partisan Fight, Senate Approves a \$2 Trillion Virus Response	After Parties Fight Over Social Distancing, Trump Extends Guidelines	As Democrats and Republican Fight, Infection Rate Leveling Off
Partisan Game Condition	In Big Win for Republicans, Senate Approves a \$2 Trillion Virus Response	Democrats Score Victory as Trump Extends Social Distancing Guidelines Through End of April	Infection Rate Leveling Off, Both Parties Claim Success

headlines used in each treatment. Details on the original articles and the differences across treatments are available in Appendix A.

Measures

We measure nine dependent variables, each with multiple items. Exact item wording and scale construction is available in Appendix B. For five of these, Concern about Coronavirus, Support for Mitigation Strategies, Personal Health Behaviors, Approval of Democrats' and Republicans' Actions, and Beliefs about Pandemic Effects, we expect to observe greater partisan division in the partisan conflict and game framed conditions. For four of these, Trust in Government, Cynicism about Government, News Interest, and Affective Polarization, we expected all respondents, regardless of partisan identification, to move in the same direction. We use Lucid's measure of party identification to classify respondents as Republicans or Democrats, including leaners as partisans.

Respondents

Between April 10 and April 14 we recruited subjects using the Lucid Therom platform to take part in a "Study on COVID-19 Coverage." 3,909 respondents answered at least one dependent variable. Of these, we dropped 1,454 for spending less than eight seconds on the initial, background article that all respondents read before receiving their assigned treatment.² This gave us 2,455 respondents; 816 in the non-partisan condition, 813 in the partisan conflict condition, and 826 in the partisan game condition. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Minnesota (STUDY00009511).

²Notably, these sample sizes were less than our pre-registered sample size of 1,237 per condition; this was a result of a higher-than-expected number of respondents failing the attention check. In retrospect, our pre-registered threshold for passing the attention check, spending at least eight seconds on the initial, background article, may have been too high. Appendix C reports the results with different thresholds for dropping inattentive respondents. These results do not differ substantively from those reported here.

Analysis

For the first five sets of dependent variables we measure the heterogeneous treatment effects among Democrats and Republicans of the partisan conflict and partisan game frame conditions as compared to the non-partisan condition. For all analyses we compare differences in means across conditions and conduct an *F*-test for heterogeneous treatment effects by party. For Hypotheses 1–3, the *F*-test is the pre-registered confirmatory test, through the difference in means across all subjects provides an exploratory test for whether there is a main effect. For Hypotheses 4–7, the difference in means is the pre-registered confirmatory test, though the *F*-test for heterogeneous treatment provides an exploratory test for whether we observe different responses from Republicans and Democrats.³ We generate *p*-values and confidence intervals using randomization inference (Gerber and Green 2012).

Results

Hypotheses about heterogeneous treatment effects

Figures 1–4 show the results of the experimental manipulations on dependent variables where we hypothesize heterogeneous effects; specifically, that, relative to the any effect on Republicans, partisan framing would increase Democrats' concern about the virus and related beliefs, actions and policy views. Each figure shows the effect of Partisan Conflict and Partisan Game conditions relative to the Non-Partisan condition. In each figure we plot the Average Treatment Effects, 90% confidence intervals, and *p*-values separately for all subjects, Democrats, and Republicans, and report the *F*-test for heterogeneous treatment effects.

In general, we find minimal evidence that Democrats and Republicans in our sample responded differently to the treatments, or that the treatments had statistically significant effects on any of these dependent variables. Figure 1 show that neither frame had a significant effect on concern about the pandemic, nor was the effect among partisan sub-groups significantly different than the overall effect. The results are similarly null for dependent variables measuring support for mitigation policies or willingness to take individual actions to slow the spread of coronavirus (Figure 2). We find no evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects on approval of the two major

³As described in our pre-registration, our pre-registered sample would have had .99 power to detect a difference in means of Cohen's $d = .2$ ($\alpha = .1$, two-sided test). For the *F*-test of heterogeneous treatment effects by party, this sample size would have .8 power to detect an interactive effect of Cohen's $d = .2$, and .91 power to detect and effect of $d = .5$. A power analysis shows our actual sample had .99 power for the difference of means. The *F*-test of heterogeneous treatment effects by party had .65 power for $d = .2$ and .81 power for $d = .5$. The closest comparable study, Han and Federico (2017) finds a heterogeneous treatment effect of size of $d = 1.2$.

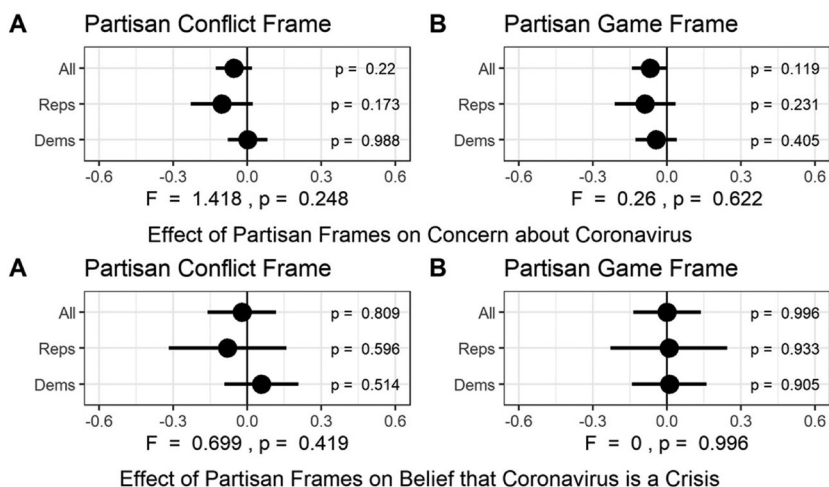


Figure 1. Measures of concern about pandemic.

parties. Our explanatory test of a main effect suggests that the partisan game frame increased approval of Democrats, but we find no similar effect in the partisan conflict frame or in the effects on approval of Republicans.

Figure 4 shows some evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects when it comes to beliefs about the pandemic, but this evidence runs counter to our hypotheses. In both conflict and game conditions, as compared to the non-partisan condition Democrats became more optimistic and relative to Republicans on all three measures of belief. This difference in effect sizes is only

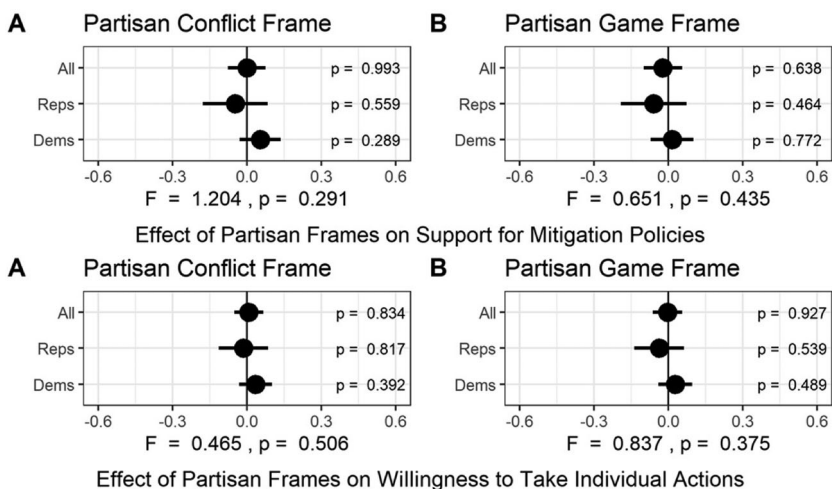


Figure 2. Support for collective and individual mitigation actions.

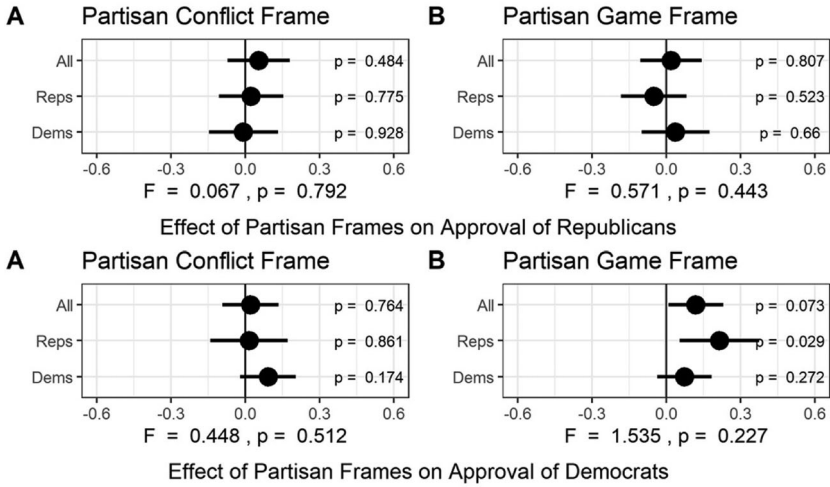


Figure 3. Approval of parties.

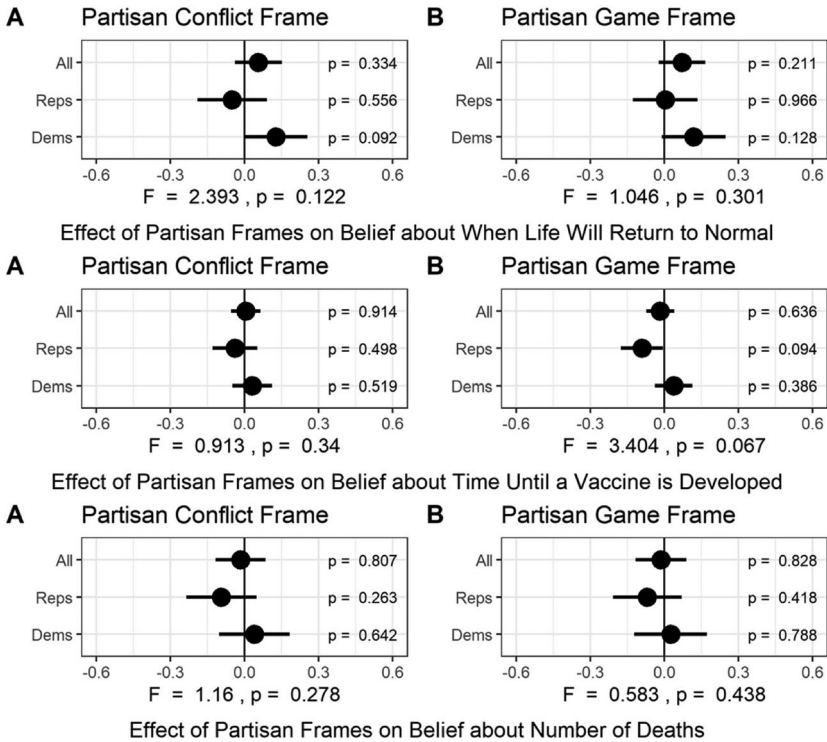


Figure 4. Beliefs about the pandemic.

statistically significant in the partisan game-frame treatment when it comes to belief about when a vaccine will be developed. Thus, what evidence we find of heterogeneous effects runs counter to our expectation that Democrats will be more pessimistic about the pandemic when news is framed in partisan terms. We find no evidence of a main effect on these beliefs related to the pandemic.

Hypotheses of homogeneous effects

Figures 5–7 show the effects of the partisan conflict and game frames on the four dependent variables where we hypothesize homogeneous effects; specifically, that among all subjects partisan framing will decrease trust, increase cynicism and affective polarization, and also increase willingness to consume news. While we hypothesized no difference in partisan effects for these dependent variables, we display subgroup effects and again employ an F-test to test for heterogeneous treatment effects between Democrats and Republicans as an exploratory analysis.

Figure 5 shows no evidence that either manipulation had an effect on the index of trust in public officials or on either measure of cynicism about politicians' actions in response to the pandemic. We also fail to find heterogeneous effects across partisans. We also find no effect on levels of affective polarization (Figure 6). Figure 7 shows that the partisan game frame reduced interest in consuming news about the pandemic, though the effect is small (.08 SD). This is contrary to claims by some that game-framed coverage increases interest in the news (Iyengar, Norporth, and Hahn 2004). We find no effect of the Partisan Conflict frame on interest in consuming news.

Discussion

Media scholars and critics bemoan framing news in terms of partisan conflict or as a game between the two parties. They claim that these frames decrease trust and increase cynicism (Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 2015). Further, such frames are thought to increase partisan polarization, both affective and in terms of issue positions (Han and Federico 2017, 2018). Given the stakes in a global pandemic, news about coronavirus that frames things in terms of partisan conflict could be particularly dangerous. Such framing effects could also account for some of the wide gulf in opinion about the pandemic seen between Republicans and Democrats (Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2020a).

Fortunately, we find little evidence of such framing effects. We find no effect that these frames, relative to a non-partisan framed treatment, widen gaps in between partisans in concern about the pandemic, support for

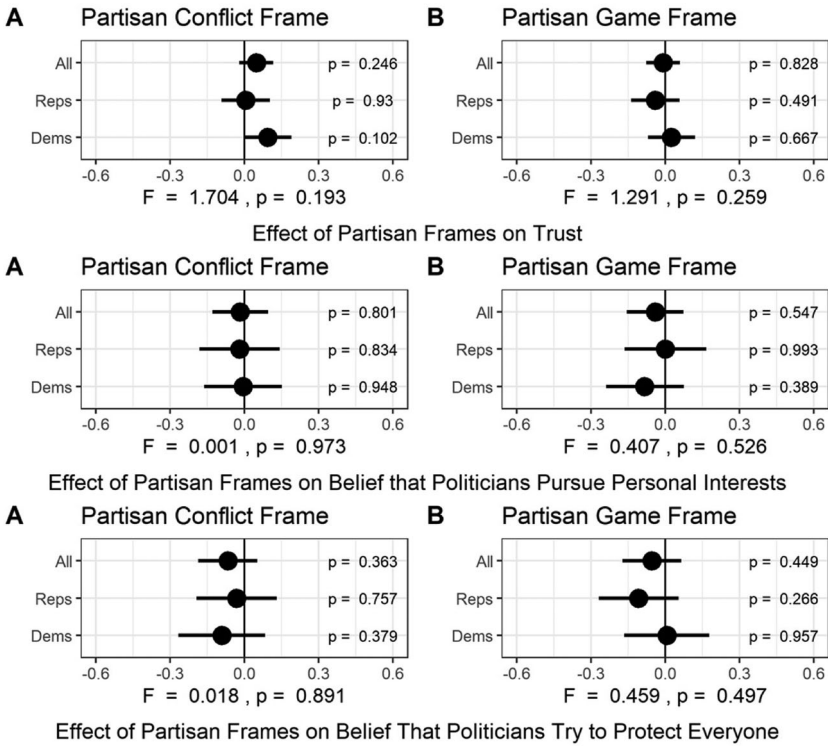


Figure 5. Trust in and cynicism about pandemic response.

mitigation strategies, willingness to take individual actions to prevent the spread of coronavirus, beliefs about the pandemic, or approval of the two parties' actions related to the pandemic. Nor do we find evidence that these partisan frames decrease trust in or increase cynicism about officials' responses to the pandemic going forward. We find some evidence that the partisan game frame reduces interest in consuming news about coronavirus, a finding that runs counter to game-frame apologists' claim that such frames are necessary to drive interest in the news. Finally, while it is unsurprising

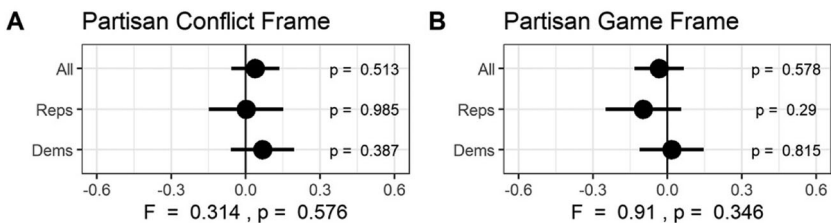


Figure 6. Effect of partisan frames on affective polarization.

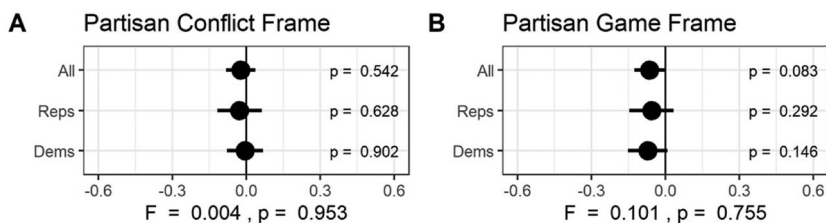


Figure 7. Effect of partisan frames on interest in news.

given the lack of effect on dependent variables more closely related to the treatment, we find no evidence that these frames increase general affective polarization. While media critics may debate whether partisan framing of news about a health crisis is appropriate, we can offer no evidence that such frames have negative effects on the mass public.

These findings are surprising given the existing literature on partisan conflict frames. One possibility explanation is that the tendency of individuals to turn to expert sources at times of health crisis could mean that partisan framing has little effect (Albertson and Gadarian 2015). If individuals perceive politicized coverage or sources as less credible, they may simply tune out such sources, limiting the possibility of any media effect, including framing effects. We did not include any questions measuring knowledge of the pandemic or comprehension of the content of the articles, so we cannot speak directly to this possibility.⁴ If this is the case, our findings are not in conflict with the existing literature finding negative effects of conflict and game frames, but suggest that this literature does not extend to public health crises. A second possibility is that the treatments were not strong enough. The procedure for designing treatments aimed to reframe the same article in three ways while keeping the informational content of the articles constant. Possibly, a more extreme partisan conflict or game frame would have found the hypothesized effect, though we believe that such extreme frames would fall outside of the range of most media coverage of these events.

An alternative, as suggested by Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky (2020b), is that even at this early stage of the pandemic the information environment was sufficiently saturated that three additional news articles, however framed, would have no effect on opinion related to the pandemic. Indeed, in a separate paper we find extremely heavy coverage of the pandemic in both the national and local press (Myers 2021). In the week preceding this

⁴What evidence we can offer does not support this, as respondents spent more time on average reading the Partisan Conflict (83 s) and Partisan Game (77 s) framed articles than the Non-Partisan framed articles (70 s), though these differences were likely the result of the partisan-framed articles being slight longer (NP: 815 words, PC: 934 words, PG: 955 words).

experiment, the average local newspaper ran two and one third of front-page articles each day about the pandemic while the New York Times and Washington Post each averaged six front-page articles per day. Importantly, this explanation would suggest that while the framed articles employed in our experiment had no effect, such framing employed repeatedly over time might. In other words, even if reading three partisan-conflict framed news articles as part of a survey has no effect, reading dozens of articles over the course of weeks or months may still impact public opinion. Our findings do not, then, rule out a negative effect of partisan conflict and game frames, but they do show that such effects are more difficult to produce than might be expected from the existing literature.

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