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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Politicizing the Pandemic? Partisan Framing of the Early COVID-19 Pandemic Was Infrequent, Particularly in Local Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

Media scholars have long expressed concern that news outlets' tendency to frame policy debates in terms of partisan conflict or political gamesmanship politicizes and polarizes public opinion. This tendency may be particularly problematic with new, highly salient issues like the COVID-19 pandemic during its earliest stages. To evaluate the degree to which coverage of the pandemic in its first months was framed in partisan terms we analyze the content of COVID-19 related articles published on the front page of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and a random sample of local newspapers between February 21 and May 15, 2020. Contrary to what existing work about the politicization of early-pandemic news coverage might lead us to expect, we find these newspapers employed partisan framings of the pandemic in only about one out of ten articles. However, these frequencies differ dramatically across the kind of newspaper, with the two national papers far more likely to employ partisan framings than the local newspapers, and lower-circulation local papers much less likely to employ partisan framing than higher-circulation local papers. These results suggest that the degree to which news consumers receive partisan-framed messages about the pandemic depends on whether they consume local or national media. Further, the collapse of local news outlets may have led news consumers to see more partisan-framed coverage in the early stages of the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Content analysis; COVID-19; local news; framing; partisanship; conflict frame; game frame

Media outlets have a well-documented tendency to frame policy debates over issues in terms of their political, often partisan, stakes, instead of in terms of substantive issue under debate. Critics of this tendency argue that it politicizes issues by framing them in terms of partisan conflict or the strategic maneuvering of partisan actors. Existing work finds that these partisan conflict and game frames increase cynicism, reduce trust in government, and exacerbate political division (Cappella & Hall Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993, 2015). Past work also shows that framing an issue in terms of partisan conflict polarizes attitudes on the issue (Atkinson, 2017; Han & Federico, 2017; Han & Wackman, 2017). Given these effects, understanding the media's use of these frames is important to understanding any role it plays in polarizing public opinion.

In this paper we examine the tendency toward using partisan conflict and game frames in the context of the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Media coverage of COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity to study the use of these frames in coverage of a novel issue, a situation

where framing decisions by journalists may be the most consequential (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). The unprecedented nature of the pandemic and initial bipartisan response to the pandemic among the public and in Congress (Funk, 2020; Kincaid & Leckrone, 2020) may have produced an environment less conducive to the use of game and conflict frames. However, some existing work argues that media coverage contributed to the polarization of public opinion during the early pandemic by, for example, quoting politicians more frequently than scientists (Sol et al., 2020). Heavy media reliance on partisan conflict and game frames in this situation would support claims that they function as a default stance for many reporters (Patterson, 2015).

Any tendency toward framing the pandemic in terms of partisan conflict or games may have been exacerbated by the recent trends toward the nationalization of media. US media consumers increasingly get their news from national sources, a trend which has contributed to the economic collapse of local media outlets (Hopkins, 2018). A variety of recent work has shown that the decline of local media has reduced political knowledge and increased polarization (Hayes & Lawless, 2015, 2021; Darr et al., 2018; Hopkins, 2018; Peterson, 2021a; Shaker, 2014; Trussler, 2021), likely because of different patterns of political coverage in local and national media (Hopkins, 2018). However, relatively little research measures how local and national media differ in their tendency to use politicized or partisan framing (see Dunaway, 2008, Dunaway and Lawrence 2015 on variation across local media). Understanding how coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic differed between local and national outlets can help us to understand the how the decline of local news affects how issues are framed for the public more generally.

To evaluate the differences between national and local media's use of partisan frames, we measure the frequency with which national and local newspapers used partisan conflict and partisan game frames in coverage of the pandemic. We measure the use of these frames in front-page articles published about the COVID-19 pandemic during the first three months of the pandemic in the US. We code for the presence of partisan conflict or partisan game frames in these articles. We then compare the use of partisan conflict and game frames in two national prestige papers (the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) and 27 local papers to evaluate differences across different kinds of newspapers. Contrary to some claims about politicization, we find only 11.1% of stories employed partisan conflict frames and 3.0% employed partisan game frames across all newspapers. However, these frequencies are significantly higher for national prestige papers, with 13.5% of articles employing partisan conflict frames and 4.7% employing game frames, compared to 8.2% and 0.7%, respectively, in local newspapers. This suggests that people who get their news from national sources, an increasing percentage of the American public, are exposed to more politicized coverage than the dwindling few who still rely on local news sources.

Partisan Framing

Media frames shape public understanding by emphasizing certain information and offering audiences a way to understand complicated issues and events. Political coverage in the US frequently frames issues and events as primarily being about conflict between the two political parties and their members. Communications scholars describes this kind of coverage as employing "partisan conflict" or "game" frames. Partisan conflict frames describe political events as sites for partisan battle, focusing on the conflict between parties instead of the content of the underlying issue (Han & Federico, 2017;

Neuman et al., 1992). Partisan game frames, a related but theoretically distinct kind of framing discuss political events in terms of the strategies employed by each side to manipulate political processes or public opinion, as well as who is “winning” or “losing” as a result (Patterson, 1993; Aalberg et al., 2012; Bartholomé 2018). While these frames are most often associated with campaign coverage (Patterson, 1993; Iyengar et al., 2004), they are also employed in coverage of public policy (Lawrence, 2000), including health policy (Gollust et al., 2017).

Partisan game and conflict frames are attractive to reporters because they help stories fit key news values that determine newsworthiness. Conflict itself is a key news value (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Phillips, 2014). In part, this is because the presence of competing sides allows including multiple voices and thus for “balance” in reporting (Phillips, 2014), complying with journalistic norms for objectivity (Bartholomé et al., 2015). Conflict is also a useful device for introducing drama to a story, with the competition between sides providing narrative suspense to topics where it might otherwise be missing (Bartholomé et al., 2015; Nisbet et al., 2003). Game frames in particular also allow journalists to focus on what the news values literature calls the “power elite” (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017), political leaders who dominate journalists' own view of politics (Weaver, 1972, p. 69; Schudson, 2008, p. 52). The use of these frames depends in part on the presence of conflict and the supply of these frames from political actors, but are also the result of journalists' agency and journalistic practice that “facilitate, emphasize, and sometimes even exaggerate conflict” (Bartholomé et al., 2015, p. 451).

Critics of partisan framing argue that it increases cynicism, decreases political trust and engagement with politics, and produces a focus on issues that are controversial over those that are substantively important (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Atkinson (2017) shows that conflict framing in coverage of congressional debates reduces support for government action because conflict provides a heuristic that policy proposals are either controversial or ideologically extreme. Frames that emphasize partisan wins and losses also exacerbate affective polarization by turning politics into a game played by two side trying to win rather than an attempt by disagreeing actors to arrive at good public policy (Han & Federico, 2017, 2018). On the other hand, emphasizing the competitive aspects of politics may increase political interest by producing journalism that is more compelling (Iyengar et al., 2004).

Partisan conflict frames may play a particularly important role in politicizing technically complex scientific and health issues. Such issues may be difficult for audiences to understand or for journalists to write about in a compelling manner, making conflict or game frames more attractive. A range of studies suggest find that conflict framing is common in coverage of climate change (Feldman et al., 2017; Hart & Feldman, 2014; Nisbet, 2009), and Bolsen and Shapiro (2018) argue that conflict framing at junctures in the last three decades drove the politicization of climate science. Similarly, game and conflict frames play an outsized role on the coverage of health policy (Gollust et al., 2019), such as the rollout of the Affordable Care Act (Gollust et al., 2017). In short, the media may be particularly inclined to frame a novel, technically complex issue like the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of partisan conflict or strategy, and this coverage may be particularly influential over public understanding of the issue.

Local Vs. National News

The COVID-19 pandemic took place in the midst of an epochal change in the media environment. Local news outlets, especially local newspapers, have declined precipitously over the past two decades in terms of circulation (Danny & Lawless, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021), and newsgathering resources (Danny & Lawless, 2021; Peterson 2021b; Walker, 2021), with a number of local papers simply closing (Abernathy, 2018), or becoming “ghost papers” that conduct little or no original reporting (Sullivan, 2020). The result has been declining coverage of local politics (Hayes & Lawless, 2021; Peterson, 2021b) and increased consumption of national news sources (Hopkins, 2018, Ch 6). This decline in local news consumption, and the associated increase in consumption of news from national outlets, has had a number of effects on citizens’ engagement with politics, including reduced split-ticket voting, political knowledge, and participation (Hayes & Lawless, 2015, 2018; Darr et al., 2018; Peterson, 2021a; Shaker, 2014; Trussler, 2021).

Existing work posits that these effects are a result of local news providing more locally relevant and less partisan coverage, resulting in greater trust. National news outlets do not, for obvious reasons, offer regular coverage of local politics and government for any but the largest metropolitan areas (Arnold, 2004; Hayes & Lawless, 2021); even when it comes to Congress, most coverage of individual representatives comes from local newspapers (Arnold, 2004, Hayes and Lawless 2015; Vinson, 2003). Yet, beyond this basic difference in coverage priorities, surprisingly little work directly compares how local and national outlets differ in their coverage of the same topics or events. Bohr (2020) examines how national and local outlets differs in the climate-related topics they cover, but not whether these outlets frame climate-related issues differently. Darr et al. (2018) find that between 2000 and 2005 local newspapers were less likely than national newspapers to use language that contains partisan cues. However, this analysis relies on a narrow measure of “partisan cue,” based on matching language in newspapers to language used in congressional floor debates (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010).¹ Finally, Hamilton and Tworek (2023) find that the *New York Times* has covered issues of propaganda, misinformation, and “fake news” in a very different manner than other newspapers. Thus, despite the widespread supposition that local and national news coverage is different, there is little evidence about how their coverage is different and no work that examines differences in their propensity to employ partisan conflict or game frames.

However, there is reason to believe that local news outlets may be less reliant on such frames to establish the newsworthiness of a story. In the place of conflict, local outlets can rely on proximity as a news value that justifies coverage and framing decisions (Boesman & Van Gorp, 2018; Harcup & O’Neill, 2017). Relying on proximity as a value for judging the newsworthiness of stories and deciding how to frame them allows local news outlets to differentiate themselves in a crowded news market (Goyanes, 2015). Even for stories that are national in scope, only local news outlets are likely to offer their audience the proverbial “local angle.” Usher (2021, Chapter 4)’s field work with local papers’ Washington correspondents suggests that many conceptualize their role primarily in terms of providing coverage that relates national events to local concerns. News consumers also appear to place value on such proximity (Schaudt & Carpenter, 2009; Goyanes, 2015; cf.; Armstrong et al., 2015). The fact that proximity is an important news value for local outlets does not mean that they do

not value conflict, but it suggests that they may be less reliant on it in coverage and framing decisions; national news outlets, unable to offer their readers the “local angle,” may lean on conflict more.²

Of course, the ability of local newspapers to provide this “local angle” depends on newsgathering resources. The decline in local newsrooms, and especially of dedicated Washington and statehouse reporters, may leave them more dependent on syndicated articles from national papers or news wires. While wire services are known to play an agenda-setting role for local newspapers (Whitney & Lee, 1982, Horvit et al. 2013), no research that we are aware of has examined the tendency of wire services to employ conflict or game frames. However, given that these articles are written for a national audience or to appeal to a wide range of local audiences, we might expect them to rely more on conflict to motivate their newsworthiness. Consistent with this, wire and syndicated articles are significantly less likely to focus on the impact of news on average citizens (Mitchell et al., 2015). Additionally, wire services and syndicated articles provide a majority of local newspapers’ coverage of Congress (Tidmarch & Pitney, 1985) and of the federal government in general (Mitchell et al., 2015); to the extent that Congress is a major site of partisan conflict, this may increase the tendency of wire services to provide conflict-framed news. Thus, to the extent that local newspapers do engage in partisan-conflict framing, we might expect this framing to disproportionately come from wire and syndicated articles.

Politicized Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A significant body of work has examined media coverage of the pandemic and the connection between media use and individuals’ pandemic-related attitudes and behaviors, including the effects of relying on different media sources (Ash et al., 2020; Cain et al., 2023; Motta et al., 2020; Reisdorf et al., 2021), the effects of misinformation and interventions to combat it (Borah et al., 2022; Cinelli et al., 2020; Vraga & Bode, 2021), and the effects of politicized media coverage on attitudes and behaviors (Flores et al., 2022; Myers, 2021; Wichowsky & Condon, 2022). These last studies come to different conclusions about the effects of politicized coverage. Flores et al. (2022) find that attaching partisan cues to pandemic-related policies polarizes responses. Wichowsky and Condon (2022) find that framing the pandemic in terms of partisan disagreement has a polarizing effect on opinions about closures but no effect on concern about COVID; Myers (2021) finds no effects from treatments that use partisan conflict or game frames on several pandemic-related outcome variables. Myers (2021) notes that this null finding may be a result of an information environment which was sufficiently saturated that a one-shot experiment could have little effect.³

A few studies specifically examine the impact of local news sources on pandemic behavior. Kim et al. (2020) find that early in the pandemic residents of rural areas within big-city media markets, who were presumably more exposure to pandemic news during the outbreak’s early stages, engaged in more social distancing behavior. Fischer (2020) finds that the number of local newspapers in a county does not predict changes in mobility data early in the pandemic. In contrast, Bailard (2022) found that a similar measure of local newspaper density was associated with greater partisan gaps in social distancing behavior, suggesting that local news polarized pandemic-related behavior. Notably, none of these studies directly examines the content of local news outlets coverage of the pandemic.

Despite this interest in the effects of politicized coverage, relatively little research examines the degree to which news coverage of the pandemic was politicized. Hubner (2021) uses an automated topic modeling approach to inductively identify frames used in 1,034 articles from the first months of the pandemic, and also identifies the affiliation and background of sources these articles quote. They find that politicians and interest-group affiliated sources outnumbered academics and public health experts. Based on this, they suggest that the initial framing of the pandemic contributed to its politicization and the polarization of opinion. Sol et al. (2020) uses an automated dictionary-based approach to measure the frequency with which newspaper articles and nightly news stories mention politicians and scientists. Like Hubner (2021), Sol et al. (2020, p. 679) find that politicians were quoted significantly more often in newspaper articles; based on this, they conclude that “newspaper coverage [was] highly politicized,” and that “high degree of politicization and polarization in initial COVID-19 coverage may have contributed to polarization in U.S. COVID-19 attitudes.”⁴

While these studies offer valuable evidence about the role of early media coverage in the politicization of the pandemic, they have important limitations. Sol et al. (2020) does not investigate the framing of news articles, merely the rate at which articles mention politicians and scientists; while Hubner (2021) supplements this source frequency data with an automated frame analysis, they use automated topic modeling to inductively generate a list of frames instead of drawing on existing frame definitions grounded in the theoretical literature. Finally, both studies analyze a small number of high-circulation news outlets: Hubner (2021) examines only two national prestige papers, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, while Sol et al. (2020) is limited to six national or major-city newspapers.⁵

Research Question and Hypotheses

Drawing on this existing literature, we evaluate two research questions about the use of partisan conflict and game frames during the early COVID-19 pandemic as well as three sets of hypotheses about the relative usage of these frames across types of newspapers. The two research questions evaluate the “politicization” claim advanced by Sol et al. (2020) and Hubner (2021). We phrase these as research questions rather than hypotheses because there is no obvious standard for how frequently these frames would have to be used to indicate “politicization” of the issue – we aim to describe their frequency and allow readers to draw their own conclusions.

RQ1: How frequently did newspaper coverage of the early COVID-19 pandemic use partisan conflict frames?

RQ2: How frequently did newspaper coverage of the early COVID-19 pandemic use partisan game frames?

We offer four hypotheses about the relative frequency with which national and local, as well as local newspapers with different circulation levels, will employ these frames.

H1: Local Newspapers’ coverage of the early COVID-19 pandemic will use partisan conflict frames less frequently than national newspapers.

H2: Local Newspapers' coverage of the early COVID-19 pandemic will use partisan game frames less frequently than national newspapers.

H3: Lower-circulation newspapers' coverage of the early COVID-19 pandemic will use partisan conflict frames less frequently than higher-circulation local newspapers.

H4: Lower-circulation newspapers' coverage of the early COVID-19 pandemic will use partisan game frames less frequently than higher-circulation local newspapers.

Our final two hypotheses are motivated by the expectation that partisan conflict and game frames that do appear in local newspapers will most often appear in articles syndicated from national newspapers or wire services:

H5: Local newspaper coverage syndicated from national newspapers or wire services will use partisan conflict frames more frequently than local newspaper coverage by the papers' staff.

H6: Local newspaper coverage syndicated from national newspapers or wire services will use partisan game frames more frequently than local newspaper coverage by the papers' staff.

Method

To measure the use of partisan conflict and game frames we collected front-page articles published between February 21 and May 15. Motivated by research suggesting that framing effects are strongest on novel issues (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014), we sought to capture the time period when elite discourse and public opinion was most fluid. The earliest days of the pandemic response saw remarkable bipartisan agreement among the public (Funk, 2020) and cooperation in Congress (Kincaid & Leckrone, 2020). However, as shown in Figure 1, by mid-May public opinion about pandemic-related policy and the outbreak's seriousness had divided along familiar partisan lines (Gebeloff, 2020; Tyson, 2020), and Congress

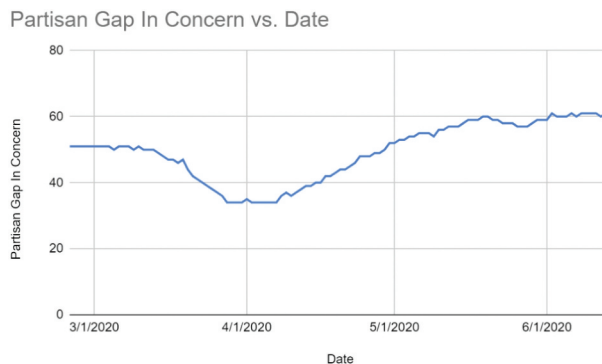


Figure 1. Partisan gap in concern about coronavirus.

returned to partisan voting patterns on Coronavirus relief bills (Kincaid & Leckrone, 2020, p. 300). While we cannot make claims about the causal effect of framing on these shifts in public opinion, the rapid polarization of public opinion, along with suggestions that this was a result of media politicization of the issue (Hubner, 2021; Sol et al., 2020), motivates our interest in how the media framed the pandemic during these first three months. This time period also matches that in other studies of early media coverage of the pandemic (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Fischer, 2020; Sol et al., 2020).

To measure coverage in national outlets, we collected all COVID-19 related articles published on the front pages of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* during this time period. These papers, and especially the *New York Times*, are often studied as examples of “prestige” or “elite” US newspapers because of their wide national circulation among political elites and their agenda-setting power for other news outlets across different media (Golan, 2006). To measure coverage in local papers, we drew a stratified random sample of 27 newspapers in the following manner. First, to make sure we captured large and small-circulation news outlets we divided newspapers whose circulation is reported to the Alliance for Audited Media into high, medium, and low circulation tiers such that the sum of the circulations of all papers in each tier was the same. To ensure that we captured geographical variation in coverage, we selected at random one newspaper from each of the circulation tiers in each census division (see Table 1).⁶

Data from Civiqs daily tracking model (Civiqs 2020). Data was manually transcribed by the author from https://civiqs.com/results/coronavirus_concern on April 6, 2023. Concern is the percentage of partisans answering “Moderately Concerned” or “Extremely Concerned.” Partisan gap is percentage of Democrats concerned minus percentage of Republicans concerned.

For each day in our sample, we randomly selected one low, one medium, and one high-circulation newspaper from this list and collected all front-page stories related to the pandemic. Since databases of local news sources such as *NewsBank* and *LexisNexis* do not contain articles from wire service or syndicated from other newspapers (Ridout et al., 2012), we collected articles from digital replications of the print version of each newspaper.⁷ This resulted in a sample of 1,580 articles, 683 from local newspapers and 897 from national newspapers.

Table 1. Local newspapers sampled.

Census Division	Tier 1 Newspaper	Tier 2 Newspaper	Tier 3 Newspaper
New England	Boston Globe	Hartford Courant	Press Herald (Portland, ME)
Middle Atlantic	Buffalo News	Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY)	Daily Freeman (Kingston, NY)
East North Central	Chicago Tribune	Indianapolis Star	Journal Star (Peoria, IA)
West North Central	Star Tribune (Minneapolis)	St. Louis Post-Dispatch	North Platte Telegraph (North Platte, NE)
South Atlantic	Tampa Bay Times	Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA)	Citrus County Chronicle (Crystal River, FL)
East South Central	Courier-Journal (Louisville)	Tennessean (Nashville, TN)	Gleaner (Henderson, KY)
West South Central	Houston Chronicle	Austin American-Statesman	Texarkana Gazette
Mountain Pacific	The Denver Post Honolulu Star-Advertiser	Las Vegas Review-Journal Sacramento Bee	Missoulian Union Democrat (Sonora, CA)

We code separately for partisan conflict and partisan game frames, and articles could be coded as containing one of these types of frames, both, or neither.⁸ While some work treats these frames as synonymous or treats game frames as a subset of conflict frames, we follow Bartholomé et al. (2018), who argue that there are important conceptual differences between the two. The defining characteristic of conflict frames is framing an issue or event in terms of conflict between two or more sides. This conflict can vary in its substantiveness; some conflict frames “focus mainly on political ideas, policy issues, ideological issues and values,” while others “address mainly the political process, politics as a game or personal attacks” (pg. 1692), but all portray issues primarily in terms of the conflict between competing political actors – in this study, between Democrats and Republicans. Game frames, on the other hand, are defined by their focus on the process and the strategies used by political actors to “win,” emphasizing winning or losing as the primary goal in and of itself, as opposed to the substantive issues at stake (Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015; Lawrence, 2000; Aalberg et al., 2012).

To code for the presence of a partisan conflict frame we use three questions drawn from existing coding definitions (Bartholomé et al., 2018; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000):

- Does the item reflect disagreement between Democrats and Republicans or individual partisans who stand in for their party as a whole?
- Does the item refer to Democrats and Republicans or individual partisans who stand in for their party as a whole taking different sides to the problem?
- Does one or both parties or individual partisans representing one or both parties reproach, blame, or shame another?

Articles were coded as containing a partisan conflict frame if the coder answered yes to at least two of the three questions. All three items originate in Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). The first two questions are those used by Bartholomé et al. (2018). We add in a third question from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)’s coding scheme because a number of articles contained a disagreement between Democrats and Republicans in which one of the partisans did not explicitly take a side but instead engaged in more general critiques of the other party.

There is considerable variation in how existing studies code for the presence of a game frame (Aalberg et al., 2012). We follow most studies in the literature in using a single item to code for the game frame’s presence. Drawing on definitions from Patterson (1993), Lawrence (2000), and Aalberg et al. (2012),⁹ we coded for the presence of a partisan game frame using a single yes/no question:

- Does the article discuss the article’s subject in terms of Democrats or Republicans winning or losing, or the strategies that Democrats and Republicans, or individual partisans who stand in for their party, employ to try to win the contest for political advancement, gain, or power?

Thus, the partisan game frame did not require explicit conflict between the two parties, though a majority of articles coded as containing partisan game frames were also coded as containing partisan conflict frames.

One of two trained coders coded each article for the presence of a partisan conflict frame and for the presence of a partisan game frame. The coders double coded two weeks of coverage (226 articles) from the national papers for a Krippendorff's Alpha of .73 for the partisan conflict frame code and .69 for the partisan game frame code. [Figures 2\(a–d\)](#) contain examples of each type of article. Notably, we coded for the presence of both of these frames, not for their prominence, which means that our estimates should be interpreted as an upper-bound estimate of the centrality of these frames to coverage.

We analyze the difference in the proportion of COVID-related articles that contain partisan and game frames using a two-sample test of equal proportions. We first compute the percentage of articles from each outlet that contain each type of partisan as well as the percentage of articles from national outlets, local outlets, and local outlets within each region and within each circulation tier. We then use a test to compare these percentages between the two national newspapers, between national papers and local papers, and between local papers with different levels of circulation.

Results

[Table 2](#) addresses RQ1 and RQ2 regarding the frequency with which newspapers use partisan conflict and game frames. Overall, we find that 11.1% of all articles employed partisan conflict frames, while only 3.0% of all articles used partisan game frames. [Figure 1](#) shows the percentage of articles from local and from national newspapers that used each frame. In the two national prestige papers, 13.5% of pandemic-related articles were framed in terms of partisan conflict. These frames were even less common in local newspapers, in which 8.2% of articles employed partisan conflict frames. Game frames were even less common than partisan conflict frames and used almost exclusively by national prestige papers (4.7% of articles vs. 0.7% of articles in local papers).

While newspapers overall did not use either kind of frame frequently, national newspapers used both kinds of frames more frequently than local newspapers. [Table 3](#) summarizes a series of two-sample tests of equal proportions comparing local and national newspapers and local newspapers from different circulation tiers. Readers of national newspapers encountered partisan conflict frames about 1.5 times as often as readers of local newspapers and encountered game frames more than six times as often. These differences are statistically significant ($p = .01$ for conflict frames, $p < .001$ for game frames).

[Figure 3](#) shows the front pages from three sampled newspapers on the same date that illustrate this difference between local and national coverage. On March 23, 2020, the *New York Times* included six pandemic-related articles, four of which were not framed in partisan terms. However, one article employed a partisan conflict frame in reporting on the legislative struggles over COVID-19 relief bill; another employed a game frame in reporting on Trump's attempts to refashion his image in order to salvage his reelection campaign. Austin American-Statesman, a Tier 2 newspaper, included four pandemic articles, none of which employed partisan conflict or game frames. Notably, this includes an article that reports on the divergent responses of political actors to the pandemic but does not frame this difference as partisan or conflictual, nor does it identify the actors, in this case Republican Governor Greg Abbott and Democratic Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins, in partisan terms.¹⁰ The Citrus County Chronicle, a Tier 3 newspaper, includes two COVID-19 related articles; one of these reports on the actions of Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican, but without describing him or his actions in partisan terms.

Risky New Phase Brings Discord and Unease

By JULIE BOSMAN
and SARAH MERVOSH

CHICAGO — Texas lifted stay-at-home orders for its 29 million residents. Hair salons in Maine welcomed customers back inside. In Alabama, clothing boutiques flung open their doors.

Nearly a dozen states tentatively returned to public life on Friday, the first mass reopening of businesses since the coronavirus pandemic brought America to a standstill six weeks ago. But there were clashes across the country over how, when and even whether it should be done.

Partisan battles flared in Illinois and Michigan, where protesters demanded that Democratic leaders loosen restrictions. The skirmishes there and elsewhere revealed political dividing lines and geographical differences, but also something more basic — a vast and widely varying range of personal views about what the country should do.

Trump Shifts Image: Leader For 'Wartime'

This article is by Annie Karni, Maggie Haberman and Reid J. Epstein.

WASHINGTON — With the economy faltering and the political landscape unsettled as the coronavirus death toll climbs, a stark and unavoidable question

now confronts President Trump and his advisers: Can he save his campaign for re-election when so much is suddenly going so wrong?

After three years of Republicans' championing signs of financial prosperity that were to be Mr. Trump's chief re-election argument, the president has never needed a new message to voters as he does now, not to mention luck. At this point, the president has one clear option for how to proceed politically, and is hoping that an array of factors will break his way.

The option, which he has brazenly pushed in recent days, is to cast himself as a "wartime president" who looks in charge of a nation under siege while his likely Democratic opponent, former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., is largely out of sight hunkered down in Delaware.

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TIMELINE FOR REOPENING

After bowing to states, Trump backs protesters

By Michael D. Shear and Sarah Mervosh
NEW YORK TIMES

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Friday openly encouraged right-wing protests of social distancing restrictions in states with stay-at-home orders, a day after announcing guidelines for how the nation's governors should carry out an orderly reopening of their communities on their own timetables.

In a series of all-caps tweets that started two minutes after a Fox News report on the protesters, the president declared, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" and "LIBERATE MINNESOTA!" — two states whose Democratic governors have imposed strict social distancing restrictions. He also lashed out at Virginia, where the state's Democratic governor and Legislature have pushed for strict gun control measures, saying: "LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege!"

His stark departure from the more bipartisan TRUMP, Page A4

► TRUMP
Continued from Page A1

tone of his announcement Thursday night suggested Trump was ceding any semblance of national leadership on the pandemic, and choosing instead to divide the country by playing to his political base.

Trump reverses course on virus task force

By ZEKE MILLER,
JILL COLVIN AND
DARLENE SUPERVILLE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Wednesday reversed course on plans to wind down his COVID-19 task force, attempting to balance his enthusiasm for reopening the country with rising infection rates in parts of the nation.

The indecision on the fate of the expert panel was emblematic

of an administration — and a country — struggling with competing priorities of averting more deaths and more economic suffering. Trump appears focused on persuading Americans to accept the price of some lives lost as restrictions are eased, concerned about skyrocketing unemployment and intent on encouraging an economic rebound ahead of the November election.

Democrats criticized Trump's reopening strategy Wednesday, saying more federal support for

testing and contact tracing is needed. While the daily number of new deaths in the New York area has declined markedly in recent weeks, deaths have essentially plateaued in the rest of the country.

One day after the administration suggested that its work would be done around Memorial Day, Trump said the White House task force of public health professionals and senior government

Turn to Trump, Page A4

Figure 2. Examples of Coded Articles. Clockwise from Top Left: National/Partisan Conflict (*New York Times*, May 5, 2020); National/Partisan Game (*New York Times*, March 23, 2020); Local/Partisan Conflict (*Hartford Courant*, May 7, 2020); Local/Partisan Game (*Boston Globe*, April 18, 2020).

Table 2. Game and conflict framing by newspaper type and tier. Total N = 1,583.

Newspaper Category	% Conflict Frame	% Game Frame
Tier 1 Papers (<i>N</i> = 270)	12.2	1.5
Tier 2 Papers (<i>N</i> = 221)	8.1	0.5
Tier 3 Papers (<i>N</i> = 192)	2.6	0.0
New York Times (<i>N</i> = 412)	12.6	5.3
Washington Post (<i>N</i> = 485)	14.2	4.1
All Local Papers (<i>N</i> = 683)	8.2	0.7
All National Papers (<i>N</i> = 897)	13.5	4.7

Table 3. Summary of tests of equal proportions.

Difference in % Conflict Frame				Difference in % Game Frame			
Comparison	Difference	<i>p</i> -value	95% Conf Int	Comparison	Difference	<i>p</i> -value	95% Conf Int
National (13.5%) vs. Local (8.2%)	5.3%	.001	(2.1, 8.5)	National (4.7%) vs. Local (0.7%)	4.0%	<.001	(2.3, 5.6)
National (13.5%) vs. Local Tier 1 (12.2%)	1.3%	.662	(−3.5, 6.0)	National (4.7%) vs. Local Tier 1 (1.5%)	3.2%	.028	(1.0, 5.4)
National (13.5%) vs. Local Tier 2 (8.1%)	5.3%	.041	(0.8, 9.9)	National (4.7%) vs. Local Tier 2 (0.5%)	4.2%	.006	(2.3, 6.2)
National (13.5%) vs. Local Tier 3 (2.6%)	10.9%	<.001	(7.4, 14.4)	National (4.7%) vs. Local Tier 3 (0.0%)	4.7%	.004	(3.0, 6.4)
Local Tier 1 (12.2%) vs. Local Tier 2 (8.1%)	4.1%	.185	(−1.7, 9.8)	Local Tier 1 (1.5%) vs. Local Tier 2 (0.5%)	1.0%	.498	(−1.1, 3.1)
Local Tier 1 (12.2%) vs. Local Tier 3 (2.6%)	9.6%	<.001	(4.7, 14.6)	Local Tier 1 (1.5%) vs. Local Tier 3 (0.0%)	1.5%	.236	(−0.4, 3.4)
Local Tier 2 (8.1%) vs. Local Tier 3 (2.6%)	5.5%	.025	(0.1, 10.3)	Local Tier 2 (0.5%) vs. Local Tier 3 (0.0%)	0.5%	1	(−0.9, 1.8)
WaPo (14.2%) vs. NYTimes (12.6%)	1.6%	.546	(−3.1, 6.3)	WaPo (4.1%) vs. NYTimes (5.3%)	−1.2%	.484	(−4.2, 1.8)

Table 4. Conflict Framing by Source of Article.¹¹

Tier	Byline (Total <i>N</i> = 673)	% Conflict Frame	Difference	<i>p</i> -value	95% Conf Int
1	Own staff (216)	7.4	24.1%	<.001	(10.0, 38.1)
	AP or other paper (54)	31.5			
2	Own staff (187)	5.9	14.7%	.011	(−1.0, 30.4)
	AP or other paper (34)	20.6			
3	Own staff (143)	0.0	13.9%	<.001	(0.9, 27.0)
	AP or other paper (36)	13.9			

H3 and H4 posit that larger-circulation newspapers will use partisan conflict and game frames more frequently than smaller-circulation papers. Consistent with H3, we find that Tier one papers used partisan conflict frames the most frequently (12.2% of articles), followed by Tier two papers (8.1%), and Tier three papers (2.6%). The differences are statistically significant between tiers one and three ($p < .001$) and two and three ($p = .025$), though we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no difference between tiers one and two ($p = .185$). All tiers of local papers used game frames extremely infrequently. These frames were used more frequently in larger than smaller circulation papers (1.5% in tier one, 0.5% in tier two; we observed no game-framed articles in tier three papers). However, all of these frequencies were sufficiently small that no



Figure 3. Front Pages of New York Times, Austin American-Statesman, and Citrus County Chronicle, March 23, 2020.

between-tier difference was statistically significant. Thus, we do not find support for H4 because game frames were nearly non-existent in all local papers.

Where Did the Partisan Frames Come From?

To evaluate the role of national news sources in disseminating partisan conflict and game frames in local news outlets we coded the source of each article according to the article's byline. We aggregated these into two categories: Articles written by the newspaper's own staff, and articles syndicated from the Associated Press or other papers. Table 4 reports the percentage of articles from each category coded with partisan conflict and partisan game frames.¹² Across all tiers, 4.9% of articles written by the papers' own staff use partisan conflict frames, while 23.4% of those syndicated from other sources use partisan conflict frames. This difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$), finding support for H5.

While the sample sizes are relatively small, there are large and statistically significant differences between the proportion of syndicated articles employing partisan conflict frames and the proportion of locally produced articles employing these frames in all circulation tiers ($p \leq .011$ for all tiers). The percentage of syndicated articles that were framed in terms of partisan conflict decreased across tiers, (though the differences are not statistically significant); larger local paper ran more partisan-conflict framed articles written by their own reporters and appear more likely to pick up partisan-conflict framed articles from the newswires. This suggests that the higher percent of partisan conflict framed stories at higher-circulation newspapers is

a function of coverage priorities, not just reporting resources, though the relatively small number of these articles across tiers suggests that this interpretation be treated with some caution.

Discussion

We find that a small but meaningful percentage of front-page articles about COVID-19 during the early months of the pandemic employed partisan conflict or partisan game frames. This conclusion is notably different from that of previous studies such as Sol et al. (2020), which deems early newspaper coverage of the pandemic to be “highly politicized.” These different findings point to the different ways that news coverage may “politicize” an issue. Sol et al. (2020) operationalizes “politicization” as the ratio of mentions of politicians to mentions of scientists in articles about the pandemic but, as they note, do not capture “journalistic choices that may have political implications, such as how an issue is framed” (pg. 685). In contrast, we measure the use of politicizing frames in coverage of the pandemic. While these two metrics capture different aspects of politicization, we suggest that merely mentioning a politician does not necessarily reflect the politicization of an issue, particularly in cases like the COVID-19 pandemic where government action is a central part of society’s response. While we can only speculate as to why these frames were used infrequently, the relative bipartisanship of this period may have made partisan framing more difficult for journalists.¹³

However, we also find a striking difference in framing between national and local newspapers. National papers framed pandemic coverage in terms of partisan conflict 1.5 times as often as local papers and employed partisan game frames six times as often as local papers. Thus, whether the pandemic was a partisan issue looked very different to readers of national and local newspapers, as well as to readers of large-circulation and small-circulation local papers. Interest in the decline of local news is not new, but most existing research has focused on the disappearance of coverage of local issues (Hopkins, 2018; Sullivan, 2020; Peterson, 2021a,b) or on estimating the causal effects of the reduced local news consumption or newspaper closure (Hayes & Lawless, 2018, 2021; Shaker, 2014; Trussler, 2021). In contrast, these findings suggest that more attention be paid to *how* local and national outlets cover the same issues. If this pattern of framing generalizes to other issues, it suggests that the decline of local news may result in news consumers receiving greater exposure to partisan-framed coverage. These findings also support Hamilton and Tworek (2023)’s argument that studies of the *New York Times* should not be treated as a representative of US newspapers more generally.

Why might this difference exist? A straight-forward explanation may be a difference in topical focus or source use. National publications may be more inclined to focus coverage on national political institutions, which are more likely to be polarized. These outlets are also more likely to have the resources to do so, as the decline of Washington correspondents from local or regional papers has reduced their ability to draw on national-level sources in their articles. It is worth noting, however, that this early period of the pandemic witnessed remarkable levels of bipartisanship at the national level, such as the near-unanimous passage of the \$2.2 Trillion CARES act on March 27, 2020, while much of the initial partisan conflict occurred at the state level, such as partisan conflict over state-level stay-at-home orders, or as conflict between President Trump and state and local officials (Kincaid & Leckrone, 2020).

A different, though not necessarily contradictory reason why we might observe this difference between national and local newspapers is a difference in news values that shape judgments

of newsworthiness and decisions about framing (Boesman & Van Gorp, 2018; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Proximity – the local angle – plays an important role in local news outlets' coverage and framing decisions in part because it reflects journalistic norms at these outlets (Usher, 2021 Ch 4) and in part because it allows them to offer a differentiated product in a competitive market (Goyanes, 2015). Proximity may make it easier local newspapers to motivate audience interest in an article without introducing drama via conflict or game frames. In contrast, national outlets, which must offer a product that appeals to consumers from a variety of markets, may need to lean more heavily on conflict and gamesmanship to attract audience interest. The differences between local newspapers at different circulation tiers may be the result of a difference in news values between papers that must cover geographically larger and more diverse communities and those that focus on smaller and more homogeneous communities.¹⁴ We offer this suggestion as a theoretical conjecture – our results are purely descriptive, and open to alternative interpretations. Nevertheless, future work on the difference between local and national news should examine differences in the relative importance of conflict and proximity as news values when judging newsworthiness and building frames.

Moreover, the finding that syndicated articles published by local newspapers are more likely to be framed in partisan terms may present yet another reason for pessimism. In some ways, this is unsurprising. Few local papers maintain Washington correspondents anymore, and even statehouse reporters are increasingly rare at local outlets (Walton & Layton, 2005). Such outlets are thus increasingly reliant on wire services and syndicated content for their coverage of legislative debates and policy responses, coverage that is easier to frame in partisan terms (Atkinson, 2017). Nevertheless, as local newsrooms shrink and an increasing number of papers are “ghost newspapers” that exist primarily to publish content from other sources (Abernathy, 2018; Sullivan, 2020), our findings suggest that local news content may increasingly mirror the more partisan-framed coverage of national papers.

This study has several important limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, we code only for the presence of partisan conflict and game frames, not their prominence in the news articles. Given the infrequency of these frames in our sample we do not believe that this had a substantive effect on our findings – as we note, these provide an upper-bound estimate of the frequency of these frames, but even this upper bound is low. Studies of coverage where these frames are more common (e.g., coverage of campaigns) would benefit from a more sophisticated coding scheme. Second, we describe the frequency of specific frames derived from existing theory, and not news sources, an inductively derived set of frames (e.g., Hubner, 2021), nor partisan cues. As we note, our definition of “politicization” leads to a different substantive conclusion than does the source-based definition of Sol et al. (2020) and Hubner (2021), and studies of other aspects of politicization would shed additional light on this phenomenon. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we study only the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic; the degree to which these results generalize to later stages of the pandemic or to other novel issues is unknown. We hope our results motivate further research on partisan framing and in differences in coverage patterns between local and national news sources.

Notes

1. Notably, this data is also from before much of the decline in local news circulation and newsroom capacity.

2. Dunaway and Lawrence (2015, 2008)'s find that newspapers that are owned by corporations or large chains produce more game-framed campaign coverage. They interpret this primarily in terms of organizations' economic incentives; alternatively, the need for journalists to produce coverage that can be reprinted in multiple newspapers may reduce the value of proximity and increase the value of conflict.
3. Wichowsky and Condon (2022, pp. 4–5) offer a similar explanation for why second experiment's null finding.
4. In addition to these studies, Krupekin et al. (2022) use a structural topic model to identify the topics present in cable, national television, and local television news coverage of COVID. They find significant differences between the topics covered by cable news and local TV news, but do not interpret these results in terms of politicization.
5. Specifically, Sol et al. (2020) examine *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, whose weekly circulation is ranked, respectively, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 8th, 9th and 38th among newspapers tracked by the Alliance for Audited Media. As the analysis below shows, there are stark differences in frame usage between these papers and smaller local papers.
6. The exception was the East South Central Division, which had no tier 1 paper. For this division, we counted the highest circulation tier 2 paper, the Louisville *Courier-Journal* as a tier 1 newspaper in further analyses.
7. Newspapers for which we could not obtain a digital reproduction were excluded from our sampling frame.
8. Articles that were coded as "partisan game" but not "partisan conflict" tended to be about the strategic implications of intra-party conflict or the strategic implications of conflict between Trump and scientific experts. Across all sources, 49% of partisan game-frame coded articles were also coded as partisan conflict frames; conversely, 13% of partisan conflict articles were also coded as containing partisan game frames.
9. This item corresponds to Aalberg et al. (2012)'s instructions for identifying a "strategic game macro frame."
10. Despite the name, a Texas County Judge serves as the county's chief executive officer.
11. The source of 12 Tier 3 articles could not be ascertained. Of the 126 articles from other sources, 75 were from the AP, 28 from the *New York Times*, 11 from the *Washington Post*, and 13 from other papers.
12. We limit our analysis across tiers to partisan conflict frames as we find only five game framed articles in local newspapers. Thus, we do not test *H6*.
13. Though see Bartholomé et al. (2015)'s argument that journalists play an active role in building these frames, even absent a supply from political actors. Future research should examine the relative roles of political actors and journalistic agency in building conflict frames.
14. Bailard (2022)'s finding that counties with a higher count of newspapers saw more polarization in social distancing suggests an alternative interpretation, that papers in more competitive markets use conflict frames more frequently, though both market competitiveness and newspaper tier are highly correlated with population.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data Availability Statement

Data and code to replicate the analyses in this paper are archived in the Data Repository of the University of Minnesota and is publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.13020/wsmw-jp95>.

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