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Frame Contestation in the News: National Identity, Cultural Resonance, and U.S. Drone Policy

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Scholarship suggests that disagreement among political officials significantly impacts how the press covers a particular policy issue and how the public perceives and comes to understand it. An unexplored area of research in the framing effects literature asks to what extent frame contestation impacts public opinion in moments of national transgressions—specifically, when the U.S. military has been accused of acts that potentially threaten the image of the nation. We, therefore, conducted an experiment in which U.S. adults were exposed to a news story about a U.S. drone strike that killed 23 Afghan civilians. We found that respondents were significantly more critical of the incident and the military more broadly when presented with frame contestation.

Keywords: cascading activation, frame contestation, cultural resonance, national identity, U.S. drone policy

Scholarship suggests that disagreement among political officials significantly impacts how the press covers a particular policy issue and how the public perceives and comes to understand it. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the public tends to look to political elites—via the news media—for cues when forming political opinions (Zaller, 1992; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). When elite disagreements arise, the press often, though not always (see Rowling, Jones, & Sheets, 2011), amplifies this discord to the public, which serves to elevate the policy problem on the public's agenda and can broaden public discourse around the issue (Bennett, 1990). As several studies have shown, when political issues are publicly debated by officials and framed in competing terms within the press, citizens are more likely to engage in critical analysis of the issues and seek out additional information (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Chong

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& Druckman, 2007b; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). This is because exposure to such "counterframes" invites uncertainty and skepticism in the minds of citizens, and it encourages them to consciously evaluate the logical and empirical merit of how various aspects of the issue have been framed. Thus, as Entman's (2004) "cascading activation" model suggests, a frame that encounters strong resistance from political opponents within the press should be met with increased resistance—or, at the very least, more rigorous scrutiny—from the citizenry.

An area of research that remains largely unexplored in the framing effects literature, however, is to what extent frame contestation in U.S. political and news discourses impacts public opinion in moments of national transgressions. Specifically, we are interested in those moments when the U.S. military has been accused of committing transgressions that potentially threaten the image and reputation of the nation. Conventional wisdom would suggest that in these moments, frame contestation is likely to either be largely absent from political and news discourse or have minimal impact on public opinion should it manifest. This is because: (a) White House and military officials, upon whom the press predominately relies when covering foreign affairs and national security issues (see Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996), are likely to set the parameters of debate in response to such incidents and, in doing so, employ frames that serve to protect the national identity (see John, Domke, Coe, & Graham, 2007); (b) political opponents and the press are likely to be reluctant to challenge such frames out of fear that doing so might elicit a patriotic backlash from the U.S. public (see Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeaux, & Garland, 2004; Zaller, 1994); and (c) the public is likely to embrace those frames that protect the national identity—regardless of whether political officials and the press contest them—because of their tendency to rally around the flag in moments when the nation is perceived to be at risk (see Bloom, 1990; Branscombe & Miron, 2004).

Recent studies, however, indicate that such assumptions about the expected responses and interactions among political officials, journalists, and the citizenry in the aftermath of national transgressions have not always held true. For example, in the wake of the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison scandal, several prominent congressional Democrats consistently challenged the White House and U.S. military's line of argument that it was an "isolated incident" carried out by a "few bad apples" and that it did not reflect the core values and behavior of the U.S. military or the nation (Rowling et al., 2011). Nonetheless, these counterframes rarely made it into the press (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). Thus, even though political officials from both parties frequently sparred publicly over the extent and severity of the incident and whether U.S. values should be questioned, this debate was not "indexed" or reflected within the U.S. press (Bennett, 1990). As a result, the scandal faded from the limelight only a few months after it was initially exposed, and the Bush administration emerged relatively unscathed, winning reelection just six months later.

What is missing from this picture is an understanding of what implications frame contestation *might have had* for the public, had it made it into the press (and should it do so in the future in response to similar national transgressions). That is, before offering any normative critique of the press or other political elites for not advancing challenges to White House frames when such transgressions arise, it is imperative to understand what the impact of such challenges, if offered, would even be on public opinion. In particular, if these counterframes have no impact on the public's understanding of a particular incident

or the broader policies that may have led to it, their absence from public discourse seems unproblematic. If, however, frame contestation—were it to occur regularly during such debates—substantively changes how the public perceives or comes to understand U.S. military transgressions and stimulates, more broadly, critical views of governmental and military policy, then we can better reflect on the significance of its absence from U.S. news discourse. The goal of this article, then, is twofold: First, we want to examine the effects of frame contestation on public opinion in moments of national transgressions; and, second, we want to extend this discussion outside the context of a specific incident like Abu Ghraib and into the domain of ongoing, controversial military policy—specifically, the use of unmanned aerial drones by the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency.

With this in mind, we conducted an experiment involving a specific U.S. military transgression to explore the effects of contestation of two national identity–protective frames—*minimization* of the transgression and *reaffirmation* of the national identity—on public opinion. Specifically, we exposed a sample of U.S. adults to a news story, derived from an actual incident that occurred in 2010, about a U.S. drone strike that killed 23 Afghan civilians (Filkins, 2010). We wanted to examine how exposure to these two culturally resonant frames from White House and military officials—when either echoed or contested by congressional opponents within the press—influenced respondents' attitudes about the scope of, responsibility for, and significance of this particular event as well as their broader attitudes about the U.S. policy of drone warfare. In particular, we sought to determine: (a) what varying effects the minimization and reaffirmation frames had among U.S. adults in response to this incident and (b) whether contestation of those frames by these other officials within the press undercut the public's receptivity to them. Our results reveal that, although the minimization and reaffirmation frames are quite persuasive in such moments, public opinion is significantly changed when these frames are explicitly challenged by congressional officials. Moreover, we found that the effects of frame contestation on respondents' attitudes toward the U.S. drone policy were significantly moderated by partisan affiliation. Given the current political debate at the highest levels of the U.S. government over drone policy, these findings have important implications for how this policy is likely to be discussed and understood by the U.S. public moving forward.

Framing, Cascading Activation, and Frame Contestation

An important scholarly framework for understanding the process by which the public communications of political leaders become news and, ultimately, influence public opinion is the cascading activation model (Entman, 2004). This framework seeks to explain how and why some frames have more success than others in the public arena. To frame, as Entman defined it, "is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In other words, a frame is a version of a text that highlights certain aspects of a policy issue or event in lieu of others; frames, in turn, shape how the public comes to understand, evaluate, and respond to a particular issue or event. In this model, the power to frame is stratified across several levels of U.S. actors, suggesting a hierarchy in which some have more capacity than others to emphasize their ideas in news and potentially influence public opinion. Executive-branch officials operate at the highest level; the White House and military officials are typically the generators of political frames,

especially on issues relating to foreign policy or national security (Hutcheson et al., 2004; Zaller, 1992). The subsequent levels of the hierarchy include Congress, policy experts and ex-officials, and the press at the lowest level. The public is largely seen as a dependent variable, though opportunities exist for citizens to influence higher levels through feedback loops such as organizing, protesting, and voting.

In essence, the cascading activation model suggests that the communication environment is like a waterfall: Some ideas, usually those introduced at the top by White House or military officials, cascade smoothly downward past potential obstacles—such as congressional opponents or the press—and into public consciousness. Other ideas, however, encounter fierce resistance. A crucial determinant of whether a frame cascades downward smoothly or encounters resistance is that frame's "cultural resonance"—that is, whether it maps onto and/or triggers relevant values, beliefs, and ideals among the general public (Gamson, 1992). Thus, the content of a frame—not just the source of it—matters deeply in shaping public discourse around an issue. In particular, culturally resonant frames are those that align well with the preexisting and long-standing schemas habitually used by large numbers of citizens, which structure how they cognitively process information and make sense of the world (Gamson, 1992; Goffman, 1974; Snow & Benford, 1988). These schema, in turn, shape how individuals might respond to alternative interpretations of the same issue (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002). In the words of Scheufele (2000): "Framing influences how audiences think about issues, not by making aspects of the issue more salient, but by invoking interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information" (p. 309). Scholarship has shown, for example, that a frame's strength increases when it resonates with consensus values (Chong, 2000; Pan & Kosicki, 2001) and when it does not contradict with strongly held prior beliefs (Brewer, 2001; Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996). Thus, those frames that activate or correspond with individuals' preexisting schema and broader cultural values—such as, for example, the view that the United States is a virtuous nation—either by celebrating, accentuating, or at least aligning with them, possess the most potential to cascade into public consciousness.

Minimal scholarship, however, has explored the impact on individual attitudes when culturally resonant frames encounter sustained contestation from other officials. Entman's model implies that such contestation, if manifest in the press, should diminish the cascade of the initial frame and, therefore, undermine public support for it, even if the frame is culturally resonant. Thus, official resistance at the top of the framing hierarchy should increase public resistance at the bottom. Studies by Sniderman and Theriault (2004) and Chong and Druckman (2007b) have begun to explore these dynamics (see also Brewer & Gross, 2005). In particular, these studies suggest that exposure to multiple, contrasting frames sharply attenuates the effects of an individual frame. This occurs because respondents become more motivated to engage in conscious evaluation of the initial frame when opposing considerations are introduced (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). Specifically, the presence of counterframes activates uncertainty in the minds of message recipients about the logical and empirical merit of the initial frame and, thus, spurs message recipients to critically assess—or at least subconsciously rationalize—why one idea or explanation might be better than another. Nonetheless, as Sniderman and Theriault (2004) argue, respondents still tend to prefer the frame that is consistent with their values and principles—that is, frames that are culturally resonant—even when competitive frames are introduced. Furthermore, Chong and Druckman (2007b) have expanded on this work to suggest that preexisting values *and* the relative strength of the competing frames determine framing effects. Finally, Zaller (1992) has shown that,

although exposure to contested frames might compel individuals to critically evaluate the competing messages, partisan cues often play a crucial role in determining which of the frames citizens choose to embrace. Thus, when elites communicate opposing positions via the media, citizens exhibit a tendency to conform to those opinions that have been articulated by leaders who seem to share their own basic political predispositions.

National Identity and Moments of National Transgressions

The individual psychology of group attachments is crucial to understanding what frames are likely to be culturally resonant among Americans in moments of national transgressions and why attempts by political opponents to dislodge these frames from public consciousness might be difficult. Social identity theory suggests that an individual's self-identity is shaped by the social groups to which he or she belongs and the value he or she attaches to those groups (Tajfel, 1982). According to this perspective, through largely unconscious cognitive processes, individuals derive comfort, self-esteem, and security from such memberships (Rivenburgh, 2000). This is especially the case with the nation, because it commands "profound emotional legitimacy" among citizens (Anderson, 2006). Cultural myths, shared stories, and embedded social narratives are used and repeated daily to appeal to, affirm, and maintain citizens' identities as members of the nation (Gellner, 1983). In turn, this prompts citizens to seek to protect or enhance the nation when it is perceived to be threatened, either physically or psychologically (Entman, 1991; Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013; Wohl & Branscombe, 2009). Because the nation serves as such an important source of comfort and security, its maintenance and preservation is crucial for its members.

When the image of the nation is threatened from within—by the transgressions of citizens, military personnel, or even policies as a whole—national identity is critically important in determining which frames are likely to be culturally resonant. In these moments, when the behavior of citizens profoundly deviates from what are perceived to be the values and principles of the nation, and the responsibility for, extent of, and overall significance of these transgressions remains unclear, the potential range of frames—or counterframes—that could be offered seems limitless. Within this context, however, we argue that citizens come to expect—even demand—frames designed to protect and positively restore the national identity. As cognitive dissonance theory suggests, individuals possess deep psychological motivation to rationalize behavior that reflects negatively upon themselves—for example, through techniques such as denial, justification, or displacement of blame (Bandura, 1990; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Thus, those frames that allow for displacement of blame and reaffirmation of the national identity are likely to be most culturally resonant in these situations.

We, therefore, employed two frames in our study: *minimization* of the transgressions and *reaffirmation* of the national identity. Minimization downplays the scope and gravity of any deviant behavior by national group members (Marques & Paez, 1994) by characterizing the behavior as isolated or limited in scope (Bandura, 1990) and by placing blame on lower-level group members instead of extending responsibility to higher levels (Grey & Martin, 2008). Reaffirmation shifts attention away from the transgression toward events or aspects of the group that portray it in a more positive manner (Tajfel, 1982), thus affirming positive group identity (Capozza, Bonaldo, & Di Maggio, 1982). This is done by emphasizing idealized group values, attributes, and behavior, often by invoking resonant historical myths

and cultural symbols (Hutcheson et al., 2004), and by making what Bandura (1990) has referred to as "advantageous comparisons": highlighting aspects of or actors within selected out-groups that reflect poorly upon those groups in comparison to the in-group. The rhetorical power of these culturally resonant frames in moments of national transgressions cannot be overstated. Because they bring considerable comfort to citizens and serve to restore their belief in the nation in these moments, they do much to discourage—among both journalists and the general public—substantive, critical examination of the broader causes and consequences of the alleged transgressions. This makes it all the more likely that these frames will cascade downward and into public consciousness without much resistance.

U.S. Drone Policy, Frame Contestation, and Public Opinion

With this in mind, this study focuses on the controversial U.S. military policy of drone warfare. Estimates suggest that the CIA conducted nearly 300 predator drone strikes in Pakistan during President Obama's first term, a dramatic increase from a total of 50 between 2004 and 2008 (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2012), and their use by the U.S. military in Afghanistan has been much higher (Associated Press, 2013). U.S. predator drones have been employed in other theaters as well, including Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia. The drone program has drawn intense criticism, however, from not only some targeted countries but the broader international community, with the United Nations recently proposing a panel to investigate civilian casualties caused by U.S. drones (Devereaux, 2013). Estimates suggest that anywhere from one-third (Bergen & Tiedemann 2011) to as high as 95% of those killed by predator drones are civilians (Kilcullen & Exum, 2009). United Nations officials, legal experts, and government officials in targeted countries also contend that drone warfare violates human rights and international law (Singer, 2009). Such controversies potentially place U.S. drone warfare at odds with the values and ideals that Americans tend to ascribe to themselves, the military, and their nation.

In addition, U.S. drone policy recently has increasingly come under fire among U.S. officials, with members of Congress—most notably, Senators Rand Paul (R-KY) and Ron Wyden (D-OR)—questioning whether the U.S. government should be able to kill suspected terrorists who are U.S. citizens (O'Keefe & Blake, 2013). Paul, for example, used a highly visible 13-hour filibuster on the floor of the Senate on March 6, 2013, to bring attention to this issue and to pressure the White House to disclose whether and under what circumstances it believes it has the legal authority to use drones to kill U.S. citizens. Much of this political debate, however, has focused solely on this one issue and not on other relevant aspects of the drone program, such as the number of civilian casualties caused by U.S. drone strikes; whether killing suspected foreign terrorists in places like Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia is legal under international law; and whether the drone program is helping or hurting the United States' broader effort to eradicate Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks.

Perhaps this is why support for U.S. drone policy has consistently remained high among Americans—and across party lines—even as opposition to drone strikes has continued to rise around the world (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013b). A Pew poll in February, 2013, for example, showed that 56% of all Americans approved of the use of drone strikes, with a majority of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents expressing support for the policy (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013a). Approval was at 55% seven months earlier (Pew Research Center for the

People and the Press, 2013a). In addition, a Gallup poll in March 2013—two weeks after the Paul filibuster—showed that 65% of Americans thought the United States should use drones to launch air strikes in other countries against suspected terrorists (Gallup Organization, 2013). Together, these results suggest that the recent political debate over drones has had minimal impact on Americans' broader support for U.S. drone policy. What has emerged in the polling data, however, is a substantial shift in U.S. public opinion regarding the one specific aspect of the policy that has been publicly debated—whether drones should be used to kill suspected terrorists who are U.S. citizens. In March 2012, for example, a Washington Post–ABC News poll found that 65% of Americans favored the use of drones to kill suspected terrorists who are U.S. citizens living in other countries (Washington Post, 2012). One year later, amid the contentious debate in the United States on this issue, a Gallup poll asked this same question and found support for such strikes among Americans had significantly dropped to 41% (Gallup Organization, 2013). Thus, it would appear that congressional opposition indeed had powerful effects on U.S. public opinion regarding the drone program, but only on this one specific aspect of the policy. It stands to reason, then, that had this debate extended to other aspects of the drone program, support for the broader policy might have diminished as well.[1]

To explore this possibility, we examined the effects of contestation (versus echoing) of national identity–protective frames in news coverage of a national transgression: a U.S. drone strike that killed innocent Afghan civilians. Minimization and reaffirmation frames facilitate the acceptance of such a transgression as an unfortunate-but-well-intentioned mistake. They do so by downplaying the scope of such an incident, delimiting blame to expendable group members, and highlighting the positive values and deeds of the nation. Nonetheless, contestation of these frames from congressional officials should undercut receptivity to them among respondents. We, therefore, expected that contestation of the White House and military-offered frames would lead to more negative attitudes about the incident. Specifically, we expected that respondents exposed to news coverage that included congressional contestation of White House frames would be more likely than those exposed to echoing news coverage to attribute blame for the incident to U.S. governmental higher-ups (H1), see the incident as wider in scope (H2), regard the incident as reflective of the way the United States conducts war (H3), and believe that this incident is evidence of a flawed military effort in Afghanistan (H4).

[1] It can be argued that citizens' attitudes toward drones, and also their likely receptivity to national identity–protective frames, are conditioned by the ongoing discursive climate. This is consistent with the cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002; Grabe & Drew, 2007). We agree with this claim, but also recognize that the cultivation approach might be beyond the scope of this study. Specifically, we acknowledge that a single experimental manipulation cannot speak to the effects of ongoing, sustained discourse on a given issue. Our goal, however, was to demonstrate that even a single instance of frame contestation—as examined here—can have important implications for citizens' understanding of, and receptivity to, national identity–protective frames. We therefore argue that, given the *potential* for the discursive climate around these issues to cultivate attitudes among the public, it is perhaps even more important to critically reflect on the implications of the apparent *lack* of frame contestation in news coverage of national transgressions.

In addition, we expected that contestation would affect citizens' broader attitudes toward U.S. drone policy generally—thus extending beyond the specific incident at hand to the broader policy debate. As with incident-related attitudes, we expected that respondents exposed to the contested frames would express diminished support for U.S. drone policy (H5). However, in making this move from a specific incident to a broader, highly politicized issue, we also took advantage of the cross-partisan nature of our design, in which a Democratic White House is positing the identity-protective frames, and a Republican Congress is contesting (or echoing) them. As Zaller (1994) suggests, citizens might be inclined to look to partisan cues when confronted with contested discourse. Following this logic, we expected that Republican respondents' policy attitudes would be most affected by both the contestation and echoing—because both come from Republican officials. Democrats and Independents, on the other hand, would be less impacted by the congressional response to these frames. Thus, we expected a moderating effect of partisanship on responses to both frame echoing and contestation—with both having significantly more impact (though in opposite directions) on drone support among Republicans (H6). We theorize this partisanship moderation only for our broader military policy attitude measure, because that policy—like respondents' prior attitudes about it—is embedded within an ongoing, politicized framework in which party cues might operate more strongly—especially cues from one's own party (Baum & Groeling, 2009). The incident-related attitudes, on the other hand, should be derived primarily from the text we presented to respondents; thus, we expected partisanship to play less of a role.

Beyond these expectations, we also explored one research question: whether the counterframes advanced by congressional officials resulted in diminished confidence in Congress among respondents (RQ1). After all, officials who dare to challenge culturally resonant frames—especially those designed to protect the national identity in moments of national transgressions—might encounter a patriotic backlash among citizens (Hutcheson et al., 2004; Zaller, 1992). Thus, we wanted to explore this possibility.

Methodology

These hypotheses were explored through an experiment in April 2011 with a sample of U.S. adults. Data collection was run through SurveyMonkey—a web-based questionnaire provider—and included 498 adults who were part of SurveyMonkey's commercial survey panel—people who sign up to take surveys in exchange for monetary credits for themselves or to be donated to charities. Following completion of a different questionnaire, participants were encouraged to participate in our study. Those who agreed to do so were directed to our experiment and randomly assigned to one of our message conditions. Because these respondents chose to be part of a panel of survey takers for SurveyMonkey, then self-selected into our study, they are not representative of the U.S. adult population. However, the sample is considerably more representative and diverse than the typical lab sample of undergraduates. Women constituted 64.1% of the sample; 43.5% of respondents were younger than age 45; 62.1% had a four-year college degree, and 10.7% had no more than a high school education; 82% of respondents were White, 6.2% were Latino/a, 3% were Black, 3.6% were Asian, and 5.3% were other or more than one race; 32.8% said they were "not at all" or "not very" familiar with predator drones, 41% said they were "somewhat familiar," and the remainder said they were "very familiar" or "completely familiar"; and 55.8% of respondents made less than $75,000 per year. This sample diversity, combined with random assignment of respondents to the varying experimental conditions, increased the external validity of the

study relative to a traditional lab sample. Crucial for our analysis was the party identification of our sample: We assessed partisanship on a seven-point scale ranging from *strong Republican* to *strong Democrat* (*M* = 4.43, *SD* = 1.8). Thus, our sample was slightly skewed Democratic, but provided sufficient variance to assess our final hypothesis.

Participants were presented with a simulated news article about a U.S. drone strike in which 23 Afghan civilians were killed. This story was derived from an actual incident reported in *The New York Times* (Filkins, 2010). In the first condition, the news story with quotes from the Obama administration and U.S. military invoked minimization frames—including downplaying the scope of the incident and attributing blame only to the low-level soldiers involved. These quotes were then echoed by Republican congressional officials, who offered similar arguments about and interpretations of the incident. In the second condition, the news story again initially invoked minimization frames, but these frames were contested by the same Republican congressional officials, who offered competing arguments about and interpretations of the incident—suggesting that it was broader in scope and that responsibility extended to higher-ups. In the third condition, the news story with quotes from the Obama administration and U.S. military invoked reaffirmation frames—emphasizing positive American values and the positive deeds of the U.S. military. These frames were then echoed by Republican congressional officials. Finally, in the fourth condition, the news story again initially invoked reaffirmation frames, but these frames were then contested by the same Republican congressional officials.[2] Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four news conditions.

The articles were followed by a series of questions designed to tap the persuasiveness of the minimization and reaffirmation frames and to see whether contestation of these frames elicited varying responses. We constructed four incident-related attitude measures out of five-point, Likert-type scales assessing the extent to which respondents agreed with various statements about the incident and its broader ramifications: blame of higher-ups (Cronbach's alpha (α) = .87), scope of the incident (i.e., how isolated versus frequent incidents like this are) (α = .74), whether it reflects U.S. war conduct generally (single item, measured on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*) (*M* = 2.81 (*SD* = 1.10)), and perceived flaws in the Afghan war effort (α = .86). All four key criterion variables were scored in the direction of *frame rejection*; higher scores meant respondents were more likely to blame higher-ups for the incident, see the incident as part of a wider problem, view this incident as reflective of U.S. war conduct generally, and perceive the Afghan war effort as flawed.

[2] We elected to omit a control group for three reasons: First, we were interested primarily in the differences between alternative frames, and whether those frames are contested, rather than the effects of frame presence or absence (see Druckman, 2001); second, we agree with scholars who raise the question of whether a true "no frame" condition is even possible (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997); and, finally, although a control group might allow a sense of baseline attitudes toward drone strikes, Americans are rarely exposed to news coverage of such strikes without an accompanying journalistic or official account, which is more likely than not to contain some sort of frame, making the comparisons examined here most relevant.

Respondents were also asked about their attitudes toward U.S. drone policy. This was assessed with two items on similar five-point scales: the extent to which respondents "support the use of predator drones by the U.S. military" (M = 3.34, SD = 1.28) and the extent to which respondents "think Al Qaeda's and the Taliban's war tactics justify the use of predator drones" (M = 3.61, SD = 1.24). These items had a Cronbach's alpha of .81, so we created a single, standardized measure for our final model. To explore our research question, we assessed respondents' confidence in Congress on a five-point scale (M = 2.15, SD = 0.93).

Results

Our first set of hypotheses predicted that in the contested news conditions, we would see respondents' incident-related attitudes move against the White House frames. Specifically, we expected that respondents exposed to contestation by congressional officials in news coverage would be more likely to attribute blame for the incident to U.S. governmental higher-ups (H1), see the incident as wider in scope (H2), regard it as reflective of the way the United States conducts war (H3), and to see it as indicative of a flawed war effort in Afghanistan (H4). We conducted t tests to assess whether these effects occurred, comparing mean attitudes within frame conditions, for those respondents who received either the echoed or contested frame. Our expectations were confirmed—respondents who received the contested news frames were more critical of the incident and its implications for the Afghan war effort generally (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mean Scores on Incident-Related Attitudes, Within Conditions, Comparing Echoed Versus Contested Frames.

	Minimization		**Reaffirmation**	
	Echoed (n = 125)	Contested (n = 127)	Echoed (n = 121)	Contested (n = 125)
Blaming of higher-ups	−0.225	0.025	−0.001	0.266
	t = 2.38, df 250, p < .01		t = 2.59, df 244, p < .01	
Scope of incident	−0.199	0.030	−0.070	0.123
	t = 2.30, df 250, p < .05		t = 1.81, df 244, p < .05	
Reflects U.S. war conduct	−0.125	0.101	−0.068	0.114
	t = 1.86, df 250, p < .05		t = 1.41, df 244, p < .10	
Flawed Afghan war effort	−0.149	0.032	−0.101	0.118
	t = 1.50, df 250, p < .10		t = 1.77, df 244, p < .05	

Several distinct patterns are shown in Table 1. Those who received the contested version of the minimization frame were significantly more likely to blame higher-ups (M = 0.025 vs. M = –0.225; p < .01), see the incident as wider in scope (M = 0.030 vs. M = –0.199; p < .05), and to think this incident reflects the way the United States conducts war (M = 0.101 vs. M = –0.125; p < .05). Those respondents were also marginally more likely to view the Afghan war effort as flawed (M = 0.032 vs. M = –0.149; p < .10). Among subjects who received the reaffirmation frame, we find similar patterns. Respondents who encountered the contested version of reaffirmation were significantly more likely to blame higher-ups (M = 0.266 vs. M = –0.001; p < .01), see the incident as wider in scope (M = 0.123 vs. M = –0.070; p < .05), and view the incident as reflective of a flawed Afghan war effort (M = 0.118 vs. M = –0.101; p < .05). They also were marginally significantly more likely to see the incident as reflective of U.S. war conduct (M = 0.114 vs. M = –0.068; p < .10). Thus, contestation of both frames in news significantly shifted perceptions of the incident.[3] These patterns are presented visually in Figure 1.

[3] Although we did not theorize the partisanship interaction for these analyses, we did explore it in response to comments by our reviewers. Analysis of variance, testing the interaction between party identification and contestation on the incident-related variables, showed no significant interactions.

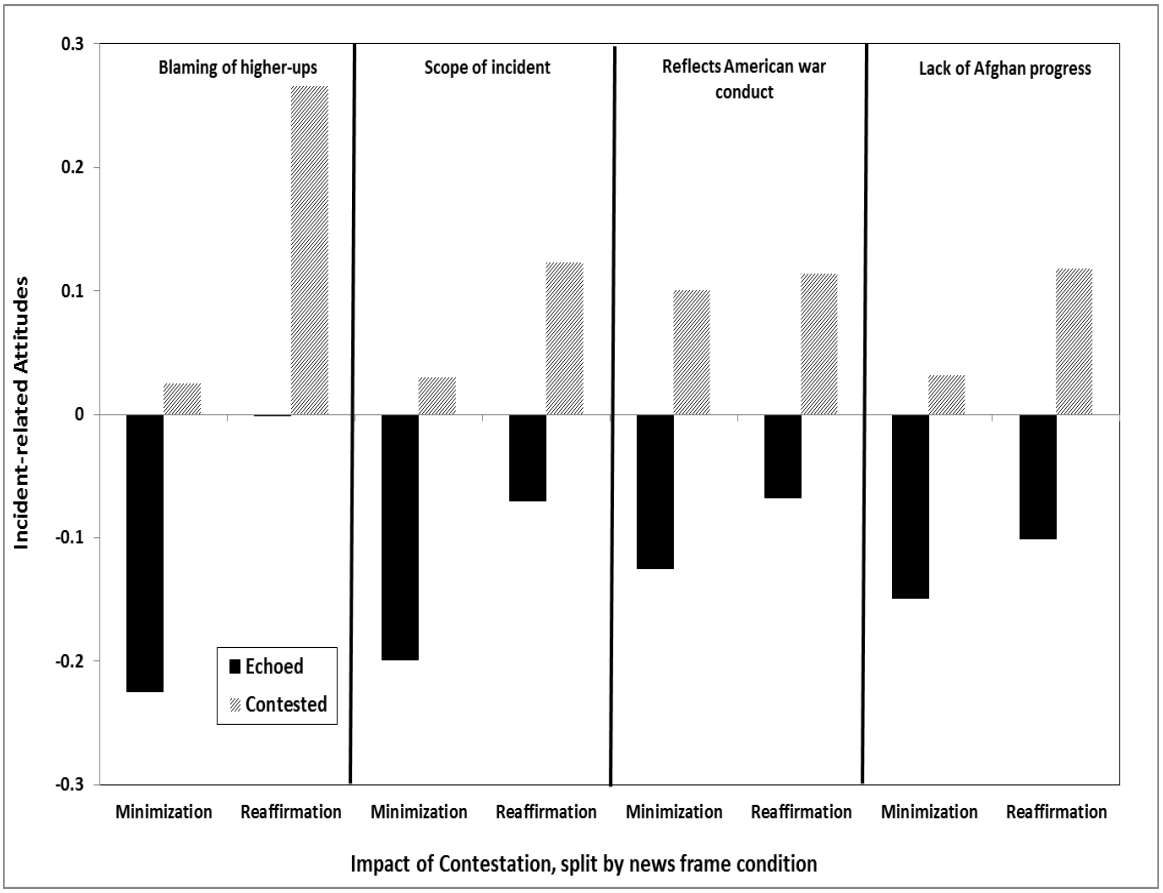

Figure 1. Means on incident-related attitudes, within frame conditions, when frame was echoed versus contested.

Next, we extended our analysis to broader attitudes about drone policy. We expected that contestation of the frames would diminish support for drone policy (H5), but that this effect would be moderated by the partisan affiliation of the respondents (H6). To explore these effects, we constructed a hierarchical regression model with four blocks: (1) respondent partisan identification; (2) dummy variables representing both conditions[4] and whether the respondent received the contested (versus echoed) frame; (3) five interaction terms: each condition by partisanship, contestation by partisanship, and each condition by contestation; and (4) two three-way interaction terms built from the previous block: partisanship interacted with each frame and contestation together. The model is presented in Table 2.

[4] In our design of the experiment, we had additional message conditions that are not included in our analysis here. Therefore, entering both conditions as dummy variables is feasible in a single model, where both are being compared to any other condition.

Table 2. Predicting Drone Policy Support by Partisanship, Frame, and Contestation.

Predictor	Standardized beta
Block 1	
Partisanship (Dem)	−.320***
Incremental R^2	10.2%
Block 2	
Received minimization frame	.074*
Received reaffirmation frame	−.007
Received contested frame	−.039
Incremental R^2	0.8%
Block 3	
DemocratXminimization	−.028
DemocratXreaffirmation	−.116
DemocratXcontested frame	.151^
MinimizationXcontested frame	.008
ReaffirmationXcontested frame	.000
Incremental R^2	0.4%
Block 4	
DemocratXcontested minimization	−.132
DemocratXcontested reaffirmation	.076
Incremental R^2 (%)	0.1%
Total R^2	11.5%

Note. Values in the table represent standardized beta coefficients upon entry.
* Significant at $p < .05$. *** Significant at $p < .001$. ^ Significant at $p < .10$.

As shown in Table 2, the model explains 11.5% of the variance in respondents' attitudes toward drones. This variance was driven almost entirely by respondents' partisan identification. The second block also shows that, although the minimization frame significantly improved drone attitudes ($\beta b = .074$, $p = .019$), the reaffirmation frame did not ($\beta = -.007$, $p = .821$). Regarding our fifth hypothesis, we see also in the second block that contestation alone does not affect drone policy attitudes ($\beta = -.039$, $p = .189$). Thus, we can reject H5. However, we do see a significant interaction in the third block. Although significant at $p = .078$, an interaction exists between partisanship and the presence of contestation ($\beta = .151$). This means the effect of frame contestation on respondents' drone policy attitudes depended on their partisanship. To clarify the nature of this interaction, we constructed a graph (see Figure 2) that illustrates the level of drone support at three levels of the partisanship measure—Republicans, Independents, and Democrats, by frame contestation.

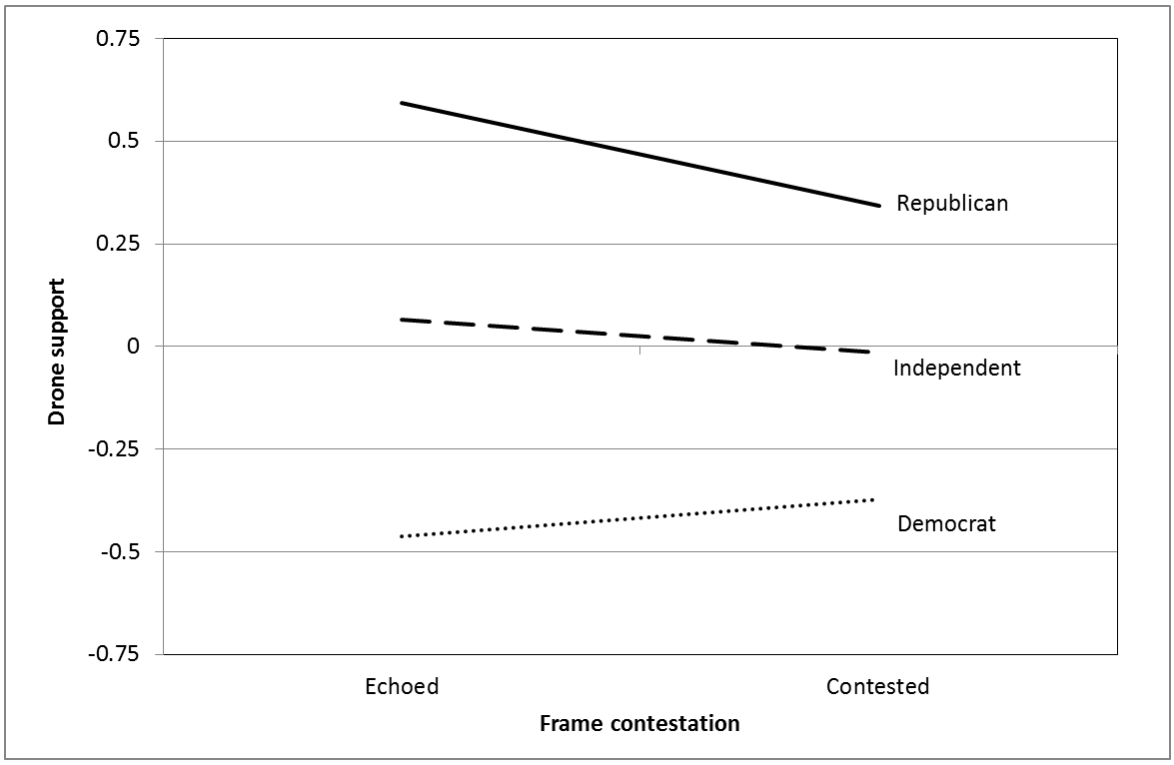

Figure 2. Moderating effect of partisanship on the relationship between frame contestation and drone policy support.

As shown in Figure 2, Republicans are most affected by contestation—which significantly diminishes their (generally positive) attitudes toward drone policy. Independents and Democrats experience less significant effects—Independents in the same direction as Republicans, and Democrats in the opposite direction. However, it is clearly among Republicans that the effect is strongest. This supports H6 and suggests that when Republican respondents hear contestation from their party's side of the congressional aisle, it significantly changes their impressions of the debated policy. They follow the lead of their own party in this instance, becoming more skeptical of the policy in response to the incident. On the other hand, Democrats, and to a lesser extent also Independents, seem unfazed by such contestation; their attitudes remain largely negative (or neutral in the case of Independents) toward drone policy, regardless of contestation. We reflect on these findings later in the discussion.

As a final exploration, we examined the effects of frame contestation on attitudes toward Congress. We posed a research question about whether the presence of congressional contestation affects respondents' confidence in Congress. To assess this effect, we ran an identical model to that presented in Table 2, but with the confidence in Congress measure as the dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Predicting Confidence in Congress by Partisanship, Frame, and Contestation.

Predictor	Standardized Beta
Block 1	
Partisanship (Dem)	.085**
Incremental R^2	0.7%
Block 2	
Received minimization frame	−.030
Received reaffirmation frame	−.043
Received contested frame	.007
Incremental R^2	0.2%
Block 3	
DemocratXminimization	−.052
DemocratXreaffirmation	−.055
DemocratXcontested frame	−.074
MinimizationXcontested frame	−.035
ReaffirmationXcontested frame	−.100*
Incremental R^2	1.4%
Block 4	
DemocratXcontested minimization	−.194
DemocratXcontested reaffirmation	−.171
Incremental R^2	0.2%
Total R^2	1.6%

Note. Values in the table represent standardized beta coefficients upon entry.
* Significant at $p = .05$. **Significant at $p < .01$.

As shown in Table 3, contestation of the reaffirmation frame does affect confidence in Congress—namely, it *decreases* confidence in Congress ($\beta = -.100$, $p = .05$). This was neither the case for the minimization frame nor for contestation generally. Instead, this effect only held for respondents who received the contested version of the reaffirmation frame—and regardless of the partisanship of the respondent. As suggested earlier, the reaffirmation frame is likely the most difficult to contest. It can be politically dangerous, for example, for political opponents to generate counterarguments to the notion that the United States is virtuous. The results here show that even if such counterarguments are made, they have negative effects on respondents' perceptions of Congress. Therefore, it could be perceived as unwise for congressional officials to challenge reaffirmation frames; not only do they gain little in terms of changing policy attitudes but they tend to suffer politically as well.

Discussion

Our results indicate that frame contestation in the news has a demonstrable impact on citizens' attitudes. These findings align with Entman's (2004) cascading activation model. Specifically, our results suggest that when messages are offered at the top of the framing hierarchy by White House and military officials, but are then contested by congressional officials in the press, it significantly diminishes the cascade of these initial frames as they move toward the public. This was the case even for frames that were culturally resonant—those designed to protect and restore U.S. national identity in the wake of a national transgression. Given the uphill climb that political opponents face when attempting to limit the cascade of such culturally resonant frames in these moments, this contestation effect is all the more significant. These results have important implications for journalists, citizens, and political officials. We wish to emphasize three significant findings.

First, our results reveal that contestation of the two frames by congressional officials generated significantly more negative attitudes toward the drone incident among respondents. In each contested condition, respondents were more likely to blame higher-ups, see the incident as wider in scope, perceive the incident as reflective of the way the United States conducts itself in war, and regard the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan as flawed. These results are illuminating: They reveal that challenges to frames—even culturally resonant frames—by political officials in news can affect how the public interprets the character, causes, and consequences of national transgressions. Scholarship would suggest that these effects result from an increased motivation on the part of respondents—when presented with opposing ideas in a news article—to consciously evaluate the merit and strength of the initial frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). Theories of persuasion would suggest that such cognitive elaboration would lead to a more critical examination of the initial frame, often prompting less adoption of its arguments, especially if they are not particularly strong (e.g., Petty & Wegener, 1999). The arguments presented by these frames are appealing, though, not because they possess sound and compelling logic, but because of their resonance with and protection of the national identity. Thus, we would expect such frame contestation to have even stronger effects were these frames not culturally resonant.

That we do see contestation effects even in the face of such culturally resonant frames is important because it suggests: (a) citizens can be prompted *not* to blindly rally around the flag (Bloom, 1990; Branscombe & Miron, 2004) in times of national transgressions; and (b) journalists' imperative to report on elite disagreement in such moments is even more critical given the persuasive power of these frames absent contestation. Imagine that such challenges had been present in news coverage of Abu Ghraib (Bennett et al., 2007). News coverage abounded with national identity–protective frames, and citizens' views were remarkably passive on this issue. Instead of creating an opportunity for critical reflection on Iraq policy, this moment turned into one of demonizing a few low-level soldiers and redirecting Americans' attention to the positive aspects of the U.S. military and the nation. Therefore, these results show that a responsible press that reports elite policy disagreement in moments of national transgressions is likely to elicit among the public more willingness to critically assess the nation, its leaders, and their policies. This is all the more important given the ongoing controversy and debate surrounding U.S. drone policy.

Second, frame contestation has implications for attitudes that go beyond the specific incident, depending on the partisanship of the audience. If Republican officials challenge a Democratic frame, Republican respondents are significantly more affected than others. This makes sense given the tendency of partisans to respond better to cues from their own leaders, especially in the context of national security issues (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Thus, were the situation reversed—with Democrats challenging a Republican White House frame—we would expect Democratic respondents to be more strongly affected. However, the current situation is particularly interesting, given the typical issue ownership patterns of Republicans and Democrats (Petrocik, 1996; Pope & Woon, 2009). Republicans are generally perceived to be more hawkish and supportive of aggressive foreign policy than Democrats (Pope & Woon, 2009), which is consistent with our data, showing that the most favorable perceptions of drone policy came from Republican respondents. That Obama has now become a figurehead for such aggressive military policy has, to some extent, confounded these partisan patterns. It seems that perhaps this ostensible issue borrowing on this particular policy matter has created an opportunity for Republicans to be more critical of the military than they might be during a Republican administration. And in this case, it is Republican citizens for whom such a critique is arguably most important—those who support the policy already and are less likely to critique it on their own. Therefore, it seems that cross-party frame contestation is particularly valuable, from an opinion diversity standpoint, in an issue context like drone warfare. Future studies should examine the various permutations of our manipulations: Republican White House and Democratic congressional challenges, *within-party* challenges to administration and military frames, and both intra- and interparty challenges on Democratic- and Republican-owned issues. These are important next steps in refining our understanding of the effects of frame contestation on broader policy attitudes.

Third, when the reaffirmation frame was contested by members of Congress, respondents expressed less confidence in this institution—and no demonstrable movement in their policy attitudes. This is notable because it suggests a patriotic backlash among respondents toward those sources who challenge the positive values and ideals of the United States. Such a challenge, which involves questioning what the transgression says about who we are and what we are about as Americans is, undoubtedly, a risky endeavor for political officials. To be sure, benefits can be gained from such challenges—contestation of reaffirmation did, after all, trigger significantly more negative attitudes among respondents toward the drone *incident* (though not the broader policy)—but likely not without political costs. It is, therefore, no wonder why challenges to the reaffirmation frame rarely manifest in the press, even if offered by congressional officials, because inclusion of such counterframes may also run a risk *for journalists* of alienating audiences and potentially triggering a patriotic backlash toward them.

From within these patterns, a fourth key point emerges: Frame contestation is most effectively and meaningfully offered in response to *minimization* frames. When echoed, minimization frames prompt more positive attitudes toward both the incident *and* the broader policy than do reaffirmation frames. This is somewhat surprising, given the overwhelming cultural resonance of the reaffirmation frame. However, the minimization frame does have more substantive content related to the incident itself—it directly addresses the scope of the incident and who is to blame. Therefore, it could simply be that our measures are better suited to capture its effects. Future studies should include broader measures to better assess the effects of both frames, potentially including measures of U.S. national identity and pride, which may be more related to and affected by the reaffirmation frame itself. Interestingly, however, we see that

contestation of the minimization frame—despite its strength—also has stronger effects—the very arguments that make it persuasive are easily countered by a firm contestation. And such contestation comes with minimal political cost, which is certainly not the case for the reaffirmation frame. Thus, the implications of these findings are that it is politically advantageous for officials to both construct and contest minimization frames, and it is democratically imperative for the press to report fully on such debates. Only then, in the face of substantive debate, can citizens be expected to critically evaluate the issues at hand.

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