**Politics or Public Health? Politicized Framing of the COVID-19 Pandemic in National and Local Newspapers**

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**Abstract:**

Beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to the COVID-19 pandemic quickly became polarized along partisan lines. One possible cause of this is media coverage that frames the pandemic in terms of partisan conflict instead of public health. 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. We find these newspapers employed partisan framings of the pandemic less frequently than some media criticism would lead us to expect. However, these frequencies differ across the kind of newspaper, with the two national papers far more likely to employ partisan framings than the local newspapers. These results suggest that the degree to which news consumers perceive the pandemic in political terms may depend on what kind of news they consume. Further, the technology-driven trend towards consumption of national instead of local media and the accompanying collapse of local news outlets may increase the degree to which news consumers perceive heath crises as partisan issues.

Beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to the COVID-19 pandemic quickly became polarized along partisan lines (Gadarian et al. 2020). One possible cause of this is media coverage that frames the pandemic in terms of partisan conflict instead of public health. Criticism of the media’s tendency to cover political issues, including health policy issues (Gollust et al. 2017), primarily in terms of partisan conflict and political maneuvering has a long history (Neuman et al. 1992, Patterson 1993, Cappella and Jameison 1997). Communications scholars describes this kind of coverage as employing “partisan conflict” or “game” frames. Partisan conflict frames describe political events as sites for conflict between the two parties, focusing on the conflict between parties instead of the content of the underlying issue (Neuman et al. 1992, Han and Federico 2017), while game frames treat 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, Lawrence 2000). Critics claim that these frames increase cynicism and trust (Patterson 1993), and further that casting policy debates in partisan terms exacerbates partisan divides on these issues (Han and Wackman 2017, Han and Federico 2017).

If news coverage contributed to the polarization of public opinion about the pandemic by politicizing the issue, the effect may have been exacerbated by the recent trends towards the nationalization of media consumption. 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 and Lawless 2016, 2018; Hopkins 2018), at least in part because of different patterns of political coverage in local and national media (Hopkins 2018). However, no work has measured how local and national media differ in their tendency to use politicized framing. Understanding whether and how coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic differs in local and national outlets can help us to understand how the decline of local news outlets affects the politicization of health issues.

To our knowledge, only one existing study examines the politicization of news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hart et al. (2020) use an automated dictionary-based approach to measure the frequency with which newspaper articles and nightly news stories between March 1 and May 26 mention politicians and scientists. They find that politicians are mentioned 1.59 times more frequently than scientists in newspaper articles, though at roughly the same rate in nightly news stories. Based on this, they conclude that “newspaper coverage is highly politicized, [and] network news coverage somewhat less so.” Importantly, they do not investigate the framing of news articles, merely the rate at which articles mention politicians and scientists, Further, their study is limited to six national or major-city newspapers, with the smallest circulation being the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

In this paper, we evaluate the degree to which news coverage has contributed to the politicization of COVID-19 by measuring the frequency with which a variety of newspapers use partisan conflict and partisan game frames in coverage of the pandemic. We do so through a content analysis of front-page articles published about the COVID-19 pandemic in during the first three months of the pandemic in the US. This period captures the onset of the pandemic and the period when public opinion related to the pandemic was most fluid. 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 or regional papers to compare coverage in national and local papers. We find that newspapers employed partisan framings of the pandemic less frequently than some media criticism would lead us to expect, with only 9.8 percent of stories employing partisan conflict frames and 2.3 percent partisan game frames across all newspapers. However, these frequencies are significantly higher for national prestige papers, suggesting that people who get their news from national sources, an increasing percentage of the American public, are exposed to more politicized coverage than those who still rely on local news sources.

**Method**

To measure the framing of pandemic-related coverage in national newspapers, we collected front-page articles published in the 12 weeks between February 21 and May 15. While the COVID-19 pandemic dates back to late 2019, the potential for a severe outbreak in the US became clear in mid to late February; we chose February 21 because it marked the start of the “Coronavirus Crash” in US stock indices. We end our sample on May 15, roughly when public concern about the pandemic stabilized.

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 a range of different kinds of 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 further divided newspapers by census division. We then selected one newspaper from each of the circulation tiers in each census division.[[1]](#footnote-1) The selected papers are listed in Table 2. 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.

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

**Table 1: Local Newspapers Sampled**

Once collected, 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. We defined a partisan conflict frame presenting the issue discussed in the article in terms of conflict, tension, debate, or disagreement between the two parties or actors representing the two parties. We defined partisan game frames as presenting the issue discussed in the article as a competition or a ‘game’ that political actors play to ‘win’ or ‘lose.’ The coders double coded one week of coverage (102 articles) from the national papers and achieved 100 percent agreement on coding decisions in that week.

We calculate the percentage of all COVID-related articles from each outlet that contain each type of partisan frame and the aggregate percentage across national outlets, local outlets, and local outlets within each region and within each circulation tier. We then use a Fisher’s exact difference of proportion test to compare these percentages between the two national newspaper, between national papers and local papers, and between local papers with different levels of circulation.

**Results**

Overall, we find that 9.8 percent of all articles employed partisan conflict frames, while only 2.3 percent of all articles used partisan game frames. Table 2 reports the percentage of articles from each outlet that used each frame, as well as the results aggregated by type of newspaper and circulation tier. We find that the overall figures conceal considerable variance between different kinds of newspapers. In the two national prestige papers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, 12.6 percent of pandemic-related articles were framed in terms of partisan conflict, with little variance between these two papers. However, only two-thirds as many articles in local papers (8.2 percent) employed partisan conflict frames, and statistically significant difference (*p* = 0.02). Partisan game frames were used almost exclusively by national prestige papers, with 4.1 percent of articles in national prestige papers using this frame vs. 0.7 percent of articles in local papers, again a significant difference (*p* < 0.01).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Newspaper (City, State) | % Conflict  Frame | % Game  Frame |
| Boston Globe (N = 46) | 19.6 | 8.7 |
| Buffalo News (N = 21) | 9.5 | 0.0 |
| Chicago Tribune (N = 30) | 6.7 | 0.0 |
| Star Tribune (Minneapolis) (N = 37) | 10.8 | 0.0 |
| Tampa Bay Times (N = 35) | 5.7 | 0.0 |
| Courier-Journal (Louisville) (N = 20) | 10.0 | 0.0 |
| Houston Chronicle (N = 36) | 25.0 | 0.0 |
| The Denver Post (N = 28) | 10.7 | 0.0 |
| Honolulu Star-Advertiser (N = 18) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| All Tier 1 Papers (N = 271) | 12.2 | 1.5 |
| Hartford Courant (N = 31) | 9.6 | 0.0 |
| Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY) (N = 17) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Indianapolis Star (N = 18) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| St. Louis Post-Dispatch (N = 30) | 13.3 | 0.0 |
| Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA) (N = 25) | 4.0 | 0.0 |
| Tennessean (Nashville, TN) (N = 21) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Austin American-Statesman (N = 29) | 20.7 | 0.0 |
| Las Vegas Review-Journal (N = 26) | 7.7 | 0.0 |
| Sacramento Bee (N = 24) | 8.3 | 4.2 |
| All Tier 2 Papers (N = 221) | 8.1 | 0.4 |
| Portland Press Herald (Portland, ME) (N = 33) | 6.1 | 0.0 |
| Daily Freeman (Kingston, NY) (N = 21) | 4.8 | 0.0 |
| Journal Star (Peoria, IA) (N = 22) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| North Platte Telegraph (North Platte, NE) (N = 15) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Citrus County Chronicle (Crystal River, FL) (N = 23) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Gleaner (Henderson, KY) (N = 13) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Texarkana Gazette (N = 26) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Missoulian (N = 29) | 6.9 | 0.0 |
| Union Democrat (Sonora, CA) (N = 11) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| All Tier 3 Papers (N = 193) | 2.6 | 0.0 |
| All Local Papers (N = 686) | 8.2 | 0.7 |
| New York Times (N = 413) | 13.6 | 4.9 |
| Washington Post (N = 485) | 12.0 | 3.7 |
| All National Papers (N = 969) | 12.6 | 4.1 |

**Table 2: Game and Conflict Framing by Newspaper and Type of Newspaper**

We see little difference between the two prestige papers in their use of either partisan conflict (13.6 percent vs. 12.0 percent, *p* = .61) or partisan game frames (4.9 percent vs. 3.7 percent, *p* = .55). However, there was considerable variation within tiers of local newspapers. Tier one papers used conflict frames at roughly the same rate as national papers, but more often than tier two papers (12.2 vs. 8.1, *p* = .19), and much more often than tier three papers (12.2 vs. 2.6, *p* < .01), though only the difference between tier one and three and tier two and three (*p* = .02) are statistically significant. However, all tiers of local papers used game frames significantly less often than the national papers (*p* = .06, .01, .01 for tiers one, two, and three vs. national papers).

*Where did the Partisan Frames Come From?*

These results show that local newspapers contain considerably less partisan-framed news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic than national newspapers, suggesting that people who consume news from national outlets tend to see more politicized content. Yet, these national papers may play an even larger role in disseminating partisan-framed coverage as these newspapers were also the source of most of the partisan conflict or partisan game-framed articles in local news outlets.

For each article published in a local newspaper we coded the source of the article according to the article’s byline. We aggregated these into two categories: Articles written by the newspaper’s own staff and articles sourced from the Associated Press or syndicated from other newspapers.[[2]](#footnote-2) Table 3 reports the percentage of local newspaper articles from each category coded with partisan conflict and partisan game frames. While the sample sizes are relatively small, the differences between sources in the percentage of articles employing conflict frames are large and statistically significant (*p* < .01 for all tiers). The number of game framed stories do not permit for a meaningful comparison within tiers across sources, though the few game framed articles that did appear in local papers were mostly syndicated.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tier | Byline (N) | % Conflict  Frame | % Game  Frame |
| 1 | Own staff (206) | 7.3 | 1.4 |
|  | AP or other paper (46) | 34.8 | 2.2 |
| 2 | Own staff (179) | 5.0 | 0.0 |
|  | AP or other paper (31) | 22.6 | 3.2 |
| 3 | Own staff (108) | 0.0 | 0.0 |
|  | AP or other paper (23) | 13.0 | 0.0 |

**Table 3: Conflict and Game Framing by Source of Article**

**Discussion**

We find that a small but meaningful percentage of front-page articles about the COVID-19 pandemic employed partisan conflict or partisan game frames. This percentage is notably lower than what might be expected from some criticism of the media’s coverage of the pandemic. It is also notably different from the conclusion of Hart et al. (2020), which finds news coverage of the pandemic to be “highly politicized.” The difference is easily explained by methodology; Hart et al. (2020) count the number of mentions of politicians and compare this to the number of mentions of scientists in articles about the pandemic, while we analyze the framing of news articles. However, as they note, Hart et al. (2020)’s analysis does not capture “journalistic choices that may have political implications, such as how an issue is framed” (pg. 685) which is the subject of our study. 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 the case health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic where government action is a central part of society’s response.

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 game frames six times as often as local papers. Interest in the decline of local news is not new, but most existing research has focused on the different issues covered by local and national outlets (Hopkins 2018) or on the causal effects of the disappearance of local newspapers (Hayes and Lawless 2015, 2018). 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 a mechanism by which the decline of local news has polarizing effects.

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 and Layton 2006). Such outlets thus rely on wire services and syndicated content for their coverage of legislative debates about policy responses to the pandemic, coverage that is easier to frame in partisan terms. 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), our findings suggest that local news content will be increasingly politicized.

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1. The exception was the East South Central census division, which had no tier 1 newspapers. For this division, we selected the highest circulation tier 2 paper, the Louisville *Courier-Journal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of the 101 articles from other sources, 62 were from the AP, 20 from the *New York Times*, 10 from the *Washington Post*, and nine from other papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)