

# **Not Too Negative: How Framing Political Attack Advertising Influences Economic Attitudes**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the effectiveness of lexical word choices, which frame an American political attack advertisement in terms of economic gain or loss. Additionally, the attack ad is framed as affecting one's own pocketbook versus societal financial well-being.

Couched within a professionally produced political attack advertisement about a financial scandal, this experiment found the gain condition to negatively influence perceptions of national economic well-being. Additionally, framing of the attack advertisement as affecting one's own personal finances increased perceptions of bankruptcy in the nation more than when it was framed as a societal issue.

The experiment broadens the usage of gain and loss framing in design while examining financial perceptions of both self and society. Findings contend that these different framing devices influence economic evaluations, which have potential to alter political attitudes in response to the political attack advertisement. The study highlights the implications of effective attack advertising on attitudes of voting citizens.

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**Keywords:** Political communication, public relations, framing, attack advertising, attitude.

## **Introduction: Not Too Negative: How Framing Political Attack Advertising Influences Economic Attitudes**

The complexity of message transference is a divisive issue in framing research due to its many applications to societal institutions such as public relations. That the framing of messages can have influences on audiences, when applied under the right circumstances is largely without contention. Much of the American public is aware of this broad definition. The study of framing has even been made public in political strategy articles such as "The Framing Wars" by *New York Times* columnist Matt Bai (2006).

However, the distinct applicability, conceptualization, and operationalization of framing have bemused researchers for decades. The enigma of framing can be traced back to Walter Lippmann's theory of "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922) and the prevalence of propaganda during the World Wars (Lasswell, 1971). Framing extends beyond informative and persuasive communications: it transcends societal communication and our psyches.

Today, studies emulating Tversky and Kahneman's (1981, 1987) seminal gain and loss experiment continue to produce wildly varying results due to different contexts, styles of message manipulation, and approaches to measurement (Kuhberger, 1998). The original 1981 experiment questioned participants about choices for curing a diseased population. This topic spurred medical communication studies finding best approaches to cancer recommendations, that gain-based messages increase use of sunscreen for beach goers, and myriad other medical field applications (Detweiler et al., 1999). In journalism and mass communication fields, gain versus loss framing has been applied to both news and politics, but with inconsistent findings, perhaps in part due to different theoretical traditions.

### **Framing Traditions in Communication**

Framing research has long traditions in the fields of journalism and mass communication, public relations, sociology, and psychology, as well as attention from other fields such as political science. For public relations research, Hallahan (1999) explicates seven distinct types of framing that are applicable to strategic communications such as issue framing, for which the issue of this study is the economy. With each field staking a claim in this quintessential paradigm, approaches to its study vary with great debate. The resulting fault lines stem from the major traditions of framing study, different conceptualizations of the theory, and myriad operationalizations of the research.

### **The Sociological View**

Complicating the picture further, there are psychological and sociological approaches to framing research designs. The diverse applications of framing inherently rely on different conceptualizations of the theory, largely in the traditions of sociology and psychology. Goffman referred to frames as a strip of narrative or a story line, later conceptualized as a picture frame. The picture frame both emphasizes what is included in the picture and what is excluded. The frame has also been characterized as having qualities itself (Gitlin, 1980).

Extending the picture frame metaphor, a frame can be elaborately gilded or simple, modern or traditional. Frames can influence the perception

of the picture inside it. Finally, frames have more recently been symbolized in housing structures. Here, a foundation is laid for the house and some beams are stronger and larger than others, which support the frame. Windows are placed in certain areas to provide certain views (Tankard, 2008).

Sociological, typically more macro-level, approaches to framing originate with Goffman's conception of "strips of doing" (1974), which is a way of understanding the world in which humans live. This original idea of narratives used for organizing information was further defined by Gamson and Modigliani (1987) as a frame, which involves a "central organizing idea or story line."

More recent scholars have furthered the definition to more fully integrate society. Reese (2008) has called frames "principles," which are produced by culture and guide society. Hertog and McLeod (2008) argue that frames, however, are larger than finite principles, and rather similar to a societal schema with a concentrated core and a dispersion of related cultural symbols. These frames are often persistent over time, but can also change with societal norms.

This view of frames is ecologically valid in its account for media production roles in society, such as by strategic communicators or professional journalists. Both societal norms such as deference to authority and the professionalization of news producers guide the cycle of frames in society. Various studies such as those of environmental protest coverage find repeated conflict frames of economic versus moral viewpoints. In the nuclear power debate Gamson and Modigliani (1987) found frames supported by interest groups of science and economic progress versus runaway technology or peace/destruction frames.

The professional values of news producers also play an important role in interpreting these viewpoints for the public. Hertog and McLeod (2008) emphasize that frames often portray a societal value guided by norms of the journalistic profession. Thus, certain stories are deemed newsworthy and certain aspects of a story may be emphasized for informative or entertainment purposes. Several studies have found that journalists seek out public officials and experts in society as sources for news, termed indexing, which often results in news favoring those in power or supporting the status quo (Bennett, 1990).

These professional limitations have been emphasized by sociological scholars such as Gaye Tuchman (1978). Gamson and Modigliani (1987) contribute to this definition of framing as the production of "frame packages," which are especially adoptable by journalists to make issues salient for the public. These packages include cultural symbols, pictures,

metaphors and catch-phrases, which are organized around a core, central organizing idea. They often show a range of positions on a societal issue.

Scholars such as Iyengar (1991), have found that these frames can also attach causal and treatment responsibility in their depiction of issues. They can provide solutions and different viewpoints through episodic frames and thematic frames. Master frames such as episodic frames emphasize the micro-level viewpoint of an issue, which often makes good pictures, is easy to understand, and makes a good, succinct story. Thematic frames, conversely, provide a bigger picture viewpoint and emphasize broader trends in society related to the issue.

Whether an event frame like protest circus (Hertog & McLeod, 1995), issue frame like nuclear progress (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987), or a master thematic frame (Iyengar, 1991), the role of society plays an integral part in its conceptualization. Power structures, societal institutions, professional norms, and culture are foundational pieces to constructing/deciphering an effective frame. Thus, these frames are so essential to our society that most people often do not even realize their existence.

### **The Psychological View**

At the micro-level of framing analysis lies a conceptualization that emphasizes not the message level of framing, but the psychological level of audience interpretation of information and its applicability to political attitudes. In this internally valid view, frames are not only impactful in their structure and meaning, but also in their effect on individual and popular opinion (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). In Robert Entman's "Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm" he emphasizes that while frames often guide thinking, the audience and individuals can produce different conclusions despite the intent of the communicator (1993).

Entman's contribution to framing is the idea of emphasis on particular aspects of society, which delineate certain considerations and solutions in response to a problem. Psychographic variables are important to the understanding and effectiveness of information, which are emphasized by Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley (1997). In looking at various studies that hinge on psychological components, as well as their own research, the scholars contend that certain publics with particular psychographic characteristics are more susceptible to the influence of frames and are thus more likely to act in accordance.

### **Gain and Loss Framing**

Important to the psychological perspective is also the idea of specific selection and emphasis of information. In Kahneman & Tversky's (1979)

landmark study utilizing different percentages of likelihood for gambling, different emphases on economics affected the psychology of participants and ultimately the decision-making process in the selection of choices. This study was replicated in an even more severe context involving the deaths of citizens related to an outbreak, where participants were more likely to choose an option that emphasized the saving of a larger percentage of lives over a confirmed number of deaths.

Our study is unique in its attempt to distinguish effects of framing stimuli in strategic communication content of gain and loss frames. Attack advertisements that are framed in terms of gain emphasize the potential upside if a congressman is removed from government. In contrast, a loss-framed attack advertisement about the same proposal emphasizes the potential loss if the congressman remains in government and continues to waste taxpayer money.

Choices framed in terms of gains lead to risk-averse decisions whereas choice framed in terms of losses tend to produce greater risk taking, according to Tversky and Kahneman (1981). However, when these same frames were examined within the context of a radio news report, no direct effects of gain and loss framing were found. Instead, most observed effects of gain and loss framing were moderated by other textual features (Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach & Zubric, 2004). This may be due to the fact that the topic of that study, the development of suburban areas, was of low consequence to study participants. When considering matters of money and human life on the other hand, humans tend to be risk-averse creatures (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, p.457). As such, the framing of politicized economic issues is especially important when considering effects.

In regard to economic affects due to choices made by a politician, potential financial gains or losses as a taxpayer sets up an appropriate context to investigate the nature of framing. The state of the economy is an issue of national concern, especially for our adult sample. The study also further heightened the salience of the economy issue for our college student participants by couching the potential gains and losses of the policy in the context of bankruptcy and unemployment after the recession of the early 2000s. This issue is one that many people care about, yet they feel relatively uninformed about the various complex proposals surrounding the economy.

In this context, strategic framing may be particularly important in attitude formation. Gain and loss framing is a good match for the study of economic attitudes. Political campaigns provide salient considerations regarding economic evaluations. Financial loss is one such economic consideration often cited in attack advertisements against ineffective leadership. Loss frames were associated with risk taking and gain frames were associated with being risk averse (Kahneman & Tversky, 1981, p.453).

The context of the choice in this study is in regard to action about unseating a risky congressional official being accused of abusing financial policies. Given the findings referenced above, we expect to see that gain frames will increase perceptions of a bad economy in this study.

### **Strategic Communications in Public Relations**

The aforementioned studies about experimental framing effects illuminate strategic framing due to the increased intent of the message to persuade rather than only inform an audience. Persuasive political messages are manifested in diverse mediums and formats because they need to reach a wide range of publics. From teachers to business people, we are all affected by political issues. It is therefore important that political messages utilize both the central and peripheral routes of the elaboration likelihood model to target publics, activate and orient each route to the topic of politics, and emphasize specific factors that will increase favorability so that attitudes will persist and increase the likelihood of desired behaviors.

The elaboration likelihood model theory (ELM) holds that persuasion can occur when thinking is high, utilizing a central processing route, or when thinking is low, utilizing a peripheral processing route (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). This is a more detailed theory than early propaganda studies about mass persuasion (Lasswell, 1971) or cognitive response theory studies, which focused only on high levels of thinking (Greenwald, 1968). It emphasizes the importance of attitude as a mediating variable between the exposure to new information and a resulting change in behavior.

The central route to persuasion requires more concentrated cognitive activity about the media message. Here a person draws on both their personal experience and their prior knowledge to scrutinize the information and determine an opinion regarding the message's claims (Berger & Mitchell, 1989). Personal experience may bring in certain considerations about the message making the framing more or less relevant.

Prior information held regarding the message may increase one's ability to process the message, accept the frame, and evaluate possible behaviors (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Individuals with high amounts of knowledge, however, could also be more resistant to persuasive framing when they are evaluated. In general, attitudes changed through the central route are clearer and more securely cemented in one's cognitive structure. These attitudes are more easily accessible from memory over time and are more highly predictive of behavior (Petty & Krosnick, 1995).

Unlike the central route, the peripheral route of cognitive processing requires less effort in evaluating the media message. Here one's motivation or ability to process the information is low, so persuasive framing must

instead utilize simple cues to change attitudes and promote behavior (Fazio & Williams, 1986).

As “cognitive misers” in a bloated media world, we must filter out information that is not important or relevant (Lang, 2000). This low motivation for information processing means that acceptance of a persuasive frame will be passive. If one does not have the ability to process the message due to its fleeting format or one’s lack of knowledge, simple cues might at least promote a positive association with the message.

Peripheral cues are typically most effective in only the short-term, however still can have powerful, temporary effects (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). They can be effective for time-specific promotions, targeting of low motivation populations, and those without the ability to process more detailed information. These attitudes dissipate over time, however, and are not stable fixtures in memory.

In relation to political messages, each route therefore requires activation of attitudes utilizing different techniques. For those populations with more interest or knowledge regarding political issues, a central route supported by rational and relevant frames is most effective.

These publics will also draw upon personal experience in their evaluations, which means messages also have to articulate why this specific individual should care about the political issue. For example, how this issue might impact one’s taxes. This type of pocketbook approach would focus on effects of the individual rather than on society as a whole.

A peripheral route would best suit those populations who are not motivated or do not have the ability to process energy-related information in an effortful manner. For those with low motivation, often simple cues can form impressions that everyone is participating in this political campaign. For example, the bandwagon effect, can subtly pressure individuals to feel that they are missing out on something or going against society (O’Gorman, 1973).

For those with low knowledge levels or a low need for cognition, simple emotions or judgments can still be elicited. Certain politicized cues can enhance the frame and increase message acceptance. These simple cues can still impact attitudes and support desired behaviors.

Some specific factors that are likely to increase such desired behaviors are valence, repetition, and confidence. Valence refers to the degree of favorability in respect to the message. In general, the more favorable a response to a message, the higher the likelihood that persuasion will take place. The more unfavorable a response is to a message, the lesser the chance of influence and even potential change in the opposite direction (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, Unnava, 2000). Favorability can be increased by tactics such as making associations with previously held beliefs or

ideologies, activating self-perceptions congruent with the message (self concept), or establishing a relationship with the individual (Fournier, 1998).

Repetition is also a factor, which relates to the extent of thinking in regard to the message. If a message is repeated, the individual has more exposure to the persuasive components. They therefore have the opportunity to elaborate more on the message and are more likely to be persuaded (Andrews & Shrimp, 1990). This is often tested in studies by having participants make lists of thoughts regarding a particular persuasive message. The more thoughts listed indicates a larger extent of thinking (Petty, Brinol, Priester, 2009).

Explicating the two unique routes of persuasion in the elaboration likelihood model in regard to political attack advertising shows how different publics can indeed be persuaded when messages are constructed under the right circumstances. While some citizens may have more knowledge or motivation to process political messages, those with lower motivation or ability can still be targeted in persuasive campaigns and moved to action.

### **Economic Attitudes**

Potential effects from gain and loss framing, as well as pocketbook and sociotropic framing are analyzed in this study for effects on political and economic attitudes. Economic attitudes are an especially relevant topic on the national agenda in light of banking scandals, housing crashes, and the overall recession. Jobs and the economy have been major political issues in state and national elections. For citizens, economic attitudes are important for personal psychological well-being, whether in regard to one's pocketbook or the economic health of the nation.

Voting literature provides a thorough investigation of economic evaluations by citizens. Voters rely on evaluations about the nation's economic state when they make decisions about who to vote for in the election booth. This utilizes a societal, or sociotropic, viewpoint for making voting decisions. Several studies have predicted the success of incumbents on the health of the economy (Kinder & Kiewiet 1981, Lewis-Beck, 1988). Citizens use these sociotropic evaluations, instead of their own economic situation.

Voting based off of one's own financial well-being, or pocketbook, is less common. People think with their pocketbook in everyday situations that directly affect them, but not typically in situations related to society at large (Popkin, Gorman, Phillips & Smith, 1976). This form of pocketbook voting would avoid information received from political advertisements and media about societal welfare. It instead accounts for only one's personal well-being as affected by a politician, making voting a highly personalized experience for those with this outlook.



## **Hypotheses**

This study posits that pocketbook frames have potential to personalize political advertisements, affecting economic and political attitudes. Making an economically-based attack advertisement more personal would increase effects in citizens through both central and peripheral processing routes because it would activate relevant schemas about past personal economic experiences. A pocketbook frame would increase the perceived importance of the economy and government more than a frame including others in the risk scenario. Hoping for a more positive personal future, viewers are more likely to have more confidence in politicians and the economy. A sociotropic frame would instead invoke negative schemas about the vast financial problems and political scandals around the country, lowering confidence. While a viewer likely has no personal experience with these, the sociotropic condition would activate information about these events.

A gain frame would also increase confidence in the economy and in politicians, while the loss frame would lower confidence. Gain frames make people risk averse, so viewers of the political advertisement would have more confidence in the economy and politicians, which would lower their perceived risk. Conversely, the loss frame would lower confidence in the economy and politicians while increasing the risk- the perception of an unstable, risky economy and political environment.

H1: Pocketbook frames will increase confidence in the economy more than sociotropic frames.

H2: Pocketbook frames will increase political confidence more than sociotropic frames.

H3: Gain frames will increase confidence in the economy more than loss frames.

H4: Gain frames will increase political confidence more than sociotropic frames.

## **Methods**

The data in this study were collected using an experiment embedded in a web-based survey of respondents enrolled in undergraduate courses at a large Midwestern university. Their instructors offered extra credit for participating in the study. All potential participants were contacted by e-mail in the spring of 2013 and given the Website of the online survey. The survey was completed by 183 students over a two week period in February 2013.

The same survey was then administered by Survey Sampling International to an adult population. Participants received \$1.00 for their participation. The survey was provided in an online survey through an email and was completed by 177 adults over a two week period in June 2013.

## **Experimental Design**

Our experiment was designed in a fully-crossed 2x2 structure. The goal of this design was to allow us to examine an internally valid frame manipulation, adhering to the strict operationalization of framing offered by Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1984) and an ecologically valid manipulation that more closely conforms to the reality of how political advertisements are constructed (Edelman, 1993; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). In the context of a financial scandal of a congressman, gain and loss frames were used in the first experimental factor, which focused on the gains from expelling the congressman, or the possible losses if he is not removed. In the second factor, the political advertisements were framed as pocketbook or sociotropic effects from removing or keeping the congressman in government.

## **Experimental Treatments**

The manipulated political advertisements were created with audio/video editing software to a level of professional quality. The advertisement focused on the issue of a corrupt congressman misusing tax dollars while Americans are struggling in a poor economy. Specifically, it encouraged viewers to visit the website of a political action committee and sign a petition to remove the congressman.

Respondents saw an advertisement very similar to contemporary political attack ads. The advertisement included pictures of money and houses to cite the mortgage and financial crises, as well as the congressman's transgressions. Pictures of luxurious spending habits by the congressman were depicted with his image in black and white. The voice over for the advertisement spoke in a foreboding voice to condemn the congressman's behavior.

The manipulations were constructed from a psychological framing standpoint in that only specific words and phrases were altered in each condition to ensure that any affect was caused by those strict changes. The changes, however, were carried out throughout the entire advertisement, creating a consistent message and adding to the ecological validity of an attack advertisement attempting to persuade the public. The advertisement was created to mimic contemporary attack ads. An example of the strict wording manipulations and use of the frames can be seen in the following bolded text (see all treatments in Appendix):

### **email prompt for pocketbook gain frame.**

Please read the following email and watch the advertisement produced by Taxpayers For Accountability. Your opinions are important to us so please pay close attention and be prepared to answer a few questions.

Dear Taxpaying Citizen,

Have **you** heard about the financial scandal involving Congressman James Smith? Instead of putting **your** tax dollars to work he's been lining the pockets of his big mortgage company campaign donors. Is that the kind of representation **you** want in Congress? Protect **your wallet** by signing the online petition to **clean up Congress**. **You** can help **clean up** Smith's act in Congress and **restore integrity** to politics by visiting **www.CleanUpCongress.com**.

Sincerely,

Taxpayers for Accountability

### **political advertisement for pocketbook gain frame.**

While **you've** been working hard to pay the bills during this tough economy, Congressman James Smith has been living like a king on the campaign trail. First-class flights. Suites in plush resorts. Gourmet meals at five star restaurants. All courtesy of campaign donors with ties to big mortgage companies who gave him more than \$250,000. In return? Smith funneled 300 million of **your** taxpayer dollars to his big mortgage industry donors. Is that how **you** want **your** money spent? It's no wonder mortgage industry lobbyists presented him their "2012 Friend of Real Estate Award." James Smith. A friend of big mortgage companies. **No friend of yours.**

**Protect your wallet. You can help restore integrity to congress** by visiting **CleanUpCongress.com** now and signing the petition to **clean up Congress**. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3. (Text on screen: Visit CleanUpCongress.com now to sign the petition. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3)

### **email prompt for sociotropic loss frame.**

Please read the following email and watch the advertisement produced by Taxpayers For Accountability. Your opinions are important to us so please pay close attention and be prepared to answer a few questions.

Dear Taxpaying **Citizens**,

Have **you all** heard about the financial scandal involving Congressman James Smith? Instead of putting **our** tax dollars to work he's been lining the pockets of his big mortgage company campaign donors. Is that the kind of representation **we** want in Congress? **Let's** protect **our tax dollars** by signing the online petition to **cut our**

**losses. We can help cut Congress’s losses in Smith and remove this shame from politics by visiting [www.CutOurLosses.com](http://www.CutOurLosses.com).**

Sincerely,  
Taxpayers for Accountability

**political advertisement for sociotropic loss frame.**

While **we**’ve been working hard to pay the bills during this tough economy, Congressman James Smith has been living like a king on the campaign trail. First-class flights. Suites in plush resorts. Gourmet meals at five star restaurants. All courtesy of campaign donors with ties to big mortgage companies who gave him more than \$250,000. In return? Smith funneled 300 million of **our** taxpayer dollars to his big mortgage industry donors. Is that how **we** want **our** money spent? It’s no wonder mortgage industry lobbyists presented him their “2012 Friend of Real Estate Award.” James Smith. A friend of big mortgage companies. **No friend of ours.**

**Let’s protect our tax dollars. We can remove this shame from congress by visiting [CutOurLosses.com](http://CutOurLosses.com) now and signing the petition to cut Congress’s losses.** Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3. (Text on screen: Visit [CutOurLosses.com](http://CutOurLosses.com) now to sign the petition. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3)

In these different textual versions of the attack advertisement, pocketbook frames utilize words such as “you’ve,” “you,” and “your,” while the sociotropic manipulation uses words such as “we’ve,” “we,” and “our.” Similarly, the gain frame emphasizes the positive aspect of removing the congressman with phrases such as “restore integrity,” “clean up Congress,” and the website name “CleanUpCongress.com.” The loss frame emphasizes the negative aspect of the congressman with phrases such as “remove this shame,” “cut Congress’s losses,” and the website name “CutOurLosses.com.” The visual images in each advertisement remained constant for each condition and were not altered for each type of frame employed.

**Stimuli**

Pocketbook	Gain	Frame	Attack	Advertisement:
<a href="http://youtu.be/NH4szR523P0">http://youtu.be/NH4szR523P0</a>				
Sociotropic	Loss	Frame	Attack	Advertisement:
<a href="http://youtu.be/NW_sN5Pg6cw">http://youtu.be/NW_sN5Pg6cw</a>				
Pocketbook	Loss	Frame	Attack	Advertisement:
<a href="http://youtu.be/4AkrBa8FJr8">http://youtu.be/4AkrBa8FJr8</a>				
Sociotropic	Gain	Frame	Attack	Advertisement: <a href="http://youtu.be/Ormj-_9h1SI">http://youtu.be/Ormj-_9h1SI</a>

Of the 183 student respondents, 46 were exposed to the loss/pocketbook condition, 45 were exposed to the gain/pocketbook condition, 47 were exposed to the loss/sociotropic condition, and 45 were exposed to the gain/sociotropic condition. For the 177 adults in the sample, 45 viewed the loss/pocketbook condition, 43 viewed the gain/pocketbook condition, 47 viewed the loss/sociotropic condition, and 42 viewed the gain/sociotropic condition.

*Measures*

*Outcome Measures.* The dependent variables for measuring confidence about the American economy include *Budget* and *Bankruptcy*. All dependent variables were created using a mean of responses on a 5-point scale about how much the participant agreed with statements about the economy. The variable *Budget* asked how much the participant agreed with the statement, “The national budget could be balanced in 2016.” (M= 2.86, S.D.=1.62). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics. *Bankruptcy* asked how much participants agreed with the statement “Bankruptcy is prevalent in the United States” (M=2.32, S.D.=1.35).

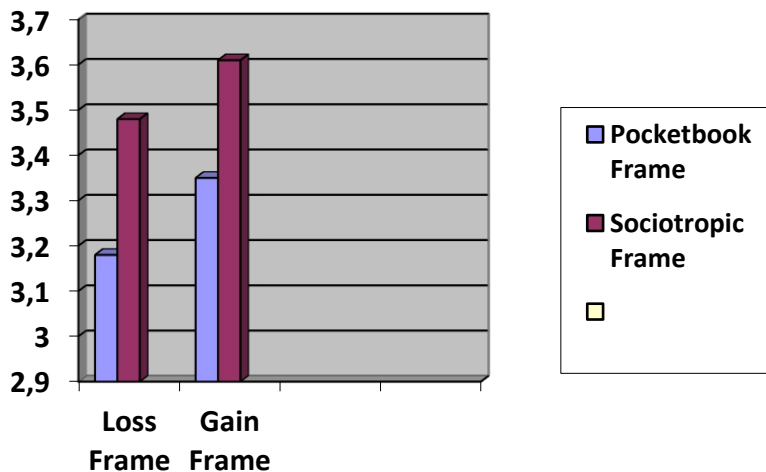
*Political Confidence* was created by the level of agreement with the statements “Taxes are supporting responsible policies,” “Earmarked special spending projects are legitimate,” and “Congress puts citizen needs before corporate interests” (M=2.32, S.D.=1.93).

**Results**

**Student Sample**

For the students, a main effect was found for confidence in the national budget being balanced by 2016 ( $F(128) = 4.38, p=0.012$ ), this was such that participants who viewed the pocketbook frame to have increased confidence in the economy and in politics.

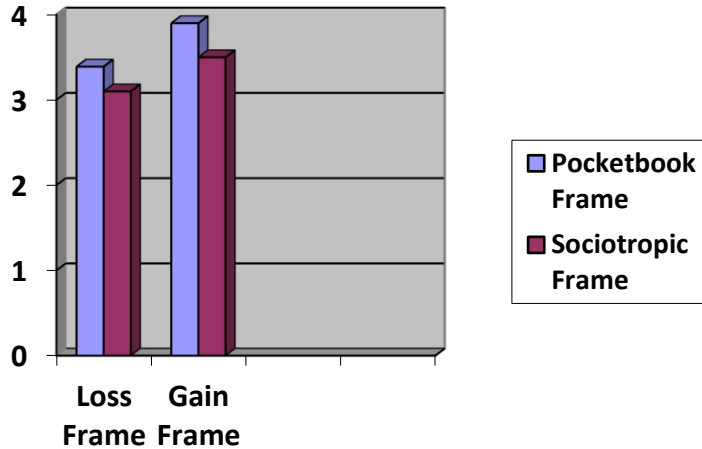
**Table 1. Student Sample Main Effect of Sociotropic-Pocketbook Framing**



Regarding the prevalence of bankruptcy in the United States, we found a main effect ( $F(128) =$

3.652,  $p= 0.046$ ) (see table 2). No significant results were found regarding political confidence.

**Table 2.**

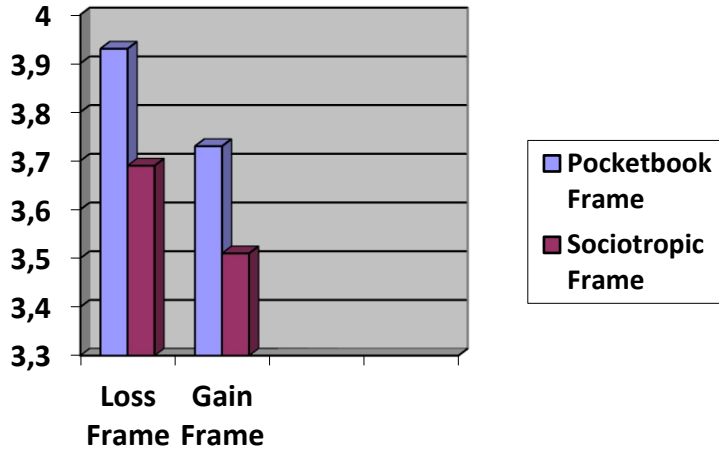


**Student Sample Perceptions of Prevalence of Bankruptcy**

**Adult Sample**

For the adult sample, a transverse interaction was between gain/loss and pocketbook/sociotropic on perceptions of bankruptcy in the United States ( $F(128)=3.9, p=0.05$ ). This was such that the role of gain and loss framing was reversed. In the pocketbook condition perceptions were higher in the gain framing than the loss framing. In the sociotropic condition perceptions were higher in the loss framing than in the gain framing.

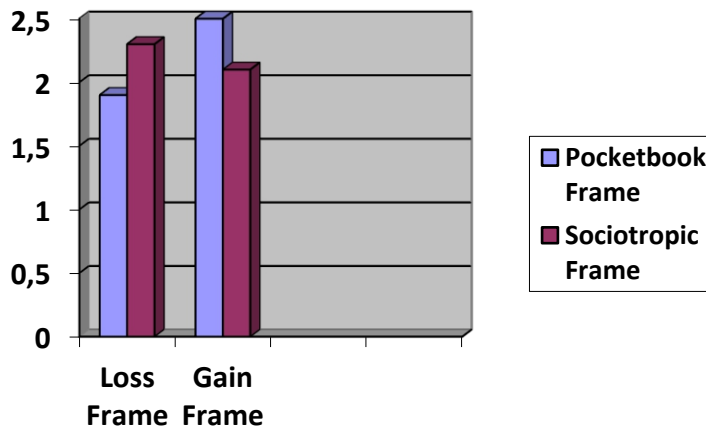
**Table 3. Adult**



**Sample Prevalence of Bankruptcy**

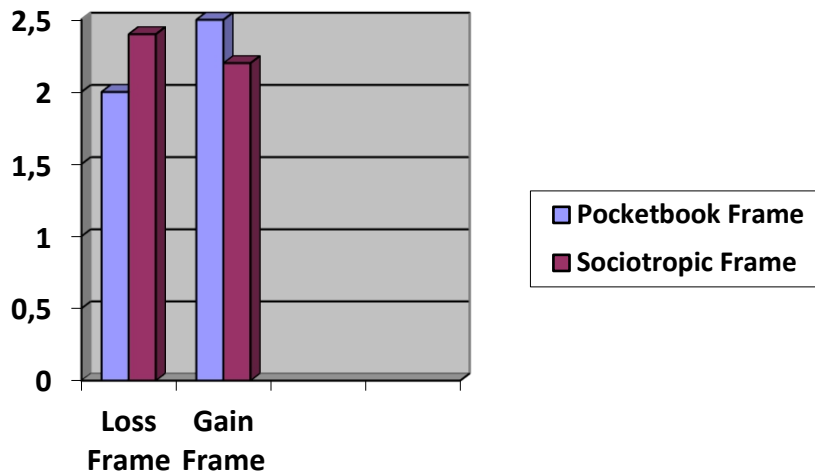
For economic confidence, pocketbook frames were found to increase confidence in the balancing of the national budget in 2016 ( $F(128)=3.9$ ,  $p=0.05$ ). This revealed another transverse interaction of higher confidence in the gain frame than the loss frame in the pocketbook condition, which was reversed in the sociotropic condition.

**Table 4. Adult**



**Sample Transverse Interaction for Balancing the National Budget**

In terms of political confidence, the pocketbook frame increased perceptions of taxes used properly ( $F(128)= 7.726, p= 0.02$ ), appropriate earmarked projects ( $F(128)= 4.803, p=0.03$ ), and citizen needs as priorities over corporate interests ( $F(128)=3.42, p=0.01$ ). This showed another transverse interaction where gain framing was higher than loss framing in the pocketbook condition. In the sociotropic condition loss framing was higher than the gain framing.



**Table 5. Adult Sample Transverse Interaction for Political Trust**

### Discussion

This study sought to explore the experimental application and conceptual extension of gain versus loss framing. While results have varied widely in past studies, this survey found that the gain frame did align with risk averse attitudes by respondents. Viewers of the political attack advertisements subsequently shared increased hope in their politicians and the economy.

This effect was found in an advertisement, a form of strategic communication not previously studied in a gain versus loss framing context. Our study utilized both strict internal and external validity to mimic a contemporary political attack advertisement and still isolate the cause for effects. This leads us to wonder if there is such a fractured paradigm. Journalists and public relations professionals both have audiences in mind when crafting messages, as well as sociological influences from their professions. Cannot both internally and externally valid experiments be produced for both informative and strategic communications?



In terms of audience psychology, this study also expands potential effects from political advertising. Our survey found evidence that pocketbook framing can effectively increase confidence in the economy and politics, while still implementing a negative effect on the victim of the attack advertisement. Both the student (57.2%) and adult sample (66.6%) stated they were likely or very likely to vote for a different candidate in an upcoming election.

This shows potential for a new type of attack advertisement that doesn't go completely negative. The combination of a gain frame and a pocketbook frame allowed viewers to personalize the issue and exhibit their risk averse instincts. This advertisement attacked the congressman, but was done in such a way that respondents did not show the resulting effects of cynicism so often found in political studies (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Future scholarship should continue these avenues of research to explore if a bridge can be made between the sociological and psychological traditions of framing for not only informative, but also strategic communication in public relations. Additionally, pocketbook and sociotropic framing should be further explored in political contexts that are not only economically based, but broader in terms of personal and societal framing. Such research could improve experimental design for scientists and message construction for strategic communicators.

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## **Appendix**

### **Pocketbook Gain Frame**

#### **Email Prompt:**

Please read the following email and watch the advertisement produced by Taxpayers For Accountability. Your opinions are important to us so please pay close attention and be prepared to answer a few questions.

Dear Taxpaying **Citizen**,

Have **you** heard about the financial scandal involving Congressman James Smith? Instead of putting **your** tax dollars to work he's been lining the pockets of his big mortgage company campaign donors. Is that the kind of representation **you** want in Congress? Protect **your wallet** by signing the online petition to **clean up Congress**. **You** can help **clean up** Smith's act in Congress and **restore integrity** to politics by visiting **www.CleanUpCongress.com**.

Sincerely,

Taxpayers for Accountability

#### **Political Advertisement:**

While **you've** been working hard to pay the bills during this tough economy, Congressman James Smith has been living like a king on the campaign trail. First-class flights. Suites in plush resorts. Gourmet meals at five star restaurants. All courtesy of campaign donors with ties to big mortgage companies who gave him more than \$250,000. In return? Smith funneled 300 million of **your** taxpayer dollars to his big mortgage industry donors. Is that how **you** want **your** money spent? It's no wonder mortgage industry lobbyists presented him their "2012 Friend of Real Estate Award." James Smith. A friend of big mortgage companies. **No friend of yours.**

**Protect your wallet. You can help restore integrity to congress** by visiting **CleanUpCongress.com** now and signing the petition to **clean up Congress**. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3. (Text on screen: Visit **CleanUpCongress.com** now to sign the petition. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3)

### **Pocketbook Loss Frame**

#### **Email Prompt:**

Please read the following email and watch the advertisement produced by Taxpayers For Accountability. Your opinions are important to us so please pay close attention and be prepared to answer a few questions.

Dear Taxpaying **Citizen**,

Have **you** heard about the financial scandal involving Congressman James Smith? Instead of putting **your** tax dollars to work he's been lining the

pockets of his big mortgage company campaign donors. Is that the kind of representation **you** want in Congress? Protect **your wallet** by signing the online petition to **cut your losses**. **You** can help **cut Congress's losses in Smith** and **remove this shame from politics** by visiting **www.CutYourLosses.com**.

Sincerely,

Taxpayers for Accountability

### **Political Advertisement:**

While **you've** been working hard to pay the bills during this tough economy, Congressman James Smith has been living like a king on the campaign trail. First-class flights. Suites in plush resorts. Gourmet meals at five star restaurants. All courtesy of campaign donors with ties to big mortgage companies who gave him more than \$250,000. In return? Smith funneled 300 million of **your** taxpayer dollars to his big mortgage industry donors. Is that how **you** want **your** money spent? It's no wonder mortgage industry lobbyists presented him their "2012 Friend of Real Estate Award." James Smith. A friend of big mortgage companies. **No friend of yours**.

**Protect your wallet. You can remove this shame from** congress by visiting **CutYourLosses.com** now and signing the petition to **cut Congress's losses**. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3. . (Text on screen: Visit CutOurLosses.com now to sign the petition. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3)

### **Sociotropic Gain Frame**

#### **Email Prompt:**

Please read the following email and watch the advertisement produced by Taxpayers For Accountability. Your opinions are important to us so please pay close attention and be prepared to answer a few questions.

Dear Taxpaying **Citizens**,

Have **you all** heard about the financial scandal involving Congressman James Smith? Instead of putting **our** tax dollars to work he's been lining the pockets of his big mortgage company campaign donors. Is that the kind of representation **we** want in Congress? **Let's** protect **our taxpayer dollars** by signing the online petition to **clean up Congress**. **We** can help **clean up** Smith's act in Congress and **restore integrity** to politics by visiting **www.CleanUpCongress.com**.

Sincerely,

Taxpayers for Accountability

### **Political Advertisement:**

While **we've** been working hard to pay the bills during this tough economy, Congressman James Smith has been living like a king on the campaign trail. First-class flights. Suites in plush resorts. Gourmet meals at five star restaurants. All courtesy of campaign donors with ties to big mortgage companies who gave him more than \$250,000. In return? Smith funneled 300 million of **our** taxpayer dollars to his big mortgage industry donors. Is that how **we** want **our** money spent? It's no wonder mortgage industry lobbyists presented him their "2012 Friend of Real Estate Award." James Smith. A friend of big mortgage companies. **No friend of ours.**

**Let's protect our tax dollars. We can restore integrity to congress** by visiting **CleanUpCongress.com** now and signing the petition to **clean up Congress**. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3. (Text on screen: Visit **CleanUpCongress.com** now to sign the petition. Paid for by Taxpayers for Accountability 501 c3)

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Dear Taxpaying **Citizens**,

Have **you all** heard about the financial scandal involving Congressman James Smith? Instead of putting **our** tax dollars to work he's been lining the pockets of his big mortgage company campaign donors. Is that the kind of representation **we** want in Congress? **Let's protect our tax dollars** by signing the online petition to **cut our losses**. **We** can help **cut Congress's losses in Smith** and **remove this shame from politics** by visiting **www.CutOurLosses.com**.

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