

# Who's in the Game? The Framing of the Canadian Election 2000 by *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*

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## Introduction

During election campaigns, most Canadians do not acquire their political information and impressions first-hand through, for example, participation in interest group activities, electoral forums or other political events. Instead they rely on mass media, especially television news, though newspapers continue to occupy a central role in national communication during elections (Taras, 1999: 18). The mainstream news media therefore shape the “informational environment” in which citizens make partisan choices, form opinions about policy and governance, and develop (or reinforce) ideological frameworks for interpreting information (Fletcher and Everett, 1991:182). Political communications are heightened during electoral campaigns that are regarded by political parties and by news organizations alike as media events, or battles fought on the media stage (Gilsdorf and Bernier, 1991: Taras, 1990: 152).

News mediation of political discourse affects the extent to which election campaigns encourage informed participation. As Fletcher and Everett argue, campaigns “should promote a constructive engagement of citizens, foster their interest and confidence in and understanding of the electoral process, and provide a stimulus to participation” (1991: 180). However, the

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organizational needs of media, coupled with long-standing journalistic practices, in particular the framing of electoral contests as games whose outcomes depend on highly personalized confrontations between party leaders, may undermine electoral democracy. Print and electronic media offer voters play-by-play commentary on who is winning the electoral game, punctuated with critical evaluations of the “team captains” (party leaders). Often neglected in the coverage are policy differences between parties and information on what is at stake in the electoral contest. Moreover, the persistent application of the game frame, often referred to as “horse-race” coverage, encourages parties to avoid clear issue positions and to obfuscate ideological distinctions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for democratic engagement, game framing treats citizens “as mere spectators, framed outside the story, not as participants integral to the election” (Mendelsohn, 1996: 15).

This article reports the results of a content analysis of election-related headlines in Canada’s two English-language national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, over the course of the 36-day 2000 federal election campaign. The national newspapers were selected because of their agenda-setting role in federal election campaigns, and because there were, for the first time, two of them competing for audience share in English Canada (see Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 191-92). Our objectives were twofold: first, to assess the prevalence of game framing in the two national dailies, and second to determine whether there were differences in campaign coverage between the two newspapers. In particular, our analysis examined whether the new, allegedly ideologically driven *National Post* (Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 192-93) illustrated overt partisanship in its attention to the parties and their leaders. The comparison proved fruitful, as we found differences in issue emphasis, leader portrayals and party assessments, differences that may reflect the two newspapers’ editorial stances and news values. Yet *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* alike embraced the game frame in their headlines, to the neglect of issues and quite possibly to the detriment of informed electoral participation.

### **Game Framing of Canadian Elections**

News framing is the necessary technique of processing and packaging information so it can be quickly conveyed by reporters and easily interpreted by the audience. As Norris explains, “news frames give ‘stories’ a conventional ‘peg’ to arrange the narrative, to make sense of the facts, to focus the headline, and to define events as newsworthy” (1997: 2). In an era of shorter newspaper reports and 30-second television clips, framing allows reporters and editors to fit complex and even novel events into familiar categories. Moreover, framing facilitates news selection and organization according to dominant discourses and assumptions (Mendelsohn, 1996: 10). The nature

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**Abstract.** This article reports the results of a content analysis of election-related headlines in Canada's two English-language national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, over the course of the 36-day 2000 federal election campaign. The authors find that the two national newspapers' headlines revealed differences in issue emphasis, leader portrayals and party assessment. Yet both newspapers embraced a "game frame" for election coverage—by focusing on the horse-race, leader personalities and campaign strategies—to the neglect of campaign issues and ideological distinctions between parties. These findings suggest that media game framing can result in troublesome consequences for constructive citizen engagement in election activities.

**Résumé.** Cette recherche présente les résultats d'une analyse effectuée sur le contenu des grands titres de deux journaux anglophones canadiens, le *Globe and Mail* et le *National Post*, au cours des 36 jours de la campagne électorale de 2000. Les auteures démontrent l'existence de certaines différences en ce qui a trait aux questions traitées par ces journaux, à la façon dont les chefs de partis y sont dépeints, et à l'évaluation des partis. Toutefois, le cadre utilisé par les deux quotidiens accorde une importance particulière à l'aspect stratégique de la campagne, en insistant sur la course entre les partis, sur la personnalité des chefs et sur les différentes tactiques utilisées. Les deux journaux négligent cependant les principaux enjeux de la campagne, ainsi que les distinctions idéologiques existant entre les partis. L'analyse suggère que d'importantes conséquences découlent du cadre d'analyse utilisé par les médias en ce qui a trait à un engagement constructif des citoyens dans les activités électorales.

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and direction of election coverage reflects both general journalistic practices and news values specific to election campaigns. Studies conducted in Canada, the United States and Australia indicate that a strategic meta narrative, called the game frame, structures much election coverage by print and electronic news organizations (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997: 37-57; Fletcher, 1981; Fletcher and Everett, 1991; Gilsdorf and Bernier, 1991; Lawrence, 2000; Mendelsohn, 1996; Patterson, 1994: 53-93; Simms, 2002; Taras, 1990: 152-54; Taras, 1999: 48-53; Wilson, 1980-1981).

The game seems a natural metaphor for an electoral contest, as it provides a clear narrative for news stories: "election day is the goal line and everything that happens during the campaign is significant only as it pertains to a politician's (or party's) chance of getting across the goal line" (Lawrence, 2000: 96). Not surprisingly, the game frame is often signalled to the reader via sports or battlefield metaphors (Simms, 2002: 95). "Clark hurls one-two punch: Tory leader attacks Liberals, Alliance in bid to become opposition choice"; this *Globe and Mail* headline from the 2000 campaign clearly illustrates the approach. Game framing shapes the selection and content of news stories, focusing on the horse-race elements of the campaign. These include: leader performance, especially during leaders' debates but also including gaffes, personality quirks and tidbits related to their personal lives; party strategies such as pseudo-events staged against colourful backdrops and the spin-doctoring offered up by party tacticians; party standings in public opinion polls; and dramatic confrontations, accusations and personal attacks.

Game framing of elections reflects the organizational needs of television, and the willingness of political parties to strategize to meet these

needs. However, the game frame is enthusiastically employed by all news media when covering political events such as election campaigns, for it meets key elements of newsworthiness, offering conflict between elites, winners and losers, personalities, drama and immediacy (Fletcher and Everett, 1991: 198-200; Gilsdorf and Bernier, 1991: 29; Lawrence, 2000: 95-96; Taras, 1990: 100-08). Embraced by the print media, the game frame generates news stories that are "light, tight and bright" (Gilsdorf and Bernier, 1991: 25), or "simple, direct, personal, dramatic, and new" (Fletcher and Everett, 1991: 193). Its focus on "infotainment" limits coverage of party platforms and issue differences. When issues are raised, they are positioned as strategic manoeuvres rather than as evidence of ideological distinctions between parties or meaningful debates about ideas. As Mendelsohn notes, "the language and culture of television encourages campaigns to be portrayed as a war, as a game, as drama, but rarely as a competition between alternate visions" (1993: 150).

The game frame was identified as a key election news practice in Canada as early as 1979. His analysis of media coverage of the 1979 federal election campaign led Fred Fletcher (1981) to argue that election campaigns are games played by political parties for the benefit of the news media. Jeremy Wilson (1980-1981) also drew attention to the prevalence of horse-race commentary by television and print news outlets during the 1979 and 1980 federal campaigns. Wilson showed how the "meta-campaign" of leader strategies, poll results and winning conditions drowned out discussion of ideas and public policy issues. Soderlund and his colleagues' content analysis of television, radio and newspaper coverage of the 1979 and 1980 federal elections confirmed a media focus on the game's key players, party leaders, as leadership issues ranged from 14 to 37 per cent of the stories per media outlet (1984: 33, 54-55). However, substantive issues such as national unity, unemployment and economic development received considerable attention during these elections and were featured in well over one half of the election stories. Thus, despite the prevalence of a horse-race theme, much of the coverage in 1979 and 1980 did employ an issue frame.

In the 1980s and 1990s, news reports of Canadian federal elections became even more attentive to the leaders' tours and typically put the game before the issues. The 1988 campaign was distinguished by a strong leader focus, as well over one half of the CBC, CTV and Global television network coverage featured the leaders in some way (Frizzell and Westell, 1989: 84). An analysis of coverage of the 1984, 1988 and 1993 campaigns in seven daily newspapers, including *The Globe and Mail*, found that attention to policy issues was scant in 1984, at 21 per cent, increased to 37 per cent of news stories in the 1988 "free trade election," and declined in 1993 to 31 per cent (Frizzell and Westell, 1994: 94). However, Dornan and Pyman's (2002: 208) content analysis of election stories in Toronto-area

and national newspapers during the 2000 federal election showed increased attention to campaign issues, with 51 per cent of the stories containing at least some reference to policy matters.

The game frame has also influenced the tone of news coverage, inspiring, or at least reinforcing, the trend toward negative evaluations of parties and especially party leaders, and generating cynical exposés of the manipulative tactics of parties. Content analyses of media coverage of federal election campaigns illustrate increasingly censorious evaluations of parties and leaders. While positive references to political actors tended to outnumber negative declarations in 1962 and 1974, by 1979 the major parties and their leaders were assessed in more disapproving terms, with a pattern of more negative than positive coverage noted for the 1980, 1984, 1993 and 2000 elections (Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 206-07; Fletcher and Everett, 1991: 96; Wagenberg et al., 1988: 125). In short, the game frame's trivialization of the issues, portrayal of campaigns as personality contests between party leaders, and hyper-critical evaluations of the strategies and motivations of political actors may affect voter interest and engagement in elections. Therefore, it is important to determine the extent to which national newspapers, as opinion-leaders at election time, employ this news frame.

### **Methodology**

The findings presented here are based on a content analysis of headlines for election-related news stories in *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, beginning the day after the writ was dropped (Monday, October 23, 2000) and ending the day after the election (Tuesday, November 28, 2000).<sup>1</sup> The two English-language national newspapers were chosen for three reasons. First, prestigious national dailies play a key role in setting the agenda for election coverage (Taras, 1999: 18). Second, newspapers offer the greatest potential for substantive, issue-based election coverage. Although institutional constraints such as shrinking budgets and scarcity of time and space prompt newspapers to adopt the strategic "light, tight and bright" format, they do have the organizational capacity to feature longer stories, more background and analysis and even substantive coverage of the issues, thus providing the most rigorous test of the game frame hypothesis. Third, the appearance of *The National Post* in 1998 signalled a more directly competitive national newspaper environment for the 2000 federal election. Although its owner, Conrad Black, sold 50 per cent ownership in the *Post* a few months before the election writ was dropped, his distinct and sometimes controversial editorial stance suggested that the *Post's* first foray into national election coverage might well reflect Black's conservative views and predilection for the Alliance party (Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 192-93). The presence of *The National Post* allowed us to

evaluate how national print media framing of the elections was affected by the competition for market share, and by what some commentators saw as the return of the partisan press (Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 191-92).

Headlines were selected for analysis because their prominence and importance in the news story position them as central framing devices. Headlines summarize the main topic of the news event, thereby defining stories so powerfully that readers “would have to make an extra effort to derive an alternative main topic from the text” (van Dijk, 1991: 50). Headlines shape the interpretation of the story by audiences, as they are often the only component of the story readers will look at or the only information readers will recall (van Dijk, 1991: 50, 69). Perhaps most importantly for our study, headlines are written by editorial staff, and thus reflect news values and newsroom culture, and express the social and political opinions of the newspaper. A newspaper’s party preferences and ideological dispositions are, therefore, most likely to be revealed by headlines.

The content analysis included headlines that appeared in the front sections and special election sections, but because we were concerned primarily with election news framing, headlines from the business section of either paper were not coded. Nor were headlines from the letters to the editor page included in the analysis. Although the letters to the editor appear in the front section of both newspapers, the associated headlines reflect the views of readers, not editors. In total, headlines for 1,141 election news stories were coded, 615 from the *Post* and 526 from the *Globe*.

Headlines were analyzed according to where they appeared in the paper (front page, editorial page, front section, special section), the type of story (hard news, personality profile, opinion column, editorial), and the main and secondary topics conveyed by the headline. Each headline was also categorized according to its overall frame, be it a *game frame* (headlines focusing on the strategic elements of the campaign, including the horse-race, poll results, leader personalities, campaign strategies, and leader and party evaluations) or an *issue frame* (headlines highlighting policy ideas or campaign issues, party stances on policy or election platforms, ideological differences between parties, and the party or government record). As well, we determined which political actor (party or leader or other) was mentioned first, second and third in each headline. Finally each headline was categorized based on whether or not it conveyed a positive, negative or neutral/balanced impression of the first-, second- and third-mentioned actor.

## **Findings<sup>2</sup>**

### *The Framing of Election 2000*

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien called the election on Sunday, October 22, 2000, a mere three and one half years into his Liberal government’s term

in office. The voting date was timed to take advantage of polls showing the Liberals with a 19 to 33-point lead over their closest competitor, the Alliance (Fife, 2000: A1). Stockwell Day had recently been elected leader of the newly constituted Alliance party, having successfully challenged Preston Manning earlier in the year. While the Alliance comprised essentially the same policy activists and actors as its predecessor, the Reform party, the adoption of a new name and leader lent it some campaign momentum. The Reform/Alliance reached its highest popularity levels at the election call, with support near 25 per cent (Alberts, 2000: A4).

The prime minister also faced another newly elected but familiar leader, Joe Clark. Selected chief of the Progressive Conservatives in 1998, Clark entered the House of Commons via a by-election in Nova Scotia a mere six weeks prior to the election call. However, Clark was no newcomer to politics, having served as prime minister for nine months in 1979 before his minority government was toppled. Pundits labelled Clark “yesterday’s man” and predicted the Conservatives were in danger of losing official party status. Similarly, the New Democratic party was judged to be facing election losses, as traditional union support was fading and Alexa McDonough’s leadership was questioned after the defection of two New Democrat MPs (Hunter, 2000: A4). In Quebec the Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe was confident that his party’s support was solid and would not be eroded by the type of strategic errors made in the 1997 campaign.<sup>3</sup>

In game frame terms, the polls indicated that the Liberal party would emerge as the clear winner (Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 211-12). Thus, with the quintessential horse-race question settled, the election did not promise much excitement for the press. Some questions did remain in regard to the end result. Would the Liberal party be returned with a majority or minority government? Did the Alliance party have a chance of making a sizeable breakthrough in Ontario? Could the Liberals surpass the Bloc in Quebec? And could the NDP and Conservatives hold on to enough seats to maintain official party status in the House of Commons? Campaign policy issues appeared unlikely to cause major controversies or stumbles and prospects for negative campaigning seemed slim given that the Alliance had toned down its predecessor party’s anti-Quebec rhetoric and was not inclined to produce the likes of the “not just Quebec politicians” negative advertising campaign of 1997 (see Dornan, 1997, for a description of the ad).

These factors did not prevent the two English-language national newspapers from considering Election 2000 a major event and dedicating a large number of personnel and column inches to election coverage. In total the *Post* ran 615 stories on the election in its main sections while the *Globe* offered 526, reversing the trend toward less coverage noted by Frizzell and Westell in the 1993 election (1994: 91). This was the *Post’s*

first national election, and not only did the new national newspaper print more stories than its competitor, its headlines were considerably more verbose. *The National Post* ran a main headline and a secondary headline in 457 of the cases (75%), and even offered a third headline 181 times (29%). In contrast *Globe and Mail* stories featured a second headline 241 times (49%) and a mere six stories (1%) contained a third headline.

These data illustrate the *Post's* style, which was more flamboyant than the *Globe's* approach to election headline writing. For example, the day after the election writ the *Post* splashed the election story on the front page with "PM attacked for fall election vanity," followed by "Cuts off questions" and "Chrétien concedes he's taking advantage of lead." The story was continued on the second page with "Nasty race could be shaping up." Another front-page headline raised "accusations of arrogance" against the prime minister. In contrast, the *Globe's* lead story after the election call featured as a main headline "Chrétien defends early vote," and the secondary headline analyzed the election call this way: "PM says choice is between two distinct visions of Canada; argues Alliance had already begun election advertising." As well, the *Globe* foreshadowed its critical approach to Stockwell Day with a front-page story highlighting his legal troubles.<sup>4</sup> These examples illustrate differences between the two papers, elaborated below, in their evaluations of the two main parties and their leaders. The front-page headlines also indicate the different game narratives embraced by the two papers. The *Post* signalled that the excitement of the race would come from attacks by all four opposition parties on the prime minister and the government's record. The *Globe*, on the other hand, cued the "two-horse race" approach, implying that the Alliance posed a greater threat to the Liberals than polls indicated, and largely writing the Bloc, the Conservatives and the NDP out of the game.

Given *The National Post's* reputation as a crusading newspaper (Taras, 2001) and its tendency to blur the distinction between opinion and hard news by placing its columnists on the front page, we expected the new paper to exacerbate the trend, first noted in 1988, for newspapers to stray from straight news and focus on analysis, commentary and opinion (Frizzell and Westell, 1994: 91). Instead, the *Globe* included more analysis and commentary than did its new competitor, though the difference was not statistically significant. The *Post* included 115 columns, including guest commentaries, in its election coverage (19% of its overall coverage), while the *Globe* ran 120 opinion/analysis columns (23% of its election coverage) (also see Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 204-05). Overall, most of the coverage was in the hard news category, as hard news made up more than 59 per cent of the *Post's* election stories and close to 63 per cent of those in the *Globe*. What the *Post* did feature more prominently than the *Globe* was a type of story headlined with what we labelled the "standing head." Fifteen per cent of *Post* and 9 per cent of *Globe* headlines



stemmed from these regularly occurring campaign features, often taking the form of summaries, and identified by a common headline. Standing heads in the *Globe* were quite bland, with labels such as "Election Notebook" and "In Brief." In contrast, the *Post's* standing heads were irreverent and bold. For instance, it ran a regular feature headlined "We Wanna Know," whose secondary headlines asked party leaders such questions as "What did you eat for breakfast?" and "Do you have a tattoo?"

There were statistically significant differences between the papers in overall framing and issue emphasis. Election framing was measured in three ways. First, the overall frame of each headline was evaluated to determine whether it reflected the game frame or the issue frame. For example, "Liberals still hold big lead, polls say," from *The Globe and Mail*, reveals the classic horse-race/game frame. In contrast, this *Globe* headline illustrates the issue frame: "Alliance promises to cut gas taxes at the pump." When headlines discussed both the game and campaign issues, we determined whether they framed the issues as part of the game, thus put the game frame first, or whether they constructed issues as the central concern of the headline. A headline that framed issues as part of the game is this one from the *Globe*: "Day can't shake hot-button issues: former Alliance pollster says party needs 4 more years to convince voters it does not have a hot-button agenda." It suggests the issues themselves are secondary to the ability of the Alliance to capture votes in an effort to win the next election.

*The Globe and Mail* was more likely than its competitor to use the game frame. Fully 81 per cent of *Globe* headlines (400) adopted a game narrative for the entire headline or put the game frame first, while 66 per cent of headlines in *The National Post* (406 headlines) featured a game frame ( $p < .01$ ). While the *Post* headlines revealed a clear issue frame or put the issues first in 33 per cent of the cases, only 19 per cent of the *Globe* headlines focused on or foregrounded campaign issues.<sup>5</sup> This finding was surprising, as the *Post's* dramatic style led us to hypothesize that the new newspaper would employ the game frame more often than its competitor in an effort to grab audience share. Still, the *Post's* flamboyance was clearly in evidence in the wording of headlines, for while the *Post* employed the game frame less often than did the *Globe*, it was slightly more likely than its competitor to use aggressive game terminology in its headlines.

The second method for establishing the frame of election stories was to determine whether or not the headlines contained an aggressive game word or metaphor, specifically, allusions to warfare, conflict, sports or athletic prowess (see Gidengil and Everitt, 2003 and 1999). The newspapers were similar in their approach to headline writing. Just over one half of the headlines in *The National Post* (311, or 51%) and 45 per cent of those in *The Globe and Mail* (239 in total) contained game words like "fires," "attacks," "battle," "race," "blitz," "tackle," "skate" or "hammer," or metaphors such as "takes aim," "sure footed," "gang up," "shifts target,"

“fractious troops” or “one-two punch.” Game metaphors present a masculine narrative of combat and competition, an approach that tended to sideline the lone female party leader, Alexa McDonough (Sampert and Trimble, 2003). As well, the appearance of game words or metaphors in a headline serves as a powerful signal to readers that the important story is not the campaign issues, but rather which party is winning the electoral race, and how and why a particular party gained, or lost, the lead.

The third approach to analyzing the overall framing of election stories by headlines was to establish the main topic of each headline. This technique confirmed the results of the general frame analysis, revealed additional differences between the two papers, and helped explain why the *Post* headlines were more focused on issues than those in the *Globe*. While both national newspapers gave almost identical levels of attention to the horse-race elements of the campaign (about 25%) and to campaign events and strategies (31%), they did differ in their emphasis on leadership and campaign issues ( $p < .01$ ). *The Globe and Mail* focused on leadership issues in more than 24 per cent of its stories, devoting 115 headlines to leadership issues and evaluations. The *Post* demonstrated less attention than the *Globe* to leader evaluations (10%, 51 stories) and more to campaign issues (28%, 148 stories). Only 18 per cent of *Globe* stories had headlines signalling election issues as the main topic of the report (87 in total). *The National Post's* greater level of attention to issues reflected its focus on the governing party's record in office, particularly the so-called “Shawinigate” affair, featuring accusations of conflict of interest against the prime minister for allegedly using his position to influence the sale of a resort, the Auberge Grand-Mère, located in his riding. The *Post* devoted considerable space to this issue, as it was the main topic in 11 per cent of the headlines, and featured in almost one third of the headlines addressing policy issues. The “Shawinigate” issue was also used as fodder for game analysis, with headlines such as “Scandal eating into Grit's lead, poll finds” and “Liberals sliding big-time.”

In summary, both newspapers' headlines framed the election as a game, focusing on leaders, strategies, poll results and nuances of party support. Neither newspaper engaged in substantive issue framing, as headlines paid little attention to party ideology, policy pronouncements or issues of concern to the voting public. For example, health care, the top concern of Canadians at the time of the election, was the main topic of 5 per cent of *Post* headlines and 4 per cent of headlines in the *Globe*. Similarly, Dornan and Pyman (2002: 210) note that “the dominance of ‘health care’ in the public issue agenda” was not reflected in Toronto and national newspaper media coverage of Election 2000. Those headlines which did employ an issue frame tended to reflect highly negative evaluations of parties or leaders, with the *Globe* raising concerns about Alliance party policy and the personal beliefs of the party's new leader (“Alliance sup-

ports two-tier health care,” “Day against abortion, Chrétien reminds women,” and “Stock’s bad week; goofy handbook, loopy MPs, clumsy handlers,”) and the *Post* both critiquing the Liberal record and highlighting the ethics controversy in the prime minister’s riding (“Dumb, broken promises and ignoring Quebec: critics savage Liberal policy document,” and “If it can’t be fixed by spending it can’t be fixed by Chrétien”).

### *Priming Leaders and Parties*

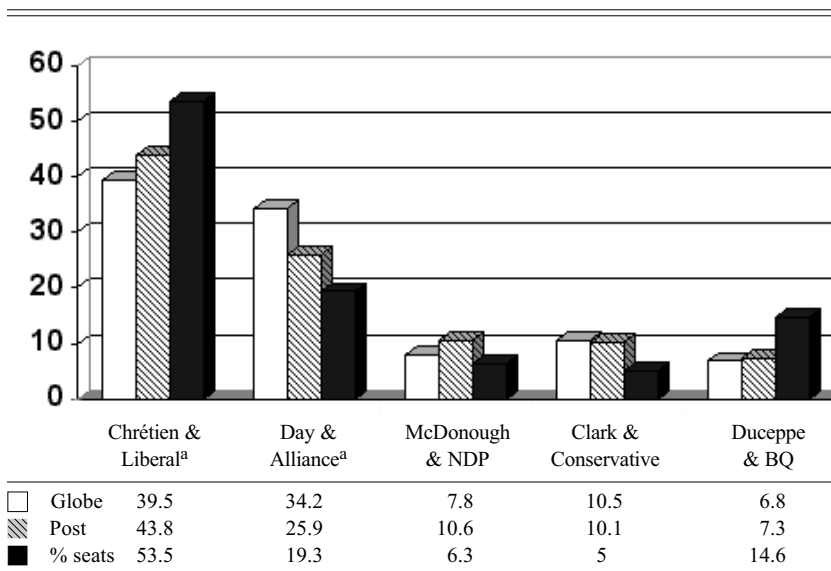
According to Fletcher and Everett (1991: 194) news organizations tend to allocate campaign coverage roughly according to party standings in the House of Commons when the election is called. This practice, as it applies to headlines, may be modified by the game frame, as the amount of attention given to leaders and parties indicates each newspaper’s assessment of who is “in the game” by focusing more heavily on the actors defined as the key players. Our analysis focused on the first actor mentioned because, as with news stories, headlines are structured as an inverted pyramid, with the most important fact, topic or actor placed at the beginning. The first actor named in a headline grabs centre stage, dominates the “action” of the headline, and defines what the story is about.

Figure 1 compares the percentage of first mentions in all headlines for the five parties with the percentage of seats held by each party at dissolution,<sup>6</sup> and highlights significant differences between the two national newspapers with respect to the political actors assigned the coveted first spot in headlines. The *Globe* mentioned Day or the Alliance first almost as often as it did the front-running leader and party (Chrétien and the Liberals), thus distorting the party standings and confirming its “two-horse race” narrative. In contrast, *The National Post* mentioned Chrétien and the Liberal party first almost twice as often as it did Day and the Alliance. Neither paper gave the prime headline spot to the three other parties very often, though the *Post* was slightly more likely than the *Globe* to mention McDonough and the NDP first in its headlines. Both newspapers gave more attention to the NDP and the Conservatives than party standings suggested, and underrepresented Gilles Duceppe and the Bloc Québécois.

News coverage of elections increasingly places leaders in the foreground, as symbols of their parties. Taras argues that television’s “need to focus on individuals and to personify complex issues, and the need of parties in the face of this to provide a single spokesperson and a neat, tightly-wrapped message, have elevated party leaders to be the supreme contestants of elections” (1990: 166). The first actor mentioned in front-page headlines is signaled to voters as a key player in the electoral game. It is interesting, therefore, that in both newspapers party leaders were more likely to be named first in front-page headlines than were their parties. Table 1 shows that there were two exceptions to this trend, both from *The Globe and Mail*, which mentioned the Bloc and the NDP first in one front-

FIGURE 1

First Actor Mentioned as Percentage of First Mentions, by Newspaper and Percentage Seats at Dissolution



a Differences between the newspapers significant at  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 1

First Actor Mentioned in Front-Page Headlines, by Newspaper

| Actor                  | National Post |    | Globe and Mail |    |
|------------------------|---------------|----|----------------|----|
|                        | N             | %  | N              | %  |
| <i>Jean Chrétien</i>   | 27            | 49 | 22             | 36 |
| Liberal party          | 10            | 18 | 13             | 21 |
| <i>Stockwell Day</i>   | 8             | 15 | 15             | 24 |
| Alliance party         | 3             | 6  | 6              | 10 |
| <i>Gilles Duceppe</i>  | 1             | 2  | 0              | 0  |
| Bloc Québécois         | 0             | 0  | 1              | 2  |
| <i>Alexa McDonough</i> | 0             | 0  | 0              | 0  |
| New Democratic party   | 0             | 0  | 1              | 2  |
| <i>Joe Clark</i>       | 4             | 7  | 1              | 2  |
| Conservative party     | 2             | 4  | 3              | 5  |

page headline, but never named their leaders first. Both newspapers, through their lack of attention, relegated all players but the Liberals and the Alliance to the sidelines. The two most competitive parties were cited first far less often than their leaders by both newspapers, but there were differences between the papers in the naming of certain leaders.<sup>7</sup> Almost one half of *The National Post's* front-page election headlines named Jean

Chrétien first, with only 15 per cent putting Day first. In contrast, Chrétien was given first mention in 36 per cent of *The Globe and Mail's* front-page election headlines, and Day received 24 per cent of the first mentions. The *Post* highlighted the prime minister while the *Globe* accentuated the contest between the Liberals and the new Alliance leader.

In summary, the results from Election 2000 support the proposition that game framing individualizes campaign coverage both by fore-grounding party leaders, and by highlighting leader gaffes, personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies. Both national newspapers mentioned the leaders of the front-running parties first in the headlines far more often than their parties. Both papers offered headlines targeting leaders' mistakes, with, for instance, the *Post* declaring "Chrétien hopes verbal gaffes won't deter voters," and "Off-the-cuff style gets Day in trouble," and the *Globe* opining "Chrétien skates on despite slips," and "Brain drain direction befogs Day at the falls." However, the two newspapers offered different levels of attention to the various parties competing in the campaign. *The Globe and Mail* mentioned Stockwell Day and the Alliance party first in the headlines almost as frequently as it did the Liberal party and its leader, thus granting the challenger a far greater percentage of first-mentions than its percentage of seats at dissolution would indicate. For the *Globe*, Election 2000 was a two-horse race, and the new Alliance leader provided considerable fodder for negative press. On the other hand, *The National Post* was more balanced in the amount of coverage allocated to the parties, as it gave the front-running Liberals the bulk of the important first mentions in election story headlines, and offered all opposition parties with the exception of the Bloc Québécois a larger proportion of first-mentions than competitive standings at dissolution suggested. As we will see in the next section, however, greater attention to a particular leader signalled highly critical evaluations of that leader and his or her party, thus illustrating the ideological leanings and partisan preferences of the news organization.

### *Leader and Party Evaluations*

The editorial predisposition of *The Globe and Mail* is centre-right, reflecting support for liberal positions on individual rights and pro-business stances on economic policy (Taras, 1990: 9; Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 193). In contrast, *The National Post* under previous owner Conrad Black's direction was assessed as a champion of both elements of the so-called "new right," neoliberalism and social conservatism (Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 192-94; Soderlund and Hildebrandt, 2001: 3; Taras, 1999: 212-18). Certainly Black made no secret of his preference for the Reform party and support of the "unite the right" initiative culminating in the creation of the Canadian Alliance (Dornan and Pyman, 2002: 194). Black sold his Hollinger Group holdings of daily newspapers and a 50 per cent share of the *National Post* to the Asper family corporation, CanWest Global, in the

summer of 2000, just weeks before the election call.<sup>8</sup> Although this sale has now shifted the ideological leanings of the Southam papers, due to the Asper family's strong Liberal connections and controversial editorial policy, Black's editorial team continued to shape news values in *The National Post* during the 2000 election. We therefore hypothesized that the *Post* would evaluate Stockwell Day and the Alliance more favourably than would the *Globe*. We anticipated that *The Globe and Mail* would harshly appraise the new Alliance leader's social-conservative views while endorsing the Liberal record because of its policies of fiscal restraint, including deficit reduction and modest tax cuts.

Previous studies have shown that the prevalence of the game frame is accompanied by direct and often unfavourable media appraisals of parties and leaders.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, this study found considerable negativity in party evaluations by both national newspapers over the course of the 2000 election campaign. Table 2 illustrates evaluations of parties by the election headlines and shows that at least one half, if not more, of the headlines that mentioned the Liberal and Alliance parties passed clear judgment on them. The exception was the *Post*, which was more likely to feature neutral or mixed assessments of the Alliance than was the *Globe*. There were two differences between the newspapers in their estimations of the parties. First, as predicted, *The Globe and Mail* was significantly more likely than *The National Post* to evaluate the Alliance unfavourably. Almost one half of the *Globe* headlines offering an assessment of the Alliance were negative (47%), compared with 30 per cent of *Post* headlines. Secondly, the *Globe* was more critical than the *Post* of all parties, particularly the Alliance and the Conservative parties, though this difference was not statistically significant.

TABLE 2

Evaluations of Political Parties, as a Percentage of Headlines Mentioning the Party, by Newspaper

| Political Party       | Positive Evaluations |             | Negative Evaluations |             | Neutral/Mixed Evaluations |             |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
|                       | <i>Globe</i>         | <i>Post</i> | <i>Globe</i>         | <i>Post</i> | <i>Globe</i>              | <i>Post</i> |
| Liberal               | 10                   | 9           | 51                   | 50          | 39                        | 41          |
| Alliance <sup>a</sup> | 11                   | 18          | 47                   | 30          | 42                        | 52          |
| NDP                   | 7                    | 18          | 36                   | 32          | 58                        | 50          |
| Conservative          | 29                   | 28          | 25                   | 16          | 56                        | 56          |
| Block Québécois       | 10                   | 18          | 28                   | 22          | 62                        | 60          |

a Differences between the newspapers significant at  $p < .05$ .

Contrary to expectations, the *Post* was not more critical of the Liberal party than was the *Globe*. Both newspapers attacked the governing

party with equal vigour. Just over one half of the headlines in both newspapers censored the Liberal party and its leader while only 9 per cent of the *Post's* headlines and 10 per cent of the *Globe's* headlines evaluated the Liberals in a positive light. As Table 2 shows, only one political party received more positive than negative evaluations overall—the Conservatives led by Joe Clark. Clark and his party were assessed negatively 16 per cent of the time in the *Post*, but received positive evaluations 28 per cent of the time the party or its leader was mentioned. The *Globe* was slightly more disapproving of the Conservatives, with 25 per cent negative assessments, but on balance gave a more complimentary analysis of the party, with positive coverage in 29 per cent of the cases.

These evaluations were reflected in each paper's editorial position. The *Globe* used its editorial pages to raise alarms about the Alliance party and its leader Stockwell Day, with editorial headlines such as "Does the Alliance threaten medicare?" and "Creationism and Stockwell Day." While *The Globe and Mail* generally treated the Liberal party in a derisory fashion, the newspaper argued that the prime minister's presumed imminent retirement meant a Liberal vote was really a vote for the then finance minister (and aspiring party leader) Paul Martin. Editorial and column headlines published late in the campaign explained "Why we recommend a vote for Paul Martin," and "How to get Paul Martin to be your Prime Minister." Martin was declared the real winner by an opinion piece headlined "Game, set: Martin." In contrast, *The National Post* used its editorials to portray the Liberal platform as a series of big-spending policies and vacuous campaign promises (for example, "The Thin Red Book," and "Liberal make-spend"). The new part-owner of the *Post*, Izzy Asper, offered an op-ed column urging a "Liberal majority with strong opposition," but overall the *Post's* editorial position was more accurately revealed by this editorial page headline: "On balance, the Alliance."

The strongly evaluative and leader-focused nature of national newspaper headlines during Election 2000 indicated the papers were engaged in agenda-setting activities. The new Alliance leader's self-proclaimed "agenda of respect" represented a refusal to play the electoral game according to media rules and was criticized by headlines in both newspapers. The *Globe* and the *Post* urged Day to campaign more aggressively, though the *Post* was more direct in its pleas. For example, the *National Post* urged Day to "get with the flow" on October 25, and further pleaded, "No more, please, Mr. Nice Guy" on November 4. *The Globe and Mail* ran a story on October 26 with the headline "Day faces pressure to go on the attack" and on November 4 a front-page headline castigated the Alliance campaign for being "too cautious." Day eventually complied, winning a more active role in the media script. For example, the *Post* reported in its headlines that the newly energized leader "came out swinging," dropped his civility, and turned "anger into effective weapon." The

*Globe* evaluated Day's strategy differently, stating "With a thinly cloaked personal attack on Chrétien, the Alliance leader strips away the phoney gentility and changes campaign tone." Ironically, after 35 days of headlines featuring party leaders "firing broadsides," "pounding" the opposition and directing personal attacks at each other, both newspapers derided the parties and their leaders for letting negative campaigning get in the way of the issues. The *Globe* declared the election "A race right out of *Seinfeld*: A Campaign about Nothing but personal attacks." Similarly, in a special election section published the day before the vote, *The National Post* assessed the campaign this way: "Cockroaches and criminals"; "Hold your nose and vote"; and "The last 35 days of campaigning have exposed the poverty of Canadian political culture." Yet both newspapers were complicit in setting the agenda for the campaign by framing the election as a nasty rhetorical battle between leaders, thus encouraging party strategists to grab headlines by joining the fray.

#### *Do Leaders' Debates Change Media Assessments?*

Televised party leaders' debates are important campaign events because of their potential strategic impact. For journalists, the debates can act as turning points in the campaign, providing leaders with the opportunity to land, or withstand, rhetorical punches. Not surprisingly, in the two national newspapers the language used to describe the debates was heavily imbued with game frame metaphors. The leaders did not just debate; they attacked, took aim, castigated and pounded. Canada's English-language national newspapers saw the English debate as the "main event" of Election 2000, as they paid little attention to the November 8 French-language debate, with three headlines in the *Globe* and only one headline directly related to the debate appearing in the *Post*. The November 9 English-language debate received more coverage, with seven headlines in the *Globe* and three in the *Post*. Did the debates alter the evaluations of parties and leaders offered by the two newspapers?

Our analysis examined positive and negative evaluations before and after the debates and found the English-language debate had a significant impact on headline assessments of the Liberals and the Conservatives, but only for *The National Post*. *National Post* headlines evaluated the Liberals more positively after the debates, and as Table 3 shows, offered the Conservatives significantly more positive assessments after Joe Clark's strong debate performance. Apart from giving a slight boost to the Conservatives after the debates, *Globe and Mail* headlines did not indicate that the newspaper had shifted its opinions of the parties, although assessments of Day in the *Globe* adopted an even more disapproving tone after the debates, for example declaring "Day the big loser in the debate." Even the *Post* seemed to sour on Day, particularly after the English debate, giving the Alliance leader more negative evaluations and fewer positive evalua-



tions when he was mentioned first in the headlines after the debates. In contrast, the *Post* printed almost four times as many affirmative post-debate stories when the Alliance party was the first actor mentioned in the headlines. For instance, one post-debate *National Post* headline optimistically declared “Transition team prepares Alliance to lead.”

TABLE 3

Positive Evaluations of Parties, Pre-and Post-English-Language Leaders' Debate, by Newspaper (as a percentage of headlines evaluating the party)

| Political party | Positive Evaluations<br><i>Globe and Mail</i> |                    | <i>National Post</i> |                    |
|-----------------|---|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
|                 | <i>pre-debate</i>                             | <i>post-debate</i> | <i>pre-debate</i>    | <i>post-debate</i> |
| Liberal         | 8   | 12                 | 3                    | 15 <sup>a</sup>    |
| Alliance        | 11  | 11                 | 15                   | 21                 |
| Conservative    | 20  | 35                 | 9                    | 40 <sup>a</sup>    |

a Impact of debates significant at  $p < .01$ .

As Table 3 shows, evaluations of the Conservative party were more positive after the debate. By distinguishing between headlines with Clark as the first actor from those mentioning the Conservatives first we found that the two newspapers embraced Joe Clark as a leader with momentum. Both newspapers increased their number of positive evaluations of Clark as a result of his strong and aggressive performance in the debates. Only 14 per cent of *The National Post* headlines mentioning Clark first before the debate were complimentary of the Conservative leader and his party. That percentage jumped to 37 per cent after the debate. More dramatically, in the *Globe*, after the debate, the proportion of positive headlines rose from 34 per cent to 71 per cent of the headlines with Clark as the first actor.<sup>10</sup> The *Globe* wrote: “Clark the big winner in leader’s debates,” “Clark came off as cool,” and “Conservatives: Debate puts new life into Tory campaign.” Two days after the English debate, the *Post* headline read: “Polls shows Clark won debate.” Canadians who watched the debate also regarded Clark as the winner, giving both Clark and his party a boost with the electorate (Blais et al., 2002: 71). According to the investigators of the Canada Election Study, the “Conservatives gained about four points during the campaign and these gains can be imputed to Clark’s performance in the debates” (Blais et al., 2002: 71).

## Summary

Their appraisals of parties and their leaders provide clear indications of the two national newspapers’ ideological leanings and partisan preferences. The competing papers did offer different evaluations of the parties,

especially the Canadian Alliance, which, as we predicted, was regarded considerably more favourably by *The National Post* than by *The Globe and Mail*. The *Globe* was more dismissive of all parties than was the *Post*. Both newspapers gave more negative than positive coverage to the Liberals and especially to Liberal leader Jean Chrétien, though the *Post* was especially vitriolic in its attention to the Liberal record and to the prime minister's alleged conflict of interest. The only political party to emerge relatively unscathed from the negative tone of strategic election coverage was the Conservative party, whose leader, Joe Clark, benefited from increasingly positive assessments by both newspapers after the English language debate.

### Conclusions

This study shows that the national news environment for Election 2000 was, as anticipated, influenced by the entry of *The National Post*, whose competition for readers and distinct ideological and partisan agenda led it to offer a different style and tone of election coverage. The *Post* was more verbose and flamboyant in its headlines, more pointed in its criticisms of the Liberal party, and more favourable in its evaluations of the Canadian Alliance. As well, although most *National Post* headlines adopted a game frame, the paper was more likely than its competitor to employ an issue frame, albeit often as a device for denigrating the Liberal record and attacking the prime minister for alleged ethics violations. In its headlines, *The Globe and Mail* adopted a classic strategic frame, the two-horse race, offered little attention to campaign issues, and, with the partial exception of the Conservative party, featured highly negative evaluations of all parties and party platforms in its headlines.

Both newspapers engaged in agenda setting by urging the Canadian Alliance leader, who began the campaign vowing to focus on the party's key campaign issues and maintain his own "agenda of respect," to change his tactics. Since the outcome of the election was not in question, dramatic tension was fostered by, in general, headlines marked by the classic pugilistic language of the game frame, replete with fisticuffs and weapon fire,<sup>11</sup> and in particular by headlines encouraging Day to adopt aggressive strategies and level personal attacks on the other leaders. As well, headlines in *The National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* cultivated negative campaigning by casting the game and its players as inept, manipulative, dishonest and even corrupt. The *Post* referred to the prime minister's "arrogance," "vanity," "conceit" and "lies" several times in its headlines, highlighted accusations of corruption and ethics violations against the Liberal leader, and called the campaign a "street fight." The *Globe's* headlines were also very critical of the Liberals, but were especially attentive to every gaffe and strategic mistake made by the Alliance and its new leader. Ironically, at the

end of the campaign both *The National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* criticized the major parties for their inattention to campaign issues and derided the party leaders for their willingness to stoop to negative campaign tactics such as personal insults. The mutually reinforcing relationship between media game framing of elections and party campaign strategies should be explored more thoroughly in future studies.

Our analysis supports the assertion that game framing trivializes and de-politicizes electoral democracy by telling stories about the most superficial, episodic and tactical elements of the campaign. *The National Post's* standing headlines in the "We Wanna Know" series are but one example of this, as they suggest a party leader's answers to questions such as "Who cuts your hair?" and "What was the name of your first pet?" are somehow important to voter assessments. Notwithstanding their often distinct approaches to covering the election, little in the headline-spun narrative in either paper revealed the forces underlying the electoral contest, such as the social context of policy debates, the ideological foundations of party ideas, and the implications of electoral outcomes for governance. Headlines in Canada's two national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, portrayed Election 2000 as little more than a slug-fest between individual leaders, thus confirming Matthew Mendelsohn's assertion that policy issues are regarded by media as "a tableau on which strategies and counterattacks are played out"; "named by the media but not discussed" (1993: 11, 14). The *Globe* and the *Post* offered voters scant incentive for constructive engagement in the campaign, and every reason to distrust the political parties and their leaders.

## Notes

- 1 All coding was conducted by the authors. To ensure accuracy in coding results, we trained an independent researcher to randomly select and code 20 per cent of the headlines in each newspaper. The formula used to determine inter-coder reliability was the number of questions in agreement divided by the total number of questions. Inter-coder reliability was assessed at 89.4 per cent for the *Globe and Mail* and 84.4 per cent for the *National Post*, with a cumulative agreement of 86.6 per cent, above the desired agreement level of 80 per cent.
- 2 In the interests of parsimony, tables and figures have been kept to a minimum. Where data are not shown in tabular form, they are available from the authors.
- 3 The key error allegedly committed by the Bloc in 1997 reveals the superficiality of the game frame. Photographers captured Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe wearing an unflattering hair net while visiting a cheese factory. The photos were reprinted and rebroadcast throughout the 1997 campaign and even surfaced a few times during Election 2000.
- 4 A letter to the editor, written by Day while he was a member of the Legislative Assembly in Alberta, and published in the *Red Deer Advocate*, prompted a charge of defamation by a Red Deer lawyer. The matter was before the courts during the election.
- 5 The percentages do not add up to 100 because some headlines were neutral and did not therefore reflect a game or an issue frame. For instance, standing head stories with headlines such as "In Brief" were classified as neutral.

- 6 Percentages for each paper do not total 100 per cent because in a small number of cases the actors mentioned first in the headlines were neither party leaders nor party representatives.
- 7 Due to the small number of cases of front-page headlines, these relationships, though striking, were not statistically significant.
- 8 Black's remaining shares in the *National Post* were sold to CanWest Global in 2001.
- 9 See the works cited in the literature review section for examples.
- 10 The number of headlines mentioning Clark first was too small to test for statistical significance.
- 11 A few examples, of many, from the headlines: "Day, PM trade fire..."; "secret weapon"; "strategic battleground"; "Clark fires broadside"; "NDP blasts Grits"; "Chrétien shifts target, opens fire on Clark"; "Make no mistake, election is war"; and "Liberal master plan is to carpet-bomb Day."

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