

# Strategic Media, Cynical Public? Examining the Contingent Effects of Strategic News Frames on Political Cynicism in the United Kingdom

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Dan Jackson<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Through the use of experimental methods, this study examines the claim that strategic news engenders political cynicism. First, it builds upon previous theory by conceptualizing and measuring political cynicism at both issue-specific and global levels. Second, the contingency of framing effects is a contested but crucial area of the framing paradigm and deserves greater attention in strategic framing studies. The study therefore examines this in detail by testing a number of individual characteristics for their moderating effects. The author found that relative to issue-based coverage, strategic news frames increased issue-specific political cynicism, but this effect was only evident for those who were less politically engaged and knowledgeable. The effects of the strategy frame on more global measures of political cynicism were minimal. The findings are discussed in the light of ongoing debates about framing effects and the media's role in democratic engagement.

## Keywords

journalism, media effects, media framing, political attitudes, Western Europe

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<sup>1</sup>Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Poole, Dorset, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Dan Jackson, Weymouth House, The Media School, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB, United Kingdom; phone: (+44) 01202 961297; fax: (+44) 01202 965530  
Email: [jacksond@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:jacksond@bournemouth.ac.uk)

On September 2, 2008, the then–United Kingdom Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alastair Darling, announced that the minimum threshold for stamp duty to be paid on house purchases would rise from £125,000 to £175,000. The move was an attempt to breathe life into the stagnating property market and enable first-time buyers to afford houses. This is how the UK’s main commercial broadcasting channel, ITV News at Ten, led its program on this day:

Home hell: will Brown’s handout rescue the property market, and save his skin?

The much-heralded plan to shore up the housing market was finally set out today with an unexpected change to stamp duty. The Prime Minister said he wanted to help people through a difficult situation, but has he done enough to make sure he hangs on to his own set of keys to Number 10?

Readers familiar with recent trends in political journalism may recognize this story as an example of the strategic framing of news. This is where policy pronouncements such as the one above are primarily interpreted by journalists for their contribution towards the political prospects of the politicians involved, rather than their impact on the housing market (in this case), wider economy, or people’s lives. Such news emphasizes the tactics employed by politicians in pursuing policy goals, as well as their performance, styles of campaigning, and personal battles in the political arena, whether it be in office, opposition, or during elections (de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008). This perspective does not deny that party political or electoral considerations sometimes motivate politics. The complaint, however, is that political debate is being eroded by a journalism that is obsessed with interpreting political actions through a prism of winning and losing and the strategies associated with this.

In this article, I take up the concern that contemporary news’ focus on the strategic game of politics is feeding political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 1993). I examine the “spiral of cynicism” thesis in the UK in the nonelection policy arena rather than the more typically studied campaign context. More specifically, the effects of strategic news are examined in the context of a debate in 2003 over Britain’s potential entry to the European single currency. Previous research has found variables such as political sophistication and partisanship to moderate certain framing effects (de Vreese 2004; de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Valentino et al. 2001), though such research has not elicited consistent results. With this in mind, the article develops and then tests the proposition that a number of other individual characteristics may moderate strategic framing effects. Consequently, the findings of the study open up the possibility that we might consider sophistication and “political engagement” more generally as important indicators of who is most susceptible to the effects of strategic news. Finally, I argue that there is value in conceptualizing and measuring political cynicism at two levels: first, towards the politicians involved in a policy debate; and second, towards politicians generally. Findings suggest that such a distinction is warranted.

## Strategic Frames and Their Effects

It is argued that journalists are increasingly using the strategic frame as their default position when covering politics, and election campaigns in particular (Blumler 1997; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Entman 1989). This argument has largely been upheld by a series of election content analyses since the early 1990s (e.g., Jamieson 1992; Just et al. 1999; Kerbel et al. 2000; Patterson 1993). Even outside of election periods, strategic frames have been found to permeate political coverage (e.g., de Vreese et al. 2001; Lawrence 2000; Morris and Clawson 2005; Skorkjaer Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen 2009).

If the increasing reliance of journalists on strategic frames within political coverage is generally accepted, then the effects of this type of news come into question: the focus of this study. In a pioneering series of experiments carried out during the 1991 Philadelphia mayoral race and the 1993 healthcare reform debate in the USA, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that in both election and nonelection contexts, those who were exposed to the strategy news were more likely to think in strategic terms and to respond with higher levels of political cynicism. Issue frames did not consistently depress cynicism, but neither did they elevate it. Cappella and Jamieson describe this process as “a spiral of cynicism,” which can originate from the media and result in a more cynical public.

Subsequent research has confirmed these findings, though developments to theory have been made. Valentino et al. (2001) found that the type of individual concerned moderates framing effects on trust in government and intention to vote. They were left to conclude that there was only “a spiral of cynicism for some.” In the context of a nonelection political issue (EU enlargement), de Vreese (2004) found that exposure to strategic news fuelled political cynicism, especially among the politically knowledgeable. However, when participants completed the same posttest a week later, the effect of the strategy frame had been muted. A later study (de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008) confirmed this trend, again in the context of EU news. In a separate study, de Vreese (2005b) found evidence to reconsider the above findings, though his methods were different. Drawing on two wave panel surveys and content analyses of news media in Denmark and the Netherlands, he found that political cynicism was contingent on the amount of strategy in the news, and was not omnipresent. Similar to Valentino et al. (2001), de Vreese (2005b) found that the demobilizing effect of strategy news was mostly confined to the less politically sophisticated. In a further development to our understanding of the spiral of cynicism theory, de Vreese and Semetko (2002) found that strategy reporting during a referendum campaign contributed to an increase in political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations. Turnout, however, remained high, leading them to argue that voters can be “cynical and engaged.”

Existing research has therefore convincingly demonstrated that exposure to strategically framed coverage of politics results in significantly greater levels of cynicism. But there is less consensus as to whether this effect is equal for all citizens and whether a full-blown spiral of cynicism is always the end result.

## Coming to Terms with Political Cynicism

Despite its clear importance as a political sentiment, conceptualizing and measuring political cynicism has proven problematic, and disagreement exists over how best to approach it (see de Vreese and Semetko [2002] for a good discussion). When studying the effects of strategic frames, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) convincingly argue for a set of measures of political cynicism beyond those found in American national election studies, with their focus on political trust, alienation and efficacy. Instead, they propose scales of political cynicism that focus on “the manipulativeness of advocates (candidates in campaigns and representatives of groups in policy debates), dishonesty, winning and getting ahead, looking good, using fear, the absence of real choice, and the role of big money” (p. 143). Their measures have been influential enough to be subsequently adapted for a number of other studies in this field (e.g., de Vreese 2004; de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; de Vreese and Semetko 2002). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that Cappella and Jamieson’s measures of cynicism are primarily aimed towards the particular actors that subjects encountered in the experimental studies. This is fine, and their findings still stand as a breakthrough in this field, but these measures of cynicism do not tell us much about the impact of frames on attitudes towards politicians and the workings of government generally (also see Valentino et al. 2001). These broader measures are important indicators of the health of a democracy (Pattie et al. 2004), and so understanding how they may be affected by exposure to news with a strategic slant warrants attention. It is therefore proposed that making a distinction between different dimensions of political cynicism can enhance the theoretical breadth of the spiral of cynicism thesis.

Making such a distinction is not an original pursuit in political science. Miller (1974), for example, interprets cynicism as an absence of trust at the level of both institutions of government and the regime as a whole, whereas others (e.g., Citrin 1974) treat it as negativism and disapproval at the level of candidates and incumbent political leaders. Erber and Lau (1990) offer such a distinction based on cynicism towards persons on one hand and issues and institutions on the other. Their distinction holds some value when considering the impact of strategic news, and so it will be pursued in this study but adapted to suit the methodological needs of framing studies. Two dimensions of political cynicism are used presently. The first (called *issue-specific political cynicism*) closely follows Cappella and Jamieson’s (1997), as it is set within the confines of the experimental media stimulus material (such as a public policy debate or election campaign). Its focus is on the character and motivations of the politicians who appear in the stimulus material, as well as one’s confidence in the process of the specific policy debate. The second dimension of political cynicism (called *global political cynicism*) assesses the character and motivations of politicians, alongside satisfaction with the political system, *beyond the confines of the media stimulus material*. It is plausible to hypothesize that because it is detached from the specifics of the stimulus material, and operates at a general level, global cynicism will be more stable and resistant to short-term change than issue-specific cynicism. For

example, a viewer could watch a strategically framed account of a political event of the day and feel cynical towards those politicians who were portrayed in a cynical, strategic light. However, their confidence in government, and opinion of politicians in general may remain robust, as these views have been constructed over a number of years and are more deeply felt than those towards specific politicians. Accordingly, I offer two hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Exposure to news framed in terms of strategy will produce a higher level of issue-specific political cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news.

*Hypothesis 2:* The effects of news framed in terms of strategy will be weaker on global political cynicism than issue-specific political cynicism.

## Individual Characteristics and Framing Effects

Within media effects research, a strong body of research has emphasized the importance of individual characteristics as moderators of media impact (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Iyengar 1991; Zaller 1992). In turn, it has become customary for studies of strategic framing effects to explore certain characteristics as moderators. However, this research has elicited conflicting and somewhat ambiguous results. Valentino et al. (2001), for example, found that nonpartisans and those with lower levels of education (which they called *political sophistication*) were significantly demobilized by strategy-based coverage. Similarly, de Vreese (2005b) found that strategic news had its largest demobilizing effect on the less politically interested, but only in one out of the two cases under investigation. However, other studies (de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Rhee 1997) demonstrated the opposite: Those with higher levels of political sophistication were more susceptible to strategic framing effects.

This inconsistency is curious, and so a brief exploration of why certain characteristics might moderate framing effects is warranted. Most scholars are in agreement that knowledgeable citizens appear to be more sophisticated in their information processing. The theory of framing effects developed by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), for example—paralleling arguments made by McGuire (1968) regarding persuasion and Petty and Cacioppo (1986) regarding central route attitude change—is that political sophisticates have more organized, integrated, and utilitarian knowledge structures. “They are not simply more intense consumers of news but rather deeper processors of it. They bring different motivations to news consumption and carry away knowledge that is more readily integrated into an already elaborated knowledge store” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997: 199). But there appears to be less agreement as to whether greater knowledge and sophistication makes someone more or less prone to framing effects. Valentino et al. (2001: 350) argue that the least sophisticated are more likely to accept the frame offered to them by the news. This is because political sophisticates have large storehouses of existing information that provides the context (in terms of

knowledge about political issues, parties, or candidates) in which any news story is processed. This storehouse gives the individual greater means by which to negotiate or reject the message in the story, thus reducing its impact. In contrast, because the less sophisticated individual lacks such a store of information, he or she is less able to resist the frame given in a news story. Zaller's (1992) influential research on receptiveness (or resistance) to mass-mediated political information supports such a theory, with the most sophisticated respondents least likely to change their opinions in the face of persuasive messages. But other framing literature rejects such a model of effects. This research argues that a consideration highlighted by a frame cannot impinge on an attitude unless it is available in memory, which, by definition, requires knowledge (Chong and Druckman 2007). Therefore, precisely because political sophisticates have a large storehouse of contextual information, the frames found in news stories become more familiar and, hence, are more accessible when making an evaluation (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Nelson et al. 1997).

Which theory will explain the effects of strategic frames most satisfactorily? Because the strategic frame is a generic frame (see de Vreese 2005a), which is abundant in political coverage, all types of citizens (both those with high and low political knowledge) should be aware of it. At the core of strategic frames lies a cynical undertone that questions the sincerity of politicians' motivations. It is hard to imagine any citizens nowadays are unfamiliar with the concept of cynicism regarding politics, thus putting into question whether an individual's storehouse of information will be a significant variable at all. Given the inconsistency of findings and contested nature of research on political knowledge as a moderator of framing effects, I pose a research question:

*Research Question 1:* How, if at all, does political knowledge moderate the effects of strategic frames on political cynicism (issue-specific and global)?<sup>1</sup>

Looking beyond knowledge/sophistication, there is little research examining the moderating role of political engagement more generally. Yet there are reasons to think it could play an important role. First, it should not be assumed that more politically knowledgeable individuals are necessarily more politically engaged. In the UK and USA, for example, there is a growing trend towards educated and politically knowledgeable people choosing to disengage from politics, or channel their participation towards nontraditional forms of action (Bennett 2004; Delli Carpini 2000; Pattie et al. 2004).

Second, engagement with the political system brings certain motivations to the processing of news frames, which political knowledge alone does not bring. Framing effects research has for years emphasized the importance of motivation, generally finding that the most motivated individuals can reject frames more easily than the less motivated (Druckman 2004; Fazio 1995; Ford and Kruglanski 1995). Personal motivation promotes attention to the appropriateness of a consideration and greater focus

on the substantive merits of a frame in judging its persuasiveness. Therefore, anything that promotes motivation will also increase the probability that one will pursue a central or systematic route to evaluating information (Chong and Druckman 2007). In our case, motivation can come from political engagement, which gives the individual reason to process a strategic frame centrally. For instance, exposure to strategic news may challenge his or her belief that political participation matters or, for party identifiers, it may depict a favored politician in cynical colors. In both of these circumstances, the engaged individual is likely to be motivated to resist the frame offered in the news, even if she or he may lack knowledge and sophistication. In contrast, the disengaged individual, lacking the same motivation, is more likely to use uncritically the considerations that have been made accessible through exposure to the frame. This proposition is tested in the current study, where I test four further variables for their moderating role in strategic framing effects.

The UK's Electoral Commission (2007) divide political engagement into three categories: knowledge and interest, participation and action, and efficacy and satisfaction with the political system. There are far too many variables within these categories to be included in a study of this nature, so I take some of the most commonly cited from each category as indicators of political engagement. These are interest in politics, partisanship and intention to vote in the next general election<sup>2</sup> (as indicators of participation and action), and political efficacy. If the theory of motivation affecting the processing of news frames holds true, then one would expect all of these features of political engagement to moderate the impact of strategy frames.

*Hypothesis 3:* Those individuals with high levels of political engagement (indicated through interest, partisanship, voting likelihood, political efficacy) will be more resistant to strategic frames than the less engaged.

## Research Design

The "euro debate" of May to June 2003 was chosen as the topic for this experimental study. This refers to the lead-up and reaction to the British government's decision not to hold a referendum on joining the European single currency for the time being. The choice of the single currency issue allows us to explore the effects of strategically framed news outside of the campaign context, though it perhaps cannot be considered a "routine" policy debate. Norris (2000) points out that coverage of European affairs is different from that of domestic politics. For domestic issues, the public has multiple sources of information on which to base their opinions, such as personal experiences of public services, the health of the economy, and so on. Consequently, they are able to discount some of the information they receive from the media. This is not the case for the EU, as it often takes place at an abstract and complex level, which ordinary people do not always see. With an issue like the euro, this makes the British public more like "observers" than "participants" (Gavin 2007) and can amplify the importance of the media in shaping British public opinion. Nevertheless, the impact of these



circumstances is more likely to concern the level of cynicism than the underlying dynamics that lie at the core of the study, and therefore the euro debate still represents an interesting and important case study to apply the strategy frame to in a nonelection context.

To test the effects of strategic versus issue-based news coverage, an experimental method was employed. Despite claims of limited external validity, experiments remain the best method when disentangling cause and effect in media research (Brown and Melamed 1990; Kinder and Palfrey 1993) and have been the method of choice for much research into strategic framing effects. Two experimental conditions were made, one strategy and one issue.<sup>3</sup> The experiments took the form of a pretest, then exposure to media material, then a posttest. The pretest measured for basic demographic data about the participants, as well as their media habits, political views, and aspects of political engagement. Depending on the random assignment to one of two experimental conditions, respondents were then exposed to either a strategy or issue framed account of the 2003 euro debate. After this, they completed a posttest questionnaire, including questions concerning political cynicism.

The media content consisted of a montage of TV news clips and newspaper/online articles that were organized in order to be coherent to the outsider. The material covered the lead-up and reaction to then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown's announcement of the decision on euro entry (on June 9, 2003). There were about twenty minutes of media material in each treatment: ten minutes of newspaper/online articles and ten minutes of television news clips (see Appendix A for an overview of experimental content). Both strategy and issue treatments contained news articles and TV clips from the same sources. The use of both print and TV news material means that we cannot be sure whether the medium has an influence on the effect of the stimulus material, but this is not the main focus of the study.

There was some common content between both of the treatments, so both of them introduced the background of the single currency and what the results of the government's assessment on euro entry were. The differences between the treatments came in how they framed the "story" of the euro debate. The issue treatment framed it around the consequences of joining (or not) for the British economy, business, and ordinary people. The strategy material also contained some of this information, in order to give some context to the euro debate. However, consistent with how it has been conceptualized in the literature (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino et al. 2001), the strategy treatment framed the euro debate as a story about the performance, style, and perceptions of the main parties/politicians during the debate, with an underlying suggestion that their motivations may be for personal gain. All five elements of Jamieson's (1992) definition of the strategy frame were included in this content,<sup>4</sup> though to varying extents. For example, the strategy frame employed did have mention of public opinion polls, but it was not a "heavy weighting" as Cappella and Jamieson (1997) define. Varying all elements of strategic news does leave some uncertainty about which of them has caused cynicism, but conclusions can still be made based on



their cumulative effect. As a typical news story might include all elements of the strategy frame, this adds to the realism of the research design.

This study represents a different design to some other framing studies, as instead of having otherwise identical news stories that are manipulated to give a strategy or issue frame, it used some different media content altogether in the two treatments. This therefore represents a relatively liberal test of the strategy frame, as there is less control over the stimulus content. Such a design has pros and cons: First, it means that the strategy impact should be greater compared to other such studies, because there is more overall strategy content. This may place greater limits on external validity than some experiments do, as it may give some respondents a heavier dose of strategy frames than they would normally experience when consuming the news. Using different media content for the two treatments also means that there are potentially other variations in the material other than the strategy frame that may cause an effect. For example, the strategy treatment contains roughly one minute more TV news material and one thousand more words of newspaper material than the issue frame. The decision not to change the original news material meant that it would be difficult to achieve an exact match of news material in terms of length. Still, care was taken to ensure the material in both experimental conditions was equivalent in terms of length and source. Qualitative ( $n = 10$ ) and quantitative ( $n = 32$ ) manipulation checks were conducted in the pilot study with undergraduate students at the author's university.<sup>5</sup> These proved the manipulation was successful, giving us confidence that there were no extraneous variables that explain political cynicism other than the frame itself.

The reason this design was employed was due to the advantage of mundane realism (Aronson et al. 1990), as real TV news clips with familiar newsreaders were used, as well as real newspaper articles. As McNair (2006) argues, credibility of the source is vitally important in these sorts of studies. Even where experimental studies have designed their own newspaper article, authenticity can be lost because the reader knows it is not from a real newspaper. Our design does not encounter this problem and is consistent with other successful experimental designs in this field (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar 1991; McLeod and Detenber 1999; Nelson et al. 1997).

In summary, the desire to create the most realistic experience of the news can mean sacrificing some control over other parts of the experiment. All experiments must always carry this sort of compromise (Aronson et al. 1990), and openly acknowledging some of the limitations the chosen design entails provides the context within which the results of the experiment can be discussed.

## **Interactive Design**

In contrast to previous experimental designs, this study employed the use of interactive online technology. This brings with it a number of advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, rather than persuading participants into a laboratory to complete the experiments, by hosting them on an interactive CD, participants were able to take them

home and do them in their own time.<sup>6</sup> This can help overcome one of the problems of artificiality that experiments can encounter. On the other hand, by allowing the experiment to be done in the comfort of one's own home, attention levels and response rate can become an issue. The ability of the user to skim through the media content was limited by a function that prevented them from moving to the next screen until either the TV news clip had finished playing or they had scrolled to the bottom of a newspaper article. This brought back some of the control of media exposure from the respondent to the researcher. The potential for participants to be not fully concentrating on the experimental material still remained, but it is equally likely for people to consume the material more attentively than they would in the "real world" (Sanders and Norris 1998). This is quite unavoidable, but as long as attention levels are spread equally amongst samples, it is less of an issue.<sup>7</sup> Given that response rates for the two CDs were almost identical, we can be confident that attention levels were also consistent.

### *Sample and Procedures*

The experiment was conducted between March 3 and April 3, 2005. The single currency issue was not salient on the media agenda during this period and had received little attention since the 2003 government decision. This means that the subject of the stimuli would be familiar to participants, but they would be unlikely to recognize any specific news stories. The sample consisted of university students and nonacademic university staff. Eight hundred CDs were distributed around campus in lectures and classes: four hundred strategy and four hundred issue CDs. Participants were randomly given either the strategy or issue CD. All participants were told that completion of the thirty-minute CD experiment meant that they were entered into a draw for a prize of £50. When all of the results were in, all participants were fully debriefed. In all, 298 people took part in the experiment, 148 in the strategy condition and 150 in the issue condition, giving a response rate of 37 percent for the strategy condition and 37.5 percent for the issue condition. The sample cannot claim representativeness for either the local or national population, as 63 percent of the respondents were aged eighteen to twenty-four, and 73 percent were students. The sample is more educated than the average, less ethnically diverse, and more affluent. They are also more likely to have some interest in current affairs and politics than nonstudent people of their age. Still, the fact that participants are consuming national media in the experiments should mean that there is no regional exclusiveness to the study. In other words, in principle we would find the same results on students anywhere in the UK. The rest of the sample comprised university nonacademic and support staff, who were more typical of the local population.

The limitations to the external validity of the study need to be considered when making conclusions, but they will not affect the internal validity. To achieve internal validity, the two samples (strategy and issue) need to be homogeneous in terms of prior demographic and attitudinal variables. This was comfortably the case with the study. The two samples were virtually identical in terms of education, age, gender,

occupation, and media habits; as well as attitudinal variables like partisanship, internal political efficacy, and election voting likelihood (all  $p$ -values > .05). As a result of their homogeneity, we can confidently attribute any differences in the posttest findings to the stimulus material and nothing else.

## Measures

*Issue-specific political cynicism.* Four items were derived from Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and de Vreese (2004) and adjusted to apply to the context of the issue debate. These were designed to gauge perceptions of participants towards the character of politicians when it comes to the euro debate, their motivations, and their confidence in the process of the specific policy debate. Participants were asked to state their agreement on a 5-point scale to the following questions: (1) "Politicians on both sides of the euro debate are willing to do whatever it takes to look good even if it means deceiving the public," (2) "Politicians are clear and honest in their arguments about the euro" (reverse coded), (3) "Politicians are too concerned with public opinion about the euro," and (4) "The debate about the euro is more about personality than the substance of the issue." The items were recoded and averaged to form a scale of issue-specific political cynicism ranging from 1 to 5, with 5 representing higher cynicism ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ,  $\alpha = .76$ ).

*Global political cynicism.* Respondents were asked to answer statements regarding politicians and the political process without any reference to the euro debate. Four questions were developed from Pinkleton and Austin (2002) and answered via a 4-point scale of agreement: (1) "Politicians are out of touch with life in the real world"; (2) "Politicians are interested only in people's votes, not in their opinions"; (3) "It seems like politicians only care about themselves or special interests"; and (d) "I'm satisfied with the way that government works in our country" (reverse coded). The responses were then recoded and averaged to form a scale of global political cynicism ranging from 1 to 4, with 4 representing higher cynicism ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ,  $\alpha = .68$ ).

*Control variables.* A number of variables other than exposure to the strategy frame were expected to potentially explain political cynicism. With this in mind, I included age, gender, political knowledge, internal political efficacy, political interest, amount of weekly news consumption, likelihood of voting, and interest in EU news as control variables in a conservative test. Some of these variables were also examined for their moderating role in strategic framing effects. Appendix B holds both the descriptive statistics of these independent variables and the wording of the specific questions.

## Results

The expectation of previous theory, subsequently reflected in hypothesis 1, is that news framed in terms of political strategy will generate higher levels of political cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news. However, this study included a

**Table 1.** Issue-Specific Political Cynicism by Experimental Condition

	Issue frame (N = 150)	Strategy frame (N = 148)	t
Issue-specific political cynicism	2.98 (0.51)	3.37 (0.73)	5.35, $p < .001$

Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses), with higher values representing greater cynicism. Significance tests are two-tailed.

distinction between issue-specific and global political cynicism. Table 1 presents the findings for issue-specific cynicism. Participants in the strategy condition ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) showed significantly higher levels of issue-specific political cynicism in comparison to those in the issue condition ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ), thus supporting hypothesis 1.

Research question 1 and hypothesis 3 asked the important question of whether individual characteristics moderated the impact of strategy news. To examine moderators in addition to the frame's main effects, whilst controlling for other potential cynicism predictors, a hierarchical regression model<sup>8</sup> was utilized, with issue-specific cynicism as the criterion variable. Table 2 presents the findings of this test.

Model 1 shows that of the demographic controls and predispositions examined, political knowledge ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ) demonstrated a robust negative relationship with issue-specific political cynicism, with voting likelihood ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p < .10$ ) showing a marginal negative relationship. This means that those who were less likely to participate and know about politics were more cynical *ceteris paribus*. After these predispositions were controlled for in model 2, strategy news exposure accounted for an additional 5.1 percent of the variation,  $F(2,292) = 18.54$ ,  $p < .001$ . As expected, strategy frame exposure ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) yielded a strong positive association with political cynicism, confirming the findings of Table 1. Upon introduction of the interaction terms in model 3, a further 4.2 percent of variation in issue-specific cynicism is explained,  $F\text{-change}(3,289) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .01$ . In this model, strategic news exposure retains its main significant effect ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, there are also a number of interactions between strategic news exposure and political knowledge ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ), political interest ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and internal political efficacy ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) that emerged as negative and significant drivers of issue-specific political cynicism, with the interactions between strategy news exposure and partisanship ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p < .10$ ) and voting likelihood ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p < .10$ ) displaying moderate negative relationships with cynicism.

In sum, the regression model for issue-specific cynicism established the main effects of strategy news exposure, thereby reconfirming the initial finding from Table 1. However, it also revealed that these effects were subject to moderation, with a number of variables interacting with strategy news exposure to negatively drive issue-specific cynicism. There is a consistent pattern to those mostly affected by the strategy frame; they are those people who are less politically engaged and knowledgeable. It appears

**Table 2.** Effects on Issue-Specific Political Cynicism by Experimental Condition

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	-.02 (.04)	-.02 (.04)	-.03 (.04)
Gender (male)	.07 (.08)	.05 (.07)	.15 (.07)
Internal political efficacy	-.06 (.06)	-.09* (.06)	-.09* (.06)
Amount of news consumption	.03 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Partisanship (partisan)	-.08 (.09)	-.10 (.09)	-.10 (.09)
Voting likelihood	-.10* (.02)	-.11* (.02)	-.11* (.02)
Political interest	-.09 (.05)	-.07 (.05)	-.07 (.06)
Interest in EU news	.03 (.05)	.03 (.05)	.03 (.05)
Political knowledge	-.19*** (.04)	-.19*** (.03)	-.19*** (.03)
Exposure to strategy frame	—	.30*** (.07)	.20** (.11)
Exposure to Strategy Frame × Political Knowledge	—	—	-.21** (.09)
Exposure to Strategy Frame × Partisanship (partisan)	—	—	-.15* (.10)
Exposure to Strategy Frame × Political Interest	—	—	-.18** (.06)
Exposure to Strategy Frame × Internal Political Efficacy	—	—	-.16** (.08)
Exposure to Strategy Frame × Voting Likelihood	—	—	-.13* (.04)
Adjusted $R^2$	.14	.19	.23
Incremental $R^2$ (%)	—	5.1***	4.2**
$n$	298	298	298

Ordinary least squares regression. Data are  $\beta$ -values and standard errors (in parentheses).

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

that these people were far less likely to reject the frame offered to them and so were more likely to ascribe cynical motivations towards the politicians in the stories. Spearman correlation tests confirmed that those who were more knowledgeable were also more likely to be politically engaged, by all the measures used. Political knowledge was positively correlated with political interest ( $r = .198, p < .05$ ), internal political efficacy ( $r = .224, p < .01$ ), partisanship ( $r = .205, p < .05$ ), and voting likelihood ( $r = .248, p < .01$ ).<sup>9</sup>

The findings for issue-specific cynicism are very important because they tell us that the choices editors and journalists make in framing news stories affect audience evaluations of the actors involved. However, these results tell us less about the impact of strategy news on confidence in politicians and governance writ large, which Table 3 displays.

To reiterate, global political cynicism represents attitudes towards politicians and the workings of democracy beyond the focus of a particular policy debate. For this

**Table 3.** Global Political Cynicism by Experimental Condition

	Issue frame (N = 150)	Strategy frame (N = 148)	t
Global political cynicism	2.33 (0.44)	2.43 (0.48)	2.18, $p = .183$

Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses), with higher values representing greater cynicism. Significance tests are two-tailed.

reason, we might expect the effects of the strategic news frame to be smaller compared to issue-specific cynicism, though still not inconsequential based on previous research (Valentino et al. 2001). Table 3 illustrates that there was no significant difference in cynicism between the issue and strategy samples. For the purpose of brevity, the full results of hierarchical regression analysis are not given here, but they tell a story of moderate but not significant change in global political cynicism as a result of exposure to strategy news. When prior attitudinal and demographic variables were controlled for, strategy frame exposure only exerted a moderate influence on global political cynicism ( $\beta = .11, p < .10$ ), with internal political efficacy ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ), political knowledge ( $\beta = -.24, p < .001$ ) and age ( $\beta = -.12, p < .05$ ) all more powerful predictors. The impact of moderating variables on strategic framing effects was insignificant. Overall, broader measures of cynicism appear to be far more resistant to framing effects than issue-specific ones.

## Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the contingent effects of strategic news coverage in the UK in the context of a nonelection policy debate. It built upon previous research by examining political cynicism at two levels and by examining a greater number of moderating variables than tested previously. Whilst the limitations of the strength of manipulation, the case study, and the sample mean some caution should be exercised over the generalizability of the findings, they offer many interesting themes that confirm some of our previous understanding, challenge others, and raise some important questions for future research.

Findings suggested that those who were exposed to the strategy frame were more cynical than their issue counterparts on issue-specific measures, but broader (global) levels of cynicism were less affected. These findings are consistent with previous literature that found effects of the strategy frame on issue-specific political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; de Vreese 2004; de Vreese and Semetko 2002). As might be expected, however, the effect was not uniform for all types of people. Whereas comparable framing studies have tested the role of political knowledge (e.g., de Vreese 2004; Rhee 1997) and partisanship (e.g., Valentino et al. 2001) as moderating variables, this study covered new ground by introducing many more. Given the contested nature of political knowledge as a moderator of framing effects, research question 1 was posed. The findings with regard to issue-specific cynicism

were clear: The least knowledgeable became more cynical as a result of exposure to strategic news. As we know, this confirms the findings of some studies (de Vreese 2005b; Valentino et al. 2001) but contradicts others (de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Rhee 1997). It is therefore difficult to make wider conclusions about the role of political knowledge as a moderator of framing effects. However, in this study the more politically knowledgeable were also more likely to be more politically engaged, allowing us to consider them together as part of a broader theory of strategic framing effects. Earlier I hypothesized (hypothesis 3) that for the most engaged, strategic news will have less impact—and results confirmed this. It therefore appeared that compared to engaged citizens, the less engaged were less resistant to the narrative of politics offered by the strategy frame and thus expressed significantly more issue-specific cynicism as a result of exposure to it. As already suggested, this effect can be explained by their low interest in political news, which is related to lower political knowledge; their low involvement in political affairs (voting likelihood and efficacy); plus their lack of attachment to a party. As a result, they are less motivated to centrally process the news story, and they possess fewer competing frames to call upon when asked to express their view of politicians. But one of the frames they will possess is the strategic frame and its cynical portrayal of politicians. It seems exposure to strategic news activates this cynicism in less engaged individuals where exposure to issue-based news does not. My findings provide support for Valentino et al.'s (2001) position that strategic news might not alienate those invested in politics because they are more likely to accept that politicians from both sides must play aspects of the political game to fulfill their role as elected representatives. Those with weaker ties to politics, however, appear to be far less forgiving when politicians are portrayed as strategically motivated.

To look at the broader significance of these findings regarding moderating variables, the results allow us to tentatively suggest that alongside political knowledge and partisanship, a broader conception of political engagement can moderate the effects of strategic news. If this is the case, then we would expect other indicators of political engagement not tested in this study to have a similar effect. Future research might examine these in order to test such a thesis. Political engagement is not a commonly used moderating variable in general framing effects literature, but then I have argued that strategic news framing may work slightly differently here. This is because the dependent variable is political cynicism, and the news frame depicts politics as a strategic game played by power-hungry politicians. Therefore, the likelihood of an individual subscribing to the frame can be influenced by variables closely related to the dependent variable, in our case broader political engagement. In the context of a study about news frames and attributions of responsibility for unemployment for example (Iyengar 1991), political engagement is unlikely to be such an important moderating variable.

Turning to evaluations of the general motivations of politicians and their belief in the system of government (global cynicism), the effect of strategic framing was less marked, suggesting that such attitudes were more resistant to short-term change. Sections of the sample may have become cynical about politicians regarding a policy



debate, but very few were turned off politics altogether. This is an important finding because previous research has tended to use either issue-specific (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997) or global/generic measures (e.g. Valentino et al. 2001) of cynicism, not both, in the same study. Whereas Valentino et al. (2001) found strategy news to activate global cynicism in certain individuals, there were no significant relationships found in this study. This might be a curious finding considering the similar research designs and procedures of Valentino et al. and the current study, but it is in line with other European research of recent years which has tended to find more moderate effects of strategic news (e.g., de Vreese 2004, 2005b) when compared to American studies, thus suggesting that the political settings may make a difference.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study only partially support any concept of a “spiral of cynicism” in the UK, with “a spiral of cynicism for some” (Valentino et al. 2001) being a more accurate conclusion. From the findings, we can tentatively suggest Valentino et al.’s (2001) theory is expanded beyond knowledge and partisanship, to a more general conception of political engagement and knowledge. But given that the moderating role of political knowledge continues to elicit contradictory findings, further research is required to draw firm conclusions in this respect. What is more, future research should not rule out the possibility of a nonlinear relationship between political knowledge and/or engagement and susceptibility to strategic framing effects. Here, individuals most susceptible to media effects may be those in the moderate category of knowledge and/or engagement; who possess enough knowledge to understand, process, and incorporate the frame; but lack knowledge to base their political judgments on ideology, party identification, or other stable, long-held predispositions. Such a scenario was not supported by the present study’s findings, but in the case of knowledge, it has been found elsewhere in media effects research (e.g., Valenzuela 2009; Zaller 1992). Nevertheless, if we accept that certain individuals are more susceptible to strategic framing effects, then it is important for future research to understand exactly how this relates to media consumption, as it may be that certain news sources hold more framing power than others as a result of their audience demographic. The question for future content analyses might then be how different media sectors and mediums cover strategy versus issues, something that has tended to be overlooked in studies that (commendably) often choose comparative and longitudinal breadth over depth.

The finding that global cynicism was, at best, only moderately affected by strategy news suggests that, in the UK at least, this type of news may not have the same deleterious consequences for the body politic that others suggest. However, there remain some strong reasons why we should not be too sanguine about the findings and their consequences for democratic engagement. The first is that this single-exposure experimental study cannot rule out the possibility that consistent doses of strategic news can result in a cumulative effect on global political cynicism, akin to the cultivation or “sleeper effect” theories of media effects (see Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006; Zaller 1992, 2002). Indeed, as a result of their comprehensive review of framing, priming, and

agenda-setting effects literature, plus their own data, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) apply the cultivation theory to the effects of strategy frames. In their model, as a result of strategy news, audiences will learn about candidates' strategic activities and evaluate politicians in more cynical ways (issue-specific cynicism). Over a sustained period, as patterns of association are activated and reactivated, and strategic narratives reinforced, cynicism towards candidates will be cultivated to become cynicism towards politicians and campaigns more widely (global cynicism), and perhaps policy debates and governance as well. Ultimately this cynicism can result in public disengagement from the political process. Evidence to substantiate their claims from within the field of framing studies is, however, mixed. Valentino et al.'s (2001) experiment found that nonpartisans and nongraduates were somewhat less likely to say that they intended to vote as a result of exposure to the strategy frame, but otherwise the rest of their sample were no different to those exposed to the issue frame. Other studies have found that although frequent and repeated exposure to strategic news increased respondents' levels of political cynicism, turnout in a national referendum remained high and unrelated to the level of cynicism (de Vreese and Semetko 2002; Elenbaas and de Vreese 2008).

Separate from news framing studies, much political science literature in the USA and UK has explored the link between political cynicism and voting behavior (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Bartle 2002; Pattie et al. 2004; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). In most cases, global measures of political attitudes are important because they have, to varying degrees, proved useful in explaining turnout in elections. Even when only weak relationships between these attitudes and participation have been found, most are unwilling to dismiss the importance of changes in them for the health and welfare of democracy (Craig 1993; Weatherford 1987).

A further reason why the findings should not be dismissed is the steady accumulation of content analysis data from a number of election and nonelection settings, which continue to demonstrate the saturation of contemporary news with strategic frames. This is important when we consider the mix of strategic and substantive news frames that the average citizen receives and provides some credibility to the sort of cultivation effect that Cappella and Jamieson (1997) propose.

If we therefore accept that strategic news is a problem, then perhaps the solution is for news organizations to offer more substantive news. But how realistic is such an outcome, given the current context in which many political journalists find themselves? Like many of their colleagues from other countries, UK news organizations are working in an increasingly commercial climate. Some of the most significant consequences of this are as a result of cost-cutting and the increasing pressure on journalists to produce more copy with the same or even less resources than in the past (Lewis et al. 2008). Strategic news appeals here because it is quick, cheap, and provides an easy way for journalists to put a new twist on the day's news compared to researching issues of substance (Fallows 1996; Kuhn 2003; Patterson 1993). In an increasingly competitive environment, news values become more imperative. Furthermore, in the eyes of journalists, strategic news has more intrinsic news value than substantive news (see de Vreese 2005a), as the former offers human interest, conflict, shared narratives (e.g., good vs. evil), and controversy (McManus 1994; Price and Tewksbury 1997).

A focus on strategic news is also an outcome of the “journalistic fightback” to perceived loss of autonomy due to ever more media savvy politicians and their PR consultants (Blumler 1997). Recent survey-based evidence gives little reason to believe that the relationship between journalists, politicians, and their media handlers is likely to improve any time soon (Brants et al. 2009).

A final reason that strategic news is unlikely to abate is that its undercurrent of cynicism with regards to politicians suits a narrative of politics that the electorate is increasingly in tune with. The evidence from this study, alongside other evidence in this field, shows how strategic news frames can activate and encourage political cynicism. But there can still be some credence to the news media’s claim that they are merely reflecting a real public cynicism with politics in their coverage. Recent political scandals experienced in the UK over MP’s expenses and political lobbying only serves to provide more reasons for journalists to suggest that politicians *are* motivated by personal gain.

In many ways, therefore, the conditions in which strategic news becomes most appealing to journalists are in the ascendancy. The degree of concern this ought to elicit might be dependent on the long-term impact of consistent exposure to strategic news and its potential link to democratic engagement. But as yet, this crucial question remains unresolved, and it will continue to provide a challenge for future research.

## Appendix A

### Summary of Experiment CD Content

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#### Summary of issue CD media content

##### Item 1

*BBC Ten o’clock News*, May 13, 2003, 1.48 min.  
*The Five Tests*: The BBC’s economics editor, Evan Davis, explains the five economic tests for Euro entry and how likely they are to be passed on June 9.

##### Item 2

*The Daily Telegraph*, May 16, 2003, p. 13, 1,546 words.  
 “The Euro: What Really Matters to Britain.”  
 By Philip Johnston.  
 This article firstly explains the five tests, then outlines the arguments for and against Britain entering the Euro. It considers the implications of entering the Euro for mortgages, pensions, jobs, prices in the shops, taxes, and finally for British sovereignty.

#### Summary of strategy CD media content

##### Item 1

*BBC Ten o’clock News*, May 13, 2003, 1.48 min.  
*The Five Tests*: The BBC’s economics editor, Evan Davis, explains the five economic tests for Euro entry and how likely they are to be passed on June 9.

##### Item 2

*Five News at 7pm*, May 13, 2003, 1.01 min.  
*The Five Tests*: *Five News*’s political editor, Andy Bell, highlights the ambiguity of the five tests, and suggests that a sixth test will be just as important to the government: whether they can win a referendum on the Euro. He therefore highlights the importance of political strategy for the outcome of the assessment on Britain’s membership of the single currency.

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(continued)

## Appendix A (continued)

### Summary of issue CD media content

#### Item 3

*Five News at 7pm*, June 9, 2003, 3.51 min.  
*Five News* reporters John Gilbert and Mark Jordan take sides on the Euro debate, each taking turns to present their case. The case for stresses the ease of currency transactions in the Eurozone, for both businesses and tourists. He also argues that trade and investment would be greater if Britain entered the Euro. Finally, he points out that competition from within the Eurozone would drive down prices in British shops. The case against joining firstly points out British public opinion on the issue: the majority being against joining. The inflexibility of the single interest rate is then attacked, as it could have pernicious effects for British mortgages. British sovereignty is at stake, he argues, as our economic decisions are taken away from us and given to Frankfurt. He finishes by comparing British unemployment and trade levels with France and Germany, arguing that we are better off staying out of the Euro.

#### Item 4

*BBC Ten o'clock News*, May 15, 2003, 1.47 min.  
 The BBC's Rory Cellan-Jones analyses the views of the car industry on the Euro debate. The boss of General Motors, Richard Wagner, says that membership of the Euro was not the deciding factor when deciding where to invest; instead, it was the overall health of the economy. Other car companies, such as Ford, are urging the government to enter the Euro sooner rather than later, because currency uncertainty is not good for long-term planning.

### Summary of strategy CD media content

#### Item 3

*The Sunday Telegraph*, May 11, 2003, p. 2, 814 words.

"Cabinet Splits as Minister Attacks Brown on Euro Delay; PM 'Authorises' Pro-Euro Ministers to Speak Out against Intransigent Chancellor:"

By Colin Brown and Francis Elliot.

A pro-Euro Cabinet minister, Helen Liddell, urges the chancellor to consider a sixth test of what the consequences would be of staying out of the Euro. She also reiterates the need for the decision to be made by the Cabinet and not the chancellor alone. These comments are interpreted by the journalist as being part of the prime minister's strategy to take control of the Euro decision from Gordon Brown. We are then told of the Cabinet "row" over the wording of the statement on the five tests: Tony Blair wants a positive spin on a "no" announcement, as opposed to the more Eurosceptic Brown.

#### Item 4

*The Independent*, May 16, 2003, p. 1, 429 words.

"Blair's Cabinet Coup against Brown Clears Path for an Early Euro Poll." By Andrew Grice.

Despite it being widely assumed that the chancellor will give a "not yet" verdict on the five tests, the fact that there will be a Cabinet discussion over the decision is interpreted as a tactical victory for Tony Blair over his "rival," Gordon Brown. The influence of the largely pro-Euro Cabinet is said to mean that the chance of a referendum in the next Parliament will not be ruled out. Allies of the chancellor insisted that the prospects of a referendum had not changed, and dismissed the idea that he had lost control of the issue as "ridiculous."

(continued)

## Appendix A (continued)

### Summary of issue CD media content

#### Item 5

*The Independent*, June 10, 2003, p. 1, 268 words.

"The Euro: The Five Tests Brown's Verdict."  
By Andrew Grice.

Written the day after the announcements of the five tests decision, this article outlines Gordon Brown's verdict. Despite significant progress over the last couple of years, the first test of convergence is still failed. The test for financial services is passed, with the chancellor stating that EMU entry would enhance the already strong position of the City. The test of flexibility is failed, "We cannot be confident that UK flexibility, while improved, is sufficient" according to the chancellor. The final two tests on the impact of the Euro for growth, stability and jobs; and investment, were both undecided. If convergence is achieved, then the last two tests will be passed.

#### Item 6

*BBC Ten o'clock News*, June 9, 2003, 1.47 min.

*The View from Europe*. The BBC's Stephen Sackur reports from Belgium, on the day that Britain said "not yet" to the Euro. He looks at how it has impacted ordinary lives, and concludes that it has become an "unremarkable fact of European life". Voxpops with Belgian people show how the Euro works on the street level: it is said to make traveling much easier, but prices have gone up since its introduction.

#### Item 7

BBC News Online, June 9, 2003, 731 words.

"Q&A: What does the euro decision mean for you? Chancellor Gordon Brown has decided that Britain is not yet ready to adopt the euro.

What does this mean for you? What are the financial and economic implications? And will the endless media speculation now come to an end? BBC News Online explains." This article answers the following

### Summary of strategy CD media content

#### Item 5

*ITV News at Ten*, May 18, 2003, 1.31 min.

*ITV News's* political correspondent, Libby Wiener, summarizes the "Euro row" that has been raging in the build up to the five tests announcement. Gordon Brown's statement that "economics not dogma" will be the deciding factor in his analysis is interpreted to mean "I'm in charge" of the Euro decision. Brown and Blair then released a statement yesterday in an attempt to dampen speculation that there was a rift between the two. Liberal Democrat economic spokesman, Matthew Taylor, criticizes the way the Euro decision is being conducted by the government.

#### Item 6

*Daily Telegraph*, May 22, 2003, p. 8, 531 words.

"Mandelson Attacked for Fuelling Euro Feud."  
By George Jones.

Both the chancellor and the PM rounded on Peter Mandelson after he claimed that Brown had "outmaneuvered" Blair over the Euro decision. These comments were also picked up by the Opposition leader, Iain Duncan Smith, who claimed the Cabinet were divided "from top to bottom" on the Euro.

#### Item 7

BBC News Online, June 9, 2003, 860 words.

"UK 'Not Yet Ready for the Euro.'"

This article details the announcement of the five tests, on June 9, 2003, with Gordon Brown saying "not yet" to the Euro. The chancellor outlined the potential benefits to Britain of entering the Euro, but he warned that joining at the wrong time could see unemployment rise, see cuts in public service spending and stall economic growth. He said

(continued)

## Appendix A (continued)

### Summary of issue CD media content

questions in a Q&A format: What does this mean for the pound in my pocket? Why did Mr. Brown say no to the Euro? Is the chancellor's decision popular? So what happens next?

#### Overall

The issue CD contained 9 minutes, 13 seconds of TV news material, spread across four news clips; and 2,545 words of newspaper text spread across three articles.

### Summary of strategy CD media content

there was a need for further reforms of the UK housing market to tackle instability. And he said the government would also review its inflation targets as part of efforts to meet the test on convergence between the UK economy and the Eurozone. The Tories denounced the announcement as "an exercise in deceit," and reiterated the splits in government over the issue. According to BBC online correspondent Nick Assinder, "It was abundantly clear what the past two weeks' of cabinet involvement had been all about—saving Tony Blair's face."

#### Item 8

*BBC Ten o'clock News*, June 9, 2003, 3.51 min.

BBC political editor Andrew Marr gives his report of the Euro announcement. After all of the anticipation of the decision, not much happened he says. We are firstly shown parts of the chancellor's speech, before the reaction to it by the opposition parties. Michael Howard describes Brown and Blair as being "united in rivalry," and the five tests had only been invented to cover up differences between the two men.

#### Item 9

*Channel 4 News*, June 10, 2003, 2.08 min.

A day after the Euro announcement, Channel 4 News's Gary Gibbon reports from the press conference held by the prime minister and chancellor, to launch the "Euro roadshow." The aim of the press conference was to build the case for joining the Euro in the future, but the questions they received were more interested in the relationship between the two men. Blair was asked directly whether he had a pact with Brown to hand over power at some stage. The reporter analyses how the two men swapped their usual roles, with the prime minister arguing the economic case, while the chancellor gave the more patriotic case for joining.

#### Overall

The strategy CD contained 10 minutes, 18 seconds of TV news material, spread across five news clips; and 2,634 words of newspaper text spread across four articles.

## Appendix B

### Overview of Independent Variables

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*Age:* Scale ranging from 1 = 16 to 24 to 6 = 65+ ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ )

*Gender:* 0 = female, 1 = male

*Political knowledge:* Four-item index, coded to give participants 1 point for each correct answer ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $\alpha = .58$ ). Questions tapped factual knowledge about British and European politics and international current affairs. Questions were (1) "How many members of the EU are there?" (2) "And how many of those countries have the Euro as their currency?" (3) "True or false: The number of MPs in British Parliament is about 100." (4) "In which country did last year's school siege take place?" Apart from the true-or-false question, all of the questions asked the respondent to choose from five answers, one of them being correct. There was no information in any of the stimuli that would help with the knowledge quiz.

*Partisanship:* On a yes/no scale, participants were asked, "Some people think of themselves as usually being a supporter of one political party rather than another. Do you usually think of yourself as being a supporter of one particular party or not?" This resulted in 104 partisans (coded as 1) and 194 nonpartisans (coded as 0).

*Internal political efficacy:* On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*, participants were asked their agreement to the statements, (1) "I think I am better informed about politics than most others"; (2) "It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go much the same"; and (3) "Sometimes politics is so complex that people like me do not understand what is going on." Responses were recoded if appropriate, added, then divided by three to form a scale of political efficacy with higher values representing higher efficacy ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Political interest:* On a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *none* to 5 = *a great deal* ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ).

*Voting likelihood:* On a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = *definitely will not vote* to 10 = *definitely will vote* with regard to the next general election ( $M = 7.7$ ,  $SD = 2.83$ ).

*Amount of news consumption:* In hours ( $M = 6.48$ ,  $SD = 3.34$ ). Based on total hours of weekly news consumption.

*Interest in EU news:* On a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *none* to 5 = *a great deal* ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ).

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## Notes

1. Although political knowledge is not as comprehensive a measure as political sophistication (see Luskin 1987), it still acts as a comparable indicator to previous research on moderators of framing effects.
2. Although the study was not conducted in an election context, intention to vote in the next general election is still a relevant indicator of political engagement, as it is a form of participation and action.
3. A control group was therefore excluded. Including a control group would essentially mean designing a “frameless” news story (de Vreese 2004). Given the aims of this study, it is fair to consider the issue group as the functional equivalent of the control group, as they are not exposed to the strategy stimulus. This is consistent with the procedures used in similar framing studies (de Vreese 2004; Iyengar 1991; Nelson et al. 1997; Valentino et al. 2001).
4. These are “(1) winning and losing as the central concern; (2) the language of wars, games, and competition; (3) a story with performers, critics, and audience (voters); (4) centrality of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (5) heavy weighting of polls and the candidate’s standing in them” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997: 33).
5. The quantitative manipulation check included seven questions about the experimental content, measuring respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale as to whether they could recognize elements of strategic reporting. These were recorded and averaged to form a scale of strategy frame recognition, ranging from 1 to 5 (with higher numbers indicating greater recognition). The means for the strategy group ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) of sixteen respondents were considerably higher than for the issue group ( $M = 0.77$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) of sixteen respondents. Given the small numbers, *t*-test results are inappropriate to report. Qualitative interviews were also conducted with ten respondents as part of the pilot. As Aronson et al. (1990) recommend, the qualitative interviews were conducted immediately after the participant had seen the media exposure and before the posttest. Interviews revealed the expected perceived differences between the news content, with respondents exposed to issue stories finding the direction of the reporting to be “straight” and focused on the issues not strategies. In contrast, strategy respondents recognized the strategy-centered narrative, with “typical politicians” a prominent theme. In the main study, there was an indicator of issue-specific cynicism that also acted as a de facto manipulation check: “The debate about the euro is more about personality than the substance of the issue.” The strategy sample mean was 2.41 and the issue sample was 1.83 ( $t = 5.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on a 5-point scale (with higher scores indicating greater cynicism), confirming that the exposures were perceived to be different on the dimensions they were chosen on.
6. Once the participant had completed the experiment, the data was automatically sent to us via the web. They did not need to be online when completing the experiment. The CD was programmed to retain a “cookie” on the user’s computer until he or she went online.
7. The mean length of time for the strategy participants (23 minutes,  $SD = 6.1$ ) was not significantly different ( $p > .05$ ) from that of the issue participants (24 minutes,  $SD = 7.2$ ).
8. Hierarchical regression is similar to stepwise regression, but the researcher, not the computer, determines the order of entry of the variables. Variables or sets of variables are entered in steps (or blocks), with each independent variable being assessed in terms of what

it adds to the prediction of the dependent variable, after the previous variables have been controlled for.

9. The variance inflation factor (VIF) average for political knowledge and the various political engagement indicators was 1.031, with none exceeding 1.120.

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### **Bio**

**Dan Jackson**, PhD, is a senior lecturer in media and communications at Bournemouth University.