

Game Frames, Issue Frames, and Mobilization: Disentangling the Effects of Frame Exposure and Motivated News Attention on Political Cynicism and Engagement

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Abstract

This study combines a media content analysis ($N=1158$) and panel survey data ($N=1612$) conducted during the Swedish 2010 national election campaign, to analyze the effects of both game-framed and issue-framed news on political cynicism, institutional trust, and political interest. The findings show that news framing matters. Whereas game-framed news increases cynicism and depresses interest, issue-framed news has mobilizing effects. Furthermore, by conceptually and empirically distinguishing frame exposure from motivated news attention as two different modes of news media use, the results show that the effects of exposure to game-framed and issue-framed news are distinct from motivated news attention. These findings suggest two different mechanisms behind media effects and shine new light on the spiral of cynicism–virtuous circle controversy.

The tendency of journalists to frame politics as a strategic game has raised concerns about the democratic role of the news media in election campaigns. In particular, by focusing coverage on the game, the horse race, and strategic motivations behind politicians' behavior—rather than on the substance of political issues, policy proposals, or ideologies—the news media are said to demobilize citizens by turning them from active participants into passive and cynical spectators of the political game (Aalberg, Strömbäck & De Vreese, 2012; Schudson, 2003). As argued by political scientist Thomas Patterson “[b]y emphasizing the game dimension day after day, the press forces it to

the forefront, strengthening the voters' mistrust of the candidates and reducing their sense of involvement. The Press has this effect because the game schema drives its analysis, and its capacity to see the campaign in other ways are limited" (1993, p. 93).

Building on these ideas, a large number of framing effect studies—largely sparked by the seminal research conducted by Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1997)—have documented clear links between exposure to game-framed (strategic) news stories and political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2004, 2005; De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Jackson, 2011; Valentino, Beckmann & Buhr, 2001; see also Schuck, Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2013, for an extensive cross-national comparative study of strategic news and cynicism). However, despite the growing evidence of the impact of news frames on public opinion, a number of important questions remain unresolved in the media effects literature. First, it is unclear to what extent the effects of exposure to game-framed news extend beyond political cynicism to other forms of political engagement. Second, there is still very little evidence that issue-framed (substantive) news actually have the mobilizing effects on political engagement that is often assumed in the spiral of cynicism literature. For instance, while the impact of game-framed news on political cynicism has been the main focus in past framing effects research, a recent study noted that “little attention has been directed to the positive effects of news content” (Adriaansen, van Praag, & De Vreese, 2010, p. 434). This is problematic not only for theory building, but also for those who want to find ways of improving journalistic practice. Third, we still know very little about whether the effects of news frames on cynicism are the result of either passive or motivated forms of media use and information processing, which would suggest two different mechanisms behind media effects. Most studies do not differentiate—and many even mix-up—the influence of passive and motivated media use when analyzing their effects on political attitudes and engagement. This is commonly done in survey research when measures of news exposure and attention are either included separately in regression models or are combined into one single index of news use.

The present study addresses these three issues by differentiating between frame exposure and motivated news attention as two different modes of media use, and by incorporating a broader set of outcome variables. To analyze the effects of exposure to both game-framed and issue-framed news in a real-world setting, this study combines a media content analysis with a panel survey conducted during the 2010 Swedish national election campaign. This approach enables a close analysis of how exposure to specific news frames influences individual-level *changes* in cognitions and attitudes over time, and thereby provides much stronger causal inferences than cross-sectional data. In brief, the results reveal that both sides in the spiral of cynicism—virtuous circle

controversy might actually be correct, but they rely on different mechanisms of influence. Therefore, juxtaposing these as two *competing* perspectives on the influence of the news media on democratic attitudes and behaviors might be misleading, as they are likely to operate simultaneously.

Effects of Game-Framed and Issue-Framed News on Political Cynicism and Engagement

On a general level, research on the effects of news coverage on political trust and engagement has generally revolved around two major perspectives on the role of news media in mediatized democracies. On the one hand, according to the *spiral of cynicism* argument, the news media are to blame for growing levels of political cynicism, apathy, and alienation among citizens. By calling audience attention to the conflict, scandal, and drama of politics, the news media are said to demobilize and detach citizens from the political process (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger & Bennett, 1999; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006; Robinson, 1976). On the other hand, the *virtuous circle* argument proposed by Norris (2000) holds that the news media have a positive influence on democratic qualities primarily by increasing political trust, contributing to issue learning, and mobilizing participation. While the effects of news exposure are positive in these regards, the notion of a virtuous circle highlights the reciprocal causal relationships between selective exposure and media effects, whereby citizens who are politically engaged tend to seek-out news to a larger extent, which in turn fuels further trust, knowledge, and involvement (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Newton, 1999; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010).

More specifically, however, framing effects research has mainly focused on how exposure to game-framed and issue-framed news influences political cynicism. According to Cappella and Jamieson (1997), strategic news—framing politics as a strategic game by focusing on who is winning and losing in the opinion battle, the performance of politicians and parties, and their political strategies and tactics during campaigns—activates distrust and cynicism towards politicians by inviting “interpretations of politicians’ motivations as self-interested and hence not worthy of trust” (p. 145).

In addition to the experimental research conducted by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), several other studies have provided empirical support for these framing effects. For instance, based on a field experiment, Rhee (1997) found that participants who read strategy-framed newspaper stories were more likely to provide strategic interpretations of an upcoming local election in Philadelphia, compared with respondents exposed to issue-framed news stories. In another experimental study, Valentino et al. (2001) not only found that strategic news induced strategic descriptions of the election among the participants, but that exposure to this frame also reduced trust in

politicians, civic duty, the perceived meaningfulness of elections, and intention to vote—primarily among weak partisans and citizens with low levels of education. Focusing specifically on political cynicism, several studies conducted by De Vreese and his colleagues have repeatedly shown, using experimental as well as survey data, that exposure to strategic news increases cynicism towards elections and candidates (De Vreese, 2004, 2005; De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; see also Jackson, 2011 for additional empirical evidence), but also that these effects might, in fact, be even more pronounced in countries where the quality of government is high and baseline cynicism low (Schuck et al., 2013). Thus, while there is significant and growing evidence that game-framed news fuels political cynicism, substantially less is known about two related aspects of the effects of game-framed and issue-framed news on public opinion.

First, it remains unclear to what extent the impact of game-framed news extends beyond political cynicism towards candidates and the election campaigns, to other forms of political trust and involvement. As discussed extensively in the literature, the concept of political cynicism and trust is multidimensional, and it is fruitful to distinguish between different levels of trust—ranging from attitudes towards specific political actors to support for the political systems as a whole (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Norris, 2011). With respect to framing effects, most studies have focused on cynicism at the actor or campaign level (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Schuck et al., 2013; Valentino et al., 2001), but it is less clear whether trust in political institutions—which is typically considered more stable—is equally influenced by exposure to game-framed news. Furthermore, studies incorporating measures of political engagement tend to reach different conclusions. While the study by Valentino et al. (2001) indicated that strategic news had a negative effect on vote intention and civic duty, research conducted by De Vreese (2005; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002) challenges the view that strategic news and political cynicism demobilizes citizens to vote: “The Danish case suggests that voters may be cynical and skeptical, the news media may even contribute to this during a campaign, but this may not have the detrimental effects on democracy, at least in terms of mobilization, which is often an (implied) assumption in the ‘demobilization’ literature” (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002, p. 633). Based on a media content analysis and a cross-sectional survey, however, a recent study found a negative relationship between exposure to game-framed news and both internal as well as external efficacy (Pedersen, 2012).

Second, while most framing effect research has been devoted to analyzing the negative impact of game-framed news on political cynicism, less is known about the assumed positive effects of issue-framed news on cynicism and various dimensions of political involvement (Adriaansen et al., 2010). For

instance, apart from the consistent effects of strategic news frames on political cynicism, one of the most striking findings from the experimental studies conducted by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) was the absence of any effects of issue frames on cynicism. Compared with participants in the control groups, who received no campaign news at all, those exposed to issue-framed coverage were no less cynical: “[e]xposure to issue frames did not lower cynicism [...] issue framing tended to function as if no news had been received” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 150). While several later experimental studies confirm the detrimental effects of game-framed news on cynicism, most are based on comparing groups exposed to either a game or an issue frame, without a control group receiving no news (De Vreese, 2004; De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Jackson, 2011; Valentino et al., 2001). Consequentially, these designs inhibit conclusions concerning the actual effect of substantive news on cynicism (Chong & Druckman, 2007). A recent study employed a two-wave panel design to specifically address whether exposure to substantive news reduces cynicism, but found mixed results. While exposure to substantive news depressed cynicism, such an effect was found only among younger citizens (Adriaansen et al., 2010).

In the present study we build on a very similar panel design as Adriaansen et al. (2010) to investigate the effects of game-framed and issue-framed news on political cynicism. Apart from providing new evidence on the effect of issue-framed news on cynicism, this study also analyzes whether exposure to game-framed and issue-framed news influences trust in the national parliament as well as interest in politics.

Trust in the national parliament reflects confidence in the most important political institution in parliamentary democracies, and is conceptually distinct from trust in actors (Erber & Lau, 1990; Norris, 2011). Recent studies have argued that game frames are more likely to influence cynicism towards political actors, while diffused or generalized support may be less sensitive to framing (Jackson, 2011; Schuck et al., 2013). By going beyond actor-cynicism towards institutional trust, this study will shine additional light on the extent to which game-framed news influence not only actor-level attitudes, but institutional-level trust as well.

To analyze whether news framing influences political engagement, this study focuses on interest in politics—i.e., the “degree to which politics arouses a citizen’s curiosity” (van Deth, 2000, p. 119). As argued by Markus Prior, “political interest is typically the most powerful predictor of political behaviors that make democracy work”—as citizens who are interested in politics are more likely to vote, possess more knowledge about politics and are more likely to participate in general (Prior, 2010, p. 747; see also Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Despite its crucial relevance as an outcome variable in the media malaise–virtuous circle literature, few framing effect studies have

analyzed political interest as a dependent variable. Rather, political interest is almost exclusively treated as a predictor of news media use (see Boullianne 2011 and Strömbäck & Shehata 2010 for two exceptions). From a spiral of cynicism perspective, we should expect game-framed news coverage to alienate citizens not only by activating cynicism, but also by reducing their sense of involvement (Patterson, 1993). Whether exposure to game-framed news has this effect is far from clear, however, as some studies indicate that horserace election coverage may even stimulate attention to politics (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004; Norris, 2000; see also Aalberg et al. 2012 for a discussion).

Following the basic assumption underlying the spiral of cynicism, however, we expect game-framed news to demobilize citizens by depressing interest in politics, while issue-framed news has mobilizing effects (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001).

H1: Exposure to game-framed news coverage (a) increases political cynicism, (b) but has negative effects on institutional trust, and (c) interest in politics.

H2: Exposure to issue-framed news coverage (a) lowers political cynicism, (b) but has positive effects on institutional trust, and (c) interest in politics.

Distinguishing Frame Exposure From Motivated News Attention

At present, little attention and research efforts have been devoted to what could be considered a crucial difference between the spiral of cynicism and virtuous circle perspectives on the influence of election news on political engagement—the underlying mechanisms that generate the suggested media effects. Theoretically, exposure and attention denote two different modes of news media use and, most likely, information processing behaviors (Eveland, Hutchens, & Shen, 2009; Porter, 2009). Typically, news *exposure* refers to the frequency of use of various news media, while *attention* denotes an increased mental effort, conscious awareness, and active processing of the content elements to which a news consumer is exposed (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Porter, 2009). While exposure is a precondition for attention, exposure does not by necessity entail attention. Rather, attention is driven by personal motivation, interest, and preference for certain types of content. As argued by Eveland, Shah, and Kwak (2003): “News attention goes beyond news exposure [...] to indicate the amount of mental focus given to the news or even to particular types of stories (such as campaign stories) in the news” (Eveland et al., 2003, p. 363).

Very few media effect studies have, however, distinguished between these two modes of news media use—leading to ambiguities regarding whether it is exposure to certain frames or differences in personal motivations and attention that produce effects on political cynicism and engagement. In this study, we argue that the conflicting results and conclusions that characterize the spiral of

cynicism–virtuous circle literature are due to the fact that different mechanisms are at work simultaneously, most likely among different groups of citizens: *frame exposure* and *motivated news attention*. Virtually no study accounts for both these processes by empirically distinguishing them as two different modes of news media use. Empirical support for virtuous circle theory is typically based on representative surveys—sometimes combined with media content data—showing a positive effect of news exposure and attention on political trust, knowledge, and engagement (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Liu, Shen, Eveland & Dylko, 2013; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). However, using either self-reported measures of news exposure or attention—or combining them into one single news consumption index—makes it impossible to know whether media content or personal motivations account for the observed relationship with cynicism, trust, and engagement. On the other hand, most experimental studies providing the strongest evidence for causal effects of game-framed news on cynicism are based on captive audiences and do not account for differences in personal motivation to seek-out and process political news. In addition, the between-group design commonly used, where participants are exposed to either a game or an issue frame, does not account for the fact that most news consumers tend to be exposed to a combination of frames during election campaigns (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2010; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2013). This is particularly the case with game and issue frames in election news. Several content analyses, conducted in a variety of countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Great Britain, Israel, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United States, have shown that game-framed news tend to coexist with issue-framed news, even though their relative prominence can vary across media types and media systems (Aalberg et al., 2012; Schuck et al., 2013; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). Given the nature of the media environment in most of these countries, citizens who watch regular newscasts or read about the election in the newspaper are likely to be exposed to both types of frames. Despite this, most experimental evidence of the effects of game-framed news originates from research designs where participants are exposed to either a game or an issue frame.

Thus, we argue that what are often described as “conflicting results” in the spiral of cynicism–virtuous circle controversy are in fact outcomes of two different processes or mechanisms. While survey studies supporting the notion of a virtuous circle are biased towards motivational aspects of news media use, controlled experiments capture the unique effects of exposure to specific content characteristics such as game-framed or issue-framed news. Based on the distinction between exposure and attention discussed earlier, we refer to *frame exposure* as the likelihood of being exposed to a certain frame, irrespective of the level of political interest or motivation that citizens might have for seeking-out and process news. *Motivated news attention*, on the other hand, denotes

the level of motivation and interest to attend and actively process political news. By analyzing the unique effects of frame exposure and political news attention simultaneously, it becomes possible to distinguish the influence of passive forms of news media use from active or motivated news consumption on political cynicism and engagement.

Following findings from previous studies, we expect frame exposure to have a unique effect on cynicism and engagement, beyond what is accounted for by differences in the amount of attention devoted to political news. Exposure to game-framed news should activate cynicism through a process of automatic information activation that occurs independently of the mental effort used to process the news, whereas exposure to issue-framed news should reduce cynicism, as well as increase institutional trust and political interest. Following the virtuous circle literature, on the other hand, we expect attention to political news to have a negative effect on cynicism, but strengthen institutional trust and engagement.

H3: Frame exposure has a unique effect on (a) political cynicism, (b) institutional trust, and (c) interest in politics, independently of the amount of attention devoted to news about politics.

H4: Attention to political news (a) lowers political cynicism, (b) but increases institutional trust, and (c) interest in politics.

To test these hypotheses a panel survey and media content analysis were conducted during the 2010 Swedish national election campaign. These are described in more detail in the next section.

Methodology and Data

The present study follows a growing trend of matching extensive media content analysis of news coverage with panel survey data to enable stronger inferences regarding cause–effect relations at the individual level (Adriaansen et al, 2010; Pedersen, 2012). Compared with cross-sectional surveys, the time component of panel data makes it possible to study changes in attitudes, opinions, and behaviors over time and, by linking each respondent's news media use to the media content analysis, to study the effect of exposure to game and issue frames on political cynicism and engagement (Finkel, 1995). Compared with experimental designs, the real-world setting provided by combining representative panel surveys with actual news coverage relaxes many of the unnatural conditions that characterize controlled experiments.

Content Analysis of Game and Issue Frames

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to study the prominence of game and issue frames in election news coverage in several major news media outlets during a 3-week period before Election Day. The unit of

analysis was full news stories published by seven nationally leading outlets included in the analysis. The selection criteria were that the news story should make references to political candidates, parties, or institutions in headline, photo, or first paragraph (newspapers), or either verbally or visually in the full news story (television). In total, the content analysis included 1,158 news stories published in four daily newspapers—*Aftonbladet* (258), *Expressen* (272), *Dagens Nyheter* (169), and *Svenska Dagbladet* (161)—and broadcasted in three daily newscasts—*Rapport* (106), *Aktuellt* (94), and *TV4 Nyheterna* (98).

Following conceptual definitions and previous empirical studies, we operationalized and coded the dominant metaframe of each story as either a *game metaframe* or an *issue metaframe* (Aalberg et al., 2012; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). A news story was coded as dominated by a game metaframe if the news item focused on the tactics or strategy of political campaigning, on the horse race and battle for voters, on the images of politicians, on political power as a goal in and of itself, or on politicians as persons rather than as spokespersons for certain policies. The *issue metaframe*, on the other hand, was dominant if the news stories focused on issues and issue positions, on real-world conditions with relevance for issue positions, or on what had happened or what someone had said and done with respect to issues and issue positions. By using the dominant frame approach, the two frames were treated as mutually exclusive in the coding procedure. Thus, even though most news items contain elements of both game and issue frames, it was the relative salience of one frame over the other that was coded. For difficult and rare cases, a third “could not be determined” coding option was available. To test for intercoder reliability, 118 news stories were randomly selected. The test showed acceptable levels of intercoder reliability (Cohen’s kappa = 0.76).

The Panel Survey

A panel survey was conducted during the final weeks of the campaign, containing survey questions about exposure to each news media outlet included in the content analysis. The panel survey was conducted by the Centre for Political Communication Research, Mid Sweden University in cooperation with the polling institute *Synovate* in Sweden. The sample was drawn using stratified probability sampling from a database of approximately 28,000 citizens from *Synovate*’s pool of Web survey participants. The participants included in this pool are recruited continuously using both random digit dialing and mail surveys based on random probability samples. Approximately 5% of those who are initially contacted and invited agree to be part of this pool of respondents. As the invitations were not done for this specific study, but rather for the purpose of doing market research, the common bias towards politically interested citizens is to some extent avoided. Furthermore, the pool of Web survey participants covers different segments of

the population in terms of residence, age, education, occupation, etc. The probability sample of 4,760 respondents aged 18–74 from this pool was stratified by gender, age, county size, political interest, and Internet use, so as to be as representative of the Swedish population aged 18–74 years as possible. Respondents were asked to complete a Web survey at four times during a period of 5 months leading up to the election. Wave 1 of the panel took place in May (May 3–20), Wave 2 in mid-June (June 14–23), Wave 3 in mid-August (August 16–23), and, finally, Wave 4 immediately after Election Day (September 20–27). To enable matching with the content analysis covering the final weeks of the election campaign, respondents who completed the Wave 3 and Wave 4 questionnaires ($n=1612$) were selected for analysis, resulting in a total cooperation rate of 34%.

Dependent variables. The present study focuses on three outcome variables: political cynicism, institutional trust, and political interest. These dependent variables were measured in the last panel wave (t). To utilize the strength of the panel data, lagged values of these variables measured in previous panel waves will be used as control variables in the analyses.

Political cynicism. Following previous work, we operationalized cynicism based on respondents' agreement–disagreement with four statements about Swedish politicians: (1) “Swedish politicians are doing their best to improve the life of ordinary people,” (2) “Politicians are only interested in people's votes, not their opinions,” (3) “Those in parliament do not care much about the opinions of ordinary people,” and (4) “Swedish politicians tend to keep their promises.” These four items were added to form a political cynicism index ranging from 0 to 12 (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.81$), with low values representing low cynicism and high values representing high cynicism ($M=7.18$, $SD=2.69$).

Institutional trust. To measure trust in political institutions, we use the following survey item: “In general, to what extent do you trust Riksdagen [*the Swedish national parliament*]?” with five response categories ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (To a very high extent) ($M=3.56$, $SD=0.97$).

Political interest. Respondents' interest in politics was tapped using the following survey question: “In general, how interested are you in politics,” with response categories ranging from 1 (Not interested at all) to 4 (Very interested) ($M=2.86$, $SD=0.75$).

Independent variables. *Frame exposure.* To measure the likelihood of being exposed to game and issue frames during the campaign, we followed a procedure of combining information from the content analysis described earlier with information about each respondent's use of the different news media sources included in the content analysis (Adriaansen et al, 2010; Pedersen, 2012; Schuck et al., 2013). This was done in several steps. First, in the last panel wave, respondents were asked about their exposure to each

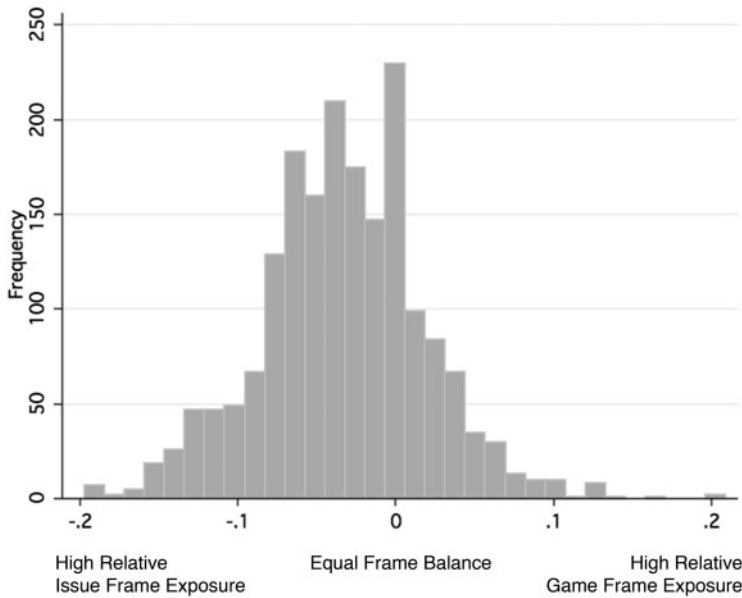
news media source the preceding week, ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Daily). Second, these seven variables (each representing exposure to a specific news media) were recoded to range between 0 (representing the minimum value “Never”) and 1 (representing the maximum value “Daily”),¹ and then multiplied by the proportion of game-framed and issue-framed coverage in each media source, creating two separate exposure variables per news media. For instance, a respondent who watched the television newscast *Aktuellt* 1–2 days the preceding week was given a game-exposure value for this specific news media based on his/her exposure frequency (0.4 on the recoded 0–1 scale) as well as the share of game-framed news stories in *Aktuellt* coverage (0.46, representing the fact that 46% of the stories used a game-metaframe), yielding an *Aktuellt* game-exposure score of 0.18. An identical procedure was used to calculate an *Aktuellt* issue-exposure score. To create an overall game-exposure index, the respondents’ values on each of the seven news media specific game-exposure variables were added—thereby accounting for the fact that most citizens are likely to use a combination of news media during the campaign. Again, the exact same procedure was used to construct an overall issue-exposure index. Finally, as the two measures are very strongly correlated—due to the fact that both were created as a function of the same original variables—we created a single relative game-frame exposure measure by subtracting overall issue-exposure from overall game-exposure. As respondents who did not use any of the seven news media outlets ($n=104$) could not have been exposed to the frames provided in these media, they were excluded from the analysis. To facilitate interpretation of this measure, Figure 1 provides an illustration of the relative game-frame exposure index. Higher (positive) values on this scale indicate a stronger likelihood of being exposed to game-framed relative to issue-framed news, whereas low (negative) values represent a stronger likelihood of being exposed to issue-framed relative to game-framed news. A value of 0 represents a balanced dosage of game and issue frames.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the majority of respondents have a negative value on the relative game-frame exposure index ($M=-0.04$, $SD=0.05$), which indicates that most citizens are exposed to a heavier dosage of issue-framed election coverage. Furthermore, there are a small number of outliers scoring comparatively high on the relative game-frame exposure index. To check the robustness of the findings, all regressions were estimated excluding these 10 observations. These analyses yielded results no different at all to the regression estimates based on the full sample presented in the results section.

¹The original 1–6-point news exposure scale included the following values: (1) Never, (2) More seldom, (3) 1–2 days a week, (4) 3–4 days a week, (5) 5–6 days a week, and (6) Daily. The recoded 0–1 exposure scale covered the full range of these values (0) Never, (0.2) More seldom, (0.4) 1–2 days a week, (0.6) 3–4 days a week, (0.8) 5–6 days a week, and (1) Daily.

Figure 1

The relative game-frame exposure index ($M = -0.04$, $SD = 0.05$)



*Political news attention*_{*t-1*}. To capture respondents' amount of attention devoted to news about politics in the news media (motivated news attention), the following three items posed in the third panel wave were summed into a single attention index: (a) "How much attention do you pay to news about politics on television?," (b) "How much attention do you pay to news about politics in newspapers?," and (c) "How much attention do you pay to news about politics on radio?," producing a scale with values ranging from 0 (No attention at all) to 12 (Very close attention) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 5.95$, $SD = 2.90$).

Control variables. Several control variables are used in the analysis of media effects on cynicism, institutional trust, and interest. Most importantly, the panel data enable substantially stronger causal inferences than cross-sectional surveys. By controlling for lagged dependent variables when estimating the effects of frame exposure and political news attention, the regression models actually capture how these independent variables are related to *changes* in each outcome variable (Finkel, 1995; Teorell, 2009). Therefore, we include lagged values of political cynicism, institutional trust, and political interest from the third panel wave when estimating the effect on these variables. We also control for the frequency of *interpersonal political discussion*, as measured by the following survey item: "How often do you discuss politics with

family and friends?," with six response categories ranging from 0 (Never) to 5 (Daily) ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.18$). Finally, all regressions models will control for key background variables such as sex_{t-4} , age_{t-4} , $education_{t-4}$, and $income_{t-4}$, as well as lagged values of political interest $_{t-1}$.

Results

Before presenting the findings speaking to our four hypotheses, Table 1 summarizes the distribution of meta-frames in the seven news media included in the content analysis. Two things are interesting to note. First, there is substantial variation between different news media when it comes to news framing. The two tabloids (*Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*) are more inclined to frame politics in terms of game than both the morning dailies (*Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*) as well as the newscasts broadcasted on television (*Aktuellt*, *Rapport* and *TV4 Nyheterna*). Second, irrespective of what news media citizens consume, it is obvious that they are likely to be exposed to both game and issue frames during the election campaign. Readers of the two dailies and television news viewers are, for instance, as frequently offered game-framed as issue-framed news. These findings are important from a media effects perspective because they challenge the external validity of experimental studies relying on designs where participants are exposed to single frames only. If exposure to game and issue frames has opposite effects of equal strength, an overall balance between these frames in the news media may in fact cancel media effects out.

Turning to the relationship between frame exposure on the one hand, and political cynicism, institutional trust, and interest on the other, simple bivariate correlations reveal a consistent relationship between frame exposure and each dependent variable. An increase in relative game-frame exposure during the election campaign is related to higher levels of political cynicism ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$) as well as to lower institutional trust ($r = -0.20$, $p < 0.001$) and weaker political interest ($r = -0.23$, $p < 0.001$) after Election Day. These

Table 1
The Share of Game and Issue Frames in Election News Coverage (Percent)

	Tabloids		Dailies		Television News		
	Aftonbladet	Expressen	Dagens Nyheter	Svenska Dagbladet	Aktuellt	Rapport	TV4 Nyheterna
Issue Frame	24	25	51	54	52	46	40
Game Frame	70	72	47	43	46	52	59
N	258	272	169	161	94	106	98

Note. $N = 1158$

results indicate not only that exposure to game frames is related to cynicism, institutional trust, and political interest in a way consistent with past research, but also suggest that issue-framed news actually may have mobilizing effects. Compared with citizens who are exposed to a more balanced composition of game and issue frames, respondents with a high relative dosage of issue-framed news are less cynical and more politically interested. The question is whether these correlations survive a substantially stronger empirical test, i.e., whether there is evidence of any effects of frame exposure on these outcome variables over time.

In Table 2, we test our four hypotheses in a series of autoregressive panel models predicting political cynicism, institutional trust, and political interest, using the frame exposure and political news attention measures. It is important to note that the autoregressive panel models in Table 2 control not only for key political and background variables, but also for lagged values of the dependent variables. Therefore, the regression coefficients capture how each predictor is related to individual-level changes in the dependent variables over time.

The hypotheses are tested in two steps for each outcome variable, corresponding to Model 1 and Model 2 in the table. Apart from the control variables, Model 1 includes the overall relative game-frame exposure index as the only news media use predictor—speaking to H1 and H2—whereas the second model adds political news attention to the regression equation, thereby addressing H3 and H4. Overall, the findings in Table 2 are strikingly consistent, lend substantial support for several of the hypotheses, and shine new light on the spiral of cynicism–virtuous circle controversy.

Starting with H1 and H2, Model 1 includes relative game-frame exposure as the only news media use predictor of *changes* in political cynicism, institutional trust, and interest. The results show that a relative increase in exposure to game-framed election news increases political cynicism over the course of the campaign ($b = 3.54, p < .001$), but has a negative effect on both institutional trust ($b = -1.30, p < .001$) and interest in politics ($b = -5.55, p < .001$). Given the construction of the relative game-frame exposure index, these effects can also be interpreted reversely by saying that a relative increase in issue-framed news exposure reduces cynicism, and increases both institutional trust and interest in politics. These findings lend support to H1 and H2.

The last two hypotheses were formulated based on two different mechanisms behind media effects. Based on the spiral of cynicism literature, we expected frame exposure to have a unique effect on political cynicism, institutional trust, and interest in politics, independently of the amount of attention devoted to news about politics (H3). Following virtuous circle theory, on the other hand, we expected motivated news attention to lower political cynicism, but increase institutional trust, and interest in politics (H4). These

Table 2
Autoregressive Panel Models Estimating the Effect of Frame Exposure and Political News Attention on Political Cynicism, Trust and Interest (OLS and Logit)

	Political Cynicism (0–12)		Institutional Trust (1–5)		Political Interest (1–4)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Media use						
Relative game-frame exposure _t	3.54*** (.84)	3.15*** (.85)	–1.30*** (.36)	–1.17*** (.36)	–5.55*** (1.27)	–4.45** (1.30)
Political news attention _{t–1}		–.09*** (.02)		.03** (.01)		.25*** (.04)
Control variables						
Political cynicism _{t–1}	.75*** (.02)	.74*** (.02)				
Institutional trust _{t–1}	.10* (.04)	.12** (.04)	.65*** (.02)	.64*** (.02)		
Interpersonal political discussion _{t–1}	–.24*** (.04)	–.13*** (.05)	.08*** (.02)	.04* (.02)	.41*** (.07)	.36*** (.07)
Political interest _{t–1}	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	1.89*** (.07)	1.66*** (.08)
Age	–.08 (.09)	–.07 (.09)	–.18*** (.04)	.00 (.00)	–.00 (.00)	–.01* (.00)
Sex	.02 (.14)	.05 (.14)	–.01 (.06)	.03 (.04)	.41** (.13)	.42** (.14)
High School	–.08 (.15)	–.05 (.15)	.02 (.06)	–.02 (.06)	.21 (.20)	–.02 (.21)
University	–.04 (.03)	–.03 (.03)	.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.29 (.22)	.21 (.22)
Income	.62	.63	.49	.01 (.01)	–.03 (.04)	–.07 (.04)
R ² Adjusted/Pseudo R ²	1,522	1,522	.49	.49	.48	.50
N			1,522	1,522	1,522	1,522

Note. Estimates are unstandardized OLS (cynicism and institutional trust) and logit (interest) coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

hypotheses are tested by including political news attention—our measure of motivated news attention—to the regression equations (Model 2). The results lend support to the idea of two distinct mechanisms of influence and, thereby, to both H₃ and H₄. Irrespective of the amount of attention devoted to political news, frame exposure has unique effects in the hypothesized directions. By accounting for motivated news attention, though, the effect of relative game-frame exposure on cynicism ($b = 3.15$, $p < .001$), institutional trust ($b = -1.17$, $p < .01$), and interest in politics ($b = -4.45$, $p < .01$) is reduced somewhat compared with its effect in Model 1—indicating that part of the frame exposure effect can be attributed to differences in motivated media use. Still however, frame exposure has a unique and statistically significant effect on each of the outcome variables. Finally, as predicted by virtuous circle theory, motivated news attention lowers cynicism ($b = -0.09$, $p < .001$) and increases institutional trust ($b = 0.03$, $p < .01$) as well as political interest ($b = 0.25$, $p < .001$). Overall these findings lend support to both H₃ and H₄ by indicating that the effects of frame exposure are distinct from motivated news attention and, therefore, primarily driven by exposure to specific frames—not by differences in motivation.

Conclusion and Discussion

The present study has addressed some unresolved issues in the spiral of cynicism–virtuous circle controversy in general, and the framing effects literature in particular. By using a matched combination of media content analysis and panel survey data, the findings both confirm results from previous studies and provide new insights regarding the processes behind media effects.

In summary, and in line with past research, the results show that exposure to game-framed news induces political cynicism among news consumers (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2004, 2005; De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Jackson, 2011; Valentino et al., 2001), but also provide evidence suggesting that game-framed news weakens institutional trust and interest in politics. The more citizens are exposed to game frames during the election campaign, the more cynical and less politically interested they get over time. While these results confirm the negative impact of game-framed news documented in past research, this study also provides new important evidence that issue-framed news actually do matter—in the opposite direction—by reducing cynicism and promoting institutional trust as well as political interest. These are critical and promising findings, given the lack of clear support for the impact of issue-framed news on political engagement found previously. For instance, when summing up the main conclusions from their important work on strategic news and cynicism, Cappella and Jamieson argued that “the real challenge for future research will be to propose and

evaluate news frames that dampen the public's cynicism about politics" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 232). Recently Adriaansen et al. (2010) similarly called for renewed efforts to study "the positive effects of news content" (Adriaansen et al, 2010, p. 434). From the perspective of news organizations and journalists who strive for engaged citizenship, the results presented here suggest that decisions on how to frame politics actually make a difference.

Apart from documenting these effects of game-framed and issue-framed news on cynicism, institutional trust, and interest, the present study contributes to the literature on framing effects in two important ways.

First, by distinguishing between frame exposure and motivated news attention as two different modes of news media use, the findings support two distinct mechanisms behind media effects on political cynicism and engagement. The fact that mere exposure to specific frames in the media generated clear effects on cynicism and engagement, beyond what was accounted for by differences in motivated attention to political news, supports the notion of passive or inadvertent framing effects (Krugman & Hartley, 1970; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002), whereby exposure to certain frames triggers a process of automatic information activation that occurs independently of the mental effort used to process the news—which is in line with the spiral of cynicism idea that media content matters (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2004; Pedersen, 2012). While never ignoring the importance of content, however, proponents of virtuous circle theory have argued that the news media promotes trust, knowledge, and engagement through a process of mutually reinforcing influences between political interest and current affairs news consumption (Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). By distinguishing the effect of motivated news attention from frame exposure, the findings presented here lend support to this argument as well. Motivated political news attention depresses cynicism and stimulates interest in politics. These separate and independent effects of frame exposure and motivated news attention indicate that two media effects mechanisms might be at work simultaneously. Rather than two competing theories of how news coverage influences political trust and engagement, the spiral of cynicism and the virtuous circle theory are perhaps best viewed as covering separate processes of media effects with potentially different outcomes on public opinion.

Second, compared with several experimental studies documenting the effects of single news frames on public opinion, in which participants are exposed to either a game or an issue frame, the findings presented here indicate not only that most citizens are likely to be exposed to both types of frames during election campaigns, but also that the effects of these frames on public opinion may very well cancel out. The consequences of being

exposed to multiple—or competitive—frames have received increasing attention in media effects research in the past couple of years (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2010; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2013). Most of this literature focuses, however, on issue framing—where different or opposing interpretations of specific issues compete against one another—rather than on generic frames such as those at the heart of this study. But the insights from these studies, i.e., that exposure to multiple frames of an issue has a different impact on news consumers than exposure to a single frame, are well echoed by the results of the present study of game and issue frames. This suggests that what matters for the effect of news coverage in real-world settings is the relative dosage of game and issue frames that citizens encounter during an election campaign. The implications for framing effects research could be profound. On the one hand, survey studies that rely on global survey measures of exposure to various news media are likely to underestimate media effects by concealing the neutralizing effects of exposure to multiple frames. On the other hand, experimental studies based on designs where participants are exposed to either a game or an issue frame are likely to overestimate framing effects by producing exposure conditions that lack external validity.

From a societal perspective, the findings presented suggest that the major news media should not be broadly blamed for growing levels of political cynicism or apathy—at least not in Sweden, or other countries, where the most important media provide a fairly even mix of substantive and strategic news. To be sure, some outlets deviate from this pattern by focusing more unevenly on game-framed coverage, and which outlets citizens use depend largely on personal media habits and motivations. On average however—when citizens' use of multiple news media are taken into account—the results suggest that Swedish citizens are exposed more to issue-framed than to game-framed news. And even though game-framed coverage induces cynicism and apathy, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that news media should focus on issue-framed coverage entirely. As previous studies indicate, horserace journalism can generate initial interest in election news and, thereby, attract less motivated news consumers to political stories (Aalberg et al., 2012; Iyengar, et al. 2004). Therefore, the critical question for journalists may be how to strike the right balance between game-framed and issue-framed coverage and to not let strategic news override substantive coverage.

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