

# The Sophisticated Public: The Effect of Competing Frames on Public Opinion

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Deliberation is the current buzzword among democratic thinkers. Deliberative democracy assumes that deliberation has an effect on the people engaging in the deliberative process. Several studies have demonstrated that this is indeed the case: deliberation increases political knowledge and opinion consistency, as well as mutual understanding and broader tolerance among citizens. In order to verify the findings from these studies and to confront the problems of internal and external validity in the previous studies of deliberation, alternative methodological designs must be applied. Applying an experimental split-sample design using CATI on the Danish electorate reveals how arguments and frames influence public opinion. Across various frames and arguments and political issues, positive (negative) arguments tend to push opinions in a positive (negative) direction. When competing frames are presented to the public, people submit to neither ambivalence nor non-attitudes. Quite to the contrary, people tend to follow their predisposition and provide more consistent opinions. Thus, deliberation composed of various competing frames and arguments facilitates – rather than distorts – sophisticated and considered public opinion.

## Introduction

This article aims to combine empirical deliberative democracy and theories of opinion formation in order to gain insight as to how deliberation influences the political opinions of the public. Deliberative democracy is the current buzzword among democratic thinkers. Much of this research focuses on the normative aspect of deliberative democracy and neglects the empirical effects of deliberation. Nevertheless, an increasing number of studies focus on the empirical effects of deliberation, and various effects have been found. The studies focusing on the effects of the deliberative process have demonstrated that deliberation does indeed cause changes in opinions, increases political knowledge (Fishkin 1997; Hansen 2004a; Luskin et al. 2002; Sturgis et al. 2005), increases opinion consistency in the form of increased single-peakedness (Hansen 2005, 2004b; List et al. 2007) or in the form of a greater capacity to tie relevant issues together (Hansen 2004a; Sturgis et al. 2005).

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Other effects include increased mutual understanding and broader tolerance among participants (Fung 2003; Hansen 2004a; Hansen & Andersen 2004), as well as institutional and policy effects (Barabas 2004; Ryfe 2005).

One major problem with the effects found is that many of the studies are strongly challenged by a lack of internal and external validity. On the one hand, the studies have problems pinpointing and isolating the exact cause and effect variables as people often tend not only to become engaged in deliberation, but also in newspaper-reading, watching the news on television more carefully and simply preparing themselves for the deliberative event in various ways. On the other hand, there is the problem of having a representative sample of the public present and active during deliberation. Much self-selection occurs during the recruitment for deliberative events as well as during the actual deliberation (Andersen & Hansen 2007; Hansen 2004a).

In order to verify the findings from these studies and confront the problems of internal and external validity in the previous studies of deliberation, a full experimental design is applied. The experimental design builds on much of the research conducted within political psychology, social-psychology and survey methodology, as well as the more recent research hybrid of political communication. In these traditions, the effects of various frames, the wording and order of the questions and so on have been applied to survey questions: effects that have been recognized and established for some time (Druckman 2001; Hyman & Sheatsley 1950; Kahneman & Tversky 1984; Olsen 1998; Schuman & Presser 1996). One of the most oft-cited framing studies is that of Kahneman and Tversky (1984). This study shows that simply by framing a question in terms of the 'survival rate' instead of the 'death rate' allows the same project to gain much in support and shift the balance of opinion. Others have shown how framing a government program in terms of 95 percent employment is greatly preferred as opposed to 5 percent unemployment (Druckman 2001, 2004).

Nevertheless, deliberative theorists tend to have neglected this line of research, even though it provides much support to the notion that arguments and information do indeed affect people's opinions. By combining advancement in the research in deliberative democracy with advancement in these framing studies, we are able to provide new evidence on the effects of deliberation. In other words, there is much to gain in combining empirical framing studies with the empirical studies in deliberative democracy.

Not counting the introduction, this article is divided into five sections: the first section discusses the existing research and some theoretical considerations linking opinion research to deliberation. The second section discusses the experimental design. In the third and fourth sections, the various frames across issues are analyzed, and the final section provides a brief conclusion.

## A Deliberative Frame

Deliberation in relation to the concept of deliberative democracy can be defined as *an unconstrained exchange of arguments that involves practical reasoning and potentially leads to a transformation of preferences* (Hansen 2004a, 98). Deliberation involves persuasion and a process in which participants present arguments for various opinions. The deliberators attempt to present their arguments as strongly as possible and – deliberately or not – leave out other elements of the issues at stake. These elements might be emphasized by other deliberators in their attempts at convincing other participants. The general idea behind framing is that a messenger is capable of promoting certain opinions over others by selecting and increasing the saliency of some of the aspects of a perceived reality (Entman 1993). In this manner, the framing theory focuses on the aspect of the deliberative process in which arguments are competing among the various opinions. In other words, framing theory provides relevant knowledge regarding one specific element of deliberative democracy – the effects of arguments – and not on all of the many other potentials inherent in deliberative democracy (see Hansen 2004a for a general review of the various potentials of deliberation). In order to indicate this narrow focus of deliberation, the terms ‘argument’ or ‘frame’ will be applied in the analyses, not ‘deliberation’.

Deliberative democracy theory and framing theory are based on the assumption that opinions are given endogenously to the political process (i.e. opinions are created, altered and transformed during the political process). If the assumption does not hold, increasing the deliberation in political processes would be irrelevant or at best only desirable for the more efficacious effect of deliberation such as increased knowledge, confidence, mutual respect and tolerance. The general notion of endogenous opinions and opinion changing over time represents a central assumption in deliberative democracy. Nevertheless, this assumption has been quite controversial in the American public opinion tradition. The fact that opinions are unstable and subject to change has led much of the American public opinion tradition to present a pessimistic picture of public opinion. The most influential political scientist in public opinion research, Philip E. Converse (1964, 1970), concludes as regards empirical findings that public opinion is *‘extremely labile for individuals over time’* (Converse 1964, 241; emphasis added) and that *‘large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time’* (Converse 1964, 245; emphasis added). Thus, large segments of the public have no real political opinion and their response is only non-attitudes – that is, opinions that are not embedded in the mind of the respondent and therefore merely represent random responses to the questions posed by the interviewer. Empirically, the concept of ‘non-attitude’

suggests that the shifts in public opinion over time will largely fit a random pattern (Converse 1964, 1970; Hill & Kriesi 2001).

Large parts of the public only possessing non-attitudes would have numerous democratic consequences. On the one hand, if you accept Converse's conclusion, how can decision makers be responsive toward the public's wishes and why should elections (or public opinion polls) be conducted at all if the people's choices are arbitrary?<sup>1</sup> However, instead of simply criticizing the public for their dynamic opinions, much contemporary research focuses instead on why people change their opinions and which variables cause opinion change, both in terms of individual characteristics as well as macro-variables such as media and elites. The current debate tends to be more positive and less pessimistic in its approach to the quality of public opinion.

John Zaller (1992) suggests that opinion instability is not due to citizens *not* having any opinions; rather, it owes to the circumstance that they have too many opinions and that their opinions are multidimensional and, as such, a more complex phenomenon. Accordingly, one consideration may lead to several different answers that do not indicate instability, but rather that the opinions are complex. Citizens experience opinion-ambivalence rather than non-attitudes, and the individual's answers reflect what happens to be most salient at the time of the interview. What happens to be salient at a given point in time depends on the general level of the elites' discourses, media coverage and the individual's level of political awareness, issue saliency, exposure and access to information, political knowledge, political interest and the individual's predisposition (Zaller 1992, 1994).

'Predisposition' is defined as fundamental beliefs, ideology or core values like socialism, liberalism or conservatism. A predisposition works as a filter for the various arguments communicated to the individual. If an argument is supportive toward the predisposition, it will be part of the opinion formation; otherwise the predisposition will not allow the argument to be taken into consideration during the opinion formation (Zaller 1992, 22). As Zaller (1992, 26) concludes, people tend consistently to follow their predisposition when expressing their opinions. Alvarez and Brehm (2002), on the other hand, argue that there is a profusion of predispositions on the individual as well as the macro levels. Each individual often has many predispositions, some of which reinforce one another, while others are in conflict and fighting for dominance.

Predispositions remain highly relevant in order to understand public opinion, but they provide multiple fix points; not just one, as Zaller suggests. Furthermore, if elites do not speak about predisposition and do not present the political issues according to predisposition, it is unlikely that predisposition will be the only basis upon which citizens establish their opinions. The research on predispositions highlights the relationship between predisposition, political

awareness and opinion. This line of reasoning will be used in discussions of the hypotheses in the empirical sections below.

## Method: An Experimental Split-sample Design

Some might oppose the entire notion of an experimental approach to measuring the effect of deliberation through opinion surveys. As defined in the above, deliberation involves an unconstrained exchange of arguments, which appears to be quite difficult to simulate in an experimental context. This is a critical aspect; however, from an experimental approach, the response to such critique would be that an experiment isolates and focuses on certain aspects of deliberation and certain relationships between variables within deliberation. In this case, the focus is on the isolated effects of arguments concerning opinion. While this is indeed only a minor aspect of any real deliberative process, it nevertheless allows focusing on a crucial aspect and assumption in deliberative democracy theory – that is, whether arguments have a bearing on opinions. Quasi-experiments regarding deliberative democracy are well known in the literature, for instance, Deliberative Polls (Fishkin 1997; Hansen 2004a) or various other public arenas for deliberation (Fung 2003). These quasi-field experiments are conducted in the context of true politics and actual problems and are thus much less artificial than other, more controlled, experimental deliberative designs conducted in the field of political psychology (e.g. Kinder & Sanders 1990; Sulkin & Simon 2001).

This experiment attempted to combine the realistic features of Deliberative Polls by using representative samples and the controlled environment of laboratory experiments with the use of split-sampling. The experiment is conducted as a split-sample design conducted via Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). A total of 2,000 telephone interviews have been carried out with a representative sample of Danes 18 years of age or older in a single wave during January and February 2005. The participants were sampled through simple random sampling of known telephone numbers. The response rate was 42 percent<sup>2</sup> and the length of the interview was set to approximately 20 minutes (Hansen 2007).<sup>3</sup>

The split-sampling design randomly divides the sample into 14 different groups that received different stimuli in the form of various arguments (e.g. one group receives an argument and another does not). A simple comparison of the two groups would provide an indicator of the effect of the argument on public opinions. The split-sampling design utilizes the latest development in CATI in which the questionnaire is a computer program. The computer program allows complete randomization across stimuli and respondents. The design has 14 splits, which gives  $3^{14}$  (about 4.7 million) different questionnaires randomly distributed among the 5,100 respondents in the sample, except

Table 1. Example from the Split-sample Experiment

	Random split 1	Random split 2	Random split 3	Random split 4
Experimental condition	Positive frame: Denmark is among the countries spending the most money per student	Negative frame: Danish students are criticized in international studies for poor reading skills	Dual frame: Danish students are criticized in international studies for poor reading skills. We are also among the countries spending the most money per student	Control frame: No stimulus
Evaluation Survey item	Do you think this is mainly a good or a bad thing?		No evaluation	
	Do you think that the public spends too much money, adequately or too little money on public schools?			

*Note:* There were a total of 14 splits in the survey, each followed by several survey items.

for the control group, which is held constant throughout the framing of the stimulus.

This form of CATI has moved experimental design from non-representative sampling based on self-selection to experimentation which, on the one hand, fulfills the laboratory's strong demand to control stimuli (i.e. high internal validity). On the other hand, external validity is fulfilled by the use of representative sampling allowing generalization to the general public (Sniderman & Grob 1996). Experimentally speaking, the design follows Campbell and Stanley (1963) Design 6 – *Posttest-only control group design*. This is the design that solves the most sources on invalidity (Campbell & Stanley 1963, 8). Furthermore, the posttest-only control group design does not have the problem of respondents being committed to an initially expressed opinion as a pretest–posttest and panel design does (Petty & Cacioppo 1996, 31). The frame/argument was exposed to the individual before (pre-decisional) the respondents answered the questions concerning various political issues pertaining to education, unemployment and opinions regarding the European Union (EU). Table 1 provides an example how one of the splits was set up.

The design allows testing the effect of a frame set-up to push opinion in a positive direction, a frame set-up to push opinion in a negative direction, and the effect of both arguments. Finally, the evaluation of the frame is included in order to show whether the respondent accepts or rejects the argument and effect. The evaluation is somewhat similar to Zaller and Feldman's (1992) 'Stop-and-think considerations', which they included in their experiments. The underlying hypotheses of the design are fully discussed in the following sections and analyses. The surveys were divided into four

sections: the first section measures political knowledge, media attention, issue saliency and political efficacy. The second section is the split-section in which the various negative, positive and dual arguments are divided randomly across various political issues. The use of the dual argument split is greatly inspired by the study carried out by Sniderman & Theriault (2004), but whereas their design lacks a control group, this design used the posttest-only control group design (see also Jackman & Sniderman 2006; Brewer & Gross 2005). The third section includes a discrete choice experiment (see Hansen & Bech 2007), and the fourth and final sections measure the traditional socio-demographics.

## Classic Framing Effects

Arguments and information bring attention to certain predispositions and solicit positive or negative considerations regarding the issue at stake (Sniderman & Theriault 2004). It would be expected that providing a positive argument for an issue tends to push opinion in a positive direction as compared to no argument being provided. On the other hand, providing a negative argument tends to move the opinion in a negative direction. This hypothesis follows Kahneman & Tversky's (1984) classic framing study.

*H1*: Positive/negative argument pushes opinion in a positive/negative direction.

Table 2 illustrates opinion indexes varying from -100 to +100 across various political issues and various frames. Initially, the discussion focuses on the positive and negative frame in Table 2. I will return to the effect of dual frame in *H2*.

Positive frames/arguments are set out to push opinion in a positive direction, whereas negative frames/arguments are set out to push opinion in a negative direction. If *H1* holds, it would be expected that the index score applying the positive argument is higher than the index score applying the negative argument. This is the case for all of the opinion items in Table 2 examining the absolute index scores; nine of these differences are statistically significant. The first conclusion to be drawn is that arguments *do* matter in the opinion-formation process. This is also evidence supporting the premise of endogenously given opinions in deliberative democracy. That which deliberative democratic theory has taken for granted is supported in the findings in Table 2.

Another relevant analysis is to compare the 'control frame' with each of the negative and positive frames. The control frame group represents a control group in which the opinion is not treated by any specific stimulus. Such a comparison allows isolating the independent effect of the positive as well as the negative frame – a comparison that is often lacking in framing studies (e.g. Kahneman & Tversky 1984; Kinder & Sanders 1990; Slothuus 2007) and

Table 2. Framing Effects of Various Political Issues (Opinion Index: –100 to 100)

	Positive frame	Negative frame	Dual frame	Control frame
<i>Education</i>				
Do you think that the public spends too much money (100), adequately (0) or too little money (–100) on public schools? <sup>1</sup>	–45***	–62	–54**	–64
To what extent do you agree that we ought to increase competition between the students in the public schools? <sup>2</sup>	–21	–27	–22	–28
<i>Welfare check</i>				
Do you think that the public spends too much money (100), adequately (0) or too little money (–100) on public transfer income? <sup>3</sup>	21***	3	4	6
<i>Unemployment</i>				
To what extent do you agree that a good way to increase employment would be to lower unemployment benefits? <sup>4</sup>	–19 <sup>a</sup>	–35	–17	–27
To what extent do you agree that a good way to increase employment would be to lower taxes on work? <sup>4</sup>	49 <sup>a</sup>	37**	47	48
If you have to choose between the three ways of increasing employment – lowering unemployment benefits (coded 100), lowering taxes on work (0) or increasing inservice training (–100) – which would you prefer? <sup>4</sup>	–39 <sup>b</sup>	–47	–44	–43
To what extent do you agree that a good way to increase employment would be to increase inservice training? <sup>5</sup>	70	66	68	67
<i>Ideology</i>				
In politics you often hear about left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale where 0 is the furthest to the left and 10 the furthest to the right (11-point scale; coded –100 to 100)? <sup>6</sup>	18***	3**	11	10
Choice between personal liberty (100) or equality between citizens (–100), (either/nor: 0) <sup>7</sup>	33	28	32	26
<i>Limited government</i>				
To what extent do you agree that society must seek to equalize large differences in income distribution within the population? <sup>8</sup>	30 <sup>b</sup>	23	36**	24
To what extent do you agree that society must seek to meet everyone's basic needs for food, housing, clothing, education and healthcare? <sup>8</sup>	80	76	79	81



Table 2. *Continued*

	Positive frame	Negative frame	Dual frame	Control frame
<i>EU</i>				
What would you vote for if there was a referendum on the European Constitution held tomorrow? <sup>9</sup>	42* <sup>a</sup>	21	26	32
What would you vote for if there was a referendum on the euro held tomorrow? <sup>10</sup>	25 <sup>b</sup>	15	15	23
N	480–515	486–509	486–524	495

*Notes:* The values represent the mean index varying from –100 to 100. \*\*The difference between the frame and the control frame is statistically significant:  $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed). Positive frame set to push toward higher index value. Negative frame set to push toward lower index value. Expenditures items have a 3-point scale. Agreeing items have a 5-point scale. The few ‘don’t know’ answers (1–2%) are coded as the middle point. In the dual frame, both the positive and negative frames are read out. <sup>a</sup>Significant difference between positive and negative frames:  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed). <sup>b</sup>Significant difference between positive and negative frames:  $p < 0.1$  (two-tailed). <sup>1</sup>Positive frame (86%): Denmark is among the countries spending the most money per student. Negative Frame (90%): Danish students are criticized in international studies for poor reading skills. <sup>2</sup>Positive frame (52%): competition between students in public schools stimulates the students to work hard and develop new ideas. Negative Frame (31%): competition between students in public schools brings out the worst in the students and does not create complete people. <sup>3</sup>Positive frame (58%): one of the largest public expenditures is public transfer income. Negative frame (88%): public transfer income creates a security net for the individual citizen. <sup>4</sup>Positive frame (58%): if unemployed persons do not take the work offered to them, they ought to lose their unemployment benefits. Negative frame (63%): unemployment is seldom self-induced. <sup>5</sup>Reversed frame of Note 4. <sup>6</sup>Positive frame: Left in politics is, among other things, related to the public attempting to ensure that everybody is taken care of. Negative frame: Right in politics is, among other things, related to the individual person having greater responsibility for himself. <sup>7</sup>Positive frame: personal liberty ensures that everyone can develop without obstacles. Negative frame: equality between citizens ensures everyone the opportunity to get ahead in the world and ensures fewer social cleavages. <sup>8</sup>Positive frame (67%): income redistribution helps secure that the difference between the rightist and the poorest is equalized. Negative frame (38%): Denmark is one of the countries with the greatest taxation burden. <sup>9</sup>Positive frame (76%): the European Constitution is necessary because of the increased number of Member States. Negative frame (52%): the European Constitution is a step toward the *United States of Europe*. ‘Yes’ (100), ‘Don’t know’ (0), ‘No’ (–100). <sup>10</sup>Positive frame (50%): if Denmark introduces the euro, we don’t need to exchange money when traveling abroad. Negative frame (74%): if Denmark introduces the euro, Denmark will lose an important national symbol. ‘Yes’ (100), ‘Don’t know’ (0), ‘No’ (–100). The percentages following the frame indicate how many of the respondents evaluated the argument presented to them in the intended positive or negative direction. Notes 6 and 7 were not evaluated.

thus only enables the investigation of the joint effects of the positive and negative frames. Actually, it could be the case that when studies lack a control group, a single frame (e.g. the positive frame) accounts for the entire effect and the negative has no effect.

Comparing the positive frame and the control frame in Table 2 provides four significant differences – all of these in the expected positive direction. Comparing the negative frame and the control frame provides significant differences on two items, both in the expected negative direction. It leaves nine positive and eleven negative frames without significant effects when compared to the control frame (i.e. that is while the combined effect of the two opposite frames is clear, the isolated effects of positive and negative frames are less convincing). Even though there are significant effects – all in the expected direction of the single frames – the significant effects are in the minority.

In order to understand these patterns, it is important to emphasize two elements: the evaluation of the arguments put forward, and the respondent and issue saliency. The first element highlights the fact that not only do the respondents provide an opinion on the issues, they also implicitly evaluate the arguments read to them. In the arguments presented prior to the question on public spending on school, 86 to 90 percent of the respondents support the frame and thus acknowledge the argument in the intended positive or negative direction. On the second education item, only 31–52 percent supports the argument; in other words, the argument the respondents accept has the strongest effect. This indicates that public opinion simply cannot be pushed by an argument, but rather, that the arguments are being evaluated by respondents and it is only when the respondents accept the argument that it will likely cause a shift in opinion.

The second element of issue saliency shows that the more thought a respondent has given to an issue, the more unlikely it is that a frame can shift their opinion. With regard to issue saliency, the respondents initially were asked in the survey about the importance of the general issues in Table 2. Unsurprisingly, almost two-thirds of the respondents find that education and unemployment are very important, whereas less than a third find that public transfer income and ideology are very important issues for the politicians to address. About four out of ten find the EU very important. In this light, it is to be expected that less salient issues would be more influenced by the arguments provided to the respondents as they would be less engaged in the issue, give it less thought and be more likely be unaware of the argument presented to them. This line of reasoning can also find support in Table 2, where the positive frame under public transfer income shows an effect even through only 58 percent accept the frame in the intended direction. In this case, the effect can be interpreted more as an effect of low saliency than a strong effect of the argument presented to the respondents.

Generally speaking, the significant differences are both the effect of the argument and the saliency of the issue. In order to verify the general picture and the robustness of the framing effects found in Table 2, six multivariable regressions on the items in the table are conducted. These regressions present the effects of the acceptance frames with and without control of political awareness, predisposition and demographics. These regressions are presented in Table 3. The dependent variables in Table 3 are the opinion items from Table 2 combined in different indexes. A total of six models are presented, each of them representing the effects of different frames on three different opinion indexes.

The explanatory variables in the framing part of the regression demonstrate the effects of the various frames compared to the control group. Each of the frames is combined with the evaluation of the argument presented to the respondent; for instance, the 'positive with accept' variable indicates that the respondent is treated with the positive frame and that this frame is evaluated by the respondent in a positive direction. Thus, the standardized coefficient for 'positive with accept' indicates that the accepted positive frame pushes opinion in a positive direction as compared to the control group. In all the models, the accepted positive and accepted negative frames push the opinion significantly in the expected direction. In the first model on limited government, the rejected frame is also significant. The substantial interpretation of the significant coefficient is that if respondents reject the idea that income redistribution levels the difference between rich and poor, they become significantly more positive toward the idea of limited government than the control group (i.e. the case now shows that an identical frame can push the public in the opposite direction according to their acceptance of the frame).

The models also show that these framing effects are robust as they are significant when political awareness, predisposition and demographics are held constant. On the other hand, it also shows that the effects of predispositions on opinion have substantially greater effects than any found framing effects. Even though a significant framing effect is found, predisposition is much stronger in determining public opinion (i.e. the public is more sophisticated in opinion formation than the classic Converse interpretation of a public dominated by non-attitudes). Quite the contrary, predisposition is a dominant and clear identifier in public opinion formation and acts like a filter through which arguments are evaluated before having a direct effect on opinion.

The models show that when controlling for various political awareness variables – predisposition and socio-demographics – the acceptance of *HI* from the analysis in Table 2 remains. Predispositions are usually assumed to be stable and not affected by framing effects as they are sharpened in early socialization (e.g. Zaller 1992; Inglehart 1981), but Model 2 in Table 3 shows

Table 3. Aggregated Models of Framing Effects (OLS Regression, Standardized Coefficients)

	Model 1: Limited government		Model 2: Left-right placement		Model 3: Unemployment	
	Without control	With control	Without control	With control	Without control	With control
Intercept	52.576	76.290***	10.141***	-14.615*	-22.273***	-21.463**
Frame <sup>1</sup>						
Positive with accept	0.116***	0.085***	0.089**	0.101***	0.089**	0.072**
Positive without accept	-0.141***	-0.126***			-0.051*	-0.025
Negative with accept	-0.076**	-0.051*	-0.071**	-0.064**	-0.092***	-0.080**
Negative without accept	0.014	-0.014			0.003	-0.006
Dual	0.057*	0.051*	0.009	0.035	0.017	0.030
Political Awareness						
Greatly politically interested <sup>2</sup>		0.027		-0.018		-0.045+
Often discuss politics <sup>3</sup>		0.006		0.022		-0.047*
Very strong issue saliency <sup>4</sup>		NA		-0.018		-0.075***
Media awareness <sup>5</sup>		-0.034		0.031		0.017
Political knowledge <sup>6</sup>		0.025		-0.059**		-0.051*
Feel well informed on the issue <sup>7</sup>		NA		0.039+		0.004
Predispositions <sup>8</sup>						
Liberal		-0.245***		0.417***		0.177***
Conservative		-0.205***		0.356***		0.178***
Self-placement on left-right scale <sup>9</sup>		-0.121***		Not included		0.151***
Demographics						
Age		0.027		0.071**		-0.091***
Men compared to women		-0.004		-0.027		-0.042+
University compared to lower education		0.019		-0.010		-0.043+
R <sup>2</sup>	4.8%	16.1%	1.7%	23.4%	2.3%	15.0%
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	4.6%	15.4%	1.6%	22.9%	2.0%	14.3%
F statistic	20.117***	25.296***	11.502***	43.346***	9.242***	20.549***
N	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000

Notes: +p < 0.1; \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001. Model 1: the dependent variable is an index based on the two limited government items in Table 2. Model 2: the dependent variable is the left-right self-placement item from Table 2. Model 3: the dependent variable is an index based on the four unemployment items in Table 2 – the fourth item from Table 2 is reversed. All dependent variables are coded -100 to +100. <sup>1</sup>Dummy: Reference category is control frame. <sup>2</sup>Dummy: Reference category is combined 'some', 'only little', 'not at all' and 'don't know'. <sup>3</sup>Dummy: Reference category is combined 'once in a while', 'never' and 'don't know'. <sup>4</sup>Dummy: Reference category is combined 'strong', 'less strong', 'not strong' and 'don't know'. <sup>5</sup>Index 0 to 100 combined of five items with 5-point scales. <sup>6</sup>Index 0 to 100 combined of seven factual knowledge questions about politics. 100 = seven correct answers. <sup>7</sup>Dummy: Very high and high extent compared to 'some', 'low', 'not at all' and 'don't know'. <sup>8</sup>Dummy: Reference category is 'socialist'. <sup>9</sup>Index from 0 (most left) to 10 (most right).

that the left-right self-placement variable is effected by framing effect. This result raises new questions about whether predisposition measures such as left-right self-placement should be considered less stable than usually assumed, and the extent to which left-right self-placement is the dominant marker for individuals' position on political issues in general.

Nevertheless, there is yet another highlight in the experiment that has not been elaborated upon: the effect of dual framing. In the dual frame in the experimental split, the respondents are presented with both the positive and negative frames. The idea with presenting a dual frame is to confront a problem with the above hypothesis (*H1*); not so much with its effect, but rather, whether the hypothesis provides a realistic environment for how opinion formation is conducted in modern democracy. In modern democracy with true electoral competition, multiple and conflicting elite discourses are persistent and the competing media are the blow-horn for these discourses. In the elites' pursuit of winning the battle over the dominant discourse, conflicting arguments are bound to be present in society as well as in the minds of the people (Nelson & Kinder 1996; Sniderman & Theriault 2004; Zaller 1992) – that is, simply providing bias (positive or negative) arguments and analyzing which direction it pushes opinion in is rather trivial and somewhat irrelevant to the consequences of the public opinion in real life as the public is usually confronted with multiple and competing arguments (Sniderman & Theriault 2004; Chong & Druckman 2006). If we believe that the public is able to make sound political judgments and individuals are most often and continuously confronted with competing and conflicting arguments in their interaction with society, it is to be expected that dual (conflicting) argumentation and no argumentation would provide very similar results. This indicates that if we experimentally present people with dual arguments, their effects are absent and close to the public opinion (the control group) in which no arguments are presented to them. The second hypothesis is:

*H2*: Dual arguments push opinion toward the control group's position.

Examining Table 2 reveals that 11 of the 13 items have no significant effects on dual argumentation. Furthermore, 11 of the 13 dual opinion indexes are placed between the positive and negative frames. The two deviating opinion items that are outside of the interval of the positive and negative frames – lowering unemployment benefits and equalizing differences in income – can both be interpreted as a result of one of the frames under the dual frame dominating the other – that is, the frames do not have the same strength (Chong & Druckman 2006). The clearest example of a dominating frame is in Table 2 note 8, where only 38 percent support the direction of the negative frame, whereas 67 percent accept the direction of the positive frame. Thus, the positive frame dominates the negative frame, which helps explain the impact of the dual frame. In this light, *H2* ought to be revised so that dual

framing only pushes opinion toward the control group position if the frames are of equal impact and strength. The Chong & Druckman (2006) finding also supports this point as they found that competing argument will only neutralize framing effects if the frames are of equal strength. Nevertheless, the general finding that stands out is that dual framing tends to push opinion toward the place where it is not treated with a specific argument.<sup>4</sup>

Yet another relevant observation of the use of the dual frame is that dual frames do not tend to increase the number of 'don't know' answers (i.e. dual frames and competing arguments do not blow the public opinion into ambivalence or non-attitudes). Rather, during a setting of competing arguments, the public is capable of providing opinions that are consistent with their predisposition. This interpretation is supported in Table 3, where the dual frame tends to provide the same result as the control frame, where predisposition is the dominant signifier for their opinion. Similar evidence is provided pertaining to the American case by Sniderman and Theriault (2004) and Brewer and Gross (2005).

The three regression models in Table 3 also provide support for the conclusion as the effect of the dual frame as compared to the control group is insignificant in Models 2 and 3. The significant result in Model 1 simply repeats the finding from Table 2, where the positive frame tends to dominate the negative frame in the case of limited government. One implication of this finding is that the elites' framing outside of the laboratory appears to be much less effective than the first hypothesis suggested. Actually, the finding supports the notion that, in the battle of the various frames and opinions, it is the public's predisposition that dominates public opinion, not a specific frame. Even though bias frames have effects, they are seldom present in real life as they are usually being challenged by at least one opposing argument. That is not to say that conflicting and opposing views always exist on the issue or have the same weight in real life (e.g. support for human rights), but only that issues that tend to be covered by the media and politicized tend to have genuine opposing arguments – otherwise they would not have been politicized or have been recognized by the media. It also suggests that in the society in which elites' arguments are less dominant, the public will continue to hold an opinion on various political issues. Thus, public opinion is not simply an echo of the elites' discourses, as V. O. Key (1961) believed (i.e. that elites are less dominating in deciding public opinion, no matter how much they would like to do so).

Yet another consequence of this finding provides a rather optimistic image of public opinion – namely, the public is sophisticated enough across various levels of political awareness, ideology and socio-demographics in their opinion formation to be able to weigh the various arguments against one another with a result that approaches public opinion without being affected by bias argumentation in the experiment (i.e. a frame not being edited or intentionally

phrased bias). The sophisticated public can filter out competing arguments and – on the aggregate level – provide answers that are quite similar to the general public opinion. A public dominated by non-attitudes responding randomly to questions once again appears to be disproved.

## Patterns in Framing Effects

Significant effects of arguments have been found thus far, even through predispositions appear much stronger and determinant in understanding public opinion than the frames presented here. Furthermore, it has been shown how dual frames tend to push opinion in the same direction as the group not treated with any arguments. A final aim of this article is to gain insight as to whether any specific patterns in framing effects can be identified.

As indicated in the previous analyses, the effect of dual, positive and negative arguments might conceal the fact that predisposition and political awareness possibly act as a filter for the effect of the argument. Following Zaller's work, the more politically aware have greater knowledge concerning their own predisposition and how the predisposition relates to the various arguments and elites' messages. Thus, the politically aware would be expected to be more consistent in their predisposition than less politically aware persons. Moreover, the politically aware should be better able to understand whether the frames they are confronted with support or do not support their predisposition – that is, the politically aware are capable of linking predisposition and relevant frames and reject frames that contradict their predisposition. Political awareness consists of political knowledge and attention to the news concerning politics in the media in order to take account of both the perception of the political knowledge and the exposure of political news.

This third and final hypothesis is as follows:

*H3:* The more politically aware are affected by the frame that supports their predisposition, whereas the less politically aware are affected by the frame that contradicts their predisposition.

In order to analyze *H3*, the respondents must be divided in terms of political awareness and their predisposition. Furthermore, self-placement on the political left-right scale in keeping with the traditional predisposition is used. Table 4 divides the choice between self-placement on the left-right political scale on political awareness and predisposition.

Comparing the most politically aware with the less politically aware within each set of predispositions (socialist and liberal or conservative) shows that the highly politically aware are more consistent in their predisposition, regardless of the frame. Considering the absolute index scores this relationship

Table 4. Left-right Self-placement Divided on Predisposition and Political Awareness (Index Score: -100 Left to +100 Right)

Political awareness	Socialist			Liberal or conservative		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Experimental condition:						
Positive frame	6+	-4	-11*	26	32+	35*.#
Negative frame	-10	-12	-34**;++	8+	21	25**
Dual frame	-10	-9	-22	25	27	34
Control frame	-12	-7	-16	21	23	27

Notes: Question wording, frames and coding follows Table 2. \*\*The difference between the highly and less politically aware is statistically significant:  $p < 0.01$ . \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed). ++The difference between the frame and the control frame is statistically significant:  $p < 0.01$ . + $p < 0.05$ . # $p < 0.69$  (two-tailed). Cell n varies between 116 and 43. The shaded areas represent the frame supporting the group's predisposition. The socialist/liberal or conservative distinction is provided with the following question: 'If you should choose between socialism, liberalism and conservatism, which of these fundamental political beliefs comes closest to your opinion?' 'Don't know' answers were further probed for answers. Political awareness is an index including correct answers to seven political knowledge items and the degree of awareness to the five different media.

is present across all frames; for example, a socialist who is highly politically aware strongly places himself on the left of the left-right political scale, whereas a less politically aware socialist places himself more towards the middle of the scale – the former group being consistent with their social predisposition and the latter group inconsistent with the traditional socialist perspective. Within the liberal/conservative group, the same image of consistency is present.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Table 4 shows that both the negative and positive frames have a stronger and more significant impact than comparing the less and highly politically aware, whereas no significant effect is found in the dual or the control frame – that is, both frames supporting and conflicting with the predisposition tend to polarize opinion within a given set of prepositions according to political awareness.

With regard to the hypothesized relationship *H3*, the findings support the hypothesis as they indicate that supportive frames are most effective among the highly politically aware and the conflicting frames are most effective among the less politically aware – regardless of predisposition as the same finding is present within the socialist group *and* the liberal/conservative group. To give an example: among the socialist group, the negative frame that supports the socialist predisposition has a strong and significant impact among the highly politically aware (-34 compared to -16), whereas the less politically aware show no effect of the frame (-10 compared to -12). On the other hand, the non-supportive frame has a strong impact on the least politically aware (6 compared to -12), whereas the non-supportive frame has no effect on the



highly politically aware (-11 compared to -16). Moreover, it should be emphasized that the endpoints among socialist and liberal/conservative correspond to this interpretation as, for instance, within the liberal/conservative group we see an index score of 35 (supportive frame and highly politically aware) and an index score of 8 (non-supportive and least politically aware). In other words, arguments supporting the predisposition have the greatest effect among the highly politically aware (i.e. if arguments support predisposition and are thus congruent with the individuals' predisposition, they are the most powerful). The concurrent effect of supportive arguments and predisposition is strongest among the highly politically aware individuals as they have the knowledge to link the predisposition and the arguments.

## Conclusion

This article has tapped into the effects of arguments on public opinion. Classic framing effects have been found: positive (negative) arguments push public opinion in a positive (negative) direction. In this manner, evidence of an argumentative effect is found, which supports the notion of endogenously given opinions dominating among deliberative democratic thinkers. When competing arguments are provided to the respondents, public opinion mirrors a public opinion that is not treated with a specific argument. A pessimistic interpretation of this finding suggests that arguments have little effect on opinions, thus contradicting the first conclusion. However, a more optimistic interpretation of the effect of arguments based on the analyses provides an opposite perspective: in modern deliberative democracy, people are continuously exposed to various competing arguments. In such a situation, people submit to neither ambivalence nor non-attitudes. On the contrary, people tend to follow their predispositions and underlying principles, and provide consistent answers. Thus, deliberation in which various competing arguments are articulated facilitates rather than distorts sophisticated and considered public opinion (Sniderman & Theriault 2004).

Across positive, negative and conflicting arguments, political awareness increases the likelihood for opinion consistency between predisposition and opinion. This suggests that political awareness continues to be an important interaction variable between opinion and predisposition. Especially among the highly politically aware, the predisposition works as a filter for the arguments provided to them. Arguments supportive of the predisposition are more effectual during opinion formation than non-supportive arguments among the highly politically aware on the grounds that they have a level of sophistication that allows them to link the supportive argument with their predisposition, creating a synergetic effect. The importance of political awareness during opinion formation suggests a cleavage between a highly

politically sophisticated public, on the one hand, and a less sophisticated public on the other. Nevertheless – and in spite of different levels of political sophistication – people do tend to follow their predispositions across the edited versions of reality with which they have been provided.

## NOTES

1. There has been much critique of Converse's thesis (Achen 1975; Smith 1984, 1994), which argues that what on the surface may appear to be a non-attitude in reality covers measurement errors such as vague wording, the ordering of questions, interviewer bias, scaling errors, the context in which the questions are asked, etc., as opposed to vague opinions. Accordingly, measuring errors can also simply be that the participants misunderstand the questions or that the interviewer misunderstands the answers or codes the answers incorrectly. The approach blames the tool of opinion polls rather than the public, so to speak. Various researchers give some empirical support to this interpretation of whether the instability is caused by the public's lack of real opinions, or the tools used to measure public opinion have to some extent dichotomized American public opinion research (Kinder 1998; Kinder & Sears 1985).
2. The definition of response rate follows the American Association of Public Opinion Research's response rate 1.
3. The study was funded by the Danish Social Science Research Council and will be available from the Danish Data Archives at a later stage.
4. However, it might be argued that there is a problem with the validity of the conclusion based on *H2*. This is the reason why the dual frames showing no effect could actually hide that the respondents are divided into two groups: one moving in the positive direction due to the positive argument and one moving in the negative direction due to the negative argument. If this was the case, the two opposite effects on the aggregated level, as presented in Table 2, would cancel each other out. Another effect of such an opposite movement would be a higher standard deviation on the dual frame as compared to the control frame; nevertheless, this is not the case. Comparison of the standard deviations (not shown) provides no support for the idea of two opposite moving groups.
5. The conclusion is also supported by the fact that the standard deviations are smaller for the highly politically aware than the less politically aware and smallest across all frames. This also suggests that opinion consistency is greater among the highly politically aware as they are more united about the aggregate opinion than the less politically aware.

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