

Reform, Rescue, or Run Out of Money?

Problem Definition in the Social Security Reform Debate

Jennifer Jerit

This study examines the extent and consequences of press independence in the realm of problem definition. Beginning with an experiment, the analysis shows that many of the words and phrases used in the 1998 to 1999 Social Security reform debate were *misleading* in the sense that they caused citizens to draw incorrect inferences about the financial problems facing Social Security. Next, the study compares the prevalence of these same expressions in the mass media and in transcripts of political speeches and press releases. Contrary to theories of indexing, reporters and journalists exhibited considerable independence in how they described Social Security's financial problems. Ironically, however, this meant that media accounts had more misleading rhetoric than the actual statements of government officials.

Keywords: *Social Security; problem definition; press independence; indexing*

Schattschneider (1960: 66) observed that “the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power.” Likewise, *how* a problem is defined can determine whether it rises to the top of policy makers’ agenda or suffers from inattention and neglect (Kingdon 1995; Stone 1997). Indeed, according to one account, the function of problem definition “is at once to explain, to describe, to recommend, and above all to *persuade*” (Rochefort and Cobb 1994: 15, italics added). This depiction naturally directs our attention to the vehicle by which problems are defined: political rhetoric and the strategic use of words (Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Stone 1997). While few deny that problem definition entails a central role for language or that the process of problem definition is highly contested, a central question remains unanswered by the literature. Past research either has focused on problem definition by members of the mass

media (e.g., Lawrence 2001) or political actors (e.g., Coughlin 1994; Kingdon 1995; Paul 1994), but not the strategic interaction between them.¹ The end result is that we know little about the extent to which elite attempts at problem definition prevail in the mass media. Understanding the nature of this relationship has important implications. To the extent that the media fail to adopt elites' definitions of social and economic problems, they may undercut the rationale for policy change. On the other hand, if professional norms and incentives cause journalists to overstate the severity of policy problems, news coverage may have the opposite effect.

In a two-part study, this article takes a comprehensive look at problem definition during an early, but critical, period of the Social Security reform debate. The first study examines the relationship between the actual words and phrases from the debate and citizens' perceptions of the problems facing the program. Experimental evidence indicates that much of the rhetoric appearing in the news caused citizens to overstate the severity of the problems facing Social Security. The second study examines the source of these misperceptions. There I report the results of a content analysis that compares reform rhetoric in news programs with the political transcripts of elected officials. As such, study 2 contributes to the ongoing debate about the independence—or lack thereof—between news media and the government officials they report on (e.g., Bennett and Livingston 2003).

Problem Definition: Do We Observe Indexing or Independence?

Journalists have considerable discretion in how news stories will be presented (Gans 1979), but do they also have the power to privilege some interpretations of policy problems over others? Past research suggests two possibilities. Take the literature on indexing (Bennett 1990, 1994). As it is commonly understood, this phenomenon refers to the “tendency of reporters and journalists to index the voices and viewpoints in stories to the range of official debate” (Bennett 1994: 31). Thus, the scope of debate about an issue in the news tracks the actual range of discussion (e.g., pro versus con) among policy makers. Although some studies have failed to find evidence of this practice (e.g., Althaus et al. 1996; Livingston and Eachus 1996), others have shown it at work in domestic policy debates (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), foreign affairs (Zaller and Chiu 1996), and in the reporting of live events (Livingston and Bennett 2003; but see Lawrence 1996).

In the original formulation of the argument, indexing refers to the *range of voices* in the news. However, the theory raises the possibility that there also might be a correspondence in the words and phrases used to define policy problems. To see why, simply consider the role of official sources in the construction of the news. Journalists and reporters get most of their information through

government-initiated events such as press releases, public speeches, legislative hearings or deliberations, press conferences, and background briefings (Schudson 2002: 256; Sigal 1973). The quintessential example is the press release, which is a *story* prepared by government officials and provided to members of the media—with the hope that the text will be used verbatim in media accounts (Graber 2002: 290). More generally, the steady flow of government-provided information provides a possible mechanism by which the actual language—not just the viewpoints—of political actors makes its way into media accounts of a policy debate.²

At the same time, a second stream of research suggests that the press displays considerable autonomy in the construction of news stories. Finer-grained approaches to the study of indexing (e.g., content analysis of sentence-level data rather than entire stories) have been important in detecting this independence. For example, in his analysis of media coverage of the Persian Gulf crisis, Althaus (2003) distinguishes between means, ends, and context discourse and finds that journalists were the source of much critical coverage regarding the political context of the crisis. Journalists also introduced oppositional viewpoints from outside the U.S. government regarding administration means—statements that did not simply mirror the official debate in Washington as theories of indexing would predict (Althaus 2003). This study, along with others (Entman 2003, 2004), shows that journalists and reporters exhibit independence in spite of the fact that they rely heavily on government sources.

Press independence derives not only from journalists' ability to ask questions but also their power "to decide precisely which *words* and *images* to assemble and transmit" (Entman 2003: 422, italics added). It stands to reason, then, that members of the media also might exhibit autonomy when it comes to the language used to define policy problems. Indeed, such independence seems likely given the different incentives of elected officials and members of the media (Entman 2003: 421). First consider elected officials. When trying to convince the public that a problem exists (Wood and Doan 2003: 642), staying "on message" (i.e., using the same or similar words to describe a problem) is of paramount importance. Political discourse teaches people to associate certain concepts with one another, and this can in turn influence their opinions (see Lodge and Taber 2005: 457–60, for general discussion). Thus, repeatedly depicting *Social Security* in a state of *crisis* will strengthen the association between these two concepts in long-term memory. Nor is such control over word choice hard to achieve. Through entities such as the Office of the Press Secretary and the Office of Communications, the administration can coordinate the public relations activities of executive branch departments and agencies by, for example, providing talking points (Graber 2002: 286–89). A similar apparatus helps partisans in Congress speak with a single voice (Cook 1989; Sellers 2000).

If elected officials are concerned with selling a particular definition of the problem and exercising maximal control over word choice, members of the media seek to produce “‘good stories’ that protect and advance their careers” (Entman 2003: 422). On this point, Lawrence (2001: 103) notes that “some problem definitions will be relatively overlooked . . . because they don’t make for good news.” The criterion newspeople use for story selection—namely, audience appeal—is useful for understanding how problems are defined by the mass media. When it comes to patterns of word choice, journalists and reporters are likely to shun repeated use of the same words for fear of boring their audience. Dramatic portrayals, such as those that portend an impending disaster, are more likely to keep people tuned into a particular source than those that take more subdued tones (Bennett 2005; Graber 2002). Whereas elected officials strive for consistency in problem definition, reporters and journalists are more concerned with attracting and keeping an audience.

To summarize, the theory of indexing implies that journalists will define policy problems using largely the same words and phrases as government officials. The autonomous press perspective suggests that there will be differences in the rhetoric used by the two types of actors, with greater variability in the words used by members of media. I examine both hypotheses in the context of the 1998 to 1999 debate over Social Security reform. First, however, I provide a brief discussion of the debate and examine the effect that reform rhetoric had on the citizenry.

Social Security Reform: The Problem and the Debate

In the coming decades, the Social Security program will stop taking in more money through payroll taxes than it pays out in benefits. Although surpluses will be sufficient to meet benefit obligations until 2017, assets in the Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Trust Fund (OASDI) are projected to be depleted by 2041.³ As the Social Security Board of Trustees and other experts have cautioned, unless action is taken to address the future deficit, Social Security will be able to finance roughly 75 percent of the benefits assuming no other changes are made (*Annual Report of the Board of Trustees* 2005: 2–8). Experts and academics have been critical of the Social Security reform debate, charging that the discussion has been couched in a “language of crisis,” and that the whole idea of a Social Security crisis is “phony” (Baker and Weisbrot 1999; Light 1995; Marmor and Mashaw 1988; Page 2000: 191). The purpose of study 1 was to determine whether there was a relationship between the actual words and phrases from the debate and citizens’ assessments of the situation facing Social Security. It investigates a central premise of the literature on problem definition—namely, that the language used to characterize policy problems has a measurable impact on citizens (Rocheftort and Cobb 1994; Stone 1997).

Study 1: Experimental Evidence on the Importance of Word Choice

In the case of Social Security, reform rhetoric can be arrayed along a continuum with the most accurate statements at one end (e.g., “If politicians do not make any changes to the fund, Social Security will be able to finance only 75 percent of benefits in future years”) and potentially misleading statements at the other (e.g., “Social Security will begin to go bankrupt . . . if we don’t find solutions now”).⁴ To develop a comprehensive list of the words and phrases that were used to describe the situation facing Social Security, I examined all Associated Press (AP) stories about the issue during 1998 and 1999. This effort yielded fifty-three words and phrases, such as “go bust,” “troubled system,” “retirement deficit,” and “underfunded.”⁵

Again, the purpose of the experiment was to determine whether there was a relationship between words and phrases from the debate and citizens’ assessments of the situation facing Social Security. Toward this end, subjects ($n = 352$) were randomly exposed to statements from the Social Security debate and then asked a question about the financial status of the program.⁶ The exact wording of the question read, “If no changes are made to the Social Security program over the next few decades, what do you think will happen? Will Social Security: run out of money completely; have only enough money to pay everyone less than half the benefits they would get today; have enough to pay everyone about three-quarters of the benefits they would get today; [or] have enough to pay full benefits to everyone.” The correct answer to the “If No Changes” question at the time of the experiment was “three-quarters” (*Annual Report of the Board of Trustees* 2003: 8)⁷

The experimental treatments were crafted so that they were as close to the real world rhetoric surrounding Social Security as possible. I removed source cues (e.g., “President Clinton”) and contextual information (e.g., “The proposal has been languishing in a Republican controlled committee . . .”) from the statements when I thought it would contaminate the treatment. Here are some examples of statements that were used in the experiment along with the original statements from the AP:

Original	Experimental Treatment
Social Security will begin to go bankrupt in about 15 years—if we don’t find solutions now.	Social Security will begin to go bankrupt in 15 years—if we don’t find solutions now.
Both our Social Security and Medicare programs will run into brick walls in a few years if we don’t do something about them now.	Social Security will run into a brick wall in a few years if we don’t do something about it now.

Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan said today what President Clinton and most other politicians have avoided saying: Any permanent solution to keep Social Security from going broke will almost certainly require increasing taxes or cutting benefits.	Any permanent solution to keep Social Security from going broke will almost certainly require increasing taxes or cutting benefits.
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Each version of the experiment featured seven statements drawn from the list of fifty-three target words or phrases. After reading each statement, subjects answered the “If No Changes” question.⁸

Table 1 lists the fifty-three target words and phrases that were used in the experiment, along with the mean, standard deviation, and modal value on the “If No Changes” question. The line in bold type represents an accurate description of the problem (i.e., the excerpt from the trustees’ report). Even when subjects were told explicitly that the trust fund would be able to pay three-quarters of the benefits, the mean value on the “If No Changes” question was 2.5, located between the “half” and “three-quarters” response options. In each version of the experiment, however, the modal response to the accurate description was “three-quarters.”

The fourth column of Table 1 shows the results of a *t*-test in which I used the sample mean for the accurate statement as the comparison point. Words and phrases above the blank line elicited a reaction from subjects that was significantly different—in the direction of a “run out of money” response—from that of the accurate description (*p*-values range from .00 to .06). These words may be construed as *misleading* insofar as citizens exposed to them were more likely to mistakenly state that Social Security will run out of money (see Jerit and Barabas [forthcoming] for aggregate-level evidence).

Not too surprisingly, when experimental subjects were exposed to expressions such as “run out of money,” “bankrupt,” “go bust,” or “short of cash,” the modal response to the “If No Changes” question was “run out of money completely.” Notably, however, some of the words that appear above the blank line (e.g., “strengthen,” “fiscal problem”) seem at least on their face to be fairly innocuous. Likewise, misleading words do not just consist of negative portrayals. This category also includes rhetoric that signals the intention to change the program in a positive direction (e.g., “repairing,” “secure,” “stabilize,” and “fix”).

The location of “go broke” *below* the blank line (i.e., among words that were not considered misleading) is somewhat of a mystery. If anything, this expression seems interchangeable with “bankrupt” or “go bust,” which were classified as misleading. Interestingly, and like the majority of misleading words, the modal choice for subjects exposed to “go broke” was the “run out of money” response. In fact, “go broke” was the only word with a mode of 1 (“run out of money”) that

Table I
The relationship between political rhetoric and perceptions of the Social Security Trust Fund

Word/ Phrase	Mean	SD	Modal Value	t-Test versus Accurate p-Value	N
Run out of money ^a	1.3	0.6	1	.00	26
Endangered	1.4	0.6	1	.00	39
Bankrupt	1.5	0.8	1	.00	26
Overwhelmed	1.6	0.7	1	.00	28
Continue to exist	1.6	0.8	1	.00	26
Failing	1.6	0.8	1	.00	39
Go bust	1.6	0.9	1	.00	45
Exhausted	1.6	0.9	1	.00	27
Overburdened	1.6	0.9	1	.00	28
Brick wall	1.6	1.0	1	.00	28
Financial problem	1.6	0.6	2	.00	28
Short of cash	1.7	0.9	1	.00	26
Challenge	1.8	0.6	2	.00	45
Shortfall	1.8	0.8	2	.00	27
Bolster	1.8	1.1	1	.00	27
Poop-out	1.8	0.9	1	.00	26
Repairing	1.9	0.8	2	.00	39
Secure	1.9	0.8	2	.00	44
Able to pay benefits	1.9	0.8	1	.00	25
Fix	1.9	0.9	1	.00	27
Fiscal problem	1.9	0.9	2	.00	27
Solvency	1.9	0.8	2	.00	28
Retirement deficit	2.0	1.0	1	.00	45
Stabilize	2.0	0.8	2	.00	26
Prop-up	2.0	1.0	1	.01	26
Day of reckoning	2.0	1.1	1	.04	25
Strengthen	2.2	0.9	2	.00	210
Insecure	2.2	0.9	2	.06	26
Updated	2.3	0.9	2	.13	39
Underfunded	2.3	0.9	2	.20	28
Reform	2.3	1.0	2	.21	27
Go broke	2.3	1.2	1	.39	28
Rescue	2.3	1.0	2	.41	26
Ills	2.4	1.0	2	.41	39
Reinforce	2.4	1.2	2	.51	25
Safeguard	2.4	1.1	2	.54	26
Buttress	2.4	1.1	2	.74	27
Shore up	2.4	1.2	— ^b	.75	25
Accurate phrase	2.5	0.8	3	—	352
Bail out	2.5	0.9	3	.88	39
Revamp	2.5	0.9	— ^b	.92	26
Protect	2.5	1.1	2	.92	26
Overhaul	2.5	0.9	3	.93	28
Crisis	2.5	1.2	2	.93	28

(continued)

Table I (continued)

Word/ Phrase	Mean	SD	Modal Value	<i>t</i> -Test versus Accurate <i>p</i> -Value	<i>N</i>
Save	2.6	1.1	— ^b	.11	238
Troubled system	2.6	0.9	2	.76	28
Preserve	2.6	1.0	2	.76	26
Reserve fund	2.7	1.1	4	.51	27
Healthier	2.8	1.0	— ^b	.10	45
Ensuring	2.8	1.2	4	.11	43
Sound footing	2.8	1.2	4	.18	28
Make sure it is there	3.0	1.1	4	.02	28
Fiscally sound	3.0	1.1	4	.04	25

Note: Respondents read statements with various words or phrases describing the condition of the Social Security system and then answered the question, “If no changes are made to the Social Security program over the next few decades, what do you think will happen? Will Social Security (1) run out of money completely, (2) have only enough money to pay everyone less than half the benefits they would get today, (3) have enough to pay everyone about three-quarters of the benefits they would get today, or (4) have enough to pay full benefits.” The line in bold type represents an accurate description of the problem. Words and phrases above the blank line elicited a reaction from subjects that was significantly different—in the direction of a “run out of money” response—from that of the accurate description (*p*-values range from .00 to .06). *t*-tests assume unequal variances.

a. Includes “run short of money.”

b. Multiple modal values.

was not classified as misleading. The pattern for this expression is anomalous, but it likely reflects the unusually high standard deviation on “go broke.”

What conclusions do we draw from this experiment? Of the four dozen or so words that were examined here, more than half were associated with incorrect estimates of Social Security’s future. Such a finding is alarming only to the extent that misleading rhetoric is prevalent in media coverage of the debate. Study 2 sought to determine if that was the case, as well as the source of misleading rhetoric. More specifically, it examined whether mediated accounts were indexed to the actual language used by political actors or if reporters and journalists exhibited independence in how they depicted the problems facing Social Security.

Study 2: Reform Rhetoric of Political Elites and the Mass Media

Here I examine reform rhetoric during the two-year period starting in 1998. My decision to focus on this particular time period, rather than the current debate, was deliberate. During the 1998 State of the Union, President Clinton put Social Security reform on the national agenda. Over the next two years,

political elites engaged in a public debate over the future of the program, making Social Security one of the most heavily covered topics in the national media. By focusing on the earliest days of the debate, I am examining one of the most critical stages of problem definition.

Drawing upon ten prominent media sources (*Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *USA Today*, National Public Radio, NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, CNN, NBC, ABC, and CBS), I examined the frequency of the fifty-three words from study 1. Included among the words and phrases is the forecast from the board of trustees overseeing the program.¹⁰ A companion content analysis examined political transcripts available on Lexis-Nexis, providing a picture of the rhetoric actually used by elected officials (in press conferences, speeches, etc.).¹¹

I begin with Table 2, which lists the twenty-five most frequently used words and phrases in media reports throughout 1998 to 1999 ($n = 3,131$). The entries marked with a superscripted *a* represent words that were characterized as misleading in study 1. Nearly half (48 percent) of the items in Table 2 fall into that category.¹² As several of the misleading words are clustered at the bottom of the table, the percentage of times misleading rhetoric appears in the debate is a bit lower (32 percent). Still, more than a third of all expressions used by journalists and reporters likely would have caused citizens to conclude—wrongly—that the program would have no money to pay future benefits. Table 2 also reveals that the trustees' forecast—one of the most reliable sources for information about Social Security—is close to last in terms of its frequency in news stories. This last finding has important implications for the ability of citizens to form accurate impressions about the situation facing Social Security. One of the principal constraints on the ability of political elites to manipulate public opinion is the credibility of the source providing information (e.g., Druckman 2001). From this standpoint, the critical 75 percent figure could have served as a powerful counterweight to the “language of crisis” that characterized the debate (Page 2000: 191)—had it been prevalent in the national media.

Both study 1 and study 2 are premised on the notion that a single word or phrase can have a powerful effect on public opinion. Research on policy metaphors (Lau and Schlesinger 2000; Stone 1997) supports this position. Stone (1997: 148) observes, for example, that “merely [describing] something as fragmented is to call for integration as an improvement, without ever saying so.” This jump from description to prescription is called a “normative leap” (Rein and Schon 1977), and it is a pervasive part of political rhetoric. Accordingly, many of the words and phrases in Table 2 imply that Social Security is *like* some other, familiar object—whether that be a failing business (“bankrupt”), sinking boat (“rescue”), or broken-down car (“repair”).

Indeed, four broad classes of metaphor seem to emerge from Table 2. The first is the comparison between Social Security and someone or something that is

Table 2

Most frequently used expressions in Social Security reform debate

Reform	550
Save	540
Shore up	333
Solvency ^a	302
Fix ^a	216
Protect	210
Preserve	154
Overhaul	112
Strengthen ^a	105
Bolster ^a	75
Bankrupt ^a	51
Financial problem ^a	49
Ensuring	47
Shortfall ^a	39
Crisis	39
Rescue	37
Revamp	37
Run out of money ^a	36
Stabilize ^a	23
Secure ^a	25
Safeguard	27
Challenge ^a	27
Trustees' report	30
Troubled system	33
Repairing ^a	34

Note: Cell entries represent the number of mentions across all media outlets. The total number of mentions in Table 1 is 3,131.

a. Denotes word or phrase characterized as misleading in study 1.

drowning (consider the words “save” and “rescue”). The second is the business metaphor (e.g., “bankrupt,” “solvency,” “run out of money,” and “shortfall”). Third, several of the words liken Social Security to a cherished object that must be shielded from harm (e.g., “protect,” “preserve,” “safeguard,” and “ensure”) or otherwise fortified (e.g., “bolster,” “shore up,” and “strengthen”). Finally, there is the suggestion that Social Security is a “problem” program (e.g., akin to a troubled child) that needs to be “reformed,” “fixed,” “overhauled,” “stabilized,” “revamped,” or “repaired” because it is “troubled,” faces “challenges,” or is in a state of “crisis.” This four-part grouping is admittedly speculative. The more general, and important, point is that many of the words in Table 2 imply a comparison between Social Security and something else, and that we fix the program in the same way we fix that “something else” (Stone 1997: 148). In this respect, the particular words and phrases in Table 2—innocuous as some may seem—are themselves a form of advocacy (e.g., Pan and Kosicki 1993: 70). This conclusion

is consistent with the recent observation of one reporter, who said, “In the early battle over Social Security’s future, almost nothing matters more than word choices.”¹³

Table 2 gives the frequency of reform words in the mass media. Though useful for getting a sense of the expressions used most commonly by journalists and reporters, it does not tell us whether the words and phrases used in the media are in any way indexed to elite rhetoric as it emerges from the White House and Congress. For example, the word “reform” was mentioned roughly the same amount in mediated and elite accounts (18 and 15 percent, respectively).¹⁴ However, there is little or no correspondence for other words in Table 2. “Save” was mentioned twice as much in the transcripts as it was in news stories (37 vs. 17 percent), while “shore up” appeared five times more frequently in the media than in actual elite discourse (11 vs. 2 percent). The crucial question, then, is whether a general pattern emerges from these comparisons—that is, do the percentages for the media and elites tend to be the same (as they are for “reform”) or are they different (as they are for “save” and “shore up”)?

I answer this question by comparing the distribution of reform rhetoric for the political transcripts and media data. The indexing hypothesis predicts that the distribution of words used by members of the media and elected officials will be similar, while the autonomous press perspective implies that they will be different. Past research on the goals and incentives of both actors suggest that differences, should they exist, will have to do primarily with the variability in words used to describe Social Security’s financial status.

I test for significant differences in word usage across sources with a Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test (Kanji 1999; see Diermeier and Stevenson 2000; Frost 1989; and Janssen 1991, for applications). The test is used to determine the significance of the difference between two population distributions, based on two sample distributions.¹⁵ In brief, the test compares the cumulative distributions of two samples, $F(x)$ and $G(x)$. The test statistic, D , is calculated as follows:

$$D_{MN} = \max | F_M(x) - G_N(x) |,$$

where M and N refer to the sample sizes of F and G , respectively. If D is greater than the critical value, we can reject the null hypothesis that the distributions come from the same population (i.e., we can conclude that the difference between sample distributions is significant). If we fail to reject, we can conclude that both samples come from the same underlying population.¹⁶

I used the word frequency data to compute the cumulative distributions for the political transcripts and media reports. Table 3 presents the results of a series of K-S tests.¹⁷

Table 3

Statistical tests for differences in reform rhetoric across political transcripts and the mass media

	1998	1999
Officials versus media comparison		
Political transcripts versus all media	.22**	.19*
Within-media comparison		
Print versus television	.12	.09
Elite versus nonelite sources	.07	.04

Note: Cell entries represent the test statistic (D) for a Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test. Significant entries indicate that the distributions come from different populations. "Elite" sources include *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, NPR's "All Things Considered," NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, and *U.S. News & World Report*. "Nonelite" sources include *USA Today*; CNN morning news; and the evening programs on NBC, CBS, and ABC.

a. * $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

Cell entries represent the test statistic (D) and significant values indicate that the distributions come from different populations. Beginning with the first row, we see that the distribution of reform rhetoric in the political transcripts is significantly different from the distribution in the mass media (print, television, and radio). Thus, even once we account for differences in volume of rhetoric appearing in transcripts and the news, patterns of word usage by political elites and the mass media are significantly different from one another.

A closer examination of the distributions illustrates the shape these differences take. Consistent with the expectation that elected officials will attempt to sound a single, consistent message, the overwhelming majority of rhetoric used by elected officials—nearly 70 percent—was limited to just three words: "save," "reform," and "fix." By contrast, the three most frequently used words in media accounts ("reform," "save," and "shore up") constituted only 44 percent of all the words used by reporters and journalists (a difference that is significant in a test of two proportions; $z = 11.61$).¹⁸ When it came to describing Social Security's financial situation, reporters and journalists used a wider range of words and phrases than elected officials.

The greater diversity in mediated accounts had an unintended consequence, however. As Figure 1 shows, members of the media used more misleading words than elected officials. Two patterns stand out in particular. First, while elected officials (represented by the gray bars) relied on just a handful of words when they were discussing Social Security ("fix," "strengthen," "challenge," and "solvency"), journalists and reporters were much more varied in their descriptions of the program.¹⁹ The second pattern relates to the kind of language appearing in elite and mediated accounts. Consistent with research showing greater autonomy for journalists (Althaus 2003), Figure 1 suggests that members of the media

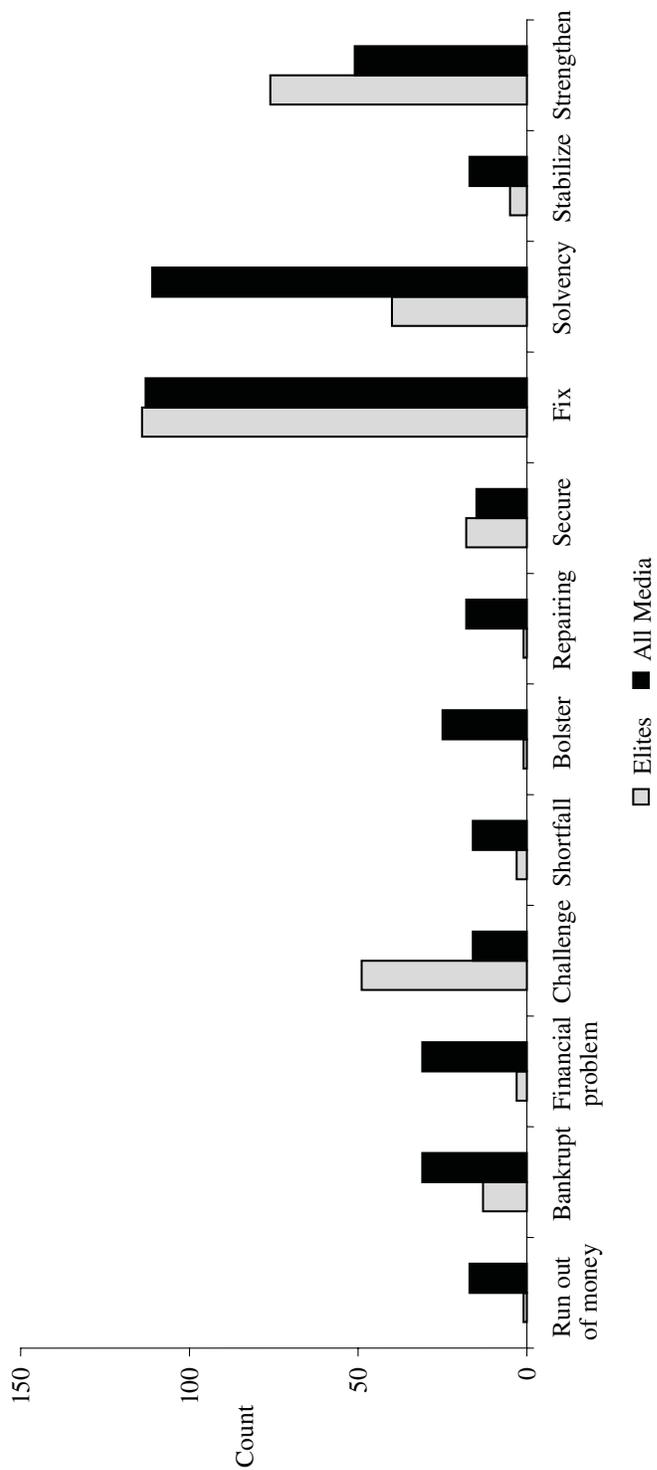


Figure 1

Distribution of Misleading Rhetoric in Mediated and Elite Descriptions of Social Security

Note: Count data from 1998 are shown, but a nearly identical pattern exists for 1999. All media sources are combined.

occasionally freelance. That is, some of the most dramatic language (e.g., “run out of money,” “bankrupt,” “shortfall,” “repair”) appears regularly in media news programs, but only rarely in official political transcripts.²⁰

So far, the mass media appear to exhibit more autonomy in the area of problem definition than one might expect based on the theory of indexing. Consistent with the incentives facing journalists and reporters, portrayals of Social Security in the mass media are more varied and more dramatic than discussions of the program in official political transcripts. The content analysis allows me to examine another topic that has long interested media scholars: differences in the nature of print and television news coverage (see Druckman [forthcoming] for general discussion). Applied to the present context, one might expect misleading rhetoric to be especially common in television news programs, given the tendency for this medium to provide dramatic, emotionally charged coverage (Bennett 2005). However, as the second row of Table 3 shows, there is no difference between the two outlets in terms of the distribution of reform rhetoric.²¹ The test statistic (.12 and .09 for 1998 and 1999, respectively) is not even close to exceeding the critical value. Paired with the results from the first row, this suggests that differences in the pattern of word usage within media sources (e.g., television vs. print) are muted compared to the differences between elected officials and the mass media.

One may object that the print versus television comparison stacks the deck against finding any differences because I combine diverse sources on both sides of the ledger (e.g., network news and the NewsHour are lumped together under “television,” while *USA Today* and the *New York Times* are combined under the “print” category). From this perspective, the combination of elite and nonelite news sources might affect my ability to detect differences between the two mediums. In fact, one might expect the differences between elite and nonelite news sources (e.g., network news vs. the NewsHour) to be greater than those between print and television. The third row of Table 3 examines that possibility, with the NewsHour, National Public Radio, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *U.S. News & World Report* serving as elite sources; and CNN, NBC, ABC, and CBS and *USA Today* serving as nonelite sources. Once again, differences across media sources are smaller than those between mediated and elite accounts.²²

The lack of a significant difference between media sources indicates that reporters and journalists might have been cueing off one another in their coverage of Social Security. Recent treatments of press autonomy suggest this type of behavior is not just probable but *likely* once we acknowledge that members of the media are cognitive misers themselves (e.g., Althaus 2003: 384). According to this perspective, recent and frequent exposure to particular words and phrases (“bankrupt,” “solvency,” and so on) make them more accessible in journalists’

minds (Fiske and Taylor 1991) and in turn more likely to appear in their portrayals of the debate. As Entman (2004: 9) observes, “The more often journalists hear similar thoughts expressed by . . . other news outlets, the more likely their own thoughts will run along those lines, with the result that the news they produce will feature [similar] words and visuals.” This study, combined with the results of study 1, provides a first glimpse at the consequences of this behavior.

Conclusion

Bennett and Livingston (2003) recently summarized the literature on press-government relations by stating, “There is strong debate about whether the control exercised by government officials and other elites over news content has diminished and, if so, whether increased journalistic autonomy in creating news narratives has improved the [quality] of political news content” (p. 359). This analysis extends prior work on both topics. Following the lead of recent research which has adopted a finer-grained approach to the study of press-government interaction, this study examined the words and phrases appearing in elite rhetoric and news stories about Social Security. When it comes to the actual language used to depict policy problems, the differences within media sources were muted compared to the differences between elected officials and the mass media. The former, primarily concerned with shaping public opinion and getting their definition of the problem to take hold, are concerned primarily with message discipline. The latter, largely concerned with audience considerations, strive to interject variety, excitement, and color into their coverage of policy debates. The end result is that journalists and reporters use a more varied—but also more misleading—vocabulary when discussing the problems facing Social Security.

This study is limited to the debate over a single issue at a single moment in time, so caution is warranted in generalizing from the results. At the same time, the focus on specific words provides an unusual degree of analytical leverage regarding the question of press independence. In this respect, my study extends research showing that members of the media exhibit autonomy through their use of words, frames, and symbols (e.g., Entman 2003; Lawrence 1996). It also suggests several paths for future inquiry. For example, the importance of word choice extends beyond problem definition, to the selling of particular policies (e.g., “private” vs. “personal” accounts)²³ and the mobilization of key constituencies (e.g., President Bush’s use of religious “code words”).²⁴ Whether news stories hew closely to the strategic choices of elites in these areas is a topic that is ripe for research.

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Notes

1. In other studies, the two types of actors are not differentiated (e.g., Mucciaroni 1994: 130; Wood and Doan 2003: 643–45).
2. For example, see Richard W. Stevenson, “President Makes It Clear: Phrase Is ‘War on Terror,’” *New York Times*, Aug. 4, 2005: A12.
3. The dates are revised each year based upon economic performance and demographic trends.
4. The first statement is based on the annual forecast of the Social Security Board of Trustees. This forecast is considered by many experts and academics to be the most accurate description of the situation facing Social Security.
5. The Associated Press (AP) serves as an agenda setter for print and broadcast outlets around the nation (Graber 2002), making it one of the most comprehensive sources for reform rhetoric in this debate.
6. Subjects came from five different undergraduate classes at a large university. The instructions stated, “You will read a series of quotations from newspapers in which politicians, journalists, and other political actors talk about Social Security. Read each quotation and select one of the answer choices that appear to the right of each quote. Regardless of your personal beliefs about Social Security, you should answer the question using the information contained only in the quotation.” I found no patterns when I examined responses by gender, course number, or other characteristics, indicating that the randomization worked. The experiment was administered in the spring of 2003, long after the 1998–1999 debate but before President George W. Bush put the issue on the agenda again in 2004.
7. This question is identical to one asked by Princeton Survey Research Associates during the late 1990s. Two features of the question make it particularly useful here. First, and as I noted above, there is a correct answer to the “If No Changes” question. This makes it possible to label as misleading any expression which leads to an incorrect response. Second, individuals’ perceptions of the trust fund have broader relevance, especially for their opinions about various reform options (Barabas 2005).
8. To test all fifty-three words and phrases, there were twelve versions of the experiment. An excerpt from the *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees* (2003) (“If politicians do not make any changes to the fund, Social Security will be able to finance only 75% of benefits in future years.”) was repeated in every version. For reasons that will become apparent later, two other expressions (“save” and “strengthen”) were repeated in several versions of the experiment. Other words were randomly assigned to one of the twelve versions of the survey. Variations in sample size are due to differences in class size and item nonresponse.
9. Although the experiment was randomized, one might wonder whether the clustering of certain target words/phrases affected the results. Taking advantage of the fact that three items (“save,” “strengthen,” and the accurate description) were repeated across several versions of the experiment, I determined if the mean rating for each of these words/phrases exhibited significant differences across versions. If they did, that would suggest that the rating had been affected by other target words and phrases. Fortunately, there were no

significant differences in the mean values of the ratings across versions ($p > .05$, chi-square). The order of presentation (e.g., whether a target word was placed first, last, or in the middle) also was inconsequential.

10. A coder unfamiliar with the project searched Lexis-Nexis for stories relevant to Social Security during 1998 and 1999. The search was limited to stories containing “social security” and one of the fifty-three words. Every hit was verified, which is to say that the full transcript of every story was read to make sure search terms were used in the appropriate context. A random sample (20 percent) of the data was analyzed by another coder. Given the straightforward nature of the coding task, the correspondence in the two coders’ judgments was high. The following sections were coded from the ten sources: *Washington Post* (Section A), *New York Times* (National Desk), *U.S. News & World Report* (entire), *USA Today* (entire), National Public Radio (All Things Considered), NewsHour with Jim Lehrer (entire), CNN (morning news). For ABC, CBS, and NBC, content up to the first commercial of the evening news broadcast was coded (Graber 2004, 259). All variants of the phrase “three-quarters” (e.g., 75 percent, three-fourths) were included in the content analysis.
11. A coder searched the political transcripts archive in Lexis Nexis. This database includes transcripts of congressional hearings, presidential news conferences and press briefings, and speeches and press conferences by national newsmakers. It is updated daily.
12. The top twenty-five expressions represent the overwhelming majority (96 percent) of all words and phrases uttered in the debate. I obtain an even greater percentage of misleading rhetoric (53 percent) when I consider all fifty-three words and phrases.
13. Linda Feldman, “The War of Words over Social Security,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 15, 2005:1.
14. For the media, “reform” was mentioned 550 times or 18 percent (550 divided by 3,131). For the transcripts, “reform” was mentioned 392 times or 15 percent (392 divided by 2,566).
15. Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) is a nonparametric test (i.e., it makes no assumptions about the distribution of the data).
16. Previous studies have adopted several approaches for operationalizing press independence (see Althaus 2003: 383–88). Many studies examine story counts—comparing, for example, the number or percentage of pro-administration and anti-administration articles on a subject (e.g., Bennett 1990; Eilders and Luter 2000; Fico and Soffin 1995). Others take a more qualitative approach (e.g., Dorman and Livingston 1994; Livingston and Eachus 1996; Mermin 1996). Some (e.g., Bennett 1990; Peer and Chestnut 1995; Zaller and Chiu 1996) but not all researchers conduct tests of statistical significance. In the absence of any single standard for identifying independence, the K-S test seemed most appropriate for my data. I observe similar patterns with a chi-square test. I do not report these results because cell frequencies drop below 5 on several occasions.
17. Once again, I restrict my attention to the top twenty-five words because they represent the overwhelming majority of rhetoric (96 percent) on this issue. Tests are conducted separately for 1998 and 1999.
18. These figures are for 1998. Three words (“save,” “reform,” and “solvency”) represented the majority (62 percent) of elite rhetoric in 1999. The corresponding percentage for the mass media is 47 percent (“reform,” “save,” and “shore up”). This difference also is significant ($z = 8.44$).
19. The difference in the distribution of misleading words is not significant, although Kanji (1999: 68) states that the K-S test yields valid results only for sample sizes larger than fifteen.
20. Figure 1 is based on data for 1998, but the pattern is nearly identical for 1999. The media also used a greater variety of nonmisleading words in both years.

21. The television sources are the NewsHour, CNN, NBC, ABC, and CBS. The print sources are *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *USA Today*.
22. I experimented with alternate categorizations and found similar results.
23. Robin Toner, "It's 'Private' vs. 'Personal' in Debate over Bush Plan," *New York Times*, March 22, 2005:A16.
24. David D. Kirkpatrick, "What They Said; What Was Heard," *New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2004:5.

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Biographical Note

Jennifer Jerit is a fellow at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut and an assistant professor of political science at Southern Illinois University. She has published articles in the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, and *Political Psychology*.

Address: Department of Political Science, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901; phone: 618-536-2371; e-mail: jerit@siu.edu.