

RESEARCH NOTE

The Mexican War on Drugs: Crime and the Limits of Government Persuasion

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Drug-related crime and violence have become increasingly worrisome phenomena in many countries around the world. This situation threatens citizens' lives and property, but, perhaps more importantly, it also threatens the survival of democratic states in developing countries (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012)

For governments to have a realistic opportunity of effectively fighting organizations that contest the state's territory, they require a measure of support from their citizens, be it active or passive (Berman, Shapiro, & Felter, 2011; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). If citizens disbelieve their governments' messages—for whatever reasons—then policy interventions may be doomed to fail. Negative outlooks become self-fulfilling prophecies: Citizens perceive that government policy is failing, which reduces societal support for the incumbent; less societal support weakens the government's ability to effectively fight crime, and the likelihood of government success further decreases.

To gain citizens' support, incumbent politicians take their case to the people, framing viewpoints, policies, and interventions as highly effective (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Kinder & Berinsky, 1999; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Yet, individuals have priors determined by information, ideology, or direct experiences that condition their sensitivity to frames (Druckman, 2001).

Under which circumstances do pro-governmental frames influence citizens? What are the limits to government persuasion?

To help answer these questions, we develop a theory on the limits of framing that identifies specific circumstances under which citizens are not receptive to governmental messages. In a nutshell, we argue that crime victimization inures individuals from pro-government messages.

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To verify our theory empirically, we use the Mexican war on criminal organizations launched in December 2006. We conducted a frame experiment that exposed individuals in the treatment group to a pro-government frame that emphasized captures of criminal organizations' bosses, and no exposure to those in the control group. We then asked individuals who they thought was winning the war on drugs: The government or the criminal organizations. The experiment was embedded in a nationwide survey in Mexico, in July 2011.

We find sufficient evidence to support our theory. Among victims of crime, there is no statistically significant effect of the pro-government frame on declaring that the government is winning the war on drugs. Yet, among non-victims, there is a statistically significant increase in the proportion of individuals assessing that the government is winning the war on drugs.

We also tested our argument conditional on three of the most recurrent types of explanations in the literature concerning public support for governments: Event-response, information effects, and elite-cues. Under most circumstances, we found that those who have been victims of a crime are immune to pro-government frames.

In the next section, we present our theory and hypotheses in the context of the existing literature. In the third section, we briefly describe the Mexican case. We then present the results of the frame experiment we conducted. Finally, we discuss implications of our findings.

Crime and Frame Effects

The existing literature concerning government conflict with organizations that aim to control its territory agrees that a necessary condition for an effective strategy is a significant degree of societal support. Such is the case in civil conflicts (Berman, Shapiro, & Felner, 2011; Bullock, Imai, & Shapiro, 2011; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Lyall, Imai, & Blair, 2011), inter-state wars (Berinsky, 2007; Brody, 1991; Gelpi, Feaver, & Reifler, 2006), and the fight against criminal organizations.

Support from society is related to citizens' sensitivity to messages advertising incumbents' accomplishments. Individuals' receptivity becomes paramount in settings in which a significant proportion of citizens does not directly experience all events related to the issue at hand. Crime and violence tend to be focalized in a few specific localities and areas within such localities. Under these circumstances, much of public opinion—and thus of citizens' support—is determined by the information that is made available through the media and word of mouth. Therefore, governments and their opponents have incentives to attempt to influence how information is framed to the public.

A frame is a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani 1989, p. 143).

There is ample evidence of the effects of frames on individuals' opinions in different settings (e.g. Callaghan & Schnell, 2005; Chong & Druckman, 2007; de Vreese, 2012; Kinder & Nelson, 2005). Nevertheless, there are limits to the effects of frames. Some individuals are more influenced than others, and some issues are more easily framed than others (Druckman, 2001; Gabrielson, 2005; Kinder & Herzog, 1993;

Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Citizens discriminate between information in favor or against policies according to certain priors.

Few studies exist regarding frame effects on crime-related topics. Existing studies for the United States show that race-profiling biases have an impact on citizens' perceptions of crime (e.g. Gilliam & Iyengar, 2005; Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005). Other work has found that information has a significant effect on perceptions of safety (Ardanaz, Corbacho, Ibararan, & Ruiz-Vega, 2013). A related literature shows that crime and violence erode trust in public institutions (Ceobanu, Wood, & Ribeiro, 2011; Corbacho, Philipp, & Ruiz-Vega, 2012; Cruz, 2008; Fernandez & Kuenzi, 2010).

However, there are no explanations on the limits of frame effects on citizens' evaluations of crime policy interventions.

A Theory on the Limits of Government Persuasion

Our theory contributes to an understanding of the limits that a government is subject to when it tries to influence public opinion. We identify crime victimization as a specific desensitizer to pro-government frames. Our core hypothesis states that individuals who have been victims of a crime become desensitized to messages communicating the success of governments' policy interventions on crime and violence (H_1).

The theoretical mechanism we propose states that personal experiences with crime will trigger an increasing incredulity regarding a government's claims of accomplishments in public safety. As a side effect, this undermines future efforts against criminal organizations creating a vicious circle of insecurity, distrust, and frustrated policy interventions.

In the literature, there are three types of explanations that are relevant to understanding citizens' approval of the government's performance and how receptive citizens are to pro-government messages. These explanations are as follows: Event-response, information effects, and elite-cues. We argue that citizens' desensitization because of crime victimization should hold even in the presence of these three variables.

Event-response theories hold that citizens will evaluate a government's performance by reacting to the current state of affairs. Multiple studies have found evidence of a close relationship between the number of war casualties and support for incumbent governments (e.g. Brody, 1991; Gelpi, Feaver, & Reifler, 2006; Mueller, 1973).

According to the logic of this type of theory, governments have limited capacities to influence citizens' opinions on the success of their performance through the use of frames. A frame is only believable if it matches events.

Therefore, low crime rates should be associated with high sensitivity to pro-government frames. Conditional on our core hypothesis (H_1), we contend that individuals who live in areas with less crime and violence will be more likely to be influenced by pro-government frames, but only if they have not being victims of a crime (H_2).

The second set of theories that we test is related to information effects. The existing literature has found significant effects of media priming and framing on

citizens' attitudes toward armed conflicts (e.g. Berinsky, 2007; Edi & Meirick, 2007; Iyengar & Simon, 1993) and violent events (e.g. Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001).

Ardanaz, Corbacho, Ibarra, & Ruiz-Vega, (2013) provide evidence that communicating objective information on crime trends in Bogota has had a significant impact on citizens' perceptions of public safety. However, crime victimization is a substantial predictor of overestimating public insecurity. Another strand of the literature has found evidence of the potential short-term desensitizing effect of exposure to violence in the media (Potter, 1999, p. 39).

Therefore, and conditional on H_1 , we would expect that as individuals' exposure to media news on crime and violence decreases, they would tend to become increasingly sensitized to pro-government frames, but only if they have not been victims of a crime (H_3).

Finally, elite-cues theories state that citizens would be sensitive to political messages when they come from sources they trust—such as politicians, political parties, or others with whom they share ideological positions or other affinities (Druckman, 2001; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992). In these theories, citizens are relatively easy prey to framing, as long as the messages come from the “right” source, or that matches their sources' positioning.

Studies on public opinion dynamics in countries undergoing armed conflicts have found that the source of the message will create significant differences in which combatant citizens endorse (Bullock, Imai, & Shapiro, 2011; Lyall, Imai, & Blair, 2011).

If it is the case that individuals' opinions are influenced by sources they trust, then, conditional on H_1 , if individuals' trusted sources are pro-government, then they would be more sensitive to pro-government frames, except if they were victims of a crime (H_4).

Public Opinion and the Mexican War on Drugs

The Mexican case provides an excellent setting to test our theory. In December 2006, the Federal Government embarked on an aggressive campaign against drug trafficking organizations. The strategy targeted the bosses of these criminal organizations, many of whom were either captured or killed.

As the fight between the government and criminal organizations intensified, the number of homicides rapidly increased. By the end of Calderon's administration, the death toll numbered >60,000. The gruesome violence used in the assassinations became the trademark of Mexico's war on drugs (see Guerrero, 2010; Osorio, 2011; and Ríos & Shirk, 2011 for different narratives on this case).

While the issue captured wide national attention, the actual fight against DTOs and the unfortunate violence related to it were concentrated in a few localities and specific areas within those localities. A majority of citizens became aware of the violence through the mass media, word of mouth, or social media. Mexicans were exposed to highly conflicting information regarding the strategy's success from both the government and its opponents.

While the opposition to the government varied in its specific focus and intensity, all agreed on the point that the government's intervention had failed, and had resulted in more harm than good (e.g. Guerrero, 2010). The Mexican government

argued that the interventions were not causing the increase in homicides, but rather that the increase in criminal activity had caused the government to intervene. Incumbent government officials were put in a complex position; they had to convince citizens that things would have been worse if the government had not intervened.

Under these circumstances, winning the hearts and minds of Mexicans and enticing them to join in the government's efforts against criminal organizations did not seem like an easy endeavor.

An Experiment on the Limits of Government Persuasion

To explore the limits of government persuasion, we designed a frame experiment to test for the potential influence that pro-government framing would have on individuals' assessments. In particular, we evaluated the effect on individuals' opinion of whether the government or the criminal organizations were winning the war on drugs.

The experiment was embedded in a nationwide face-to-face probabilistic survey conducted in Mexico from July 9 to 17 of 2011 ($n=1,800$). The survey was conducted by the Public Opinion Coordination at the Office of the Mexican Presidency. It included a control group ($n=900$) and a treatment group ($n=900$) (see the [Supplementary Appendix](#) for further detail on the survey).

The frame's content replicated the main discourse of the Federal Government, which emphasized the capture of criminal organizations' kingpins as the "right" way of evaluating success in the fight against organized crime. The capture of drug lords was highly publicized in the media, and the government ran intensive advertising campaigns showcasing the captures as proof of the progress it was making in fighting criminal organizations. Our frame was designed to influence people to think about the war on drugs in terms of government captures of DTOs bosses, not about the source of the message as such, which in our design is not attributed to the government. It reads as follows:

Felipe Calderon's government has been characterized for its open fight against drug trafficking. During his administration, the most important captures of powerful and dangerous leaders of criminal organizations have taken place, from hit men up to the bosses of cartels and criminal organizations. Among the apprehended are Édgar Valdez Villarreal *alias* "La Barbie," José Gerardo Álvarez Vázquez *alias* "El Indio," Vicente Zambada Niebla *alias* "El Vicentillo," and Francisco Javier Arellano Félix *alias* "El Tigrillo."

After exposing individuals in the treatment group to the frame, and no-exposure for those in the control group, the survey asked all individuals in the sample the following question: In the Federal Government's fight against organized crime, who do you believe is winning: the Federal Government or organized crime?

We find no evidence of imbalance between our experimental groups that would bias the treatment effect (the test for balance and the explanation of the treatment effect can be consulted on the [Supplementary Appendix](#)).

Results

Given adequate balance, we conducted difference-in-proportion tests between individuals in the control and in the treatment groups to test our hypotheses. The baseline frequencies in the control group are as follows: 26.5% answered the Federal Government is winning; 53.2% answered the criminal organizations are winning; the remaining 20.3% either answered that they “do not know”, that “neither is winning”, or declined to provide an answer.

At the most aggregated level, we find that the pro-government frame induced a 5.3% increase ($p < .01$) on the proportion of individuals responding that the government is winning the war. This represents a 20% increase from the baseline of 26.5%. The proportion of individuals answering that organized crime is winning was reduced owing to frame exposure in 2.6%; yet, this difference is not statistically significant. Note that the magnitude of the effect should vary across time and societies as a function of different factors, such as the credibility of their political authorities.

To verify our theory on the limits of frames, we conducted tests at two levels of segmentation. First, we compared individuals who were victims of a crime, and those who were not both in the control and treatment groups. According to the survey we used, a disturbing 46% of Mexicans reported being victims of at least one crime in the year prior to the survey.

Second, we executed a more robust test of our theory by segmenting our sample using variables that approximate the three main explanations in the literature concerning citizens' support of incumbent governments. We then further segmented it by whether the individuals were victims of crime in the year prior to the survey.

The results support our theoretical expectations at both levels of segmentation. As compared with non-victims in the control group, non-victims who were exposed to the pro-government frame showed a significantly higher proportion of individuals answering that the government is winning the war on drugs, 7.3% more ($p < .01$), and a lower proportion answering that the organized crime is winning, 5.1% less ($p < .10$). On the other hand, the pro-government frame did not have a significant effect on victims of crime, as stated in our first hypothesis ($H1$).

If our theory holds, being victim to a crime should inure citizens from pro-government frames, even in population segments that the literature has proven to be more sensitive to frames and more supportive of the incumbent government. In the following paragraphs we show the tests' results for variables approximating the three main explanations in the literature: Event-response, information effects, and elite-cues.

Event-Response

We posited that individuals who live in areas with less crime will be more likely to be influenced by pro-government frames, but only if they have not being victims of a crime ($H2$).

We approximated the crime and violence context by using the number of homicides related to criminal activities at the municipal level from December 2006, when president Calderon declared the war on drugs, up to June 2011, the month prior to the survey's interviews. We used data from Mexico's National Public Security System.

Three categories were created: The first category, “non-violent”, includes individuals living in the first three quartiles of cumulative homicides. The second category, “violent”, includes individuals living in municipalities with a number of homicides above the third quartile and up to the 99.8% of Mexican municipalities. Finally, the third category, “extremely violent”, contains individuals in the top 0.16% most violent municipalities. These cases show a clear discontinuity in the distribution.

Table 1 shows the results of the difference-in-proportion tests. We find that only individuals living in extremely violent places are sensitive to pro-government frames; it is a strong effect, twice the size of the effect that the frame has on the overall population.

However, once we segment the sample by victimization, we find no effect of pro-government frames at any level of violence, which confirms our theoretical expectations on this matter. Pro-government frames do influence individuals who have not been victims of crimes in both violent and extremely violent places. Contrary to what could be expected based on event-response theories, contextual violence does not predispose individuals against pro-incumbent messages.

Information Effects

We stated that low exposure to crime-related information should be associated with a higher acceptance of pro-government frames; yet, this sensitizing effect should not occur if the individual was the victim of a crime (H_3).

We test this hypothesis by using two variables. First, we use the level of news consumption at the individual level, which we measure on the basis of an additive index of the number of days that individuals reported to having been exposed to news through television, radio, and newspapers. From this index, we produced two categorical variables: “Low exposure,” comprising cases up to the first quartile of this index and “high exposure,” encompassing cases in the fourth quartile.

Second, we measured whether the individual was exposed to explicit images of violence in television, newspapers, or the Internet in the week prior to the survey interview. Of the sample, 54% reported they were exposed to explicit images in at least one of these sources.

Table 2 presents the results of the difference-in-proportion tests that we conducted. Individuals in the high news consumption category conform to our theoretical expectations: If they were victims of a crime, pro-government frames did not influence them. Yet, high consumption by itself does not immunize individuals against frame effects.

Interestingly, when news consumption is low, there is no evidence of desensitization among victims of crime. We hypothesize that this segment should be relatively uncontaminated, and thus relatively more receptive to messages, even if they have been victims of a crime.

Regarding exposure to explicit crime-related violence in the media, we do not find evidence showing that it induces desensitization. However, as our theory predicted, crime victimization inures individuals from pro-government frames regardless of exposure (Table 2).

Table 1
Frame Effects by Level of Violence and Victimization

Level of violence		Difference (%)		
		Full sample	Victims	Non-victims
Non-violent ($n = 212$)				
<i>The (...) is winning</i>	Federal government	1.9	11.3	-3.7
	Organized crime	-6.6	-6.4	-6.6
Violent ($n = 1,128$)				
<i>The (...) is winning</i>	Federal government	3.3	-0.6	6.0**
	Organized crime	1.1	4.5	-1.5
Extremely violent ($n = 419$)				
<i>The (...) is winning</i>	Federal government	12.3***	5.2	17.7***
	Organized crime	-10.3**	-3.4	-15.0**

Note: Entries are differences in proportions of the treated group minus the control group.
 * $p < 10$; ** $p < 05$; *** $p < 01$.

Elite-Cues

Finally, we tested for elite-cues arguments. We approximate elite-cues using two variables: Presidential approval and identification with the president's party, the PAN. We posited that those individuals closer to the incumbent should be more sensitive to pro-government frames. However, if they were the victims of a crime, we should not observe any frame effect (H_4). Table 3 presents the difference-in-proportion tests for these two variables and for victimization.

We find that presidential approval does not work the way that elite-cues explanations would predict it to. The frame influenced both those who approve of the president and those who do not, and in similar proportions. And, as our theory predicted, victims of a crime were insulated from pro-government frame effects, even if they approved of the president.

With regard to party identity, our results mostly conform to the elite-cues predictions. The frame we tested influenced the opinions of both *panistas* and non-*panistas*, but the effect on *panistas* was twice as large.

Once we further segmented the sample by victimization to test for our core hypotheses, we found a rather robust effect of the frame on *panistas* that have been victims of crime. Identification with the presidents' party seems to prevent individuals from becoming inured to pro-government frames. Non-*panistas*, as we expected, become insulated from pro-government frames when they have been victims of a crime.

Conclusions

In this article, we delved into the limits of governmental influence on public opinion regarding policy interventions on issues of crime and violence. Our main argument

Table 2
Frame Effects by Presidential Approval, Party Identification, and Victimization

Variable	Difference (%)			
	Full sample	Victims	Non-victims	
Presidential approval	Approve ($n = 975$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	Federal government	0.5	6.8**
		Organized crime	1.2	-2.9
	Disapprove ($n = 450$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	Federal government	0.7	11.5***
		Organized crime	-0.6	-5.8
Party ID	PID: Panista ($n = 394$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	Federal government	11.0*	9.3*
		Organized crime	-10.9*	-0.8
	PID: Non-Panista ($n = 1,332$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	Federal government	4.5**	7.5**
		Organized crime	-2.6	-7.0**

Note: Entries are differences in proportions of the treated group minus the control group.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Frame Effects by News Consumption, Exposure to Violence in the Media, and Victimization

Variable		Difference (%)		
		Full sample	Victims	Non-victims
News consumption	Low ($n = 472$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	9.7*** -9.9***	14.5** -5.0	7.0* -10.5**
	High ($n = 500$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	3.6 1.4	-2.4 1.9	10.5** 0.6
Exposure to violence in the media	Not-exposed ($n = 804$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	5.0* -4.3	6.5 -0.8	4.6 -6.0*
	Exposed ($n = 955$) <i>The (...) is winning</i>	5.2*** 0.7	-0.6 3.2	10.5*** -4.0

Note: Entries are differences in proportions of the treated group minus the control group.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

was that individuals would become desensitized to pro-government messages if they were victims of crime.

Our results indicate that, under many conditions, victims of crime do become desensitized to pro-government frames regarding public policies against criminal organizations. In a scenario like the one Mexico is facing, in which a high proportion of the population has been victim of a crime, most government propaganda is doomed to fail.

We find that only low levels of news consumption and/or identification with the president's party mitigate this desensitizing effect of victimization. These results imply a rather complicated scenario for a government trying to make its case to its citizens on public security issues.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at IJPOR online.

Acknowledgments

Beatriz Magaloni and Alberto Díaz-Cayeros thank the support from the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University. Vidal Romero thanks the Asociación Mexicana de Cultura A.C., and Conacyt for their support. We thank Rafael Giménez, Lorena Becerra, and Alexandra Uribe for their comments and support. We also thank participants at the 2013 APSA meeting, and at the Stanford Center for Latin American Studies Seminar.

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