

# Framing the Gun Control Debate: Press Releases and Framing Strategies of the National Rifle Association and the Brady Campaign\*

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*Objective.* How can social movements increase their presence in the news? We argue that press releases can do so via social movement framing. Press releases from, and news coverage of, social movement organizations (SMOs) in the gun control debate serve as our case. *Methods.* A qualitative framing analysis is conducted to identify frames in press releases from the National Rifle Association and the Brady Campaign. Logistic regressions assess the effect of frames in press releases on *New York Times* coverage of the gun control debate. *Results.* We find that both organizations use systematic framing strategies in their press releases. Only the Brady Campaign has a significant association between specific frames in its press releases and coverage in the *New York Times*. *Conclusions.* Press releases are viable tactics for SMOs, but biases in news media have implications for how effective press releases might be for an SMO.

December 20, 2012, six days after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the National Rifle Association (NRA) issued a press release stating it would be holding a press event the next day, along with registration information and a satellite television frequency (NRA, 2012). At the event, Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the NRA, spoke to a room full of news reporters to announce the launch of a NRA study on the feasibility of armed guards in schools. One remark from LaPierre that day reverberated with the audience, and was repeatedly quoted in subsequent news coverage: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” (Lichtblau et al., 2012). This statement came to embody the NRA’s message in the wake of Sandy Hook, repeated so often in news coverage that both supporters and opponents of the NRA understood its position on, and solution for, school shootings in the United States. This example demonstrates one of the benefits of news coverage for a social movement organization (SMO); news coverage of LaPierre shared the NRA framing of the problem of gun violence with the entire nation in a way the NRA alone could not.

News coverage of social movements has proven to be a crucial tool for movement mobilization and framing as it offers a platform for SMOs to appeal to the public directly (Gamson et al., 1992; Gans, 1979; Lipsky, 1968). Previous research on news coverage of SMOs focuses on the use of protests to garner news coverage, and it is unknown if more

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subtle SMO tactics, such as press releases, are effective in garnering news coverage. This study uses the gun control debate to advance social movements research by exploring the feasibility of SMOs to garner news coverage through press releases, a tactic designed to directly engage the media.

Using press releases from the NRA and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, we conduct a framing analysis of both organizations to empirically test if press releases influence their coverage in the *New York Times* (NYT). The gun control debate is an ideal case for this study since the NRA and Brady Campaign are well-resourced SMOs representing both sides of the gun control debate; news coverage of gun control is fairly frequent; and both organizations regularly issue press releases. We use both qualitative and quantitative analyses to assess how the NRA and Brady Campaign package their messages in press releases, and how effective these packages are in garnering news coverage. Given that news attention is renewed with every mass shooting in the United States, the gun control debate is a topic that touches the lives of nearly every American and debate about gun control has reached a new peak in recent years. Our study attempts to add nuance to this public discussion by exploring how both SMOs frame the issue, and if such framing influences news coverage of the gun control debate.

### Media Attention and Social Movements

Lipsky (1968) argues that media coverage is valuable for SMOs because it both energizes supporters and brings in new members. Media coverage of a movement also informs the public of a movement's grievances and agenda (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). These broad benefits from news coverage have motivated social movement scholars to examine SMOs' methods of engaging the media to garner coverage (Andrews and Caren, 2010; Ferree, 2002; Ryan, 1991). Another benefit from SMO news coverage is the establishment of movement legitimacy. Gamson's (2004) analysis of movement opportunity structure, movement framing, and the media argues that social movements face crucial challenges of legitimacy that must be overcome to survive. Media coverage provides legitimacy for social movements in three ways. First, news coverage convinces the public of a movement's legitimacy by broadcasting movement frames that resonate with the public. Second, news coverage identifies incentives for joining a social movement and the benefits of movement success. Finally, news coverage can embarrass opponents of a movement by challenging their claims and legitimacy (Gamson, 2004). These processes, often intertwined, make news coverage of SMOs a powerful mechanism for social movement resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

Several factors contribute to media coverage of social movements. One is the patterning of media coverage to focus on recent salient events, called the issue attention cycle (Downs, 1972). SMOs may use rhetoric and agendas that appeal to the issue attention cycle to increase their newsworthiness (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith, 1996). Similarly, Walsh's (1981) concept of suddenly imposed grievances argues that SMOs gain news coverage when current events bring movement issues to public attention. Most often, suddenly imposed grievances take the form of a natural disaster, political crisis, or other dramatic event, bringing social movements news coverage as they mobilize on events relevant to their cause (e.g., the nuclear-free movement during the Three Mile Island incident or the gun control movement in the wake of the Columbine shootings). In short, news coverage of social movements is associated with the saliency of a respective movement to current events. However, it is beyond the ability of an SMO to influence the issue attention cycle

or suddenly imposed grievances; thus the capacity of SMOs to engage news outlets outside the context of these factors is an important tactic for SMOs.

One tactic for SMOs to garner news coverage is the use of violent protests and visible counterprotests (Earl et al., 2004; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith, 1996; Oliver and Maney, 2000). However, the newsworthiness of protests has declined in the United States due to their institutionalization, with exceptions occurring with especially large or violent protests, making this tactic not an ideal way to reach journalists (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998; Walker, Martin, and McCarthy, 2008). As a result, SMOs have moved to directly communicate movement messages to the media, but not all SMOs are equal in this regard. Andrews and Caren (2010) found that older, larger, and more organized SMOs achieve more news coverage than smaller, newer, and poorly coordinated organizations. This is because larger and more resourced SMOs use media-specific tactics by presenting the SMO as an authority on key issues and as a credible source to journalists (Andrews and Caren, 2010; Barker-Plummer, 2002; Levin, 2002). Similarly, Ryan (1991) found that SMOs that engage news outlets directly with press kits and spokespersons have a greater chance of gaining news coverage because such efforts create a trusted status between SMOs and journalists. While this previous work shows that efforts to engage the media can be effective, the effectiveness of many specific tactics to garner media coverage, such as press releases, remains unknown.

### *Press Releases*

SMO press releases provide a potentially insightful way to explore how social movements engage the media and their efficacy in doing so (Barker-Plummer, 2002; Levin, 2002; Rohlinger, 2002; Wolfsfeld, 1984). Martin (2010) found that press releases issued by an SMO correlated with increases in media coverage, suggesting that press releases may be a viable SMO tactic to generate or shape media coverage of an SMO. But how can social movement theories provide a mechanism for press releases to affect news coverage of an SMO?

The most viable theory of a mechanism of press releases is social movement framing (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). Social movement frames reduce complex issues to easily understood scripts concerning movement grievances and motivation for actions that are easy to communicate to movement supporters and the public, allowing both an understanding of a movement's rationale, goals, and public appeals and an empirical measure of its cultural positions (Johnston and Noakes, 2005). Benford and Snow (2000) argue that frames have three core tasks. First, frames diagnose problems justifying movement mobilization and emergence. Second, frames identify the movement's preferred solutions to said problem. Lastly, frames motivate newcomers to join a social movement.

Frames used repeatedly within and across social movements are called master frames (Snow and Benford, 1992). Master frames often appeal to universal values; for instance, frames of civil rights and human rights both rely on a "rights" master frame. A further example of frames and master frames is evident in Rohlinger's (2002) study of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and Concerned Women for America (CWA). Master frames used by the SMOs were the "women's rights" master frame for NOW and "the sanctity of life" master frame for CWA (Rohlinger, 2002). However, master frames are broad conceptual tools, and in order to examine the intricacies of a social movement framing strategy, social movement scholars sometimes use the related concept of packages (Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Ryan, 1991). Packages are social movement messages and ideas derived from master frames with the ability for

the specific content of packages to change over time and with social contexts. Gamson and Modigliani argue that packages “offer a number of different condensing symbols that suggest the core frame and positions in shorthand, making it possible to display the package as a whole with a deft metaphor, catchphrase, or other symbolic device” (1989: 3). Rohlinger (2002) uses the concept of packages to demonstrate the variety of framing strategies used by NOW and CWA that were built on master frames in the abortion debate. Both SMOs used a variety of packages that were bounded within each organization’s overall master frames but allowed varying rhetorical strategies that appealed to different audiences as the social and political contexts of abortion changed.

The concept of packages is ideal for studying variation in social movement frames in press releases. Press releases may have packages of particular frames that garner greater news coverage compared to other packages. This leads us to conceptualize press releases as culturally crafted products that contain packages of social movement frames specifically for media discourse (Benford and Snow, 2000; Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Rohlinger, 2002). This conceptualization of press releases parallels Isaac’s conceptualization of the labor problem novel, where he finds that novels were a literature product used by labor activists to frame labor movement issues (Isaac, 2009). Though, unlike novels, which are meant for public consumption, press releases are made to appeal to journalists. We anticipate that press releases will contain packages of social movement frames and that specific packages may resonate with journalists to generate increased news coverage of a SMO.

In short, framing theory suggests that press releases can be a tactic for media engagement, ostensibly for SMOs to garner news coverage. However, it remains unknown if such a tactic is effective. This study presents an empirical assessment of press releases as a tactic for SMOs to garner news coverage by using press releases and news coverage from SMOs in the gun control debate. In order to examine packages of frames in the gun control debate, we use press releases from the NRA and Brady Campaign.

## **The Gun Control Debate**

The issue of gun control is one that touches millions of Americans, whether their communities are affected by gun violence or they support the right to bear arms. In the gun control debate, two opposing SMOs stand out as leaders in term of media attention, the NRA and Brady Campaign (Amenta et al., 2009; Cook and Goss, 2014). We argue that both of these organizations are most properly understood as SMOs, as opposed to special interest groups, because they meet two distinguishing criteria: (1) both organizations maintain direct communications with the constituents they represent and are embedded within the public sphere and (2) both organizations are single organizations (albeit large ones) among many within the larger social movement (Císar, 2013; Minkoff, Aisenbrey, and Agnone, 2008). Moreover, our conceptualization of the NRA and Brady Campaign places them firmly within Andrews and Edwards’s (2004) argument for advocacy organizations, allowing us to apply concepts from the social movements literature to the case of the NRA and Brady Campaign.

### ***The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence***

The Brady Campaign is the oldest SMO in the United States advocating stronger gun laws (Goss, 2004, 2008). The SMO began in the 1980s as Handgun Control, Inc., and

changed its name in 2001 to the Brady Campaign, an honorific of Jim Brady, the White House press secretary maimed in the 1981 assassination attempt on President Reagan. The Brady Campaign plays the role of grass roots opposition challenging the NRA in policy and protest efforts, while also advocating for new gun control laws. The Brady Campaign has a history of gun control victories, most notably the Federal Assault Weapons Ban and the aptly named “Brady Bill,” which mandated instant background checks for all merchant purchases of firearms.

### *The National Rifle Association (NRA)*

There is no doubt the NRA is the largest organization devoted to the cause of gun rights in the United States. Boasting over 3 million members in 2004, the NRA sends regular publications to its members, organizes social events for fundraising, and promoting shooting sports (Melzer, 2009; Spitzer, 2012). Melzer (2009) demonstrates that the NRA meets the definition of an SMO as a “complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals” (McCarthy and Zald 1977:1218), and as an organization that engages sources of power in a long-term effort on behalf of an ideologically aligned constituency (Tarrow, 1998). The NRA’s agenda for gun rights emerged from the “Cincinnati Revolution” in 1977 when gun rights advocates took majority of leadership on the NRA’s board of directors during its annual meetings. From that point on, the NRA’s leadership adopted positions of strict defiance to any new proposed gun regulations, whether they be local, state, or national (Melzer, 2009). Despite recent victories for the NRA in the past decade, such as the expiration of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 2004 and the widespread enactment of concealed carry laws, the organization argues that the right to bear arms is but a single election or congressional vote away from being destroyed. The NRA portrays an impressive image of credibility to the media, due in large part to its size and ability to mobilize voters. As a result, it receives more media attention than other gun rights group (Amenta et al., 2009).

The Brady Campaign and NRA are not the entirety of SMOs devoted to the issue of gun control in the United States. However, for the purposes of understanding how SMOs fare in utilizing press releases for news coverage, they offer ideal cases: both SMOs are large in terms of membership and resources relative to their movement, have dedicated efforts to constructing press releases on a regular basis, and are credible to journalists due to their history of advocacy and previous track records of success in policy outcomes. As a result, these two SMOs provide ideal cases for a study examining the efficacy of packages in press releases.

### *Relations Among the NRA, Brady Campaign, and News Media*

The NRA and Brady Campaign engage news media differently. Goss’s (2008) analysis of the gun control movement highlighted a bias among media agents to support the frames and perspectives of gun control advocates, such as the Brady Campaign, rather than gun rights advocates. As a result, the Brady Campaign tends to view media as a valuable resource and adopts a media strategy that reaches out to journalists early and often with potential stories. In similar work, Patrick (2002) found that national news outlets exhibited a deep-seated bias against the NRA and its agenda. Patrick (2002) attributes this media bias to

a liberal-progressive culture among professional journalists who are unfamiliar with, and have no desire to become acquainted with, gun ownership and gun rights. Later work by Melzer (2009) shows that this bias is also perceived by the NRA general membership as NRA members believe that elite media outlets, such as the *NYT*, promote a gun control agenda rather than the values expressed by gun rights supporters. Patrick (2002) found that while the NRA maintains a professional media relations staff, which issues regular press releases and responds to news journalist inquiries, it remains less active than the Brady Campaign's efforts to engage new media outlets. The reason for comparatively lower rates of media engagement by the NRA is primarily driven by this organization's belief that it cannot achieve successful framing in news coverage due to the anti-gun bias of journalists. In light of this mistrust between the NRA and elite media outlets, Patrick argues that the main media strategy used by the NRA is a "holding action" (2002:170) where the NRA often aims to respond to journalists' requests for comments and mitigate negative bias in their stories rather than regularly reaching out to journalists directly.

Yet, despite the differing strategies of the NRA and Brady Campaign, both organizations continue to reach out to the news media with press releases. While the Brady Campaign reaches out with press releases often, the NRA opts to be more conservative with its media engagement, reaching out when the organization seeks to contest claims made against it. The discrepancy in media relations between the NRA and Brady Campaign makes the gun control debate an interesting case to assess the efficacy of press releases as an SMO tactic to garner news coverage. For example, we can see if press releases and frames used by these organizations vary substantially and if that variation can explain changes in news coverage. We can also assess if NRA press releases are indeed effective even though they are used sparingly, as opposed to the Brady Campaign's approach to engage with media outlets often.

Communications scholars have found news media biases toward a "cosmopolitan" view of guns in society, which is to say that guns are not desirable in a modern society and gun owners and gun rights supporters are suspect (Downs, 2002). Callaghan and Schnell (2001) found that media coverage of the political discussion on gun control from 1988 to 1996 brought key frames of the gun control debate to public attention, and that journalists selected only a few frames offered by parties in the gun control debate. As a result, journalists often write about the frames that they sense would generate the most cultural resonance, altering the public discussion of gun control as news coverage legitimizes specific frames in the gun control debate but not others (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001). In short, previous research leads us to anticipate newspapers such as the *NYT* will provide news coverage favorable to the Brady Campaign. But while biases likely exist, extant research has failed to demonstrate if media engagement from the NRA or Brady Campaign can influence subsequent news coverage as well as reduce or exacerbate these biases.

## Research Questions

The current study is guided by two research questions focused on assessing the efficacy of NRA and Brady Campaign press release packages and the frames they are built upon. While much attention has been given to the issue of gun control in the United States, no research has outlined the overall frames of both the NRA and Brady Campaign in the past 10–15 years. This leads us to our first research question: *What are the packages of frames used by the NRA and Brady Campaign in their press releases?* We previously noted that packages with frames that resonate with journalists have the potential to garner more news coverage

than packages with frames that do not resonate. This leads us to our second question: *Do different packages for frames in NRA and Brady Campaign press releases increase the odds of media coverage for these SMOs?*

### **Analytic Strategy**

To address our first question, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of press releases issued by the NRA and Brady Campaign, which produced data on the packages employed by both SMOs. For our second research question, we examine whether specific packages in press releases were associated with increases in media coverage of the SMOs. To capture media coverage of the NRA and Brady Campaign, we use a dummy variable to indicate whether or not *NYT* articles directly quoted either organization during a given week. Since our measure of media coverage is dichotomous, it is most appropriate to use logistic regression models assessing probabilities of media coverage in a given week. Preliminary analyses revealed that assumptions of heteroskedastic and independent error were not met, prompting us to use the Huber/White formula to calculate robust standard errors in our models, providing more conservative estimates of statistical significance (Long, 1997).

### **Data Sources**

Data for this study come from a content analysis of press releases from the NRA and Brady Campaign, as well as *NYT* coverage of both organizations. We collected all press releases issued by the NRA (386 total releases) and Brady Campaign (1,053 total releases) from January 1, 2000 to June 23, 2011. This time period was selected as it offered the longest continuous time that press releases for both SMOs could be culled. A search of Lexis Nexis for variations on titles for the NRA and Brady Campaign in *NYT* articles provided our data on news coverage. The *NYT* was selected as our source for media coverage as previous research has established the *NYT* as the gold standard of newspaper data in the United States and is a standard bearer for other news outlets (Amenta et al., 2009; Earl et al., 2004). Our initial search produced a corpus of 1,184 articles. From these, a careful reading of each article was undertaken to select only those that directly quoted the Brady Campaign or NRA, narrowing the final corpus to 481 *NYT* articles.

Data for the qualitative analysis come from an inductive content analysis of press releases to identify the framing packages employed by both SMOs. Using press releases issued by the NRA and Brady Campaign ensures that we capture frames from their cultural sources and not from media interpretations of these frames (Benford, 1997; Johnston and Noakes, 2005). While there is a discrepancy in the research literature on the empirical measurement of frames (e.g., core tasks or other messages (Benford and Snow, 2000)), we opt to follow Rohlinger's example of packages (2002), allowing us to identify themes that can vary over time yet still contain master frames relevant to the SMO. Packages used by the NRA and Brady Campaign were inductively identified by an in-depth reading of collected press releases, with notes taken during this reading to identify reoccurring themes. Using these reoccurring themes, a content coding scheme was developed and then applied to each press release to identify the presence of packages in press releases (Singleton and Straits, 2009). We discuss these packages in the qualitative findings below.

Data for the quantitative analysis come from aggregated data from the content analysis of press releases as well as a content analysis of the *NYT* corpus. We aggregated the press

TABLE 1

TABLE 1 Packages in Press Releases by the NRA and Brady Campaign

	NRA		Brady Camp.	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Total releases	386	100	1,053	100
Packages unique to the NRA				
2nd Amendment rights	197	51.04		
Safety and rule of law	45	11.66		
American culture/heritage	76	19.69		
Packages unique to the Brady Camp.				
Crime control			262	24.88
Public health/safety			265	25.17
Rights and democracy			375	35.61
Shared packages				
Responses to opposition groups	35	9.07	98	9.31
Politician endorsements	25	6.48	201	19.09
Politician condemnation	21	5.44	120	11.40
Administrative	80	20.73	123	11.68

releases’ package data to construct weekly counts of the appearance of each type of package issued by the SMO. These weekly-level data serve as the independent variables in our quantitative analysis. To build the dependent variable of news coverage, a content analysis was undertaken—this time to identify news articles that directly quoted the NRA or Brady Campaign. Using data from this second content analysis, we constructed a weekly dichotomous indicator of whether the NRA or Brady Campaign had been directly quoted in a given week (1 = SMO quoted in the *NYT* that week, 0 = SMO not quoted in the *NYT* that week). We used the presence of direct quotes as our measure of media coverage because they capture instances when journalists allow subjects being covered to speak for themselves, which is a goal of SMOs seeking to present their frames to the public (Tuchman, 1972). Quotes were identified by the research team with minimum intercoder reliability of 85 percent throughout the data collection process.

**Qualitative Inferences from the NRA and Brady Campaign Press Releases**

The qualitative analysis of the NRA and Brady Campaign press releases identified three unique packages for each organization. In addition, four shared packages regularly employed by both organizations were also identified. Table 1 displays the frequency distribution of these packages in press releases. We now present contextual uses of the three unique packages from both organizations, followed by descriptions of the four shared packages.

***Packages Unique to the NRA***

First and foremost in the NRA’s packaging of frames in press releases is the theme of *Second Amendment rights and freedoms*. This package appeals not only to owning guns but also all aspects of gun use, industry, trade, and rights protect by the constitution and law.

This is illustrated by the following example from an NRA press release referencing a court decision that found a gun manufacturer not liable for the negligent use of its products:

The lawsuit, brought by the City of Chicago, is one of many attempts nationwide by gun-control activists to bankrupt the American firearms industry. Almost every court has thrown out such cases. Today's decision marks another milestone in defense of the Second Amendment and the firearms manufacturers. (November 4, 2004)

The NRA's package of Second Amendment rights and freedoms also includes the right to exercise gun ownership for self-defense, meaning that Americans have the unhindered right to choose which guns they want and to use those guns when deemed necessary. Take the following example that came from an NRA press release regarding a court case where the NRA sued the City of New Orleans after confiscating firearms from citizens in wake of Hurricane Katrina:

Chris W. Cox, NRA's chief lobbyist, stated, "During a time of chaos and lawlessness, Ray Nagin took away the only means of protection law-abiding citizens had, and by delaying necessary and appropriate action to right this wrong, he blatantly continues to disrespect New Orleans citizens. The Mayor's contempt of court, his contempt of the Second Amendment, and his disrespect of the law-abiding gun owners of New Orleans is shameful." (April 10, 2006)

The second most prevalent unique package of the NRA is *American heritage and culture*. This package attempts to frame gun ownership and use as common and mainstream behavior in the United States. At the same time, the NRA also uses this package to show that efforts by groups opposing the NRA's agenda are themselves extremist and not supported by average Americans. Take the following example where the NRA presents state election victories as successes in defense of American heritage and culture:

Voters in Tennessee, Arkansas, and South Carolina made a powerful statement on Tuesday by overwhelmingly voting to include National Rifle Association-backed constitutional amendments to protect America's great, ages-old heritage of hunting and fishing as state constitutional rights. "The voters have spoken and they have sent a very clear message to anti-hunting groups like the Humane Society of the United States and PETA: You and your extremist agendas are not welcome in my state," said NRA-ILA Executive Director Chris Cox. "NRA will continue to lead efforts to pass these amendments across the nation. We must be vigilant because even as we get more sportsmen's groups to join us in the fight, extremists are pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into anti-hunting campaigns." (November 5, 2010)

The third unique package for the NRA is the theme of *safety and the rule of law*. This package posits that gun ownership is completely safe as long as gun owners are educated and behave responsibly in the use and storage of guns. At the same time, this package condemns the negligent and illicit use of guns, allowing the NRA to ostracize those who cause gun violence as deviants. Furthermore, this package posits only law-abiding citizens will heed gun control laws and suggests the answer to curbing gun violence is not new gun laws, but stronger enforcement of current laws. Safe, responsible gun use is illustrated as a nonproblem in the following example:

On Wednesday, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson signed House Bill 641, the Right-to-Carry Reform Bill, into law. This National Rifle Association (NRA)-backed legislation improves New Mexico's existing Right-to-Carry laws and expands access to licenses by more law-abiding New Mexicans. "These changes will encourage more law abiding New

Mexicans to apply for a license and protect themselves in a lawful, responsible manner,” stated Chris W. Cox, NRA’s chief lobbyist. (April 6, 2005)

Overall, the NRA’s three unique packages draw on a master frame of rights, law, and safety. The NRA frames gun ownership, gun use, and gun rights as lawful and safe. At the same time, the NRA also tries to show that these rights and practices enjoy support from a large contingent of law-abiding Americans who eschew gun control.

### *Packages Unique to the Brady Campaign*

The most prevalent package employed by the Brady Campaign is the *rights and democracy* package. This package advocates freedom from fear of guns and gun violence. This package also uses democratic rights rhetoric to emphasize the rights of local citizens to govern themselves. As such, the Brady Campaign uses the rights and democracy package to argue the NRA, and its allies, often work against the rights of municipal governments to regulate guns. Below is an example of this package being used when the Brady Campaign lauded municipal government in Columbus, Ohio, for passing an assault weapons ban. The ban resulted in threats from the NRA to move its national convention away from the city, which was supposed to be a boon for local merchants due to increased commerce from convention attendees.

Columbus police officers said they didn’t want to face military-style semiautomatic assault weapons on the streets, and the city’s elected leaders wisely listened to law enforcement and passed sensible restrictions on these weapons. What the NRA’s leader said to the people of Columbus this morning is let us set public policy, or we won’t visit your city. That must never be the agreement in a civilized democracy. We urge Mayor Coleman and the City Council to stand tough for public safety and we urge the people of Columbus to support their elected officials in this matter. Columbus residents should be proud of their leaders. They are proving the city will stand with the police and won’t back down from bullies. (July 18, 2005)

Also present in the rights and democracy packages is the right to legally challenge the gun industry to increase levels of public safety. The Brady Campaign often advocates the use of liability lawsuits to sue gun manufacturers for harmful use of their products.

“This ruling is an important victory for the people of Gary and the rest of Indiana who have suffered from the distribution of guns to criminals and gun traffickers because of the practices of the gun industry,” said Paul Helmke, President of the Brady Center . . . “When the gun industry injures the public, it should be held accountable.” (October 29, 2007)

The second most prevalent package found in the Brady Campaign press releases was one of *public health and safety*. This package emphasizes the tragic outcomes of gun violence. It is here that tragedies such as Columbine and the Virginia Tech massacre are held up as consequences of weak gun laws and easy access to firearms:

Eight years ago this week, the young people in Littleton, Colorado suffered a horrible attack at Columbine High School, and almost exactly six months ago, five young people were killed at an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania. Since these killings, we’ve done nothing as a country to end gun violence in our schools and communities. If anything, we’ve made it easier to access powerful weapons. We have now seen another horrible tragedy that will never be forgotten. It is long overdue for us to take some common-sense actions to prevent tragedies like this from continuing to occur. (April 16, 2007)

The public health and safety package emphasizes these events as preventable tragedies rather than as criminal acts. By showing that gun deaths are preventable, the Brady Campaign seeks to convince its members and sympathizers that the consequences of weak gun control laws are dead children rather than just high levels of crime.

The final Brady Campaign package is *crime control*. This package embodies a simple logic: there are too many guns in the American population, leading to excessive rates of gun violence. In this package, the Brady Camp often espouses support for new or stronger gun laws in the name of law enforcement, take, for example:

This legislation [a recently passed microstamping law in California] will help law enforcement track down armed criminals and solve gun murders. Our police are working harder than ever to catch criminals and keep them behind bars, yet about 40 percent of homicides go unsolved. Giving police tools like microstamping to help them do their jobs is the common sense thing to do. (February 11, 2008)

Another example of weak gun laws often touted by the Brady Campaign is the existence of the “gun show loophole,” referring to the practice of individuals purchasing firearms at gun shows without a background check:

terrorists have exploited our weak gun laws, including the gun show loophole, to purchase weapons. Take the case of . . . a convicted felon with ties to the Hezbollah terrorist group in Lebanon, traveled to gun shows in Michigan last year to buy guns and ammunition . . . How then, did he get his weapons? He acquired them because just like 31 other states, Michigan does not require unlicensed sellers at gun shows to conduct criminal background checks. Unlicensed sellers would not have checked and would not have known that Mr. Boumelhem was prohibited from buying guns. (November 11, 2001)

Finally, the crime control package states that law enforcement agencies often agree with the Brady Campaign on gun control issues:

The Major County Sheriffs Association today approved a resolution urging President Bush and Congress to renew the landmark 1994 Assault Weapons Ban, which is set to expire September 13 unless President Bush gets Congress to act. “We are very pleased at today’s action by the Major County Sheriffs Association, and we thank President Margo Frasier and the other sheriffs for their strong support for reauthorizing the Assault Weapons Act.” (June 29, 2004)

Overall, the Brady Campaign relies on master frames appealing to safety and democracy to form its packages in press releases. The Brady Campaign repeatedly appeals to the right of local citizens to be free from gun violence and to use whatever laws they deem necessary to secure that right. At the same time, the Brady Campaign uses dramatic images of gun violence to emphasis the life-and-death stakes of the gun control debate.

### ***Shared Packages in Press Releases***

There are a number of press release packages used by the NRA and Brady Campaign that are strikingly similar. These packages are more universal and explain how both SMOs interpret recent events as opposed to appealing to the cultural bases of their movement. These shared packages also announce newsworthy events related to the organizing efforts of the NRA and Brady Campaign.

The first shared package, *responses to opposition logic and attacks* (hereafter, *response package*), is used by both the NRA and Brady Campaign to convey organizational responses

to actions taken by countermovement groups. This package is unique in that it does not convey specific messages shaped by the internal cultures of each SMO but rather statements of condemnation to their opposition:

Response Package of Brady Camp: “The NRA’s leaders say we should just ‘enforce the laws on the books’ — and then they sue to stop the enforcement of common sense laws,” said Paul Helmke, President of the Brady Center. “Law-abiding gun owners should have no problem reporting to the police when their guns go missing. This gun-lobby lawsuit threatens a reasonable common-sense law, and can only help gun traffickers and criminals.” (May 12, 2009)

Response Package of NRA: Referring to the Five-seveN handgun in a press conference by the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, Mike Barnes today suggested that the NRA’s President, Wayne LaPierre, “put on a bullet proof vest, and we’ll fire the weapon at him, and see what happens. He should put his body where his mouth is.” . . . It is pathetic to see the gun control lobby make hysterical statements to resurrect their failed political agenda. According to the [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives], this armor-piercing ammunition is only available to the military and police. The Brady Campaign continues to deceive the American people in their effort to ban firearm ownership by all law-abiding Americans. (March 3, 2005)

The next shared package, *statements of condemnation or praise of political actors*, is used by both organizations, particularly in times when an election was imminent. In this package, both organizations would issue platitudes toward political actors they viewed favorably. Likewise, condemnations meant to damage the electability of a politician were issued if he/she was viewed as an enemy of the SMO:

NRA Endorsement Package: “As the former Virginia Attorney General, and a former Secretary of Public Safety, Jerry Kilgore understands that the key to reducing violent crime lies in strictly prosecuting violent criminals — not increasing firearm regulations. He is a true leader who firmly believes in the Second Amendment,” Chris W. Cox, NRA chief lobbyist, stated. Based on past pro-gun efforts and a firm pledge to continue to protect Virginia’s proud hunting and outdoor heritage, Jerry Kilgore earned an NRA . . . “A” rating, the highest endorsement rating allocated to candidates. (June 1, 2005)

Brady Camp Endorsement Package: During her years of distinguished service in the House of Representatives, Lynn Rivers has been a committed advocate for stronger gun laws. She supported legislation that would stop criminals, terrorists, and children from buying firearms at gun shows by requiring a criminal background check on every firearm sold at these events. She also opposed efforts to repeal the federal assault weapons ban, a law that that is strongly supported by law enforcement officers across the country. (March 13, 2002)

NRA Condemnation Package: “NRA will not allow Barack Obama to revise history. That is why we will be sending this fact sheet of Obama votes to wherever hunters and gun owners congregate and to 4 million NRA members to share with their friends and neighbors,” said Chris W. Cox, NRA’s chief lobbyist. “He has supported bans on handguns and semi-automatic firearms, and he has voted to ban possession of many shotguns and rifles commonly used by hunters and sportsmen across America. And we will remind voters every single time he lies.” (September 10, 2008)

Brady Camp Condemnation Package: “As a former Member of Congress, I know what it’s like to have a public record,” said Handgun Control President Michael Barnes. “Governor Bush is going to have a lot of explaining to do to defend his atrocious record on guns to the

American people — the majority of whom overwhelmingly support new common-sense gun control laws.” (May 4, 2000)

The last shared package in the press releases of the NRA and Brady Campaign is the *administrative* package. This package is used to communicate messages in press releases that are important to movement insiders. The NRA often uses this package to announce annual meetings and conventions. The Brady Campaign, likewise, uses this package to communicate leadership changes in the organization. Both organizations used the package to also share condolences for social movement actors who have passed away.

**NRA Administrative Package:** Gun-rights advocacy reached new heights in September 2007 and May 2008 when NRA’s Celebration of American Values convened presidential candidates and other Second Amendment advocates to state their views on firearm freedom. A similar Leadership Forum will be reprised at the Phoenix Convention Center, on Friday, May 15, at 12:00 p.m. Pro-freedom speakers currently slated to appear are still to be announced. (March 31, 2009)

**Brady Campaign Administrative Package:** Survivors of fallen officers come to Washington, DC, during National Police Week ([www.policeweek.org](http://www.policeweek.org)) to hear the names of their fallen officers read at the National Peace Officers’ Memorial Day Service on May 15, to share their burden of grief with other survivors at Survivors’ Seminars, and to see the name of their loved one engraved on the Walls of Remembrance at the Memorial. Nationwide during National Police Week, the group Concerns of Police Survivors, Inc. (COPS) distributes a half million blue ribbons for law enforcement agencies to tie to their car antennas to call national attention to this day . . . For more information, visit [www.nationalcops.org](http://www.nationalcops.org). (May 15, 2008)

The administrative package is meant to communicate to the media the logic and reasoning of organizational actions, and gives clear information on times and dates of events. Should the media pick up these press releases, it may spread this information to potential allies and sympathizers. Though administrative packages communicate information in a straightforward manner, they still contained the frames and values unique to either movement. For instance, in the examples delineated above, the NRA clearly appeals to Second Amendment rights, while the Brady Campaign appeals to crime control sensibilities.

In summary, both the NRA and Brady Campaign utilize a consistent set of packages to engage the media in press releases. The NRA often engages the media with packages that illustrate gun ownership and gun rights as uniquely American, constitutionally protected, and safe. The Brady Campaign regularly packages gun violence as a public health and crime issue and emphasizes the right of Americans to regulate firearms in their community. Worthy of note, both organization use packages that are similar in appeal and purpose (shared packages), but are still entrenched in the master frames of a respective movement. While our analysis reveals that there are patterns in press releases packages, it is not certain if these packages effectively influence news coverage. This question leads us to our quantitative analysis.

### **Quantitative Analysis of NRA and Brady Campaign Press Releases and Media Coverage**

We use two logistic regression models to compare media coverage of the NRA and the Brady Campaign. Model 1 assesses the probability of media coverage for the Brady Campaign, while Model 2 assesses the probability of media coverage for the NRA. Both models incorporate independent variables measuring the weekly counts of each package

TABLE 2  
Summary Table of Weekly Media Coverage and Press Release Data

Variable	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Brady Campaign					
Media coverage <sup>a</sup>	598	0.147			
Crime control	598	0.440	0.701	0	3
Public health and safety	598	0.443	0.696	0	4
Rights and democracy	598	0.627	0.849	0	5
Responses to opposition groups	598	0.164	0.452	0	3
Politician endorsements	598	0.336	1.593	0	23
Politician condemnation	598	0.201	0.508	0	4
Administrative	598	0.206	0.480	0	4
National Rifle Association					
Media coverage <sup>a</sup>	598	0.239			
2nd Ammendment rights and freedoms	598	0.328	0.628	0	4
Safety and rule of law	598	0.075	0.276	0	2
Heritage and culture	598	0.127	0.385	0	2
Responses to opposition groups	598	0.059	0.268	0	3
Politician endorsements	598	0.042	0.216	0	2
Politician condemnation	598	0.035	0.210	0	3
Administrative	598	0.134	0.436	0	4

<sup>a</sup>Dummy variable.

that both SMOs utilize in their press releases as identified in the qualitative analysis. We also included a control variable for which week an observation belonged. In all, our data set includes 598 weeks of media coverage and press releases for the NRA and the Brady Campaign. A summary table of the variables used in Model 1 and Model 2 is presented in Table 2.

The results for Model 1 and Model 2 are reported in Table 3. Model 1 examines the probability of media coverage for the Brady Campaign based on the use of packages in press releases. According to Model 1, three packages are significant predictors of media coverage for the Brady Campaign: public health and safety, rights and democracy, and administrative packages. All other packages used in press releases by the Brady Campaign appeared to not be significantly associated with weekly news coverage in the *NYT*. Interpreting the results in Model 1, we find that an increase of one press release per week containing a public health and safety package increased the odds of coverage in the *NYT* by 52.2 percent. An additional weekly press release using a rights and democracy package improved the odds of the Brady Campaign receiving media coverage by 46.8 percent. Finally, an increase of one press release per week employing an administrative package improved the odds of Brady Campaign media coverage by 56.1 percent.

Model 2 examines the probability of media coverage for the NRA, and finds that the NRA is much less likely to influence its odds of media coverage via press releases. None of the independent variables capturing distinct types of packages used by the NRA was significantly associated with increased media coverage in the *NYT*. In fact, none of the coefficients in Model 2 managed to produce a test statistic greater than 1.5, which suggests that regardless of the type or frequency of packages used in weekly NRA press releases, press releases do not predict media coverage of the NRA.

To simply state how these models relate to our research questions, we find that Brady Campaign packages in press releases are a significant predictor of media coverage in the

TABLE 3  
Logistic Regression Estimates of Media Coverage

	Model 1	Model 2
Brady Campaign		
Crime control	−0.012 <i>0.177</i>	
Public health and safety	0.42* <i>0.166</i>	
Rights and democracy	0.384* <i>0.131</i>	
Responses to opposition groups	−0.076 <i>0.259</i>	
Politician endorsements	0.013 <i>0.085</i>	
Politician condemnation	0.007 <i>0.22</i>	
Administrative	0.446* <i>0.227</i>	
Week (control)	−0.003* <i>0.001</i>	
Constant	3.552	
NRA		
2nd Amendment rights and freedoms		0.227 <i>0.171</i>
Safety and rule of law		−0.165 <i>0.385</i>
Heritage and culture		−0.244 <i>0.303</i>
Responses to opposition groups		0.468 <i>0.368</i>
Politician endorsements		0.253 <i>0.398</i>
Politician condemnation		−0.343 <i>0.626</i>
Administrative		−0.138 <i>0.23</i>
Week (control)		−0.002* <i>0.001</i>
Constant		3.358*
<i>N</i>	598	598

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Unstandardized logits, robust standard errors italicized.

*NYT*. However, NRA packages in press releases do not appear to have any significant association with media coverage in this particular news outlet. It appears that the *NYT* is much more responsive to messaging provided by the Brady Campaign in its press releases than messaging employed by the NRA, as only press release packages issued by the Brady Campaign were found to significantly predict *NYT* coverage of the SMO.

It is possible that many other factors can influence media coverage of the gun control debate. *NYT* coverage of the NRA and Brady Campaign may be affected by factors identified earlier such as the “issue attention cycle” or “suddenly imposed grievances.” To further examine this possibility, we ran a series of sensitivity analyses accounting for

a number of factors that may theoretically influence news coverage of the gun control debate. These models adjusted for the occurrences of mass shootings (using FBI data), the political party of the current president, fluctuations in crime rates, and the timing of Supreme Court cases on gun rights, as well as interactions between press release packages and these measures. None of these factors significantly altered the results reported here and for the sake of brevity we present results from the most parsimonious regression models.

## Discussion

Our qualitative analysis of NRA and Brady Campaign press releases shows that both organizations utilize packages of collective action frames that are unique to their movement cultures. The NRA employs packages that build on a movement culture viewing gun ownership and use as normal and uniquely American. The NRA's packages rely on a cultural belief of American heritage and gun culture that has been well documented in other studies of gun ownership (Melzer, 2009). Similarly, the Brady Campaign also uses packages that are based on its movement culture. Appealing to a movement culture that abhors gun violence, the Brady Campaign's unique packages emphasize crime reduction, public health, and the right of governments to regulate deadly weapons. However, both SMOs also employed packages of collective actions that were shared. These shared packages press releases are likely a result of statements from SMO to serve as "records" of response to current events (as seen in the *response* shared package). Additionally, the NRA and Brady Campaign appear to use press releases to state their positions regarding political actors, especially during election times (the *political condemnation and endorsement* packages). Finally, both organizations also use an *administrative* package to present information on movement events and members. Our qualitative findings suggest that while the NRA and Brady Campaign both attempt to use packages that resonate with their membership base, which we identified as unique packages, as well as press release packages that straightforwardly communicate information and did not rely on strong cultural appeals, which we identified as shared packages.

The results of our logistic regressions suggest that *public health and safety*, *rights and democracy*, and *administrative* packages employed by the Brady Campaign are associated with *NYT* coverage. No press release packages for the NRA were a statistically significant predictor of media coverage. It appears that the press releases packages of the Brady Campaign resonate with *NYT*. We found that two unique packages and one shared package from the Brady Campaign significantly improved the odds of this organization receiving media coverage, while no such associations were found for the NRA. This finding is supportive of previous research finding the Brady Campaign enjoys a much more fruitful media engagement strategy than the NRA (Goss, 2008; Melzer, 2009; Patrick, 2002). An implication from these findings is that the *NYT* is more likely to cover the Brady Campaign when it announces movement activities via administrative packages. This organization's reliance on administrative packages is particularly interesting because it is the one package most likely to increase movement momentum by announcing activities such as petition drives, marches, and other movement mobilization activities. While we do not have a measure of the quality of media coverage on the NRA and Brady Campaign, this finding suggests that the *NYT* is willing to broadcast information to facilitate the coordination of efforts specific to the Brady Campaign but not the NRA. Such media coverage would prove to be a valuable resource for the Brady Campaign.

Why does the *NYT* appear to be more receptive to the Brady Campaign packages of rights and democracy and public health and safety? This is an intriguing question. NRA packages

of safety and Second Amendment rights do not resonate with the *NYT*, despite the fact they both draw on frames of democratic rights and safety. While both the NRA and Brady Campaign are using master frames appealing to rights and safety, the Brady Campaign frames these issues closely with civil rights and public safety in contrast to the NRA's appeal to individual freedoms and self-reliance (Melzer, 2009; Snow and Benford, 1992). The Brady Campaign's approach aligns with "cosmopolitan" norms of the journalism profession at large (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001). Additionally, the Brady Campaign's use of safety and rights frames emphasizes values of violence reduction and prevention that are conducive to urban environments. It may be that the Brady Campaign packages are more effective because rights to safety and firearm regulation are likely to resonate with urban residents. On the other hand, packages used in NRA press releases framing gun ownership as normal are meant to reverberate with rural residents in "middle America." Such findings would confirm Patrick's (2002) work finding that *NYT* reporters covering the NRA have little resonance with its culture, and have little desire to understand it. Overall, both SMOs utilize packages to present their collective action frames in press releases as a theoretically logical and effective tactic. However, only the press release packages from the Brady Campaign garnered *NYT* coverage. Our results support the conclusion that the NRA is not successful at translating package frames from press releases into news coverage in the *NYT*. Future research may find fruitful work in attempting to unpack the reasons why the *NYT* ignores NRA messaging and the implications of such behavior.

## Conclusion

There are some considerations that our data and approach are unable to address, leaving future work for research. We are unable to address the quality of media coverage that the NRA and Brady Campaign receive in this study. It is possible that packages in press releases may qualitatively affect how these organizations are covered in the news, but we cannot show what that effect would be. Also, we are unable to address the conditions under which the Brady Campaign and NRA are more likely to use press releases and specific packages. More research is needed to identify the conditions when press releases are made and which packages are used.

Our research provides the first description of NRA and Brady Campaign packages of collective action frames in press releases. The implications of such findings should be beneficial to scholars of the gun control debate, as previous work has demonstrated that there are differences between the NRA and Brady Campaign in terms of media engagement. Additionally, efforts to revive the gun control movement in the United States by organizations such as Mayors Against Illegal Guns may opt to use similar packages of collective action frames as the Brady Campaign. This research provides a baseline to compare future social movement framing data for research concerning gun control in the United States.

Furthermore, our research also demonstrates a potential for master frames to make SMO press releases more effective. The Brady Campaign and NRA both use frames that appeal to master frames of safety and civil rights. Yet, the Brady Campaign press releases better resonate with the *NYT* since they resonate with frames of safety and civil rights that are often held by journalists. Since we only examine two SMOs in a narrow movement, future work on other SMOs and movements should explore press releases and the use of master frames to produce more effective strategies for news coverage.

We conclude with some straightforward remarks. The Brady Campaign and NRA both use packages of frames in their press releases. We find that these packages are built on cultural understandings unique to each movement. Given that press releases are a theoretically viable tactic to engagement with news outlets, we find that help only the Brady Campaign has packages in press releases that are associated with *NYT* coverage. The NRA does not appear to have any packages associated with improved odds of news coverage. Future research should explore the conditions by which press release framing strategies are selected and the correlates of when press releases are deployed.

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