

Political Issues Management: Framing the Issue of Climate Change

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Politicians must identify and present issues in ways that resonate with the public, effectively establishing their legitimacy as issue managers. This public relations concept has primarily been studied in the corporate context. By bridging public relations and political communication scholarship, this analysis examines how democratic presidential candidates at CNN's 2019 climate crisis town hall managed the issue of climate change using fact versus value-based frames, gain/loss frames, and responsibility frames. The results indicate that candidates predominantly used value-based frames, gains were almost exclusively presented in the context of the economy, and candidates were more likely to use prognostic frames over diagnostic responsibility frames when presenting the issue to the public. These findings speak to the value of framing in political issues management.

Keywords: political issues management, public relations, framing, climate change, primary campaigns

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that supports climate change. However, many people still deny climate change, ignore the science, and actively support politicians and organizations that do the same (see De Pryck & Gemenne, 2017). Unsurprisingly, climate change is a topic of great political interest and importance, especially in the United States. During the 2020 presidential election, in a historic move to center climate change in the election and persuade publics to vote accordingly, CNN hosted a seven-hour town hall forum dedicated to climate change. Ten Democratic primary candidates—Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Pete Buttigieg, Julian Castro, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Andrew Yang (listed alphabetically)—participated in individual back-to-back 40-minute discussions about the threat of climate change and their plans to address the problem should they be elected president (Preston, 2019). Because politics is a zero-sum game in which only one candidate is elected, and some citizens still contest anthropogenic climate change, the town hall candidates needed to (1) uphold the position that climate

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change is a critical issue that warrants immediate action, (2) communicate their plans for managing climate change, and (3) establish why they were the right (and only) manager to address the issue.¹

The CNN town hall forum on climate change aptly illustrates issues management in the political context. Issues management is an essential component of strategic public relations (Bowen, 2005) and is the process by which corporations “identify, evaluate and respond to those social and political issues which might significantly impact on it” (Johnson, 1983, as cited in Jaques, 2009, p. 282). Issues management serves as an early warning detection system designed to minimize external threats related to social and political change that could harm an organization’s reputation and financial success (Wartick & Rude, 1986). Although often studied in the corporate context, issues management has great utility in the political context given that politics is inherently about identifying, evaluating, and responding to sociopolitical and environmental issues (Heath & Waymer, 2011). A critical step in issues management is issue framing, which involves constructing the parameters of an issue and providing an appropriate plan to address the issue. Politicians must identify and present issues in ways that resonate with the public, effectively establishing their legitimacy as issue managers. Thereby, issues management can enhance a politician’s long-standing political performance (see Renfro, 1993). Accordingly, political campaign success (i.e., winning an election) is issues management par excellence.

The present study adds to the public relations literature on political issues management—an understudied phenomenon (Heath & Waymer, 2011)—by exploring how the top Democratic candidates of the 2020 presidential election addressed the issue of climate change while positioning themselves as legitimate issue managers during CNN’s climate change town hall. Through a content analysis of this event, we provide insight into three framing mechanisms of enduring interest to public relations scholars that are common in political climate change discussions: fact-based versus value-based framing (Fischer, 2019; Knight, 1999; Nisbet, 2009), gain/loss framing (Nabi, Gustafson, & Jensen, 2018; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006), and responsibility framing (Kelley, 1967; Newell et al., 2015; Sillars, 1982). This study adds needed insight into the strategic process of political issues management, provides useful information about how Democratic candidates framed climate change during a key campaign event, and examines a new campaign format that uniquely facilitated issues management.

Literature Review

Political Issues Management

Issues management explains how organizations come to know, understand, plan for, and effectively participate in the issues that might affect them to ensure their long-term reputational and financial success (Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995; Renfro, 1993; Wartick & Rude, 1986). The issues management process originated post-World War II to quell public criticisms about the political power of

¹ Not every Democratic candidate at the town hall held climate change reform as his or her central campaign issue (e.g., Yang campaigned on universal basic income). However, because the town hall centered on climate change, the candidates needed to establish their preferability over their opponents through this issue.

capitalist enterprise (Heath & Waymer, 2011). After the rise of big business in the early 20th century, activists began scrutinizing corporations for causing social harm through environmental damage, worker mistreatment, and support of wars, among other ills. Instead of merely responding to these criticisms, many organizations sought proactive policy participation to better control the standards by which public opinion was formed. Issues management thus became an advantageous corporate strategy because “identifying and managing issues *early* enhances corporate capacity to influence new regulations and guidelines rather than responding to them *ex post-facto*” (Jaques, 2009, p. 283; emphasis added). Eventually, issues management evolved into a broader managerial approach for developing positive plans to address any concern that companies may eventually face to prevent or mitigate crises, political or otherwise (Coates, Coates, Jarratt, & Heinz, 1986; Coombs, 2007).

Central to the issues management process is the issue itself. According to Crable and Vibbert (1985), “issues” do not simply exist or possess material properties. Rather, people create issues by attaching significance to a perceived problem. Similarly, issues are never fully resolved, but may be addressed based on their placement in the life cycle—in the potential, imminent, current, critical, or dormant phase (Crable & Vibbert, 1985). Typically, issues are ready for policy decisions at the current and critical phases, which is when they receive mass media attention, and coverage/opinions of the issue are dichotomized into “sides,” as often seen during political campaigns. Importantly, issues do not always progress through the cycle in a linear manner; issues fluctuate between the different phases as public attention to, interest in, and narratives surrounding issues ebb and flow (Downs, 1972; McComas & Shanahan, 1999).

Issues management has primarily been studied in the corporate context (e.g., Smith & Ferguson, 2013; Veil & Kent, 2008). However, there is relevance and application of issues management in the political context (Heath & Waymer, 2011). First, a main pillar of issues management is issue framing (Jones & Chase, 1979)—positioning an issue to create strategic responses or affect policy outcomes. As stated, issues are not inherently understood or agreed upon by all (Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995), but instead are “contestable matters of fact, value/evaluation, policy, and identity/identification” (Heath & Waymer, 2011, p. 144). That is, issues only become such through strategic framing, debate, and interpretation of evidence. This process of issue framing unfolds during political campaigns. Politicians must establish issues as critical enough to warrant public attention, articulate how they implement policy reform, and distinguish themselves from other candidates based on their assessment of key issues.

Second, politicians operate in a boundary-spanning capacity, similar to how public relations practitioners scan internal and external publics as part of the issues management process (see Lauzen, 1997). Politicians are the link between the government and the public and are responsible for communicating policies to their constituents. Politicians must also demonstrate that they are in touch with public concern while also possessing expert knowledge—or legitimacy in issues management parlance (Coombs, 1992)—to appropriately implement change. Finally, both corporate and political actors are motivated to maintain financial or election viability through favorable public opinion, which issues management is well-positioned to address (Renfro, 1993). Issues management as a strategic approach, then, helps candidates manage relationships with key publics that form around important issues (e.g., climate change) and ultimately win elections.

Yet, there are two important distinctions between corporate and political issues management: the nature of authority and the role of publics in this process. Jones and Chase (1979) suggest that citizens, businesses, and the government all contribute to policy decisions. However, the ultimate authority to implement policy changes that affect corporations lies with the government (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985). Indeed, corporate issue managers can *influence* legislation, but political issue managers can *enact* legislation, which increases the gravity of political issues management as evident in contentious elections. Relatedly, because government officials in the United States are elected to these positions, publics hold a more active role in political issues management. That is, publics, through voting, are the ones who give politicians the mandate to manage issues in particular ways. Political issues management thus begins with appealing to the public and framing issues in ways that cohere with public understandings and values.

Issues Management in Theoretical Context: Framing Theory

Issue framing, which aids in analyzing and developing strategies to address issues, is integral to the issues management process (Jones & Chase, 1979). According to Entman (1993), framing is used to

define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits . . .
 . diagnose causes—identifying the forces causing the problem; make moral judgments—
 evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies—offer and justify
 treatments for problems. (p. 52)

Extant research has long demonstrated the presence and effects of framing in public relations (e.g., Darmon, Fitzpatrick, & Bronstein, 2008; Vasquez, 1996) and politics (e.g., Druckman, 2001; Iyengar, 1994).

Frames are especially important for keeping issues salient and shaping opinions about phenomena that individuals do not directly see or experience (Downs, 1972; Rademaekers & Johnson-Sheehan, 2014). Indeed, Downs (1972) argued that environmental issues, like climate change, are particularly susceptible to the rapid issue cycle because people experience the effects disproportionately, and not enough people directly suffer from the issue. Therefore, scholars have identified several prominent framing mechanisms often used in climate change discussions. Nisbet (2009) created a typology of climate change frames, such as public accountability or conflict. Spence and Pidgeon (2010) examined the influence of gain versus loss framing and geographic proximity, while Nabi and authors (2018) tested emotional responses to climate change threat. Though political candidates could use several frames to address climate change, here we focus on three framing mechanisms that are directly applicable to political issues management in that they can spur voter mobilization, which is needed for political issues management, and emphasize the candidates' approach to managing the issue of climate change.

The first framing mechanism explored in this study is *fact-based* versus *value-based* framing. Issues are conceptualized as contestable matters of fact, value, evaluation, policy, and so on (Heath & Waymer, 2011). Presenting scientific agreement (i.e., facts) about an issue is a powerful heuristic that contributes to attitude formation (van der Linden, Leiserowitz, Rosenthal, & Maibach, 2017). Accordingly, some publics will be persuaded by frames that call attention to facts, or a topic's unbiased and objective factors (Knight, 1999). Yet, scientific language (e.g., hypothesis, method) can act as a frame that prohibits

understanding with the public. Alternatively, because voters are often influenced by previously defined ideological perspectives and belief systems, frames that center on values, morality, or questions of right and wrong may be more persuasive (Knight, 1999; Rademaekers & Johnson-Sheehan, 2014). Such value-based frames often strive to unite individuals and create climate change agreement through calls to environmental stewardship or comparisons to other noteworthy political movements, such as the civil rights movement (Nisbet, 2009). Extant research shows the prevalence of both fact and value frames during political campaigns (Fischer, 2019; Nelson & Garst, 2005) and climate change discussions (Nisbet, 2009).

Because climate change is still a politically contested issue (see De Pryck & Gemenne, 2017), successful political management of climate change begins by convincing the voting public that the issue is both real and imminent. Accordingly, the Democratic candidates during the CNN town hall may have emphasized the science-based facts of climate change to stress the need for policy reform. However, framing research suggests that message effectiveness is often contingent on the congruence between frames and the beliefs/repertoires of the audience (Kornprobst, 2019). Given that the venue (CNN) and the audience (presumably Democrats) for the climate change town hall were likely already supportive of climate change and therefore in agreement about its factual existence (i.e., sympathetic publics; Zellman, 2020), it may have been more politically expedient to emphasize the values behind climate change reform as a mobilization tactic rather than reiterate agreed-upon facts. We thus pose the following hypothesis about the Democratic candidates' use of strategic messaging via fact and value frames:

H1: Candidates who participated in the town hall will use more value-based frames than fact-based frames to manage the issue of climate change.

The second framing mechanism we explored during the town hall is *gain/loss framing*. Commonly referred to as emphasis frames, gain/loss frames use "qualitatively different yet potentially relevant considerations" (Druckman, 2004, p. 672) to describe the same issue. These frames position outcomes in terms of losses (e.g., we will lose something if we do not implement change) or gains (e.g., we will gain something by implementing change; Goffman, 1974). These frames have strong external validity because they often originate from examples in the real world (D'Angelo & Lombard, 2008). Gain/loss framing has been studied in contexts such as health behavior campaigns (e.g., Ratcliff, Jensen, Scherr, Krakow, & Crossley, 2019; Rothman, Bartels, Wlaschin, & Salovey, 2006), advertising (e.g., Roy & Sharma, 2015; Segev, Fernandes, & Wang, 2015), and climate change communication (e.g., Spence & Pidgeon, 2010).

To manage the issue of climate change (i.e., policy reform) and spur vote choice, politicians have the option of framing inaction in terms of loss (e.g., there will be irreversible damage done to the environment if we do not implement reform policies) or action in terms of gains (e.g., we have an opportunity to build a better environmental future). Public opinion and policy support can shift depending on if policies and vote choice are presented as preventing negative outcomes, as compared with increasing positive outcomes (Schuck & de Vreese, 2006). Research indicates that arguments aimed at preventing loss are common in climate change communication (Foust & Murphy, 2009; Roberts, 2016) and perhaps more persuasive than arguments that promote gains (Arceneaux, 2012; De Vries, Terwel, Ellemers, & Daamen, 2015). Still, it is common for climate change communication to promote gain frames through aroused hope appeals (Nabi et al., 2018). Indeed, previous scholarship has called for the positive reframing of climate

change discussions by emphasizing the mutually beneficial relationship between economic growth and climate change reform (Rademaekers & Johnson-Sheehan, 2014).

During the climate crisis town hall, it would have been reasonable for the Democratic candidates to manage the issue of climate change by highlighting the consequences of climate change inaction (i.e., loss frames), considering the persuasiveness of loss frames and the competitive nature of the campaign. Indeed, the candidates were not only contending with other Democratic challengers in the polls, but also ultimately running against incumbent President Donald Trump, who enjoyed broad public support despite actively denying climate change for much his presidency (Cheung, 2020). Such loss frames work to induce fear (Arceneaux, 2012; O'Keefe & Jensen, 2008), and during the 2020 election, many Democratic voters cited anxiety over a second Trump presidential term as the motivation for their vote choice (Peoples & Fingerhut, 2020). However, gain frames also would have been reasonable, given how issues management works to proactively and positively construct policies and responses to issues to avoid crises (Coates et al., 1986; Coombs, 2007) and that campaigns are oriented toward promoting a candidate's vision for a better future. We thus pose the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent do candidates who participated in the town hall use gain/loss frames to manage the issue of climate change?

Finally, we considered how the Democratic candidates managed the issue of climate change through *responsibility framing*, which includes how speakers assign responsibility for causing and solving problems (Kelley, 1967; Sillars, 1982), a central component of most issue debates (Hallahan, 1999). Responsibility efforts to assign blame are referred to as diagnostic frames, whereas frames that promote solutions to problems are prognostic frames (Benford & Snow, 2000). Framing responsibility and who is to blame for environmental emergencies is central to climate change negotiations, policy, and governance; past climate change policies have repeatedly placed responsibility on citizens and communities through efficiency metrics and personal carbon footprint reports (Newell et al., 2015). Research on political issues, responsibility framing, and public opinion shows how responsible agents (e.g., incumbent administrations) are viewed more negatively compared with agents who are framed as part of the treatment (e.g., challengers; Iyengar, 1989).

The Democratic candidates at the CNN town hall were attempting to manage the issue of climate change during a political campaign, which necessarily involved not just proposing policy reform, but also juxtaposing their hypothetical administration's approach to climate change with the existing one. It would make sense for the candidates to blame Republicans, the Trump administration, and harmful organizations for contributing to the climate change issue while positioning the Democratic party and, importantly, its voters as the solution. Such responsibility framing would constitute the Democratic candidates as legitimate issue managers for the climate change issue (see Coombs, 1992), and the public as needed participants in this issues management process (see Jaques, 2009). To assess responsibility frames in political discourse, we pose a final research question:

RQ2: How and to what extent do candidates who participated in the town hall use diagnostic and prognostic responsibility frames to manage the issue of climate change?

Method

To address the hypothesis and research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of CNN's climate crisis town hall, which took place over seven hours on September 4, 2019. The 10 leading Democratic candidates at the time—Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Pete Buttigieg, Julian Castro, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Andrew Yang—participated in the event, taking the stage individually. After being welcomed by the CNN moderator, the candidates promptly responded to questions from the moderator, CNN climate correspondent Bill Weir, in-person audience members, and virtual audience members via video questions. Each candidate received different questions; however, the question content conformed to similar themes. In total, each candidate answered questions for approximately 40 minutes.

This town hall forum was a prime context to study political issues management. First, it represented a new campaign event unique to the 2020 presidential election. While news networks have previously hosted political town halls, this was the first election cycle in which an entire event focused on one topic. Importantly, the focus of the town hall—climate change—is an issue that, if unaddressed, will lead to a catastrophic crisis, which the issues management process is designed to avoid (Jones & Chase, 1979). The format and prime-time placement of this town hall also enabled the top Democratic candidates to speak on climate change at unparalleled length, which provided audiences critical information about the candidates' climate change plans; candidates certainly discussed climate change through the 2020 election, but rarely did they dedicate 40 minutes at once to the topic, and back-to-back. Finally, the town hall facilitated public-candidate interaction—the ideal form of public relations (see Taylor & Kent, 2014)—as both physical and virtual audience members were invited to ask questions.

Coding Procedure

The interview transcripts for the 10 Democratic candidates were collected from the NexisUni database. To create an appropriate classification system for the conceptual focus, all variables were operationalized within the context of climate change. After extensive training on the coding procedures, the two authors coded for the presence or absence of variables using each question and corresponding response as the unit of analysis ($N = 168$). The entire data set was cross-coded to ensure reliability. Intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha can be found below (KA; where applicable).

Fact Frames

Fact-based frames indicated when a candidate suggested that climate change was an undeniable fact, real, not debatable, and not a hoax (adapted from Nisbet, 2009; KA = .84).

Value Frames

Value-based frames indicated when a candidate suggested that the public should care about climate change or how not caring about climate change went against American values. This variable also included discussions about environmental justice as a warrant for action (adapted from Nisbet, 2009; KA = .93).

Gain/Loss Frames

There were four individual levels within the gain/loss frame variable. *Loss frames* indicated when a candidate discussed the negative effects of climate change inaction. *Gain frames* indicated when a candidate discussed how climate change action or policy would lead to a more positive future. *Neutral frames* indicated when a candidate responded to a question without explicitly mentioning how action or inaction would lead to any outcome. *Mixed frames* indicated when a candidate discussed both losses and gains in his or her response (adapted from Spence & Pidgeon, 2010; KA = .76).

Diagnostic Frames

Four items were used to track diagnostic responsibility frames. *Collective fault* indicated when a candidate suggested that humans or the collective “we” were at fault for climate change (e.g., American people, the international community; KA = 1). *Trump fault* indicated when a candidate suggested that Trump or his administration was at fault for climate change (KA = .89). *Business fault* indicated when a candidate suggested that big businesses (e.g., nonrenewable energy companies, lobbyists) were at fault for climate change (KA = .79). *Individual fault* indicated when a candidate suggested that the behaviors of the individual person were at fault for climate change (e.g., using plastic bags, not recycling; adapted from Iyengar, 1989; Newell et al., 2015; KA = 1).

Prognostic Frames

Four items were used to track prognostic responsibility frames. *Collective responsibility* indicated when a candidate suggested that America or the collective “we” should take action to address climate change (KA = .87). *Government responsibility* indicated when a candidate suggested that the government should take action to address climate change. This variable included references to candidates’ hypothetical administrations, government agencies (e.g., Department of Defense), or the president (KA = .78). *Business responsibility* indicated when a candidate suggested that businesses or specific industries (e.g., nonrenewable energy companies) should take action to address climate change (KA = .90). *Individual responsibility* indicated when a candidate suggested that climate change action should be taken at the individual level (e.g., individual people needing to recycle, driving less; adapted from Iyengar, 1989; Newell et al., 2015; KA = .89).

Analytical Approach

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. We performed descriptive statistics to understand the proportions of variables relevant to our hypothesis and research questions. We further analyzed the data using cross-tabulations and analysis of variance. To enhance the descriptive utility of our analysis and provide additional context—something too often ignored in research (Gerring, 2012)—we expanded on our quantitative findings with numerous textual examples in the discussion.

Results

The goal of this study was to explore issues management in a political context by examining the different framing mechanisms used by Democratic candidates to manage the issue of climate change during CNN's town hall event. This analysis investigated how climate change was framed as an issue that warrants immediate action via fact versus value-based frames, gain/loss frames, and responsibility frames (prognostic and diagnostic). We found support for Hypothesis 1, which predicted that the Democratic candidates would use more value-based frames than fact-based frames to position climate change as an important issue that warrants attention. During the town hall forum, the Democratic candidates framed environmental reform as the moral or right thing to do in 22% of their responses ($n = 37$), while candidates used fact-based frames less, in just 8.9% of responses ($n = 15$). Post hoc analysis found a significant difference in how often each candidate used value-based frames ($p = .026$, two-sided Fisher's exact test). For example, Beto O'Rourke suggested that addressing the issue of climate change was a moral imperative in 44.4% of his responses ($n = 8$), the most of any candidate.

The first research question explored the extent to which politicians used loss and gain frames to manage the issue of climate change. While 28% of responses did not use a gain or loss frame ($n = 47$), 20.3% employed a loss frame ($n = 34$), 27.4% employed a gain frame ($n = 46$), and 24.4% of responses incorporated both a loss and a gain frame ($n = 41$). Considering the persuasiveness of gain/loss frames (see Arceneaux, 2012; De Vries et al., 2015), it is noteworthy that nearly a third of the responses did not include any call to future losses or gains. In these responses, the candidates answered the question posed to them without referencing the consequences of inaction or opportunities of action.

Considering that strategic communication is impacted by a variety of factors, we questioned whether our findings were influenced by candidates' ranking in political polls before the town hall. We created a candidate ranking variable using a credible national poll conducted by Emerson College (Silver, 2018), during the period August 24–26, 2019 ($n = 627$), shortly before the town hall.² Interestingly, we found a significant difference between the gain/loss frame candidates used and their ranking in the polls: $F(3, 1354.772) = 4.758$, $p = .003$. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey Honest Significant Difference (HSD) test indicated that the mean score for the loss frame ($M = 13.24$, $SD = 11.66$) was significantly different from the gain frame ($M = 7.37$, $SD = 9.27$) and the mixed loss/gain frame ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 6.97$), but there was not a significant difference from responses that did not use a gain/loss frame ($M = 11.55$, $SD = 10.70$). This indicates that candidates ranked higher in the polls before the town hall, such as Joe Biden, were significantly more likely to use loss frames as an issue management strategy.

The second research question explored how and to what extent candidates used diagnostic and prognostic responsibility frames to manage the issue of climate change. For diagnostic responsibility frames, candidates placed blame on both President Trump and businesses in 19% of their responses ($n = 32$). Candidates meanwhile placed fault on collective humanity and individual humans much less: in 2.4% ($n = 4$) and 0.6% ($n = 1$) of responses, respectively. A summary variable was created to reflect the number of

² The nomination preference of Democratic candidates: Biden (31%), Sanders (24%), Warren (15%), Harris (10%), Yang (4%), Booker (3%), Buttigieg (3%), O'Rourke (2%), Castro (1%), Klobuchar (1%).

fault frames used in a single response, from 0 to 4 ($M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.59$). One third (35.7%) of candidate responses ($n = 60$) employed at least one of these diagnostic frames. The candidates who identified Trump at fault were significantly more likely to emphasize the government's responsibility to address climate change (59.4%), compared with those who did not identify Trump at fault (33.1%), $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 7.590$, $p = .006$. A post hoc analysis found that there was a significant difference among candidates placing blame on President Trump, $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 18.024$, $p = .035$. For example, candidates Amy Klobuchar and Joe Biden each identified Trump at fault in six responses, representing 42.9% of Klobuchar's responses and 33.3% of Biden's responses.

For prognostic frames, the most common entity called upon to solve the issue of climate change was the government at 38.1% ($n = 64$), followed by the collective at 18.5% ($n = 31$), and businesses at 14.3% ($n = 24$). Individual Americans were the least called upon to solve the climate change crisis, at 8.3% ($n = 14$). Again, we created a summary variable for the number of identified entities responsible for fixing the climate change issue ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 0.83$). More than half (57.1%) of candidate responses ($n = 96$) employed at least one prognostic frame, which was notably higher than diagnostic frames ($n = 60$). This means that the Democratic candidates were more likely to focus on solutions to the climate change issue, indicating a propensity to focus on proactive change. Because a focus on the role of government was the highest prognostic response, we conducted further analyses to examine when candidates compared themselves with other candidates. This variable included comparisons with incumbent president Trump or another Democratic candidate (adapted from Turcotte, 2013; $KA = .82$). We found that candidates who explicitly compared themselves with President Trump in their responses were significantly more likely to identify the government as a necessary entity for climate change response, $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 4.528$, $p = .033$.

Discussion

This study provides insight into political issues management, particularly issue framing, which is a critical function of public relations that has been understudied in the political context. We contend that politicians are, in essence, public relations managers who must address sociopolitical issues, appeal to the public, and mediate the relationship between the government and the public. Several points warrant discussion.

First, the results indicated that candidates preferred value-based appeals over fact-based appeals for managing the issue of climate change. Value-based appeals were present in nearly a fourth of responses, almost three times more than fact-based appeals. These results align with extant literature that demonstrates the prevalence of value-based frames in political and environmental discourse (Fischer, 2019; Nelson & Garst, 2005). As Nisbet (2009) found, value-based frames are often used to create climate change consensus by linking environmental reform to other widely agreed-upon movements or critical issues. A qualitative review of the texts supports this. For example, Amy Klobuchar likened climate change reform to a "mission," suggesting numerous times how Americans could come together, as they did for the landing on the moon or the civil rights movement, to solve this great problem. In another example, Pete Buttigieg (2019) stated, "This [climate change] is not only a question of generational justice. It is a question of social, racial, and gender justice" (p. 4). And Julian Castro (2019) echoed this point, highlighting how his plan accounted for environmental justice reform because "the first folks to get flooded out are the poorest communities. They're often communities of color" (p. 4). Combining climate change reform with

environmental justice broadens the appeal of such policies to the Democratic voting base, which is composed of many marginalized communities (Oliphant, 2019).

The primary campaign context and issue ownership also likely contributed to the predominance of value-based frames. Issue ownership suggests that a major difference between Democratic and Republican parties in the United States is the issues they "own" and are presumed to better manage (Benoit et al., 2011). The Democratic party typically claims issues related to education, jobs, health care, and the environment. The Republican party claims issues related to crime, national security, terrorism, family values, and abortion. Considering that this environmentally oriented town hall took place during the primary campaign, in which the goal was to convince Democratic base voters to choose among same-party candidates, the audience for this town hall presumably already believed in the effects of climate change. So, the audience can be classified as a sympathetic public whose members were already (generally) receptive to these candidates and climate change policy reform (Zellman, 2020). Accordingly, the goal of this town hall was likely to motivate voter turnout for a certain Democratic candidate, not make publics believe in climate change. Thus, emphasizing the facts of climate change could have been less persuasive for motivating action compared with emphasizing shared values and positioning climate change as a social justice issue.

The results also showed how the Democratic candidates almost equally employed loss, gain, mixed, and neutral frames in their responses during the climate change town hall. There were a few dominant trends among the loss/gain frames we can unpack with textual examples. Candidates often used loss frames to emphasize the urgency of climate change reform, noting how "we are running out of time on this one" (Warren, 2019, p. 6) and do not have the "luxury of debating whether this is an issue" (Buttigieg, 2019, p. 5). Candidates used gain frames to link climate change reform to economic opportunities, such as increasing jobs or transforming the energy industry. As Amy Klobuchar (2019) noted, "There's a lot of exciting things that can happen in rural America out of this. So there's a lot of new jobs" (p. 6). Pete Buttigieg (2019), the second-highest user of gain frames (43.8% of his responses), suggested that increasing incentives for companies to achieve net-zero emissions would allow "companies [to] respond; the American auto industry is capable of great innovation but we've got to set up the left and right boundaries for that" (p. 8).

Among the four options (i.e., loss, gain, mixed, neutral), however, candidates employed loss frames the least, which is surprising given the literature that suggests the pervasiveness of loss frames when making decisions in risk contexts (Arceneaux, 2012; De Vries et al., 2015). However, research does link positive future expectations (e.g., gains) to feelings of hope, which can increase interest in climate protection (Chadwick, 2015). Gain frames are also a strong predictor of vote choice (Finn & Glaser, 2010). As the qualitative examples presented earlier demonstrate, the gains were almost exclusively presented in the context of the economy (e.g., increasing jobs, revolutionizing industries). It thus makes sense for the Democratic candidates to emphasize how climate change reform could lead to positive economic outcomes when contesting an incumbent president they perceived to be harmful to the environment, but whose public approval at the time largely stemmed from his economic performance (see Brenan, 2019).

Our findings also point to the candidates' use of prognostic over diagnostic responsibility frames to manage the issue of climate change. More than half of the candidate responses suggested at least one entity that could or should be responsible for *solving* the climate change issue, compared with a third of responses

that discussed those who contributed to the issue. This emphasis on prognostic frames is likely explained by the issue cycle and where CNN and the candidates placed the issue of climate change. Crable and Vibbert (1985) argued that issues are ready for decision and policy action at the critical phase. That the CNN town hall focused solely on climate change, and candidates attempted to galvanize support through this issue, likely indicates that climate change was considered a critical issue on the verge of a crisis if reform was not implemented. Accordingly, focusing on solutions to addressing this issue would have been the more appropriate route to take. Still, when candidates used diagnostic frames, they mostly blamed President Trump and his regressive policies or the businesses that cause environmental harm (e.g., oil and gas industries with large carbon footprints). This strategy is unsurprising given that the Democratic nominee would eventually run against President Trump in the 2020 general election, and polling data suggested that the biggest concern for Democratic voters was beating President Trump (Peoples & Fingerhut, 2020). Accordingly, the more Democratic candidates juxtaposed their policies and plans with Trump's, the more they were likely able to establish their presidential viability; our results also showed a significant relationship between comparisons to Trump and diagnostic frames that criticized Trump for inadequately responding to climate change.

What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that nearly a fifth of responses (18.5%) included a prognostic frame suggesting a collective responsibility to addressing climate change, which was more than responses suggesting how businesses should address the issue (14.3%). While the Democratic candidates did criticize big business for contributing to climate change, they also stressed how solving the issue was an American imperative. This finding can be partially explained by the prevalence of value-based frames that connected environmental reform to American values. A qualitative review of the questions candidates received also lends insight into this finding. During each town hall, it was common for CNN moderators to include some variation of the following question, "What is the greatest personal sacrifice you are asking an American to make for climate change?" (Sanders, 2019, p. 8). Theoretically, there is immense value in directly responding to the questions that are asked, because failure to do so can lead to a contentious relationship between the questioner and responder (Bull & Mayer, 1993). Thus, it makes sense to see such a high amount of collective responsibility frames, considering the questions that were posed. However, responses such as, "I'm asking Americans to make this a priority" (O'Rourke, 2019, p. 10) and "I would ask the American people to think bigger about the changes we can make collectively" (Yang, 2019, p. 12) indicate the reluctance of candidates to suggest too much collective responsibility or to be too specific about public changes, given how they framed Trump's administration and big businesses as responsible. The results of this study thus add important insight into the political issues management process: Issue framing is not solely contingent on political candidates, but on the interactions that lead to candidate responses. Thus, as scholars continue to explore political issues management, they should be probative about how interactions lead to different perceptions about issues and candidates as issue managers.

Moreover, the results of this study illustrate an important connection between issue framing and legitimacy, which is a central theme in issues management. According to Coombs (1992), effective issues management includes manager legitimacy, which is "the public acceptance of the political order's claim to authority" (p. 105). Coombs identified a variety of tactics designed to increase perceptions of manager legitimacy, such as speaker charisma and credibility, the rationality of arguments, and, importantly, value-based appeals. Using value-based frames, as the Democratic candidates did during this town hall, can

effectively position an issue as important and worthy of action while also contributing to the legitimacy of politicians as issue managers. A qualitative review of the texts demonstrated how personal narratives were often used as part of loss and gain frames (e.g., "I've experienced this loss, therefore I know what can happen in the future," or "I have implemented environmental reform policies in my city that have increased jobs, therefore I can do the same on a national scale"). By framing the climate change issue in terms of personal and professional losses and gains, the Democratic candidates were simultaneously managing the climate change issue and establishing their legitimacy as issue managers. Future research should thus consider the connection between specific issue frames (e.g., fact vs. value, loss vs. gain, diagnostic vs. prognostic) and manager legitimacy. Such a study could have great prescriptive value for political issues management.

Finally, this study lends needed theoretical insight into the nature of political issues management compared with corporate issues management, particularly as it relates to the role of publics. Corporate issues management concerns the allocation of an organization's resources to participate in and control the issues that might affect the health and vitality of the organization (Chase, 1982; Coates et al., 1986; Jaques, 2009; Wartick & Rude, 1986). Accordingly, and depending on the issue (e.g., climate change), the management of the issue through policy, strategic communication, and operational change is often a precursor to obtaining favorable public opinion or as the nexus for maintaining favorable public opinion (e.g., issues management is one strategy for preventing or mitigating the negative effects of crises; see Coombs, 2007). Simply put, favorable public opinion is often (but not always) the *outcome* of successful corporate issues management.³ In the political context, especially during a campaign, public opinion and participation become the *foundation* for issues management. So, for a candidate to affect policy and manage critical sociopolitical and environmental issues, like climate change, publics need to vote for the candidate; the Democratic candidate's plans for managing the climate change issue are rendered useless if they are not elected by the voting public. Consequently, those attempting to manage political issues must strategically frame policy as something that publics can and should affect. This central role of publics for political issues management is apparent in the strategic framing choices of the candidates who participated in the CNN climate change town hall. For example, the candidates emphasized value-based frames to mobilize voting rather than fact-based frames to convince audiences that climate change is real, understanding that their audiences were likely already climate change believers. The candidates blamed Trump for climate change the most, which is consistent with the public concern over a second Trump presidency (Peoples & Fingerhut, 2020). And, the candidates emphasized the need for collective action (i.e., public support via voting) over business action, given that legislative change that would impact businesses is not possible without an administration change. Political issues management thus situates publics as more active participants in the issues management process, a unique theoretical difference from corporate issues management.

Conclusion

This study provides a foundation for research on political issues management. Following extant literature, we examined three key framing mechanisms that are common in climate change discussions—fact versus value-based framing, gain/loss framing, and responsibility framing—finding the prevalence of value and prognostic frames. Yet, there are many other ways a candidate can frame an issue. Future

³ Consumers may not always be aware of corporate efforts to affect legislation.

research should identify other framing mechanisms that political candidates may use in their attempts to manage the climate change issue. Because issues management is an intricate public relations tactic, there are likely other variables not included in this analysis (e.g., intermedia agenda-setting, competing discourse from opponents) that affect how politicians frame and manage issues. Further, while the focus on one town hall event and the sole topic of climate change enabled a nuanced analysis of political issues management, the generalizability of our findings is limited by this approach. Undoubtedly, the framing of an issue occurs throughout an entire political campaign, not just at one event; future research should thus consider how issues management changes or evolves. Similarly, the candidates within this study would likely manage other issues (e.g., health care, the economy) in different fashions than climate change. Future studies should expand the sample to see if the findings reported in this study span different topics. Although we postulated how questions affected responses, future research should more centrally examine how question type affects political issues management. Finally, our understanding of political issues management would benefit from comparing how candidates manage issues in comparison with their governing parties (e.g., the Democratic National Committee). For now, this study crucially examined how Democratic candidates employed framing to manage the issue of climate change, combining and extending research from public relations and political communication. Furthermore, it examined a new campaign format in the 2020 presidential election that uniquely facilitated issues management. As such, this study adds needed insight into political issues management.

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