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Framing Environmental Disaster

Environmental Advocacy and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

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"Melissa K. Merry offers a fresh examination in *Framing Environmental Disaster: Environmental Advocacy and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill*, using content analysis that includes the innovative use of blogs, emails, news stories and Congressional Testimonies. She discusses how interest groups use events and crises to leverage their cause. Scholars, practitioners and students will benefit from her contribution to the field disaster management and public policy."

—Mary D. Bruce, *Governors State University*

"Melissa Merry's study of rhetorical strategies used by environmental groups during the Deepwater Horizon is a marker in the systematic study of the framing of arguments in politics. The study will become a model of how to study political rhetoric systematically outside of the confines of the political psychology laboratory. It allows a much firmer analysis of the role of blame attribution in politics."

—Bryan D. Jones, *University of Texas-Austin*

Framing Environmental Disaster

Environmental Advocacy and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

The blowout of the *Deepwater Horizon* and subsequent underground oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 is considered by many to be the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history. Interest groups, public officials, and media organizations have spent considerable time documenting the economic and ecological impacts of this spill, as well as the causes of the spill, ostensibly to prevent future disasters of this magnitude. However, rather than an unbiased search for answers, such investigations involve strategic efforts by a variety of political actors to define the spill and its causes in ways that lead to their preferred policy solutions.

Framing Environmental Disaster evaluates the causal stories that environmental groups tell about the spill and develops theoretical propositions about the role of such stories in the policy process. Which actors do groups hold responsible, and how do groups use blame attributions to advance their policy agendas? Constructing a creative methodological approach that includes content analysis drawn from blog posts, emails, press releases, and testimony before Congress and insights and quotations drawn from interviews with environmental group representatives, Melissa K. Merry argues that interest groups construct causal explanations long before investigations of policy problems are complete, and use focusing events to cast blame for a wide range of harms not directly tied to the events themselves. In doing so, groups seek to take full advantage of "windows of opportunity" resulting from crises.

An indispensable resource for scholars of public policy and environmental politics and policy, this book sheds new light on the implications of the Gulf disaster for energy politics and policies, while advancing scholarly understandings of the role of framing and causal attribution in the policy process.

Melissa K. Merry is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Louisville. Her research interests include environmental politics and policy, interest groups, and political communication. She has authored articles appearing in *American Politics Research*, *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, and *Environmental Politics*, among other journals.

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Preface

In April 2010 I was finishing teaching my spring semester courses at the University of Louisville and, having recently wrapped up one research project, was looking for a new research topic and set of questions to pursue. When the *Deepwater Horizon* blowout occurred, my initial reaction—like that of most people—was shock and dismay. When oil starting spilling from the underground well and the magnitude of the disaster became clear, I sensed that I needed to document and study the disaster in some way (though at the time I was not sure how). I began collecting communications from national environmental organizations—their blog posts, press releases, and emails. I saved them as Word documents on my computer as the disaster was unfolding—still unsure how long the spill would last or what questions I would answer by examining these documents. Months later, I returned to these communications and started reading through them, eventually developing the concept I call "blame-casting" to describe how interest groups immediately assign blame in the aftermath of events such as this one.

Fast forward to December 2012. Again, I was finishing teaching my fall courses and enjoying spending some time on what had turned into a book project on blame attribution following disasters. One afternoon, I was checking the news online while taking a break from work and happened to read, with horror, news about the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. The rest of the day I was gutwrenched, unable to do anything except watch my Twitter feed and check various news websites, hoping for any kind of good news, which, of course, never came. In the days and weeks that followed, the nation searched for meaning in the tragedy, and conversations inevitably turned to causation. People asked, *why* did this happen, and *how* can we prevent another mass shooting?

Amid the sadness and anger over innocent lives lost, it dawned on me that this tragedy illustrated the very phenomenon I was writing about, albeit in a completely different context: the centrality of blame attribution in the aftermath of heartrending events. In part, this stems from a desire to regain control; we assume that if we can simply pinpoint the crucial factor that allowed a gunman to enter a school and shoot a classroom full of first graders, maybe we can do something about it. Of course, the task is complicated

by the politics surrounding gun control. Those who defend the Second Amendment right to bear arms declare, "guns don't kill people; people kill people." In response, proponents of stricter gun control argue that "people kill people *with guns*."

Beyond the polarized discourse surrounding the causes of violence, the question of what could have prevented the massacre at Sandy Hook is actually quite complex. Would fewer lives have been lost if an armed security guard had been present on school grounds? If the gunman had not had access to automatic weapons? If he had received treatment for any mental health problems he was suffering? Though difficult to answer definitely, such questions are crucial to the direction of public policy. Namely, whoever offers the most convincing causal story stands the best chance of having their preferred solutions enacted. It is no wonder that discussions of blame and causation began almost immediately following the shooting, just they did following the *Deepwater Horizon* blowout.

While this book focuses mainly on the Gulf oil spill, the broader theoretical framework is applicable to other issues, and I hope that it can serve to shed light on the *political* process that follows oil spills, mass shootings, and other sudden rare events, even if it cannot identify the precise causes. I also hope that this book is not a purely academic exercise but, rather, that it has some value for political practitioners. Namely, by demonstrating how political actors strategically frame policy problems and suggesting circumstances under which such framing is more or less successful, this research may offer insights to those who wish to be more effective policy advocates.

In developing the theoretical framework for this book, I benefited from the advice and assistance of a number of people. Owen Graham, Kevin Fahey, and Brad Coffey provided invaluable assistance in the development of the content coding scheme and in the coding of documents. Fellow panelists at the 2011 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association—including Deserai Anderson Crow, Mat Hope, and Michael D. Jones—provided crucial feedback early on in the project, as did my colleagues in the Political Science Department at the University of Louisville. I am also grateful to the individuals from ten environmental organizations who took time out of their busy schedules to speak with me and to offer their insights about the politics surrounding the Gulf oil spill. Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my husband, Joshua Merry, and to my parents, Leland and Susan Poague, for their unwavering support throughout the entire project.

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1 Blame Attribution and the Policy Process

The *Deepwater Horizon* was a massive oil rig, approximately the size of a 40-story building, floating 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana. In April 2010 the rig—owned by Transocean, but under lease to British Petroleum (BP) Plc.—was drilling an exploratory well at 5,000 feet and was just days away from temporarily capping the well and transferring the pumping of oil to a production platform or pipeline. Tragically, shortly before 10:00 p.m. CDT on April 20, the drill bit encountered a pocket of methane gas some two miles beneath the sea floor. As it rose, the bubble expanded, obliterating numerous barriers before exploding onto the rig platform. While most of 126 workers onboard escaped by lifeboat, 11 men were killed and 17 others injured in the blowout. Despite the Coast Guard's best efforts to extinguish the flames, the rig burned for 36 hours before sinking into the Gulf waters on Earth Day, April 22. And that was just the beginning.

At the former rig site, an oil slick soon appeared, and BP officials revealed that the blowout preventer—a mechanism consisting of rams, valves, and shearing blades designed to close in a well in case of emergency—had failed. For the next three months, oil gushed from the sea floor, releasing more than 200 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico before it was finally capped on July 15. As the largest accidental marine oil spill not just in the United States, but the *world*, the Gulf oil spill had a devastating effect on the ecosystems and economies of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. However, the significance of the disaster stems not just from the tragic loss of life and damage caused by the crude oil: the oil spill was also a hugely important *political* event.

For the entire summer of 2010, both government officials and members of the public were riveted on the shocking images. After being criticized for a lack of transparency about the magnitude of the spill, BP installed a camera at the wellhead—nicknamed "spillcam"—allowing the media to broadcast a live feed of the unrelenting flow of oil. News organizations provided footage of cleanup workers picking tar balls off once-pristine beaches, and environmental groups circulated heart-rending photos of pelicans and sea turtles coated in toxic, brown goo. As the size of the spill grew day by day, the media reported a series of memorably named (and largely unsuccessful)

efforts by BP to cap the well—remember the "top hat" and the "junk shot"? Meanwhile, discussions were occurring from the highest levels of government down to the dinner table conversations of the American people about what caused the spill, how the cleanup should be conducted, and how a disaster of this scale could be prevented in the future.

This book is about how interest groups—namely, environmental advocacy organizations—sought to shape these discussions about the Gulf oil spill. I start with the premise that the political impact of such events is not simply a function of the "facts"—in this case, the size of the spill, the number of oiled birds, or the lost income in the fishing and shrimping industries, to name a few. Oddly enough, sometimes the amount of attention a problem receives doesn't have much to do with the facts at all! In a study of 30 education policy debates in France, for instance, Baumgartner found that the scope of the issue—in terms of the number of people affected, the budgetary allocation, and the magnitude of the proposed policy change—did *not* influence how many people actually got involved in the debate.[1] Similarly, in a study of oil spills, Birkland found that the volume of oil spilled was not a good predictor of whether a spill received media coverage; rather, the visibility of the spill—that is, the ability of interested parties to photograph or film the spill in vivid and compelling terms—mattered more.[2] So in addition to considering the objective facts, we also need to look at the way these facts are strategically presented or, as social scientists say, "socially constructed."

As scholars of communication, sociology, and political science have noted, framing—or the way events are interpreted and described—is central to politics.[3] For instance, the meaning of such phenomena as rising global average temperatures is not "given."[4] Depending on one's beliefs about climate change, rising temperatures could signal natural fluctuations or serve as evidence of the catastrophic consequences of human activity. Politics, thus, consists of competition over the meaning of such information, and language is the medium through which actors construct their interpretations and seek to persuade others.[5] In the case of the Gulf oil disaster, there was much to interpret, from the technical aspects of oil drilling and the circumstances leading to the blowout, to the appropriate responses by the government and the oil industry.

In this investigation of how environmental organizations framed the Gulf oil spill, I am particularly interested in which actors groups held responsible and how groups used blame attributions to advance their policy goals. As is the case with many policy problems, the Gulf oil spill cannot be explained as the fault of just one company or individual. Rather, there was quite a large "cast of characters" and, thus, many potential ways of divvying up the blame. While BP had leased the rig and held 65 percent ownership of the oil prospect (called the Macondo well), two other oil companies also had ownership stake in the well, Anadarko Petroleum Corporation and MOEX Offshore 2007. Transocean owned the rig and employed 79 of the 126 workers who were on board when the blowout occurred. Additionally,

BP had hired a number of subcontractors, including Halliburton, which oversaw cement work on the well. Aside from these corporations, we can also look at the involvement of various government actors. The agency most directly involved in the regulation of oil and gas activities prior to the disaster was the Minerals Management Service (MMS) within the Department of Interior; this agency approved the sale of the oil prospect and signed off on BP's drilling plan. Of course, there's also President Barack Obama, who just weeks before the blowout announced the federal government's commitment to expanding offshore drilling, based in part on the assumption that offshore drilling accidents are extremely improbable. In short, environmental groups had many possible choices in terms of whom to blame for the spill.

BLAME ATTRIBUTION AND THE GULF OIL DISASTER

But why study blame attribution in particular? There are certainly other features of problem definition upon which one could focus. Rochefort and Cobb, for instance, identify a number of dimensions, including severity, novelty (or how unusual a problem is), and proximity (or personal relevance of a problem) that affect how a problem is understood and how seriously it is taken.[6] However, across a diverse range of literatures—including psychology, sociology, and political science—scholars agree that causal attributions, including the fixing of blame, are basic to human cognition and central to the policy process.

Within psychology, there is an immense literature on attribution, or "the way in which individuals explain events."[7] This work emphasizes the fact that attribution is something people do naturally, even unconsciously, as they process information; it helps individuals to maintain a sense that the world is predictable and controllable.[8] As Tilly states, "evolution has organized our brains to create accounts of actions and interactions in which X does Y to Z . . . we assign moral weight to these sequences, deciding many times each day (usually without much reflection) whether we or someone else did the right thing."[9] The attribution process is arguably more pronounced in the context of disasters, which tend to evoke fear as well as a desire to avert similar events in the future.[10]

From a political science perspective, attribution is considered a critical element of representation and democratic accountability. In other words, for citizens to exercise "popular control" over elected officials, they must be able to evaluate whether those officials played any part in making people's lives better or worse. Once citizens have made these responsibility judgments, they can hold elected leaders accountable through their voting decisions or other forms of political participation.[11] There is even empirical support for the influence of blame attributions on voting behavior, especially "economic voting." For instance, if citizens blame the government for poor economic performance, they are more likely to turn out to vote and, in doing so,

to punish the incumbent party.[12] Scholars have also found that attribution facilitates collective action in the form of mass protests. In a study of Russian citizens, Javeline found that individuals who could attribute blame for wage arrears—that is, unpaid or late wages—to a specific culprit were more likely to engage in protest than those who did not fix blame.[13]

Beyond its general importance for democratic governance, causal attribution has been the focus of much theorizing and empirical work in the field of public policy. Scholars have noted that the way a policy problem is defined can shape which solutions are considered and, ultimately, adopted.[14] Stone notes the importance of causal stories in pointing to particular remedies.[15] Generally, she argues, causal stories that attribute problems to purposeful human action—as opposed to accidents—lead to calls for governmental intervention. By identifying guilty parties, causal stories indicate who (if anyone) should be punished and who should be empowered to "fix" problems. Further, causal stories facilitate the creation of political alliances—separating the innocent "us" from the guilty "them"—to move particular policy solutions forward.

In summary, causal attribution is essential to the ways we make sense of our world and seek to shape it through the policy process. It is a natural and, at times, unconscious process, and yet it is also utilized deliberately and strategically in efforts to translate attributions into public policy. Returning to the Gulf oil spill, consider the implications of various blame attributions. If most (or all) of the blame is fixed on BP, what is the logical policy response to the disaster? Certainly, it would make sense for BP to clean up the spill, pay out legitimate damage claims, and improve its safety procedures. Yet this causal explanation wouldn't necessitate any major policy change; it would not lead to an overhaul of energy policy and might, in fact, perpetuate offshore oil drilling to the extent that it paints a relatively favorable picture of other oil companies. Alternatively, blame could be fixed on the entire oil industry; in contrast to the "one bad apple" explanation, this explanation would signal a more systemic problem stemming from the corporate culture of the industry—such as a widespread disregard for the environment—or the inherent risks involved in drilling activities. One might also point to Americans' dependence on fossil fuels as the root cause of the spill, creating the demand that makes it profitable for oil companies to engage in offshore drilling. The latter two attributions suggest the need for reforms that would shift America's energy policy away from oil extraction and toward renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar power. Thus, depending on which causal explanation(s) prevailed, the Gulf oil disaster could have very different implications for public policy.

FOCUSING EVENTS IN THE POLICY PROCESS

By studying how environmental groups assigned blame for the disaster, I seek not only to illuminate the political importance of the spill, described by President Obama as the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history, but

also to reveal something more general about the role of focusing events in the policy process.[16] As defined by Birkland, focusing events are sudden, rare events that draw attention to preexisting policy problems or failures of government.[17] Examples include natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina; industrial accidents, such as the 2011 meltdown of Japan's Fukashima nuclear plant; and terrorist attacks, such as September 11. Following Cobb and Elder's discussion of "triggering events," Kingdon was the first to incorporate focusing events into public policy theory.[18] In his "multiple streams" model, policy problems and solutions are assumed to exist independently of one another. When a focusing event occurs, however, political actors have a window of opportunity to link their preferred policy solutions to the problems highlighted in the event. By making the case that they have just the right solution to the problem-at-hand, interest groups, government officials, and others seek to use focusing events to advance their policy goals.

Since Kingdon's seminal work, other scholars have incorporated focusing events into theories of the policy process. In their Punctuated Equilibrium theory, Baumgartner and Jones suggest that focusing events serve to destabilize existing power arrangements, altering how a policy is viewed and changing the venue in which decisions are made and the make-up of participants involved in the process; as a result, dramatic policy change (or "policy punctuation") can occur.[19] Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith suggest a similar role of focusing events in bringing about policy change.[20] In their Advocacy Coalition Framework, the authors note the importance of exogenous shocks, or events that occur outside existing governing arrangements, in uprooting political actors' deeply held beliefs and facilitating policy change. Finally, Birkland examines in greater depth *how* and *why* focusing events matter for public policy.[21] Observing that "potential focusing events" such as plane crashes and various natural disasters are commonplace, Birkland asks why some of these events are more "focal" than others, capturing more media and governmental attention and leading to greater demands for policy change. Based on a study of hurricanes, earthquakes, oil spills, and nuclear accidents, Birkland concludes that focusing events have greater impact on agenda-setting when they are rare, widespread, and highly visible and when there are active interest groups or other constituencies ready to voice their concerns in the wake of these events.

In summary, these theories presume that focusing events are important in facilitating policy change, due in part to the ways various actors use these events to promote their policy objectives. But just how do political actors do this? In fact, there has been very little examination of the *means* by which individuals and groups seek to leverage focusing events in support of their goals. Combining insights from the literatures on focusing events, blame attribution, and framing, I offer a more nuanced view of this process than has been seen before. Specifically, I develop two theoretical propositions highlighting the ways that political actors assign blame in the aftermath of focusing events, and, using the Gulf oil disaster as a case study, I test hypotheses derived from these propositions.[22]

PROPOSITION 1: BLAME-CASTING

The first of these propositions describes a concept I call *blame-casting*, whereby political actors assign blame in the immediate aftermath of focusing events—long before the full details of these events are known. This concept builds on an under-studied implication of Kingdon's multiple streams model. Namely, Kingdon argues that political actors have solutions just waiting for the right problem to arise, and Boscarino has demonstrated that groups shift their justifications for policy solutions in response to changes in problem salience.[23] Similarly, I argue that interest groups have well-established beliefs about their political opponents. In policy areas with long-standing problems, groups have causal stories ready, just waiting for focusing events or other developments to raise the salience of those problems. Once a focusing event (such as an oil spill) happens, groups can readily blame particular actors without waiting for full investigation of the causes of the event. In short, just as solutions are developed before problems, so too is blame assigned before wrongdoing.

> *Proposition 1:* In established policy areas involving long-standing problems, interest groups respond to focusing events by offering preconceived causal stories.

The term *blame-casting* denotes two aspects of this framing activity: (1) a forecasting element, in which groups offer predictive statements about the conclusions they believe others will draw based on incoming information; and (2) an element similar to typecasting, in which groups build on and reinforce stereotypes about their political opponents. In order to preserve the plausibility of these accounts, groups emphasize facts that are already known and broadly accepted. For instance, in the case of the Gulf oil disaster, environmental groups might point to BP's preexisting poor safety and environmental records as evidence of its culpability in the current disaster. Additionally, groups are likely to keep their blame attributions general enough that new details do not undermine their claims. In the case of the oil spill, for instance, groups might emphasize the general risks associated with oil drilling, while avoiding detailed accounts of the events leading up to the spill and the relative contributions of the various companies involved in the drilling operation.

While somewhat risky—to the extent that groups' claims might later be disproven—the practice of blame-casting offers numerous potential advantages. As Kingdon's model indicates, windows of opportunity in politics are unpredictable and can close without the enactment of any policy solutions. By responding immediately to focusing events, interest groups, policy entrepreneurs, and other political actors can ensure that they don't miss these opportunities. A second advantage of blame-casting is, simply, that these preconceived causal stories have already been developed and can be