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## **Presidential framing in the Christine Blasey Ford and Anita Hill cases**

Lindsey E. Blumella and Dinfin Mulupib

### **Abstract**

Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas in 1991 called attention to widespread sexual abuse in the US. Testimony from Christine Blasey Ford against Thomas Kavanaugh 27 years later underscored the lack of progress in its eradication. Using the cascading network activation model, this study identifies the episodic and thematic framing of both cases in relation to top down influencers. A content analysis (N = 901) of US newspapers and TV networks showed episodic framing dominated coverage in both cases. Both Bush and Trump successfully emphasized their nominee as deserving of SCOTUS. Trump also significantly contributed to the negative framing of Blasey Ford. Thematically, Republican-led framing focused on American values and maintaining the rule of law, whereas Democratic-led framing concentrated on raising awareness to the systemic problem of sexual abuse and threat the nominee posed to progressive rights. News coverage included challenging both presidents, but only for a total of 15.9% for Trump and 10.7% for Bush. On the other hand, Hill was challenged in 40.5% and Blasey Ford in 73% of news coverage. In sum, even with strong opposition, the cascade model's success indicates that White House messaging continues to usurp social justice issues.

### **Background**

“This was an extremely hard thing for me to do, but I felt I couldn't NOT do it.” (Vesoulis, 2018). An estimated 20.4 million viewers along with millions more online heard the words of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford during the Senate hearing for SCOTUS (Supreme Court of the United States) nominee Brett Kavanaugh (Reuters, 2018). Kavanaugh was a Republican nominee put forward by Donald Trump (Reuters, 2018). Blasey Ford went on to testify that when at a high school party, Kavanaugh and his friend locked her in a bedroom, pinned her down on a bed, assaulted her while covering her mouth to muffle her screams, and attempted to rape her (Vesoulis, 2018). Blasey Ford also stated that she managed to run out of the room before being raped, and that “Brett's assault on me drastically altered my life” (Vesoulis, 2018). Less than two weeks later, the US Senate confirmed Kavanaugh to SCOTUS (Daniel, Lee, & Simon, 2018).

For many, the story was familiar. Nearly three decades earlier, 27 million people (Rucinski, 1993) listened to Anita Hill say in a Senate hearing for SCOTUS nominee Clarence Thomas, “It would have been more comfortable to remain silent . . . I felt that I had to tell the truth. I could not keep silent” (“Nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas,” 1991). Thomas was a Republican nominee put forward by George H.W. Bush. Hill accused Thomas of sexually harassing her at work when he was in a managerial position at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, Totenberg, 2018). The US Senate also confirmed Thomas to SCOTUS (Totenberg, 2018).

This study examines the framing of news coverage in the Hill and Blasey Ford cases to identify the influencers, the wider implications of the framing, and to compare and contrast both cases.

## Introduction

Frames are set interpretations or schemas that help people process information (Goffman, 1974). Those in positions of power, such as heads of state, celebrities, and even journalists use framing by promoting perspectives, which advantage them and disparage or ignore other perspectives (Entman, 2003). To address how this flow of power impacted news coverage of Hill and Blasey Ford, this study uses Entman's (2004) cascading network activation model. Simply put, the cascade model describes the top-down process in the US wherein frames promoted by the White House trickle down in a system – repeated by elites and journalists, and finally transmit to the public. Journalists play a critical role as a conduit of the frames elites' promote (via direct quotes, repeating frames, covering one side over the other, etc., Entman, 1993). In both cases included in this study, Presidents Trump and Bush had vested interests in their nominee successfully becoming a member of SCOTUS, and so it is important to analyze how the presidents' messages impacted news coverage. Furthermore, since news sources commonly shape or reinforce news frames (Tankard, 2001), how the president, other elites, and all involved were used as sources and challenged in news coverage are also considered.

In order for elites to promote their frames through the cascade model effectively, their messages are usually based on preexisting ideas, which are described in framing research as culturally congruent (Entman, 2004; Kornprobst, 2019). How Bush and Trump promoted their SCOTUS nominee quickly changed after the testimonies of Hill and Blasey Ford. Both presidents needed to use culturally congruent frames that would convince the Judiciary Committee and the Senate to confirm their nominee despite the accusations of sexual abuse.

Recent events, which uncovered years of abuse by powerful men eventually leading to the #metoo movement, have both reiterated and demystified the cultural congruence of rape culture in the US and around the world. Rape culture is a societal acceptance of male-perpetrated violence, particularly against women (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). Rape culture does not purport rape as acceptable, but rather promotes the myths that there are only few cases of legitimate rape and/or legitimate victims (Buchwald et al., 1993). Bush and Trump built on culturally congruent rape culture narratives in order to diminish the credibility of Hill and Blasey Ford and to defend the worthiness of their nominee.

In general, journalists tend not to challenge the status quo in their coverage (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) – making culturally congruent frames even more powerful. Subsequently, frames promoted by the White House and elites can spread through networks with little resistance, to the point that dissension from other actors is muted. For instance, news coverage of the Access Hollywood tape mostly focused on Trump's defense, which was rooted in rape culture. It consisted of his denial, him threatening to sue anyone coming forward to accuse him of sexual abuse, and him dismissing his accusers as liars and not being attractive enough (Blumell & Huemmer, 2019).

One way to identify culturally congruent framing is through classifying frames as episodic or thematic. Iyengar (1990) notes news tends to cover events episodically (focusing on the individual) rather than thematically (wider contextual implications). This is important to the present study because not only can framing use cultural congruence to discredit anyone coming forward, by focusing heavily on the individuals (episodic), greater social and cultural inferences are downplayed or overlooked (thematic). This fits in with rape culture and existing patterns in news coverage of sexual abuse, which often frame sexual abuse as rare and extreme events

(Jordan, 2012). Besides the systemic issue of sexual abuse, these cases also overlap other thematic issues such as judicial processes, the impact of lifelong appointments to SCOTUS, political party loyalty, the status quo, and so forth. And so, the systemic issue of sexual abuse can also be overshadowed by other thematic issues at play. Consequently, an important part of examining the cascade model in this study is to identify the episodic and thematic frames used to either defend or discredit the nominee.

Accordingly, a content analysis (N = 901) of US newspapers and TV network channels, and an inductive frame analysis of relevant presidential press materials (N = 48) are used to map how frames flow through top-down levels of power to the public. The analyses help identify the mainframes used in news coverage and to what extent elites, and especially the president, narratives around the testimonies of Hill and Blasey Ford.

## Literature Review

### *Anita Hill*

On October 11, 1991, a law professor from the University of Oklahoma testified about her reported experienced sexual harassment from then nominee Clarence Thomas (Rucinski, 1993). Anita Hill's original intention was not to go public, but she agreed to after details of her private interviews with two Democratic aides were anonymously leaked to the press (Lewis, 1992). In her testimony, Hill stated that while Thomas was her supervisor at the EEOC, their good working relationship changed when Thomas repeatedly pressured Hill to go out with him romantically – which she declined (Smitherman, 1995). Hill also stated Thomas told graphic sexual stories in the office, and when she left the job in 1983, Thomas told Hill that his career would be ruined if she ever revealed his behavior (Smitherman, 1995).

Reaction to Hill from the exclusively white male Senate Judiciary Committee, the news media, and the public intersected with both sexism and racism (Bryan, 1992). In one example, Senator Howell Heflin asked Hill during her testimony hearing if she was both a “scorned” woman and a “militant” civil rights activist (Hill, 1997). Moreover, defenders of Thomas (including himself) used the US' racism and oppression of Black people as a defense mechanism. For instance, Thomas described the proceedings as a “high-tech lynching” (Smitherman, 1995, p. 8). Scholars also note that Hill was victim blamed and shamed (Bowles Beasley, 1994; Bryan, 1992; Smitherman, 1995). When polled during the hearing, the majority of Black people in the US sided with Thomas; however, one year after the hearing, women overall sided more with Hill (Rucinski, 1993).

The changing attitudes of women in 1992 corresponded to the labeled “Year of the Woman” (Strauss, 2017). It was during this time more women ran for public office than ever before, workplaces implemented more anti-sexual harassment regulations and trainings, and overall awareness to gender inequality increased (Smitherman, 1995). Many credited Hill with largely contributing to the changes by coming forward (Bryan, 1992). Since then, Hill has remained in the public eye and continues to be an advocate against sexual abuse (Hill, 1997).

### *Christine Blasey Ford*

On September 27, 2018, a psychology professor from Palo Alto University testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee about her reported experienced sexual assault by then nominee Brett

Kavanaugh and his friend Mark Judge (Vesoulis, 2018). Much like Hill did 27 years prior, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford spoke to a panel of all white male Republican politicians; however, four Democratic female Senators were on the Committee this time (Golshan, 2018). Instead of naming women to the Committee, Republican politicians chose to delegate Rachel Mitchell, a conservative sex crimes prosecutor from Arizona, to act as a surrogate during Blasey Ford's testimony (Gabbatt, 2018). The attempt was perhaps to avoid the same male only questioning that occurred during the Hill testimony.

During Kavanaugh's testimony, Republican politicians chose to speak – mostly to commiserate with Kavanaugh and criticize Democratic politicians (“Supreme Court Nominee,” 2018). Republican politicians didn't blatantly call Blasey Ford a scorned woman; nevertheless, they worked to discredit her – including stating she confused Kavanaugh with another man (Kelly, 2018).

Senator Orrin Hatch (R), who sat on the Committee for both Hill and Blasey Ford's testimonies, changed from calling Hill a liar to describing Blasey Ford as an “attractive” and “pleasing” witness (Wire, 2018). Trump, despite some restraint, mocked Blasey Ford at a rally to a cheering crowd of supporters (Haberman & Baker, 2018).

Blasey Ford was also reluctant to testify publically. She privately met with her local Representative Anna G. Eshoo (D) on July 20, 2018, to detail her account. Shortly afterward Blasey Ford wrote a letter to Senator Dianne Feinstein (D), which was kept confidential by Feinstein's office until September 12, 2018, when *The Intercept* reported on it (Sullivan, 2018). In coming forward, Blasey Ford and her family faced dangerous threats and had to leave home (Mak, 2018). Polls showed the public found Blasey Ford more credible than Kavanaugh, which increased after she testified (Montanaro, 2018). This seemed to signify a cultural change from when Hill testified or perhaps there was a different response when the person coming forward is White. Also different was the recent #metoo movement, which began in 2007 by Tarana Burke, but popularized in 2017 with the uncovering of several powerful abusive men such as Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Harris, 2018). Furthermore, politics was still ever present as Democratic politicians in the wake of Kavanaugh's confirmation encouraged the public to vote in the impending midterm elections, for what they called a “blue wave” (Cohn, 2018).

Since testifying, Blasey Ford has intermittently resurfaced publically. Firstly, for a *Sports Illustrated* Inspiration of the Year Award, Blasey Ford taped an introduction for the 2018 recipient Rachael Denhollander (Abdeldaiem, 2018). Former gymnast Denhollander was the first person to spoke publically against the sexual abuses by USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar. Nassar is now convicted in Michigan of sexual assault and child-pornography (Abdeldaiem, 2018). Secondly, Blasey Ford, along with Kavanaugh, was named one of the 100 most influential people by *Time* in April 2019 (Time, 2019).

### *Cascading network activation model*

In order to compare and contrast Hill and Blasey Ford, this study utilized framing. Framing is a well-researched theory consisting of a rich body of literature. Broadly, framing is the selection and consequent salience of highlighted parts of events and issues (e.g. De Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993). In the wake of 9/11, Robert Entman (2004) proposed the cascading network activation model – building off his early work.

The cascade model for short, chronicles how political frames develop as they flow downwards or cascade from powerful actors through to the public (Entman, 2004, see p. 10 for

figure). At the top is the presidential administration, followed by other elites (e.g. members of congress, experts, etc.), news media, news frames, and finally the public. Entman (2008) subsequently divided elites into political oppositions. Each level can contribute to the cascade; however, information usually simplifies in activation spreading, thus positioning the schemas of frames as powerful if there is not clear objection (Entman, 2004). Take for instance, many bills passed into legislation are not read in completion by those voting on the bill, let alone the public who learns snippets about legislation through news media. In this process, the main source of information is governments themselves, but journalists actively shape dominant frames by choosing which snippets they estimate as important to disseminate to the public (Bell & Entman, 2011).

The cascade model was introduced at a time when the George W. Bush administration had just successfully activated frames on the need for an Iraq invasion to target the “axis of evil” for the “war on terror” (Harmon & Muenchen, 2009). They falsely implicated Saddam Hussein with 9/11 (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005), stated Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (Kolmer & Semetko, 2009), and together with the UK ignored the other members of the UN Security Council to invade Iraq. These frames were repeated by US elites, rarely challenged in the beginning by US news media (Kolmer & Semetko, 2009), and led to majority support from the American public (Newport, 2003).

Although the cascade model illustrates “the ability to promote the spread of frames is stratified; some actors have more power than others to push ideas along to the news and then to the public” (Entman, 2004, p. 9). Generally speaking, in the case of the US, the president has the most amount of power to influence news messaging. This is then followed by other elites such as Republican and Democratic politicians.

### *Cultural congruence and sexual abuse*

Goffman (1974) explained framing as an “arbitrary slice or cut” (p. 10) of a bigger picture, determined by relevant actors through relying on existing ideologies and/or fabricating new ones. Using existing cognitive structures or schemas are effective in framing because they provide sense making for people (Entman, 2010).

Entman (2004) explains there are four main variables, which impact the spread of frames in a top-down system: motivations, cultural congruence, power, and strategy (p. 13). Entman (2008, 2010) later indicated that cultural congruence was the most influential in determining whether or not frame activation will be met with resistance or agreement. Culturally congruent frames have majority public and media support because they reinforce commonly accepted values and norms – to which administrations and elites actively promote (Entman, 2008). On the other side of the spectrum, incongruence usually results in passive responses from administrations and elites, such as ignoring or passive acceptance (Entman, 2008). In between congruence and incongruence is ambiguity (Entman, 2008).

In the case of publicizing sexual abuse, news frames are both reliant on existing ideologies and sometimes even made up as Goffman (1974) suggests. Consequently, someone coming forward to accuse a public figure of sexual abuse is at a great deficit. It is important to note that sexual abuse in this study includes all forms of harassment, violence, misconduct, and rape. This is not to imply each individual action is of equal severity, but rather to position all forms of violence and misconduct against women as wrong and motivated by accepted sexism.

Existing public narratives around sexual abuse feed into rape culture or societal

acceptance of male violence (Buchwald et al., 1993). Rape culture is bolstered by commonly believed rape myths. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, first developed in 1999 and later updated in 2011, identifies common rape myths like “she asked for it,” “she’s lying,” “he didn’t mean to,” and it “wasn’t really rape” (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). These rape myths were built upon the most common scenario of rape, which is a male perpetrator and a female victim (“victims of sexual violence” n.d.) – the same dynamic focused on in this study. This is not to imply that there aren’t other scenarios or that men don’t get raped. Schulze, Koon-Magnin, and Bryan (2019) have posited the need for more LGBT+ inclusivity around discussions of rape myths. Specifically, their work focuses on power dynamics between perpetrator and victim, which is critical in both gender and sexuality – emphasizing the need to go beyond the male perpetrator and female victim scenario (Schulze et al., 2019).

It is in this environment of doubting the accuser, the accused and their defenders can easily manufacture a response, as seen with Trump calling all of the women who came forward liars and threatening to sue them (Blumell, 2019). The type of framing that disparages those coming forward and protects the accused sticks in news coverage because 1) it’s common, and 2) the power of the accused. The power of whom Entman (1993, p. 52) describes as *communicators*, is that they handpick texts (images, stereotypes, catchphrases, information sources, judgments, etc.) to guide the receivers’ thinking. Regardless of their merit, popularized news frames can influence the public’s judgment (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

### *Episodic and thematic framing*

Frames can be generic or issue-specific. De Vreese (2005) argues that generic frames can increase representational validity in order to better generalize and theory build. Generic frames are frames that can be used for various topics and which “transcend thematic limitations” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 54). Generic frames are likely not from critical perspectives, and are therefore limiting. For example, specific political and ideological frames emerge from specific issues, which feed into greater cultural, social, and political systems (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997), and have substantial impact on public attitudes. Take, for instance, the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” frames familiar in US news coverage on reproductive rights (Colker, 1992). Or how from affirmative action measures implemented in the 80s and 90s came the false term “reverse discrimination” (Becker, 1997).

Generic frames can also overlap or remain too broad when focusing on specific events. Nonetheless, like many other news stories, the confirmation hearings of Thomas and Kavanaugh intertwine with two common generic frames identified by Iyengar (1990): episodic and thematic. By studying how poverty is framed in news coverage in the US, Iyengar (1990, 1994) noted a greater emphasis on individuals or episodic framing, over tackling poverty as a whole or thematic framing. The result is two-fold: 1) episodic frames shift responsibility away from powerful actors such as politicians onto the individual, and 2) framing effects research shows audiences have decreased empathy toward those with lower socioeconomic status when exposed to episodic framing compared to when exposed to thematic framing (Iyengar, 1990, 1996).

Part of the controversy surrounding Hill and Blasey Ford was the dualism of focusing on the individual case (episodic), as well as emergent socio-political issues such as rape culture (thematic). Regan (1994) notes the confusion this created in the Hill case and how both Republican and Democratic politicians teetered between focusing on the individuals (Thomas

and Hill), as well the greater implications at stake. This was especially apparent for Senate committee chair Joe Biden (D), who during the hearing explicitly stated its purpose was to evaluate the worthiness of Thomas to SCOTUS, and not debate the issue of sexual abuse, even though the issue was important (Regan, 1994).

## Research questions

Based on the literature of episodic and thematic framing (Iyengar, 1990, 1994, 1996), the first research question seeks to understand the dominant episodic and thematic news frames in the Hill and Blasey Ford case, and their possible counter frames by asking:

RQ1: How do episodic and thematic news frames manifest during the Hill and Blasey Ford cases?

In relation to the cascade model (Entman, 2004), the next two-part research question identifies the dominant framing by Bush and Trump and the frequency of their source use in the sample:

RQ2a: How did the dominant framing by Bush and Trump manifest in news coverage?

RQ2b: How were Bush and Trump used as sources during the Hill and Blasey Ford cases?

Finally, the last research question focuses on the cascading actions within the model to better understand how Bush and Trump's frames flowed through the system, specifically within news coverage:

RQ3: How did the presidents' frames cascade via other actors in relation to:

- (a) Repeating the dominant frames.
- (b) Challenging the dominant frames.

## Method

This study was a content analysis ( $N = 901$ ) of print and TV network news coverage of the testimonies of Anita Hill ( $n = 482$ ) and Christine Blasey Ford ( $n = 419$ ). In order to identify dominant frames for the cascade model, this study also examined George H.W. Bush's press briefings ( $n = 10$ ), Donald Trump's press releases ( $n = 7$ ) and tweets ( $n = 19$ ), Democratic press materials ( $n = 12$ ), and the testimonies of Hill and Blasey Ford.

### *Sampling*

The sample was set for six months, beginning with the first mentions of Hill/ Blasey Ford in the news. Six months was an adequate timeline as it encapsulated the news cycle for both cases. For Hill, the timeline ranged between October 6, 1991, and April 6, 1992, with her testimony occurring on October 11, 1991. For Blasey Ford, the timeline ranged between September 16,



2018, and March 16, 2019, with her testimony occurring on September 27, 2018. In the Hill sample, 82.6% of coverage occurred in October 1991, fading to 4.8% in November, and 1.5% in December. There was a slight spike to 8.7% in February 1992, but March and April combined were only .8% of coverage. In the Blasey Ford sample, 74.5% of coverage occurred in September 2018, 23.4% in October, followed by a sharp decrease to 2.1% for the remaining months combined.

Even though Ford's news coverage includes online and alternative news media, to maintain equivalency with the pre-digital news coverage of Hill's original testimony in 1991, the sample focused only on traditional news media of national (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*) and regional (*The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Post*, *Daily News*, *The Philadelphia Daily News*, *The Atlanta Journal*, and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) newspapers. Newspapers were identified by choosing the "major US newspapers" option in the LexisNexis database. Also, included was a TV network sample consisting of ABC, NBC, and CBS, which are the original "big three" networks in the US (Hindman & Wiegand, 2008). In comparative communication research, Wirth and Kolb (2012) stress the importance of sample equivalence, specifically construct or functional equivalence. To include online news and partisan cable news media such as Fox News and MSNBC, which did not exist during the Hill testimony, would be dissimilar to traditional print and network TV news. Therefore, only similar news media were used in this study. Future research of Blasey Ford should include cable news and online news media.

LexisNexis searches consisted of the search words "Anita Hill" or "Christine Blasey Ford" in order to isolate coverage specifically relating to the testimonies of the women. Duplicates, online articles, wire stories, editorials, opinion pieces, and non-related stories were eliminated from the sample. Duplicates and non-news related TV programming, such as the talk show *The View*, were also eliminated. The final sample included 482 coding units for Hill (newspapers = 285, TV = 197), and 419 coding units for Blasey Ford (newspapers = 259, TV = 160).

The researchers used the same sample dates for the presidential press materials. C-SPAN provided Bush's press briefing transcripts for the Anita Hill case ( $n = 10$ ). The official Whitehouse website ([whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov)) archived Trump's press materials ( $n = 7$ ), and an archival website ([trumptwitterarchive.com](http://trumptwitterarchive.com)) documented Trump's tweets in the Blasey Ford case ( $n = 19$ ). For the counter side, press materials from the Democratic National Committee's website ([democrats.org](http://democrats.org)) ( $n = 7$ ), and C-SPAN materials from Democratic politicians regarding Anita Hill ( $n = 5$ ) were analyzed. Transcripts of both Hill and Blasey Ford's testimonies were also reviewed.

### *Code development*

The codebook for this study included an introduction to the study and its intent, specific variables, and their corresponding levels of measurement, and instructions on how to code each variable (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014).

### Frames

Much of quantitative coding is deductive only – developing variables based on existing literature or previously tested variables (see Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2016). Frame analysis can be

both inductive and deductive, or a combination of the two as is the case with this study (De Vreese, 2005). The first step was to read the presidential materials carefully, organizing data into smaller textual units or by “chunks” (e.g. Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 247; McKee, 2003), which enabled the researchers to identify the subthemes and examples within the episodic and thematic frames. The remaining political materials and the Senate hearings’ transcripts were also analyzed through the same process. The researchers then conducted a pilot study of 50 news articles from the sample to ensure the identified frames addressed the scope of the news coverage (Linstrom & Marais, 2012). Once the pilot test was complete, the subthemes were finalized and then incorporated into the codebook as dichotomous variables. They were then deductively coded with the other variables in the coding process.

These are the results of the inductive analysis: The inductive assessment showed Bush and Trump publically promoted similar episodic and thematic framing. Episodically, the presidents consistently stated how worthy their nominee was of being on SCOTUS and attacked Democratic politicians for their behavior during the confirmation process. Thematically, the presidents discussed the importance of maintaining American values and the rule of law (patriarchy) while faced with an unexpected obstacle. Dissimilarly, Trump was negative toward Blasey Ford while Bush avoided directly attacking Hill.

To counter White House framing, Democratic politicians also used a combination of episodic and thematic framing. Episodically, since many Democratic politicians chose not to confirm the nominee, they accordingly spoke as to why he was not deserving of the Supreme Court position. Democratic politicians also showed support for Hill/Blasey Ford and attacked Republican politicians for their behavior during the confirmation process. In the case of Blasey Ford, Democratic politicians also courted voters for support in the impending 2018 mid-term elections. Thematically, Democratic politicians focused on the systemic problem of sexual abuse and why the confirmation threatened progressive rights. See Table 1 for the full details of the framing for confirmation sourced from the White House and Republican politicians, and against confirmation sourced by Democratic politicians.

On the confirmation side, episodically, deserving encapsulates a common reaction to high profile sexual abuse cases. That is to show compassion for the accused over the survivor (Weiss, 2009) – particularly to point out how the accusation ruins his life, and in this case career (Payne et al., 1999). Negative includes discrediting Hill/Blasey Ford, which is also common in sexual abuse cases, especially to say the person is lying (Payne et al., 1999; Weiss, 2009). For politics, political communication is most often created through competing frames (Entman, 1993), which in the US polarizes debates via the two major political parties. Furthermore, when politics and social justice issues collide, politicians and news media tend to redirect attention to political implications

**Table 1.** Episodic and thematic framing.

	Episodic Framing	Examples	Thematic Framing	Examples
<i>Confirmation</i>	<i>Deserving</i>	"... I have done nothing but increase my enthusiasm for Clarence Thomas." (Bush at press conference, 9/27/91) "Judge Brett Kavanaugh is a fine man, with an impeccable reputation ..." (Trump tweet, 9/21/18)	<i>American values</i>	"... the power of the American ideal, the values of faith and family, of hard work and opportunity, are the values that unite us all that give America meaning." (Bush at confirmation, 10/23/91) "It is up to us to re-dedicate ourselves to the traditions and wisdom of our Founders ..." (Trump at confirmation, 10/8/18)
	<i>Negative (Hill/Blasey Ford)</i>	"I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr. Ford was as bad as she says, charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents ..." (Trump tweet, 9/21/18) "...I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. What neighborhood was it in? I don't know. Where's the house? I don't know. Upstairs, downstairs, where was it? I don't know ..." (Trump at rally, Haberman & Baker, 2018)	<i>Rule of law</i>	"I do believe the Senate Committee has conducted itself in a very fair way ..." (Bush at press conference, 9/27/91) "Just started, tonight, our 7th FBI investigation of Judge Brett Kavanaugh. He will someday be recognized as a truly great Justice of The United States Supreme Court!" (Trump tweet, 9/28/19)
	<i>Politics</i>	"The American people saw some of the seamier sides of Washington life" (Bush at press conference, 10/24/91) "... VOTERS ARE REALLY ANGRY AT THE VICIOUS AND DESPICABLE WAY DEMOCRATS ARE TREATING BRETT KAVANAUGH!" (Trump tweet, 10/3/18)		

(Continued)

**Table 1. (Continued).**

	Episodic Framing	Examples	Thematic Framing	Examples
Against Confirmation	<i>Not deserving</i>	"Judge Thomas is not the best-qualified American to be on the Supreme Court." (Sen. George Mitchell at confirmation debate, 10/15/91) "The Judge Kavanaugh the American people saw ... does not have the character, the temperament, or the judgment to sit on the highest court in our land." (Sen. Kamala Harris website, 10/6/18)	<i>Raise awareness</i>	"The nation is going through a very important teach-in on sexual harassment, but I'm afraid the Senate is about to flunk the course." (Sen. Barbara Mikulski at confirmation debate, 10/15/91) "You are affecting the culture of our country ... how we deal with survivors who come forward right now is unacceptable" (Sen. Cory Booker at hearing, 9/27/18).
	<i>Support (Hill/Blasey Ford)</i>	"I believe Anita Hill. I believe what she said" (Sen. Robert Byrd at confirmation debate, 10/15/91) "Her story is credible and I believe her." (Sen. Mazie Hirono website, 9/16/18)	<i>Threat to rights</i>	"How could Thomas ever be believed when he had denied ever discussing Roe v. Wade ... ?" (Rep. Nita Lowey statement, 10/12/91) "If Brett Kavanaugh is confirmed to the Supreme court, he could overturn Roe v. Wade and set women's rights back decades ..." (Kirsten Gillibrand tweet, 7/19/18)
	<i>Politics</i>	"The administration's troops led a seek-and-destroy mission against Anita Hill ..." (Sen. Patrick Leahy at confirmation debate, 10/15/91) "If you are angry that our leaders have thrown away honesty, decency, and fairness for their own partisan gain, vote" (DNC website, Perez & Shackelford, 2018, para. 1).		

of the situation, as the case with the Access Hollywood tape during the 2016 US presidential campaign (Blumell, 2019). It is not surprising both political parties focused on politics.

Thematically for the confirmation side, discussing American values reflects the underlying motivation of Republican politicians to maintain the patriarchy. The patriarchal status quo or patriarchy is any culture that "affords men certain privileges and entitlements that are not available to women" (Dickerson, 2013, p. 103). In relation to controlling SCOTUS, Republican politicians seek to limit women's rights under the law (Borgmann, 2013; Jensen & Weasel, 2006). For example, Trump has been vocal about his goal to restrict reproductive rights (Jackson, 2019; Wong, 2019). Bush was also anti-reproductive rights, though at times more moderate than Trump (McCammon, 2018). Bush and Trump focused on this indirectly in their press materials by highlighting "American" values and traditions.

*Rule of law* addresses the change to the system addressing the accusations poses, which is

also patriarchal. Members of the public such as Hill and Blasey Ford have historically little influence on Supreme Court nominations. Furthermore, sexual abuse is often brushed aside, especially in politics (Sisk, 2018), and therefore seriously reacting to accusations would fundamentally change the system. Both Bush and Trump focused on the importance of Hill and Blasey Ford having “due” process within the confirmation process, but that equally the due process would in no way inhibit their nominee’s confirmation.

As stated above, Democratic politicians expectedly focused episodically on not confirming the nominee and supporting Hill/Blasey Ford. Thematic framing against confirmation includes two major subthemes. *Raise awareness* comes from the stated intentions of both Hill and Blasey Ford to inform the Senate and public of their sexual abuse experiences (“Nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas,” 1991; Vesoulis, 2018). In the process, news media reported other survivors also came forward, and the cases increased awareness about the systemic problem of sexual abuse (Alter, 2018; Strauss, 2017).

*Threat to rights* addresses how the confirmation poses a risk to rights by 1) scaling back reproductive rights and other progressive legislation, and 2) placing someone accused of sexual abuse on SCOTUS. In a 40-year content analysis of US news coverage of the women’s movement, Terkildsen and Schnell (1997) commonly found the political rights frame.

### *Sources*

One common framing device is source use (Tankard, 2001). Journalists heavily rely on sources in order to verify and obtain new information (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In this study, a source is a person directly quoted within the sample unit. A series of dichotomous variables were developed to code for sources with direct quotes for this study. The source variables included the president (Bush or Trump), Republican politicians, Democratic politicians, conservative other, liberal other, activist, civil society (NGO, lawyer, religious leader, etc.), ordinary citizen, celebrity, Hill/Blasey Ford, and Thomas/Kavanaugh.

### *Source challenge*

As part of measuring the cascade model (Entman, 2004), challenge variables were included for the president, Republican politicians, Democratic politicians, Hill/Blasey Ford, and Thomas/Kavanaugh. To challenge, in this study constituted a counter argument or disagreement in direct relation to what the source has said. For instance, after Trump tweeted Blasey Ford should’ve called the police when the reported incident happened, Republican Senators Susan Collins and Jeff Flake stated in the press they opposed Trump’s statement. As Collins said, “. . . I thought that the president’s tweet was inappropriate and wrong” (Sullivan, Min Kim, & Wagner, 2018, para. 16). Each challenge variable identified who was challenging the actor. The categories of the challenger were as follows: journalist/media, Republican politician, Democratic politician, civil society/activist, celebrity, ordinary person, Hill/ Blasey Ford, and Thomas/Kavanaugh. This variable had a second column for cases where more than one source challenged the actor. Using SPSS, the researchers later recoded both columns into individual dichotomous variables for each challenge source and then combined the dichotomous variables on a mean scale in order to test the level that each actor was being challenged by various sources. This is referred to as the “level of challenge.”

### Intercoder reliability

After finalizing the codebook and pilot testing, both researchers coded 100 articles, or just over 10% of the sample, for intercoder reliability. After the first round, for the framing variables: American values ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), threat to rights ( $\alpha = .94$ ), deserving ( $\alpha = .83$ ), not deserving ( $\alpha = .88$ ), politics ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and rule of law ( $\alpha = .83$ ) achieved acceptable results. President source ( $\alpha = .90$ ), president challenge ( $\alpha = .93$ ), Republican politician ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), Republican challenge ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), Democratic politician ( $\alpha = .93$ ), Democratic politician challenged ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), conservative other ( $\alpha = .88$ ), liberal other ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), activist ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), Hill/Blasey Ford ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), and Thomas/Kavanaugh ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ) also achieved intercoder reliability.

After further explicating the remaining variables, a second round yielded acceptable results for the raise awareness frame ( $\alpha = .83$ ), negative frame ( $\alpha = .84$ ), celebrity ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), ordinary citizen ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ), and Kavanaugh challenge ( $\alpha = .80$ ) variables. A third round resulted in acceptable results for the remaining variables: support ( $\alpha = .82$ ), civil society ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and Hill/Blasey Ford challenge ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

### Results

The researchers used statistical analysis in SPSS to answer the research questions. RQ1 sought to identify the use of episodic and thematic framing in both cases. In order to understand the correlation between the frames, a series of chi-square with Phi and Cramer's V tests were run. Tables 2 and 3 list the full results, along with the M and SD. Results show episodic and thematic framing occurred in tandem with each other to both counter and support. Overall, episodic framing was more common than thematic in both cases.

Table 2  
*Chi-square results between frames in the Anita Hill case (df = 1).*

	$\chi^2$	$\phi_c$	M (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Episodic	1. Deserving		.48 (.5)								
	2. Not deserving		.2 (.4)	28.09***							
	3. Hill Negative		.37 (.48)	36.18***	20.86***						
	4. Hill Support		.48 (.5)	4.62*	16.61***	24.03***					
	5. Politics		.49 (.5)	23.19***	5.7**	1.02	.15				
Thematic	6. American values		.06 (.23)	5.67**	5.09*	.001	1.58	9.5***			
	7. Rule of law		.23 (.42)	3.46	1.89	1.82	2.88	24.3***	7.79**		
	8. Raise awareness		.33 (.47)	1.60	.53	.01	3.37	.31	1.5	5.32*	
	9. Threat to rights		.35 (.48)	12.7***	54.44***	1.89	44.02***	5.48**	15.66***	.03	2.17
					.17	.34	.06	.3	.11	.18	.01

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 3  
Chi-square results between frames in the Christine Blasey Ford case ( $df = 1$ ).

	$\chi^2$	$M (SD)$	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Episodic										
	1. Deserving	.64 (.48)								
	2. Not deserving	.42 (.49)	4.89*							
	3. Blasey Ford Negative	.53 (.5)	24.42***	4.61*						
	4. Blasey Ford Support	.52 (.49)	.35	14.32***	1.97					
	5. Politics	.51 (.5)	6.91**	.95	19.71***	1.3				
Thematic	6. American values	.16 (.37)	3.72*	1.28	14.65***	.08	31.96***			
	7. Rule of law	.17 (.38)	11.38***	15.28***	24.72***	.81	13.44***	40.10***		
	8. Raise awareness	.54 (.5)	.48	50.33***	.05	.05	10.3***	.08	3.71*	
	9. Threat to rights	.28 (.45)	4.27*	33.56***	4.35*	25.80***	.15	17.80***	8.72**	28.31***

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

Firstly, in the Hill case, deserving and not deserving were significant counters to each other, along with negative and support. All four were also significant in all combinations with each other. Thematic framing of threat to rights appeared in 70.4% of American values, but rule of law and raise awareness were negatively significant.

The crossover between episodic and thematic framing was most common with threat to rights – appearing significantly within 43.1% of deserving, 67% of not deserving, 50.2% of support, and 40.3% of politics. Also, significantly appearing in thematic framing was politics at 77.8% of American values, 69.7% of rule of law, and 56.2% of threat to rights. Table 3 shows results for Blasey Ford were slightly different from Hill. For episodic framing, once again deserving, negative, and not deserving correlated with each other, but support was only significant with not deserving. Thematically, rule of law and threat to rights correlated with all subthemes. American values and raise awareness did not correlate. When examining the frames collectively, interestingly, politics appeared in all of the confirmation framing at 55.4% of deserving, 60.7% of negative, 81.4% of American values, and 70.4% of rule of law. However, it was only significantly within 43.4% of raising awareness on the against confirmation side.

Next, RQ2a asked to categorize the dominant frames by Bush and Trump in the sampled news coverage. Based on the inductive frame assessment, the content analysis of news articles indicated that Bush's episodic framing was most common in the overall sample, namely politics (49%) and deserving (48%). However, Bush's thematic framing was at 23% for rule of law and

only 6% for American values. The most common counter in the Hill case was support at 47%. In the Blasey Ford case, Trump's episodic framing was popular, with deserving (64%) being the most common overall. Negative (53%) and politics (51%) were also popular; nevertheless, so were support (52%) and raise awareness (54%). Like Bush, Trump's thematic framing was not common with American values at 16% and rule of law at 17%.

The second part of the question (RQ2b) sought to understand how the news coverage used the president as a source. Tables 4 and 5 show chi-square results with Phi and Cramer's V tests between all news sources and the episodic and thematic framing. Not surprisingly, the source use of Bush was most prevalent in deserving (83.3%) and politics (76.2%). Notably, not deserving (32%) was also significant for Bush – indicating news coverage used not deserving as a counter to Bush as he promoted his own schemas.

Similarly, the source use of Trump was significant in his promoted episodic framing of deserving (76.4%), politics (66%), and negative (66.5%). This time, Trump was also a significant source for American values (22.2%). Unlike Bush, Trump negatively correlated with the counter framing of not deserving, raise awareness, and threat to rights. Overall, the results indicate both presidents

Table 4

*Chi-square results between frames and sources in the Anita Hill case (df = 1).*

$\chi^2$ $\phi_c$	Deserving	Not Deserving	Negative	Support	Politics	American	Value of Law	Raise Awareness	Threat to Rights
Bush (17%) <sup>+</sup>	0.49*** 32	17.82*** .19	.62 .04	2.76 -.08	0.18*** 25	.44 6	.97 .08	.10 .04	.63 10
GOP politician (36.3%)	7.71*** 24	21.84*** .21	1.88*** .26	3.5 .09	9.99*** 32	.73 6	3.14*** 26	.33 .05	.25 05
Conservative (10%)	3.12*** 17	5.79** .1	.88 .08	.06 -.01	.69** 12	.75 4	.7 .02	.03 .002	.07 .01
Clarence Thomas (29.9%)	5.02*** 31	124.87*** .51	.27* .11	4.45 1	2.13*** 16	.0*** 4	0.22*** 15	.93** .11	8.3*** 20
Dem politician (40.7%)	9.28*** 20	34.94*** .27	.5* .10	11.02*** 15	2.23*** 30	.10 9	3.66*** 17	.17 .02	2.26*** 22
Liberal (8.5%)	.06 .01	.84 -.04	.09 .05	1.33 05	.64 .06	.04 .01	.78 .08	.03 .01	.31 03
Anita Hill (31.7%)	0.26*** 15	58.02*** .35	3.08*** .17	22.69*** 22	.64 .04	.19 .05	.01 .01	.54 .03	1.02*** 21
Activist (7.5%)	.82* .1	1.97 -.06	.08 .01	3.53** 14	.58 .06	.59 .04	.53* .1	9.96*** 20	.18** 12
Celebrity (2.5%)	.08 .05	.09 -.01	.06 .01	.03 01	.26 .02	.17 2	.43 .05	.32** 12	.55 .03
Civil Society (49.6%)	.55** .12	7.31** .12	.24** .12	18.3*** 2	.52** .13	.41 3	.21 .05	0.14*** 21	.43* 11
Ordinary person (20.3%)	.04 01	.04 -.01	.53** .11	10.71*** 15	.11* .1	.06 .01	.88* .1	.89* * 13	.37** 12

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

+ = total frequency of source in sample



Table 5

*Chi-square results between frames and sources in the Christine Blasey Ford case (df = 1).*

$\chi^2$ $\phi_c$	Deserving	Not Deserving	Negative	Support	Politics	American	Value of Law	Raise Awareness	Threat to Rights
Trump (50.6%) <sup>+</sup>	7.86*** 26	6.67** -13	9.37*** 27	3.69 -09	0.93*** 31	.21*** 5	.13 05	2.98*** .18	.01* .10
GOP politician (61.8%)	4.27*** 33	9.28** .15	0.64*** 22	1.18 05	3.93*** 32	0** 5	.35** 13	.07 04	.01 .01
Conservative (25.8%)	.38** 13	1.22 -05	.82** 15	3.18 -09	2.76*** 23	5.78*** 5	.71** 13	4.14*** .18	.5 04
Thomas Kavanaugh (42.2%)	1.87*** 32	57.22*** .37	1.87*** 17	1.13 -05	.63 06	.91 8	2.54*** 23	.38 11	.79 08
Dem politician (51.6%)	0.73*** 22	17.64*** .21	1.8*** 17	5.55** 13	8.44*** 3	.75** 5	2.19*** 17	1.75*** 17	.53 06
Liberal (4.1%)	.02 03	3.58* .09	.01 02	26 03	0.04** 16	.4 0	.39** 13	.06 04	.51** 12
Christine Blasey Ford (35.6%)	5.24*** 19	23.95*** .24	.61** 14	82 04	.93 08	.6 08	0.22*** 16	.35*** 15	.5 03
Activist (12.4%)	.04 01	28.82*** .26	.56 06	24.19*** 24	.17 03	3.68*** 8	3.17*** 18	7.94*** 3	5.75*** 33
Celebrity (4.5%)	.01 01	3.42 .09	.79 07	10.77*** 16	.15 57	.55 04	.08 .04	.86** 15	.78 04
Civil Society (41.1%)	.46 08	.00 -01	.01 01	19.64*** 22	.35 03	.36 3	.15 01	.17 04	.04 01
Ordinary person (32.7%)	0.68*** 16	9.72** .15	.62 08	26.63*** 25	.02 01	.91 8	.77 07	4.89*** 19	.12* 1

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

+ = total frequency of source in sample

successfully promoted their intended framing within news coverage, and their frames were prominent in the overall news coverage of both cases.

RQ3 examines to what extent the cascade model activated for both cases. Firstly, RQ3a asked what sources contributed to the presidents' framing. Table 4 indicates in the Hill case, alongside Bush, Republican politicians, conservatives, Thomas, Democratic politicians, and Hill were significant sources for deserving and not deserving. This shows that as the deserving cascaded, it was repeated by the confirmation side while the against confirmation side successfully countered with not deserving. For politics, all political sources expectedly contributed.

Unlike Bush, Republican politicians were negative (53.1%) against Hill, negative as well, was Thomas himself (44.4%), and Democratic politicians (42.3%). Democratic politicians had mixed support for Hill during the confirmation process (11 Democrats voted to confirm Thomas, Associated Press, 1991). Even though Democratic politicians were significant in their support for Hill, they have since been criticized for their treatment of her – especially former Vice President Joe Biden (Sonmez, 2019). Ordinary citizens used as sources contributed to negative (46.9%) and support (62.2%). In doing so, more discussed raise awareness (44.8%) and threat to rights

(45.9%) over confirmation thematic framing. Furthermore, activists, celebrities, and civil society also significantly used against confirmation thematic framing, but none for confirmation. In fact, though Republican politicians used rule of law (59.6%), and Thomas used American values (10.4%) and rule of law (31.9%), overall news coverage used fewer sources for thematic framing on the confirmation side when compared to the against confirmation side.

Table 5 indicates that similar to Hill, news coverage of the Blasey Ford case used Republican politicians, Kavanaugh, Democratic politicians, and Blasey Ford as sources for deserving and not deserving. Following Trump, Republican politicians, conservatives, and Kavanaugh were negative. Showing support were Democratic politicians, activists, celebrities, civil society, and ordinary people. Different from Hill, Blasey Ford news coverage had more variety of sources for confirmation thematic framing, particularly rule of law. During the confirmation process, Republican politicians emphatically repeated that voting no to Kavanaugh would be a major scandal and disruption to the American system. Take for instance, Senator John Cornyn (R) who said, “You’re not guilty if someone makes an allegation against you in this country. We’re not a police state. We don’t give the government that kind of power” (Eversden, 2018, para. 4).

Also different was how ordinary citizens contributed to deserving (38.3%), not deserving (41%), and support (43.9%), but not negative. Similarly, ordinary citizens only contributed thematically to against confirmation with raise awareness (40.8%) and threat to rights (40.2%).

The final analyses concentrated on whom challenged sources within the news coverage (RQ3a). It is important to note, this study looked at challenge in direct connection to what a source said. Therefore, many sources may be opposed to each other but not necessarily positioned in the news coverage to challenge their opposition’s direct quote. To test the level of challenge each significant actor received, the combined challenge variables were used in independent t-tests as a continuous variable along with the dichotomous variable of the two cases (either Hill or Blasey Ford).

Firstly, an independent t-test between the cases and the presidential challenge continuous variable showed significance,  $t(899) = -2.31, p < .05$ . President Trump ( $M = .02, SD = .04$ ) was challenged significantly more than Bush ( $M = .02, SD = .04$ ). However, both went largely unchallenged in the news coverage, with Trump challenged at 15.9% and Bush challenged at 10.7% in the total sample. Frequencies showed that for Bush, those challenging the most were Democratic politicians (5.6%), followed by journalists (2.3%), Republican politicians (1%), ordinary citizens (.8%), elites (.6%), and Anita Hill (.4%). For Trump, journalists (7.4%) challenged the most, with Republican politicians (4.5%), elites (2.1%), Democratic politicians (1.2%), ordinary citizens (.5%), and Blasey Ford (.2%) following. As mentioned above, the challenge from Republican politicians was not in connection to Trump’s pick for nominee, but rather the negative tweets and comments he made toward Blasey Ford (Sullivan et al., 2018).

Next, independent t-tests were run between the cases (Hill or Blasey Ford) and the respective combined challenge variables for Republican politicians, Democratic politicians, Thomas/Kavanaugh, and Hill/Blasey Ford. Results showed higher levels of challenge in the Blasey Ford case for each analysis. Firstly, Republican politicians in the Hill case ( $M = .02, SD = .05$ ) were challenged significantly less than in the Blasey Ford case ( $M = .07, SD = .07$ ),  $t(899) = -10.85, p < .001$ . Frequencies indicate Republican politicians in the Hill case were challenged most by Democratic politicians (7.1%), then journalists (3.5%), elites (2.5%), Hill (1%), and ordinary citizens (1%). The level of challenge increased against Republican politicians in the Blasey Ford case, with Democratic politicians challenging the most (24.3%), followed by

elites (14.3%), journalists (2.9%), ordinary citizens (2.2%), Republican politicians (1.9%), and Blasey Ford (.5%).

Measuring the Democratic challenge variable shows once again Democratic politicians in the Blasey Ford case ( $M=.06$ ,  $SD=.07$ ) were contested significantly more than in the Hill case ( $M=.02$ ,  $SD=.05$ ),  $t(899)=-10.92$ ,  $p<.001$ . The sources for challenging Democrats in the Hill case were Republican politicians (8.3%), journalists (2.5%), elites (1.9%), ordinary citizens (1.7%), Democratic politicians (1.2%), Hill (.6%) and Thomas (.4%). Once again levels of challenge were higher in the Blasey Ford case against Democratic politicians with Republican politicians (34.6%), Kavanaugh (6.4%), elites (2.6%), ordinary citizens (1.9%), journalists (1.9%), and Democratic politicians (1%).

Levels of challenge were higher for Kavanaugh ( $M=.06$ ,  $SD=.07$ ) than for Thomas ( $M=.03$ ,  $SD=.06$ ),  $t(899)=-7.48$ ,  $p<.001$ . For Thomas, Hill challenged the most (7.3%), followed by elites (5.4%), Democratic politicians (3.1%), ordinary citizens (2.3%), journalists (1.5%), and Republican politicians (.6%). For Kavanaugh, similarly Blasey Ford was highest (16.2%), then elites (9.3%), Democratic politicians (7.6%), ordinary citizens (5.3%), journalists (3.3%), and Republican politicians (.5%).

Finally, Blasey Ford ( $M=.54$ ,  $SD=.4$ ) was challenged significantly more than Hill ( $M=.29$ ,  $SD=.38$ ),  $t(899)=-9.85$ ,  $p<.001$ . Hill's challengers were Republican politicians (19.9%), then Thomas (16.4%), elites (11.4%), ordinary citizens (6%), Democratic politicians (2.5%), and journalists (1%). Blasey Ford's challengers were Republican politicians (51.1%), then Kavanaugh (34.6%), ordinary citizens (13.9%), elites (4.7%), Democratic politicians (1.2%), and journalists (1.4%). By far, Hill and Blasey Ford were the most challenged compared to the remaining sources and were the only ones to be consistently challenged by more than one source. In total, Hill had at least one source challenge in 40.5% of news coverage and Blasey Ford in 73% of news coverage. This compared to Thomas who was challenged at 20.1% and Kavanaugh who was challenged at 42.5%.

## Discussion

This study used content analysis of US newspapers and TV networks ( $N=901$ ) and an inductive frame analysis of relevant presidential press materials to understand the cascading network activation model (Entman, 2004) within the news coverage of Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford. The cases had striking similarities as both women intended to report anonymously but eventually publically testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee, came forward against a Republican nominee, faced severe public scrutiny, raised awareness, and mobilized activists to stand up against sexual abuse. The results were also the same: both nominees now sit on the Supreme Court. Despite 27 years of various gender equality advancements, a year of the women (Strauss, 2017), the #metoo movement (Harris, 2018), and polls indicating the public found Blasey Ford more credible than Kavanaugh (Montanaro, 2018), the outcome remained the same. Notably, just as President George H. W. Bush stood by Clarence Thomas, Donald Trump didn't waver from promoting Thomas Kavanaugh. One difference between the cases was the intersection of gender and race in the case of Hill (Bryan, 1992). Thomas himself related the proceedings as a "high-tech lynching" (Smitherman, 1995, p. 8) to draw upon the imageries of slavery and abuse to Black people in the US.

The cascade model explains the power of the president and other political elites to shape news coverage of important events – without news media challenging them significantly in the

process (Kolmer & Semetko, 2009). Though there was opposition against Thomas and Kavanaugh, news media continued to privilege the White House's messaging. Thus, news coverage infrequently challenged the presidents directly. Trump, who pushed rape culture narratives against Blasey Ford – repeating his behavior chronicled during the news cycle of his own admitted and accused sexual abuse (e.g. Blumell & Huemmer, 2019), was challenged only 5.2% more than Bush. Trump was also a source in 50.6% of coverage vs. Bush at only 17%. Specifically, word searches of the entire sample show, “Access Hollywood” only appeared eight times. Consequently, news coverage lacked significant counter frames to Trump's negative framing of Blasey Ford. Though Bush himself wasn't negative in his messaging like Trump, he didn't counter the negativity of the Republican Party toward Hill.

The findings of both cases support the cascade model and add that the degree of effort put forth by the president will be reciprocated by news media. Bush was more reserved than Trump, and it resulted in less coverage. Nevertheless, reserved or not, being president positioned Bush as a significant player. On the other hand, it was relatively easy for Trump to attract media attention, even though many of his statements were unsupported, negative, and uphold rape culture. The findings do challenge the simplification of messages during activation spreading (Entman, 2004). In both cases, the president started with simplistic messages that either ignored or undermined greater social justice contexts. Further research is needed to understand if the precedent for promoting public policy implementation differs from presidential appointments in terms of the amount of information required to legitimize the president's desires to the public. In terms of SCOTUS nominees, it appears to be very little information required, even though it is a life-long appointment.

Both presidents successfully introduced dominant frames in the news coverage through 1) emphasizing episodic frames, and 2) building on culturally congruent schemas. Iyengar (1994, 1996) notes news is generally episodic and focuses on individual case studies rather than reporting on the societal level. By doing so, the responsibility shifts to the individual rather than holding those in power accountable (Iyengar, 1990). For the current study, those on the confirmation side repeatedly concentrated on the nominee's worthiness and his experienced unfair treatment in order to avoid addressing sexual abuse. They also successfully shifted responsibility for the controversy back to the women coming forward or the Democratic Party rather than take responsibility for supporting a questionable nominee. These results show the need for news media to concentrate more on thematic news coverage as a way to hold elites responsible.

Furthermore, the chances of serving on the Supreme Court are miniscule – even less for women and people of color (94.7% have been white men, Campisi, 2018). The acute inequality and unlikelihood of becoming a Justice should thwart anyone's perceived entitlement to it; yet, episodic framing in the news coverage successfully emphasized both nominees' merit while simultaneously discrediting the women who came forward against them. These findings support previous research, which shows when survivors come forward they are often dismissed and doubted, while the accused are pitied and supported (Buchwald et al., 1993; Payne et al., 1999; Weiss, 2009).

In other words, Bush and Trump successfully promoted their nominee through episodic framing because it was culturally congruent (Entman, 2008; Kornprobst, 2019) to rape culture narratives (Buchwald et al., 1993; Payne et al., 1999; Weiss, 2009). Though not frequently used for Hill, thematically, Trump and Republican politicians also shifted attention away from sexual abuse to the “danger” addressing Blasey Ford's testimony posed to US judicial and political

systems. Fear of disrupting the patriarchy is another predominant culturally congruent narrative repackaged in various forms in the struggle for most gender, racial, and sexuality reforms. For years, conservatives in the US have argued legalizing gay marriage poses a threat to the traditional heteronormative family (Brumbaugh, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2008). Conservatives also cite mothers working outside the home as destroying the family (Coontz, 2016). Slavery continues to be justified in US history as terrible but necessary for economic prosperity (Ford, 2009). Relating to eradicating rape culture, not long after #metoo began journalists, elites, and the public began the narrative that the movement went too far. Even during the Blasey Ford case, Trump stated, “It’s a very scary time for young men in America” (Diamond, 2018, para. 1). These false or exaggerated ideas continue to be mostly unchallenged by news media. In particular, news coverage would improve if news professionals more explicitly identified repressive societal constructs such as rape culture and the patriarchy in their work. This would also require more inclusive source use and less reliance on elites. The patriarchy advantaged Thomas and Kavanaugh, even when facing serious accusations. Nevertheless, episodic and thematic counter framing did occur in both cases. Along with the negative framing of Hill, was support. And not deserving framing countered deserving framing for Thomas and Kavanaugh.

Thematically, the against confirmation side was considerably more present than the confirmation side with raise awareness in 54% of Blasey Ford coverage and 33% of Hill coverage, and threat to rights in 28% of Blasey Ford coverage and 35% of Hill coverage. Remarkably, more variety of sources also contributed to against confirmation thematic framing compared to confirmation framing. For instance, ordinary citizens concentrated on episodic framing of deservingness or negativity but did not significantly focus on American values or rule of law. They did however speak to raise awareness and threat to rights. This is in part, because of the public mobilization centered on social justice, and private citizens coming forward with their own experiences. Such as a woman named Brenda who called into C-SPAN, “I’m a 76-year-old woman who was sexually molested in the second grade. This brings back so much pain . . .” (“Open Phones,” 2018).

The presence of support for Hill and Blasey Ford and awareness to greater societal implications is important. Nevertheless, along with the counter frames came high levels of negativity and challenge. Of all the sources, Hill and Blasey Ford were challenged the most. Incredibly, Blasey Ford at 73% and Hill at 40.5%. This was more than double the level of challenge toward Thomas (20.1%) and Kavanaugh (42.5%). As Entman (2008) discussed, the combination of congruent and incongruent frames produces ambiguity. This analysis shows overall congruence in both cases is a lower risk for journalists (Entman, 2008) as opposed to news coverage, which challenges rape culture and patriarchal entitlement.

### *Limitations and future research*

Limitations include the primary focus on a quantitative method, which provided several statistical results but further qualitative inquiry is needed. Sampling cable TV news networks, and in the case of Blasey Ford, online news coverage would also enhance the study. The sampled news media of this study were moderate and so further analysis of partisan news media would most likely result in greater differences between organizations and the medium. Preliminary analysis of this sample showed very few significant differences between the print and TV sample, and therefore given the complexity of the analysis, the media were not divided by

medium or organization for this study. Future research could provide further results by focusing on the medium. It could also be useful to focus on non-news media to better understand if the messages spread beyond news.

There are also many ways to approach researching these cases beyond concentrating on the top-down influencers. Additional focus on the bottom-up influencers, such as activists should be included in the future research. The only framing device focused on in this study was sources. Exploring other framing devices, such as headlines, photos, leads, logos, etc. (see Tankard, 2001), could help nuance the findings. Studying the framing effects of news coverage and presidential messaging would also be useful since public opinion polls seemed to shift in favor of Blasey Ford when compared to Hill (Montanaro, 2018; Rucinski, 1993). This also points to a need for further investigating how news organizations consider the audience, since news coverage still heavily focuses on presidential messaging regardless of public opinion.

## Conclusion

Examining the cascade model during the news coverage of Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford showed Presidents Bush and Trump successfully introduced news framing, which Republican politicians repeated, and the opposition contested. Thematically and episodically, the confirmation side during the Hill case relied on the patriarchy to promote their candidate and during the Blasey Ford case, it was still culturally congruent for Republican politicians to do the same (Entman, 2008; Kornprobst, 2019) – even if there was greater opposition. The ambiguity (Entman, 2008) in the news coverage ultimately protected powerful actors, especially the presidents, from direct challenge. Instead, Hill and Blasey Ford bore the most critique. These results may deter survivors from challenging powerful figures in the future, especially via news media. The results also show that the success of a political party's nominee outweighs serious investigation into accusations of sexual abuse.

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