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Seeing both sides of the same coin: how equivalence framing influences citizens' satisfaction toward government concerning politically debated policy decisions in the environmental domain

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To my friends, who have supported me endlessly in this uphill battle of finishing this thesis. Thank you for making me laugh, for giving me a shoulder to cry on when I needed it most, and for ensuring me that everything would be alright in the end.
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Contents

Introduction

The use of framing is omnipresent in our day-to-day lives; from the advertisements we consume to the thoughts we have and the things we tell ourselves. Within the field of Public Administration, framing is present in how institutions present information within the policy cycle, for example in the evaluation stage of their performance or at the beginning within their agenda-setting power (James et al., 2020; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). This also links to the declining trust in governments on the European continent (Eurofound, 2022). It therefore becomes more important for governments to regain this trust. One of the ways governments try to do this is by sharing information on their performance, hoping that accountability ultimately enhances trust (James et al., 2020, p. 8). Within the Netherlands specifically, citizens have become more aware of how the government used framing in several administrative and political scandals that have been uncovered. Two of those examples are the gas extraction in the province of Groningen and the childcare benefits scandal, where in both cases, the government failed to act in policy implementations, which resulted in financial damages for families and irreversible mental damage. The latter case regarding the childcare benefits made the government resign because of its failing actions. It is thus important to understand how framing changes the way we perceive information, specifically when that information is coming from government institutions. This leads to the research question:

How does equivalence framing influence citizens' satisfaction with their government concerning politically debated environmental policy decisions?

This thesis aims to understand how equivalence framing can influence citizens' perception and thus satisfaction with policy decisions taken by the government, with the use of a vignette experiment.

Academic relevance

This thesis tries to add to the existing literature about equivalence framing within Public Administration and Political Science. While equivalence framing has been used by a myriad of scholars, most of the research highlights the (dis)satisfaction of services and institutions (e.g. Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Olsen, 2015), or how a frame influences managers or politicians in their decision-making process (e.g. Baekgaard et al., 2019; Belardinelli et al., 2018) or how frames influence (political) opinions (Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2007b; Koch & Peter, 2017). This thesis is an addition to the existing literature by looking at a specific policy domain: the environment. A lot of literature on framing is related to economic frames and their strengths (Druckman, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). This thesis will also investigate cases where policy decisions have been politically debated. This means that the cases that will be used get a lot of media attention and are actively on the political agenda.

Societal relevance

This thesis has societal relevance because it tries to highlight the importance of getting a better understanding of how people perceive frames and how people can be more proactive in recognizing these patterns. This becomes increasingly important as the use of performance information by governments is rising. Besides this, as people consume a lot more media, it is also important to gain more knowledge about the use of frames for media literacy purposes. Lastly, within the Netherlands, there have been multiple political debates about “renewing the administrative culture” of politics (Nieuwsuur, 2022), as well as scandals regarding policy decisions made by the former government of Rutte, who has been in power since 2010 until 2024. This thesis hopes to contribute to more effective communication, how to gain policy support, and how to create a more informed society.

This thesis will start with describing what performance information is, how this links to framing, what equivalence framing is, and how it has been studied in prior research in the theoretical framework section. After that, the methods will be discussed, which consist of the research design and decisions

that have been made to answer the research question. Two of these elements are the use of an online vignette survey and cases relating to the Groningen gas extractions, noise pollution caused by airports, and air pollution caused by steel manufacturing company Tata Steel. Third, the results of the survey will be analyzed. The gathered empirical data shows mixed support for the main hypothesis. Finally, the discussion and conclusion will describe the reasons why this might be the case, the limitations of this thesis, and the avenues for future research.

Theoretical framework

Performance information and its use

Performance metrics are becoming more important in the policymaking process. Governments produce more metrics than ever but do not use them to their full potential (James et al., 2020). Performance information is mostly used as "a cognitive process – it requires people to choose pieces of information, interpret them, and apply them in the form of a belief, decision, or action" (James et al., 2020, p. 1). Combined with this increase in performance metrics, advancements were made in behavioral sciences that went against the idea of the *Homo economicus* - who is rational and focused on maximizing utility - and gave more attention to how cognitive biases and emotions influence decisions, creating a new subfield: behavioral public administration (James et al., 2020). The reason for this uptick in the use of performance metrics, specifically within governments, is to show the commitment to the efforts that they have set out to do. This in turn should help with trust in government. Performance information and its use can thus have a compellingness to them. Studies have found that the way performance information is presented affects the way people respond to this information (James et al., 2020). The use of anecdotes is for example more powerful to convey performance information than static numbers. Or how slight changes in numbers can change the way we perceive performance information, for example in how a 6,0 and a 6,9 are perceived as equally good (James et al., 2020, p. 13). These examples show how important the framing of performance information is in how people perceive information and in turn how a frame can alter decision-making.

Frames in decision-making

When making a decision, one must choose between the possible outcomes or consequences that each decision brings with them. Rational choice theory (or utility theory) describes that this decision-making process is done by weighing the costs and benefits of different options and then choosing the option that maximizes utility. Prospect theory, proposed as an alternative to rational choice theory by Tversky and Kahneman (1979), challenges this by highlighting the deviations from rationality when decisions must be made under uncertain circumstances, and how individuals will make decisions based on perceived value and weighted probabilities. They make a distinction between "two phases in the choice process: an initial phase in which acts, outcomes, and contingencies are framed, and a subsequent phase of evaluation" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, p. 454). They argue that "the value function is commonly S-shaped", which means that gains on the smaller scale (€10 and €20) have a greater subjective difference than on a bigger scale (€110 and €120) (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, p. 454). The same goes for losses. Losses, however, are more extreme than gains, as individuals are more displeased by losses than equivalent gains (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, p. 454). This theory was linked to performance information by for example Baekgaard et al. (2019), who studied how the presentation of performance information influenced elected politicians' preferences (Baekgaard et al., 2019, p. 1). By studying how the preferences of politicians changed through the use of equivalence framing and the combined effect of rhetoric, format, and framing, they found that performance information has the strongest effect on politicians' preferences, compared to rhetoric or presentation format, which both also have an effect but to a lesser extent (Baekgaard et al., 2019, p. 2). Another example of how our decision-making can be influenced by its presentation is the study by Belardinelli et al. (2018), in which they researched if and how public managers are influenced by frames when they use performance information. They found that especially in the evaluation stage, frames affected the ratings of public managers.

Framing as a concept

Framing thus matters when decisions are being taken, as they influence not only the decision-maker in their choices but also the individual who is affected by the choice. Within the domain of Public Administration and Political Science, framing is a concept that has been researched by lots of scholars. The definition of framing for this thesis is by Druckman (2011). Framing refers to an individual's preference, shaped by prior experiences and how information is presented to this individual (Druckman, 2011). Frames in thought is the concept of how one bases their preferences or attitudes which come from a subset of dimensions, rather than all possible options (Druckman, 2011). These dimensions are available, accessible, and applicable or appropriate (Druckman, 2011, p. 9). To have a preference, an individual must have information available and have existing associations with the topic (Hameleers & Boukes, 2021, p. 930). This is only possible when an individual comprehends the meaning and significance of said information (Druckman, 2011, p. 9). Accessibility of this information is as important, as this refers to the way we unconsciously access the information based on contextual triggers or frequent usage of information. The more one is exposed to a frame, the more accessible it becomes. The applicability or appropriateness depends on the context and the strength an individual gives to the information based on the context. It can also depend on the motivation of an individual; if one deems a problem as irrelevant, the effect of the frame will be eliminated. Thus, when there is a conscious processing of information, the strength of this applicability is dependent on the available information and the judged persuasiveness or effectiveness (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2011, p. 9). When a frame is then accepted, a framing effect happens. This is when a frame nests into an individual's mind and leads them to change their attitude because of the influence of the frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 637; Hameleers & Boukes, 2021, p. 929). However, frames can also compete. Chong & Druckman (2007b) studied the strength of frames in democratic competitive contexts and the public's capacity to choose alternative frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 637). They describe frame strength as "the extent to which a frame emphasizes available and applicable considerations" (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 639). A frame is strong when the availability and applicability are highlighted to where it changes one's opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 640). Weak frames will most likely have no effect on an individual, as it does not match the compatibility of

one's preferences. They found that a strong frame had a significant influence on moving an individual's opinion, and that weak frames have barely any effect of changing one's preferences. Competition between frames made the respondents evaluate the frames more, therefore motivating people to consciously process and integrate the opposing viewpoints (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 651).

Equivalence framing

Research on equivalence framing shows that whether information is framed positively or negatively affects the evaluation that individuals make (Koch & Peter, 2017, p. 847). Equivalence framing (or valence framing) highlights how the same (thus equivalent) logical information is positioned, positively or negatively, and how this changes an individual's perspective (Holleman et al., 2020; Koch & Peter, 2017; Levin et al., 1998). An example of this is the study conducted by Levin & Gaeth (1988) in which they showed that perceptions changed whether ground beef was labeled "75% lean" or "25% fat" (Levin & Gaeth, 1988). Equivalence framing is different from other types of framing, like issue framing or emphasis framing, which are also media frames that try to influence or manipulate the perceptions and attitudes of their audience. Issue framing refers to how certain aspects of an issue are highlighted in the handover of information, with the goal of influencing the interpretation and evaluation of an issue (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). This is mostly done by highlighting values or beliefs, or changing the language of a frame. Emphasis framing happens when the emphasis is put on a specific part of an argument, to accentuate or conceal different dimensions of an issue (Koch & Peter, 2017, p. 848), which leads to different frames leading to different message content. This is done through repetition or strong language. Emphasis framing focuses on a specific sub-issue of a topic, for example, economic consequences, personal consequences, or morality (Entman, 1993; Hameleers & Boukes, 2021, p. 929). The difference between these types of framing is that issue framing focuses on the narrative, while emphasis framing is more about diverting the focus to a different aspect. This is in turn different from equivalence framing, which displays the equivalent information from a positive or negative frame.

Levin et al. (1998) differentiate three types of equivalence framing. First, risky choice framing, where a frame is used to show the outcomes of a potential choice that has different levels of risks, of which the risks are also shown in different ways. This was first introduced by Tversky & Kahneman (1981). An example of this is the study of Hameleers & Boukes (2021), where they looked at COVID-19 interventions and which of the frames would be strongest: the health frame or the economic frame depending on the type of COVID-19 intervention taken by the government. The second type is attribute framing, where a frame focuses on the characteristics of an object or event through a positive or negative lens. This type of framing will be the focus of the thesis. An example of this is the aforementioned study of Levin & Gaeth (1988), where they looked at the "75% lean" versus "25% fat". Within attribute framing, "the dependent measure of interest is not a choice between independent options, but it is instead a measure of the more basic process of evaluation" (Levin et al., 1998, p. 158). The third type is goal framing, where the goal of an action or behavior is highlighted within the frame (Levin et al., 1998, p. 150). An example of this is the study of IJzerman et al. (2024), in which they had cardiac patients fill in a survey on their intention to change their lifestyle based on whether a medical professional was involved. Their goal framing was to show the benefits of quitting smoking (more energy, better appearance, better sleep) versus the losses of not quitting smoking (increased risk of cardiovascular disease) (IJzerman et al., 2024, p. 39).

With the use of these frames, valence framing effects happen. This is when a frame shows the same information in either a positive or negative way (Levin et al., 1998, p. 150). A valence-consistent shift happens when even though equivalent information is being shown, the evaluation of the information changes based on the difference in formulation (Holleman et al., 2020, p. 281). This valence-consistent shift, however, can be influenced by negativity bias. Negativity bias takes place when, based on former experiences and one's susceptibility to negative frames, one is inclined to rate something as less good. The reason for this is that negative events stick with us more than positive events do, most likely due to our survival instincts (Tversky & Kahneman, 1979; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Negativity bias is also more visible in our day-to-day lives, for example in media coverage, where poor performance gets more clicks than good performance, and thus we are more exposed to it (James et al., 2020). When combined with the theory about loss aversion, where losses are psychologically

perceived as larger than gains (Tversky & Kahneman, 1979), this can increase negativity bias even more. This happens because the mind associates a positive frame with favorable associations, whereas the negative label of the same information evokes an unfavorable association (James et al., 2020, p. 24; Levin et al., 1998, p. 164). A study within Public Administration that shows this phenomenon is the study of Olsen (2015), who described how equivalence framing can have substantial effects on citizens' perception of public services (Olsen, 2015, p. 469) by looking at satisfaction and dissatisfaction rates of hospital services. His research showed that negative frames result in a much more negative evaluation compared to the positive frame, which is also consistent with other literature (e.g. Baekgaard et al., 2019; Druckman, 2011; Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

This leads to the hypothesis of this thesis. Based on the literature on equivalence framing and the literature on negativity bias, the hypothesis is as follows:
H1: Respondents will react more negatively to a negative frame compared to a positive frame.

Methodological approach

To answer the question of how equivalence framing influences citizens' satisfaction toward their government concerning politically debated policy decisions about the environment, the methodological approach will be described, starting with the research setting.

Research setting

This research will be conducted in the Netherlands and it is therefore necessary to give context on how environmental policies are organized in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has a multi-leveled policy system, where each actor at each level has its responsibilities in the policy cycle. Central to this system is the subsidiarity principle, which means that issues should be handled by the lowest level of authority possible. This system will be explained from the top level to the most local level, thus we

start at the national level. At this level, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management is responsible for the environmental policies regarding water management, transportation, and environmental quality. One of the most important agreements is the National Climate Accord, which is a public-private partnership to achieve the climate goals that are stipulated in the Paris Climate Accord on a national level (Rijksoverheid, 2024b). Next is the province level, where each province is responsible for spatial planning and regional environmental policies and coordinates with both the municipalities and the national government to align the national strategies. Then comes the local level, where municipalities are responsible for waste management, air quality, and urban planning. Lastly, as the Netherlands is part of the European Union (EU), it also must abide by EU laws and regulations regarding environmental policy. The Netherlands, specifically within the environmental domain, puts emphasis on cooperation and connection between governments, businesses, knowledge institutions, NGOs and citizens (Rijksoverheid, 2024a).

Research design

This research will be conducted by doing an online vignette experiment, through a survey using Qualtrics XM. It is a quantitative study because it focuses on gaining numerical data to say something about a broader phenomenon. This is a deductive between-subjects approach, which means this study tries to test a theory in the real world between two independent groups. This also makes it a positivist study (Toshkov, 2016). A between-subjects experiment is the most used method to research equivalence framing and its effects (Levin et al., 1998). The use of vignettes is one of the more common methods of researching equivalence framing and its effects (e.g. Koch & Peter, 2017; Levin et al., 1998; Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Olsen, 2015). Within this survey, participants randomly get assigned the positive or negative of each vignette case, with a total of three cases. This makes this study a ‘randomized controlled trial’ (Toshkov, 2016, p. 167).

Respondents will first be asked about their opinions on the following topics: 1) the implications of gas extractions, 2) noise pollution caused by airports, and 3) health implications due to air pollution. Afterward, the vignettes were randomly assigned to all three cases and asked how they would rate

government performance. Lastly, respondents were asked about personal details such as age and gender. The average time it took to complete the survey was 5 minutes.

This thesis will not go into the effects of multiple competing frames, for example when individuals are exposed to both the negative and positive frames of the same case. This thesis will only look at the logical equivalent.

Case selection

The cases that have been selected are policy problems that are in the decision-making stage or have just passed that stage. They have also been highly featured in the Dutch news and several debates within the House of Representatives have taken place about these cases, which means they are visible on the political agenda. When using salient topics, it could be that the information is more accessible, relevant, and available, and thus frames may have a more profound effect (Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Hameleers & Boukes, 2021, p. 928). However, it could also be the case that the opposite happens, where the frame does not achieve its effect, as the stronger an individual's beliefs are, or when an issue is more relevant to an individual, the less it is likely that a frame has its effect (Hameleers & Boukes, 2021, p. 933).

All the cases are part of the environmental domain. The environmental domain has been chosen as a research domain as the cases within it appeal to the imagination. They are, however, not as politically dominant or contentious as other cases, within or outside of the environmental domain. An example of a more political contentious case within the domain of the environment is the reduction of nitrogen, which have led to several farmer protests and a political party that is currently in the process of becoming part of the coalition. Because of the emotional response this can cause, it was decided not to use this case. The case of Groningen, which will be described in the following part, can potentially also be categorized as causing an emotional response, it is not a polarizing issue. It was therefore chosen to include this case within the study.

Case 1: Gas extractions in Groningen

In 1963, the Netherlands started extracting gas from the biggest gas field in Europe. Located in the province of Groningen, the gas field becomes the financial basis of the Dutch welfare state, making up 5 percent of the total Dutch economy at its peak and yielding 363 billion euros over the course of 60 years (Parlementaire Enquêtecommissie aardgaswinning Groningen, 2023). While at the start of the gas extractions there barely seemed to be any consequences, this changed when the Dutch Petroleum Company (NAM) found that the gas extractions would lead to subsidence. In 1993, it was concluded that the subsidence had earthquakes as a result and only in 2012, after an earthquake with a magnitude of 3.6 on the Richter-scale, the urgency of these earthquakes ended up on the political agenda due to damages. However, it took an extremely long time for these results to turn into different policy decisions: In 2014, the government decided to lower the extraction amount and after another big earthquake in 2018, the government decided to fully stop the gas extractions in 2030. On April 19th 2024, it was officially declared that by the 1st of October 2024, gas extractions in Groningen will be irreversibly stopped (NOS Nieuws, 2024b). This decision came 31 years after it was concluded that earthquakes in the region are caused by gas extractions. The handling of the gas extractions caused the people in the region to feel neglected, as they also did not reap the benefits of the billions of euros that were yielded.

On February 9th 2021, the House of Representatives appointed a Parliamentary Committee to inquire insight on how the decision-making process took place about the gas extractions, the handling of the caused damages, and the reinforcement operation. This inquiry took two years and concluded that the interests of the people of Groningen (Groningers) had structurally been ignored (Parlementaire Enquêtecommissie aardgaswinning Groningen, 2023). There were ten conclusions, with the first four underlining the most important take-aways. First, the problem has been structurally underestimated. Examples of this are the denial that the earthquakes and gas extractions were related, the underestimated magnitude of the earthquakes, and the underestimation of the damages this would cause and the impact this would have on the Groningers. Second, monetary gains were too dominant in the decision-making process about the gas extractions. Third, the assurance of the gas supply was used as a cover-up and disturbed the decision-making process in lowering the gas extractions. And

lastly, the security of the Groningers was not taken into account for an unacceptably long time. All of this has led to an ongoing process of damages settlements and reinforcement operation, which is what the frame in this thesis will be focused on in the first and second vignettes.

Case 2: Noise pollution caused by airports

On March 20th 2024, it was ruled that residents close to Schiphol, the biggest airport in the Netherlands and the third biggest airport in Europe, are not protected enough against the decisions made by the State regarding Schiphol, specifically regarding the number of flights and the noise pollution caused by Schiphol (Schallenberg, 2024). The plaintiffs pointed out the European Convention on Human Rights, with the right to an undisturbed private life. The State pointed out the economic interests at stake, however, the judge ruled that while this can be the basis of their policy decisions, the State failed to take the interests of the residents into account (NOS Nieuws, 2024c). This court case does not come as a surprise, as the noise complaints about Schiphol have risen almost every year, which have been tracked since the founding of the Residents Point of Contact Schiphol (BAS) (Bewoners Aanspreekpunt Schiphol, 2024, p. 18). BAS is a foundation created in 2007 by Air Traffic Control of the Netherlands and Schiphol (NOS Nieuws, 2024d). Besides this, the regulations for noise pollution have been in place for the past 15 years, but have not been enforced (Schallenberg, 2024). The Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management has published a website called ‘https://www.luchtvaartindetoekomst.nl/’, in which they depict the future of aviation through a policy note for 2020-2050. With this policy note, the government tries to implement the triple bottom line approach, in which ‘people, planet, profit’ is a central element for decision-making (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2020, p. 10). The government tries to bet on technological improvements, that will make airplanes less noisy and more sustainable, to keep on growing the aviation industry. They are also going to implement different ways in which noise pollution and irritation can be measured with the goal to reduce the complaints. Another measure that is implemented to reduce complaints and more concrete is reducing flights at night. This is mostly related to Schiphol now, as Schiphol is the biggest airport of the Netherlands, but this will be personalized for Eindhoven Airport and Rotterdam the Hague airport as well. One of these measures for Eindhoven Airport is that

scheduling flights end at 23:00. The new measures are planned to take effect in November 2024 (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2020). This frame of the changing night flights is what will be used for the third and fourth vignettes in this thesis. As there are more airports in the Netherlands, it was decided not to focus on Schiphol only, but on noise pollution by airports in general, as this can also be experienced in the proximity of other airports.

Case 3: Air pollution caused by Tata Steel IJmuiden

Tata Steel Ijmuiden (Tata Steel) is a steel production complex based in the Netherlands and is the biggest Tata Steel production location in Europe. Tata Steel is part of the bigger Tata Steel Group, based in India. Tata Steel is the biggest carbon dioxide emitter as an individual company in the Netherlands, which makes up 8 percent of the total emissions (Tata Steel, 2023, p. 56). Tata Steel is also the single biggest emitter of nitrogen dioxide. Keeping the Paris Climate Accord in mind, these emissions are something that Tata Steel needs to lower. More importantly, the Dutch government now must do so too through the ruling of a court case. Urgenda has sued the Dutch government for not meeting their legal duty to protect Dutch citizens against climate change (Urgenda, 2019). In 2019, the Supreme Court of the Netherlands ruled that the Netherlands needs to lower its emissions by a minimum of 25 percent by 2020 compared to 1990 levels. While 2020 has passed and the climate goal was met (NOS Nieuws, 2022), this court case has set a precedent for the State to be held liable when it does not comply with its legal duties to protect its citizens. Tata Steel is also not out of hot water. The National Institute for Public Health and the Environmental (RIVM) reported in September 2023 that there is a direct link between health problems and the pollution of Tata Steel. Air pollution through nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter makes people in Wijk aan Zee, the area in which Tata Steel operates, live 2,5 months less on average. People in surrounding areas also have an increased risk of a shorter life and health problems. This means that while Tata Steel needs to lower its emissions, which is also in line with the Climate Accord and the Urgenda court case, there now will also be stricter expectations for health if Tata Steel wants help through government funding (NOS Nieuws, 2024a). The months less to live due to the air pollution of Tata Steel will be the focus of vignettes five and six.

Operationalization of the concepts

To apply equivalence framing within a vignette experiment, a positive and a negative frame was made for each of the cases. This is the independent variable. The data that is used for all of the vignettes are based on facts. For the Groningen case, this was based on the last monthly report of the National Coordinator Groningen (NCG), who oversees the reinforcement operation. The percentages are 42 percent of the houses in Groningen meet the safety criteria versus 58 not meeting the safety criteria (Nationaal Coördinator Groningen, 2023). For the Airport case, the policy note for aviation was used, written by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. This stated that flights at night will not fly by 11 percent versus 89 that will still fly (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2020, p. 52). Lastly, the Tata Steel case included information from the National Institute for Public Health and the Environmental (RIVM). They have conducted research on the health effects due to Tata Steel's air pollution, which stated that the increased risk of lung cancer in Wijk aan Zee is for 4 percent caused by Tata Steel and 96 percent not caused by them. The respondents are also informed about the source of the information given, as this would link the information given directly to a government institution. This then links to the dependent variable of government satisfaction. This is measured by a scale from zero to ten. Below is an example translated to English and Figure 1 shows a screenshot of how this looked in the survey itself.

<u>Example of the negative Groningen vignette (translated to English):</u>

Due to the earthquakes that occurred as a result of gas extraction in Groningen, a reinforcement project has been set up in the province of Groningen. This process is led by the National Coordinator Groningen, part of the national government, and has been underway since 2020. The reinforcement process assesses whether houses meet the safety quality. This program determined that 58% of the houses do not meet the safety standard.

How would you rate the performance of government on a scale from 0-10?

Figure 1 The layout of the negative Groningen vignette

Data collection

Using a program called G*power, a power analysis was conducted prior to the study to calculate the number of participants that is needed for each case, assuming a medium effect size. The input was a one-tailed t-test for a difference between two independent means, with a Cohen's *d* of 0.5, an alpha of 0.05, a power of 0.8, and an allocation of 1. All three cases will be assigned to the whole group of participants, therefore needing 51 respondents for each vignette (positive versus negative), which brings the total minimum *N* to 102. To get the most representative sample and reach the minimum *N*, the survey was distributed through LinkedIn, Instagram, and personal connections. While this is not ideal, it is the most realistic to get the number of participants that is necessary in the given time with the available resources.

The population for this thesis is Dutch-speaking residents of the Netherlands, excluding the Caribbean part of the Netherlands, due to the cases being mainland-focused. This means that Dutch citizens who live outside of the Netherlands are not part of this study. The data about the population is gathered

through data from Statistics Netherlands (CPB) (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020; Van der Mooren & De Vries, 2022). Everyone over 18 is eligible to participate in this study.

The study was conducted from April 22nd 2024 until May 5th 2024. In that timeframe, 186 respondents filled in the survey. As some of the respondents did not want to participate or did not satisfy the requirements to participate by not living in the Netherlands, the usable respondent sample became 184. Since this number was still enough to reach the minimum of respondents necessary, it was decided that only the respondents who fully finished the survey would be considered in this thesis. That is an *N* of 155.

Respondents have been asked for their consent to participate in this survey through an informed consent form (shown in **Appendix A**, together with the other survey questions). The data that has been collected is anonymous and non-traceable. The personal data that has been collected is gender, age, highest achieved educational level, and postal code. This is to ensure the sample will be representative of the Dutch population.

Data analysis

The analysis has been conducted using SPSS, by doing independent-samples t-tests. A balance test was done to check for randomization within the treatment and control groups (positive versus negative). This was done by doing a descriptive test, a means test, and an independent-samples t-test. Some of the variables were re-coded in order to do these tests. The positive and negative vignettes were put together and re-coded into 11(positive) and 12 (negative) for the independent-samples t-tests. The variable ‘age’ is recoded into ordinal for descriptive purposes. The variable ‘highest education’ is re-coded into groups described by Statistics Netherlands (CPB), which are lower, middle, and higher educated (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2019). This will be done to conduct a balance test, as well as for descriptive purposes.

Reflections on reliability and validity

The reliability of this study is medium-high because three cases will be tested instead of just one. This means that the application of the vignettes will be tested three times and thus the hypothesis tested three times. The internal validity is high, because of the experimental design of the research. In general, an experimental design makes research more internally valid (Hameleers & Boukes, 2021, p. 928). It is a multi-group study with a control group (positive versus negative frame). The frames per case are assigned randomly, as well as the cases themselves, which means that some respondents start with the Groningen case and others with Tata Steel or airports. In the survey, a washout question was added between the question about the importance of the cases and the cases themselves, to try and blind the respondents to what the survey is about. The external validity of this study is medium, because of the way the survey is distributed through LinkedIn, Instagram, and a personal network. It is thus more difficult to guarantee a representative sample of the population. However, the external validity is not low because the equivalence frame should be generalizable to other contexts, which has been the case for other between-subject designs that have researched equivalence framing.

Results

Data description

As discussed in the methods section, the sample was a non-probability convenience sample, and it is therefore harder to achieve a fully representable sample of the Netherlands. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample and the population. For the variables gender and age, the sample is similar to the population except for the age bracket of 18-29. It makes sense that this bracket is the biggest in the sample due to the way of distributing the survey. The same reasoning can be used for the variable of highest achieved education, as most of the people are higher educated. While this could influence the absolute rating given for the satisfaction with the way the government performed, it should not interfere with the effect of the frame, as a valence-consistent shift should still take place.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics		
Variable	Sample	Population
Gender (female)	52.3%	50.3%
Age		
18-29	45.8%	15.3%
30-44	14.8%	18.2%
45-59	22.6%	21.4%
60-82	16.8%	22.8%
Highest education		
Lower	3.2%	26.4%
Middle	11.0%	37.9%
High	85.8%	35.5%
$N = 155$		

To check for outliers in the sample, a descriptive analysis was first done. This showed that all the negative vignettes had at least one outlier. The Tata Steel negative vignette had two and the airport negative vignette had three. The Airport positive vignette also had one outlier. As this is quite high for the sample, it could have been the case that the power of the sample was not enough. The consequences of this will be further elaborated in the discussions section of this thesis, but it could be that this is normal behavior. Therefore, the outliers were not taken out of the analysis. A balance test was conducted to check for randomization. Table 2 shows the results for the balance test per vignette. The results show that within the Groningen case, there is a significant difference between the lower educated group ($p < 0.05$). For the airport case, there were significant differences between the groups in gender ($p < 0.1$ within the female group and $p < 0.05$ for the male group). Therefore, this causes a lower external validity within the Groningen and airport case.

Table 2 Balance test									
Variables	Cases								
	Groningen Positive	Groningen Negative	Difference	Airports Positive	Airports Negative	Difference	Tata Steel Positive	Tata Steel Negative	Difference
Gender									
Female (percentage)	.487	.557	.070	.592	.456	.136+	.520	.525	.005
Male (percentage)	.500	.430	.070	.382	.544	.162*	.467	.463	.004
Non-binary (percentage)	.013	.000	.013	.013	.000	.013	.013	.000	.013
Rather not say (percentage)	.000	.013	.013	.013	.000	.013	.000	.013	.013
Age (mean)	40.14	39.3	.841	39.3	39.51	.428	40.05	39.40	.653
Education									
Lower (percentage)	.000	.063	.063*	.053	.013	.040	.027	.038	.011
Middle (percentage)	.132	.089	.043	.132	.089	.043	.133	.088	.045
Higher (percentage)	.868	.848	.020	.816	.899	.083	.840	.875	.035
Political preference (mean)	36.87	36.09	.775	36.66	36.35	.309	36.37	36.60	-.235
N	76	79		76	79		75	80	
+ = $p < 0.1$ * = $p < 0.05$									

Table 3 shows the results of the independent-samples t-test for each vignette. Within the Groningen case, the results show that the negative frame is more negatively rated ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 2.178$) compared to the positive frame (M = 4.83, $SD = 1.969$) and is statistically significant with 90 percent confidence ($t(1.800) = .289$, $p < .1$). For the Airports case, the results show that the average of the negative frame is lower ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.782$) compared to the positive frame ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.632$), however, this is not statistically significant ($t(.843) = .135$, $p > .1$). Lastly, for the Tata Steel case, the respondents significantly rated the negative frame ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.975$) lower compared to the positive frame ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 2.088$, $t(2.285) = .367$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 3 Satisfaction rates per frame									
	Groningen Positive	Groningen Negative	Difference	Airports Positive	Airports Negative	Difference	Tata Steel Positive	Tata Steel Negative	Difference
Satisfaction with Government Performance Rating	4.83	4.23	.601+	5.76	5.53	.232	4.93	4.19	.746*
+ = $p < 0.1$ *= $p < 0.05$									

To summarize, the hypothesis of this thesis is:

H1: Respondents will react more negatively to a negative frame compared to a positive frame.

In all three cases, the positive frame always had a better rating compared to the negative frame, thus showing signs of a valence-consistent shift happening and the potential for a negativity bias being present. The absolute difference between these frames was small but present. However, only two of the three cases were significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is mixed support for the hypothesis that respondents will react more negatively to a negative frame compared to a positive frame.

Discussion

While people's immediate response to the idea that frames of equivalent information do not matter as much as they do, literature has suggested time and time again that it does. The findings in this thesis are mostly in line with the existing literature on equivalence framing, which states that equivalence framing indeed plays a role in the perception of information. As two out of three cases are statistically significant, it could relate to the power of the study. This could be an implication to current research, where smaller groups do not show the same effect the frames have or more positively, cases that have been heavily featured in the media, and thus have increased accessibility to the frames, may not lead to a reduced or non-effect by the frame, as believed in current research (Hameleers & Boukes, 2021). This thesis hopefully also highlights the importance of knowing when a frame is used and the implications this has on people's perspective and in turn the decisions they make. If we see these findings in the light of Public Administration, a recommendation would be to be mindful of the use of performance and how it is framed. For example, if performance information is framed negatively while its goal is to change behavior, it is more likely to fail than succeed.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of this thesis are, however, the potential reason for why there is mixed support for the hypothesis. First, regarding the power of the analysis. While the power and the sample size were calculated beforehand and the minimum sample size was still reached, it could be that the sample size was still not big enough for a significant result in one case, and a significance of only $p < 0.1$ in another case. It could be that there was thus a Type II error, resulting in a false negative (Toshkov, 2016, p. 179). Besides this, as the descriptive analysis showed that there were outliers in each case, it could be that this was normal behavior, but due to the smaller sample size that could not be determined. Therefore, a slightly bigger sample would have been better to see if this was the case. Related to the sample, the external validity was affected via the method of sampling. Due to the use of a convenience sample, the sample was not representative which had a statistically significant effect on the airport case, therefore compromising the results. While this way of sampling was the most accessible with the given time and resources, it was not the most ideal. The representativeness could have also been improved by analyzing the spread of respondents through the given postal codes. This was not done in the end as this was too much work for the given time and would have been easier if the province had been asked instead. The reliability of this study is also lower due to the decision to focus on politically debated policy decisions, firstly because these policy decisions might not be politically sensitive in different contexts (e.g. different countries), thus not replicable. Second, if these politically debated issues are ever resolved, this could influence the rating given to the government's performance satisfaction. Maturation could thus be a threat. Third, the reason for the lack of statistical significance could be due to the research design. As respondents progressed through the thesis, it could be that they registered what was being researched, therefore not giving their gut reaction to the frames (Olsen, 2015, p. 476). Another limitation of this thesis is that it did not explore the interaction between variables, for example, the personal importance of each case to a respondent. While these questions were recorded in the survey, it was ultimately decided to not do the analysis. This was partially related to the sample size, but also due to the limited amount of time.

There are, however, plenty of avenues for future research. First, as the calculated sample size might not have enough power, it could be interesting to see if this is because of the study itself, or because the effect of equivalence framing does not show up when smaller sample sizes are used. An avenue of research could therefore be in the effect or strength of an equivalence frame in smaller studies. Second, postal codes were collected as data for a potential hypothesis that was later scrapped. The hypothesis would have been that the physical distance people are from the cases would influence their government performance satisfaction rating. An example of this would have been if people closer to airports, and thus are more prone to noise pollution from said airport, would have a more negative or bigger reaction to the frame than someone who does not live close to an airport. Unfortunately, the theoretical basis for how this physical distance would affect people's ratings was deemed too limited to use this hypothesis in this thesis. Lastly, this thesis did not explore the interaction between the personal importance of each case and the rating respondents gave. This would still be an interesting addition to this thesis, as it would give more insight into whether the strength of a frame is affected by personal motivation, as suggested by literature (Aarøe, 2011; Chong & Druckman, 2007b; Druckman, 2011).

Conclusion

This thesis tried to see how equivalence framing influences citizens' satisfaction with their government concerning politically debated environmental policy decisions. First, it was found that a valence-consistent shift was present, as there was an equivalence framing effect where the positive frame had a better government performance satisfaction rating than the negative frame. However, two out of three cases were statistically significant, with only one of them reaching a significance of $p < 0.05$. These findings might offer insight into how even though the absolute differences between positive and negative frames are small, it does show a difference within politically debated environmental policy decisions. The results of this thesis are hopefully a beginning in pursuing additional research into the use of equivalence frames within the environmental policy domain, as well as the use of equivalence frames into politically debated topics.

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Appendix A

Survey questions

BLOCK 1 - Introductie

Voor dit scriptieonderzoek is het noodzakelijk om uw persoonsgegevens te gebruiken. Om deze gegevens te gebruiken tijdens het onderzoek is uw toestemming nodig.

Wat is het doel van het scriptieonderzoek?
Het doel van het scriptieonderzoek is om framing te onderzoeken over politiek gevoelige thema's binnen Nederland.

Welke gegevens worden gebruikt?
Het gaat om de volgende gegevens: geslacht, leeftijd, postcode, opleidingsniveau en politieke opvatting.
De persoonsgegevens worden gebruikt om te analyseren of er een verband is tussen framing en de kenmerken van een persoon. Bij de start van het onderzoek krijgen uw gegevens direct een pseudoniem. Op deze manier kan wel worden onderzocht wat u in de enquête aangeeft, maar is niet duidelijk dat u het bent. Hierdoor blijft uw anonimiteit gewaarborgd. De gegevens worden niet gedeeld met anderen en zullen alleen voor dit scriptieonderzoek gebruikt worden. Alle gegevens worden veilig opgeslagen.

Wat gebeurt er als ik van gedachten verander?
Deelname aan dit onderzoek is geheel vrijwillig. U kunt als deelnemer uw medewerking aan het onderzoek te allen tijde stoppen, of weigeren dat uw gegevens voor het onderzoek mogen worden gebruikt, zonder opgaaf van redenen. Als u van gedachten verandert, kunt u een e-mail sturen naar **[redacted]** met daarin een kort bericht waarin u aangeeft dat u uw persoonsgegevens wilt laten verwijderen.

Wat wordt er na het scriptieonderzoek met mijn gegevens gedaan?
Uw gegevens worden per direct verwijderd nadat het scriptieonderzoek is afgerond en deze als voldoende is bestempeld.

Kruis aan wat van toepassing is.

Nina Salomons, 21-04-2024, **[redacted]**.

- Ik verklaar dat ik 18 jaar of ouder ben en geef toestemming dat mijn gegevens worden gebruikt voor deze scriptie.
- Ik ben niet 18 jaar of ouder en/of geef geen toestemming dat mijn gegevens worden gebruikt voor deze scriptie

- Page break -

Vraag 1: Bent u woonachtig in Nederland?

- Ja
- Nee

BLOCK 2 – General questions cases

Vraag 2: Op een schaal van 0-10, hoe belangrijk vindt u het volgende onderwerp?

- Gevolgen van gaswinning (0-10, increments of 1)

- Page break -

Vraag 3: Op een schaal van 0-10, hoe belangrijk vindt u het volgende onderwerp?

- Geluidsoverlast vliegvelden (0-10, increments of 1)

- Page break -

Vraag 4: Op een schaal van 0-10, hoe belangrijk vindt u het volgende onderwerp?

- Gezondheidsgevolgen luchtverontreining (0-10, increments of 1)

- Page break -

Vraag 5: Wat is de kleur van gras?

- Open vraag

BLOCK 3 – Groningen

Vraag 6: U ziet zo een kort bericht over de gaswinning in Groningen. Ook volgt een vraag die betrekking heeft op het bericht.

- Page break -

Door de aardbevingen die zijn ontstaan als gevolg van de gaswinning in Groningen is een versterkingstraject opgezet in de provincie Groningen. Dit traject wordt geleid door Nationaal Coördinator Groningen (NCG), onderdeel van de nationale overheid en wordt sinds 2020 door NCG geleid. Via het versterkingstraject wordt beoordeeld of huizen voldoen aan de veiligheidskwaliteit. **Via dit programma is vastgesteld dat 42% van de huizen voldoet aan de veiligheidsnorm.**

Hoe zou u het optreden van de overheid beoordelen op een schaal van 0-10? (0-10, increments of 1)

OR

Door de aardbevingen die zijn ontstaan als gevolg van de gaswinning in Groningen is een versterkingstraject opgezet in de provincie Groningen. Dit traject wordt geleid door Nationaal Coördinator Groningen (NCG), onderdeel van de nationale overheid en wordt sinds 2020 door NCG geleid. Via het versterkingstraject wordt beoordeeld of huizen voldoen aan de veiligheidskwaliteit. **Via dit programma is vastgesteld dat 58% van de huizen niet voldoet aan de veiligheidsnorm.**

Hoe zou u het optreden van de overheid beoordelen op een schaal van 0-10? (0-10, increments of 1)

- Page break -

BLOCK 4 – Vliegvelden

Vraag 7: In het volgende fragment gaat het over de gevolgen van geluidsoverlast van luchthavens. Er volgt ook een vraag die betrekking heeft op dit bericht.

- Page break –

Door nieuwe maatregelen van de overheid wordt het percentage nachtvluchten dat in Nederland vliegt 89%. Deze maatregelen zijn genomen vanwege de geluidshinder die omwonenden ervaren. Het maatregelenpakket wordt in november 2024 ingevoerd.

Hoe zou u het optreden van de overheid beoordelen op een schaal van 0-10? (0-10, increments of 1)

OR

Door nieuwe maatregelen van de overheid wordt het percentage nachtvluchten dat in Nederland niet vliegt 11%. Deze maatregelen zijn genomen vanwege de geluidshinder die omwonenden ervaren. Het maatregelenpakket wordt in november 2024 ingevoerd.

Hoe zou u het optreden van de overheid beoordelen op een schaal van 0-10? (0-10, increments of 1)

- Page break -

BLOCK 5 – Tata Steel

Vraag 8: U ziet zometeen een bericht over de gevolgen van de uitstoot van Tata Steel. Tevens volgt een vraag die betrekking heeft op dit bericht.

- Page break -

Uit onderzoek van het RIVM blijkt dat 96% van de toekomstige gevallen van longkanker in Wijk aan Zee niet worden veroorzaakt door de uitstoot van Tata Steel. In dit onderzoek is gekeken naar de hoeveelheid chemische stoffen die zich via de lucht verspreiden en neervallen op de grond. Daarna is bekeken wat dat betekent voor de gezondheid van omwonenden.

Hoe zou u het optreden van de overheid beoordelen op een schaal van 0-10? (0-10, increments of 1)

OR

Uit onderzoek van het RIVM blijkt dat 4% van de toekomstige gevallen van longkanker in Wijk aan Zee worden veroorzaakt door de uitstoot van Tata Steel. In dit onderzoek is gekeken naar de hoeveelheid chemische stoffen die zich via de lucht verspreiden en neervallen op de grond. Daarna is bekeken wat dat betekent voor de gezondheid van omwonenden.

Hoe zou u het optreden van de overheid beoordelen op een schaal van 0-10? (0-10, increments of 1)

- Page break-

BLOCK 6 – Algemene vragen

Vraag 9: Wat is uw geslacht?

- Man
- Vrouw
- Non-binair
- Zeg ik liever niet

- Page break -

Vraag 10: Wat is uw leeftijd?

- Open vraag

- Page break-

Vraag 11: Wat is het hoogste opleidingsniveau dat u succesvol heeft beëindigd?

- Basisschool niet afgemaakt
- Alleen basisschool
- VMBO
- MULO, MAVO, HAVO onderbouw of VWO onderbouw
- MBO
- HAVO en/of VWO
- HBO
- WO
- WO master
- Doctoraat/gepromoveerd
- Zeg ik liever niet

- Page break-

Vraag 12: In de politiek wordt soms gesproken over “links” en “rechts”. Waar zou u zichzelf op deze schaal plaatsen?

- Extreem links -> Extreem rechts (0-100)
- Zeg ik liever niet

- Page break-

Vraag 13: Wat is uw postcode?

- Zeg ik liever niet

- **Einde van de survey -**

Dank u wel dat u de tijd heeft genomen om deze enquête in te vullen.

Uw antwoord is opgenomen.

Als u van gedachten verandert, kunt u een e-mail sturen naar **[redacted]** met daarin een kort bericht waarin u aangeeft dat u uw persoonsgegevens wilt laten verwijderen.