Framing of Parliamentary Electoral Narratives in Bangladesh: A Content Analysis of Leading National Dailies

Safayat Hossen[*] and Jebunnesa Juthi[**]

[*]Assistant Professor, Mass Communication and Journalism Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh.

[**]BSS (Hons), Mass Communication and Journalism Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh.

Abstract

This study employs content analysis to examine how Bangladeshi national dailies framed the narratives of Bangladesh's 12th National Parliamentary Election. Data were collected from four prominent Bangladeshi national dailies named *Bangladesh Pratidin*, *Prothom Alo*, *The Daily Star*, and *Daily Sun*. This study was guided by framing theory. Findings reveal that around 95% of the news articles were presented as hard news, focusing on daily events, while only 5% were classified as soft news, providing a more analytical or interpretative view of the election placed on front and inside pages. The conflict frame was the most dominantly used across all newspapers, followed closely by the intimidation and election conspiracy frames. In contrast, the issue, game, human interest, and economic frames were among the least used, suggesting a media focus on political tensions, unrest, security threats, and electoral manipulation rather than on policy discussions, campaign strategies, economic development, or personal voter experiences. While minimal differences were observed in overall framing techniques, the order of the fourth and fifth most-used frames varied slightly. Such findings contradict many of the prior studies and demand further investigation.

Keywords: framing, parliamentary election, political narratives, conflict, election conspiracy, Bangladesh

Contact: [*]Email: safayatdu@mcj.ku.ac.bd   [**] Email: jebunnesajuthi16@gmail.com

Introduction

In democratic societies, the media plays a vital role in shaping political discourse, particularly during elections. Through framing the news, the media influences citizens' perception of political events, actors, and issues (Sahu & Sahu, 2021). During elections, media coverage not only informs the public but also shapes their voter understanding, affects cynicism, influences turnout, and evaluation of electoral events (Rhee, 1997; Chong & Druckman, 2007). Framing, therefore, is not merely a stylistic or rhetorical device but a powerful tool that shapes public perceptions of democracy, political legitimacy, and accountability (Scheufele, 1999). Some news stories portray elections as a competitive race, focusing on who is leading or trailing, while others highlight them as opportunities to foster participation and strengthen democratic engagement (Chebrolu et al., 2023).

In Bangladesh, the media landscape exhibits a pronounced focus on political events through diverse framing strategies (Hasan, 2020). This attention intensifies during national parliamentary elections (Al-Zaman & Noman, 2023). The 12th National Parliamentary Election of Bangladesh (NPEB) was held on January 7, 2024. Several political parties, including the main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), boycotted the election, raising serious questions about the inclusiveness and competitiveness of the electoral process (Karim & Rahman, 2024). Voter turnout was notably low, at less than 41.8%, making it the second-lowest since Bangladesh's democratization in 1991. Besides voting irregularities, widespread violence, arrests, opposition boycotts, and concerns about electoral integrity made it newsworthy (Spinelli, 2024; Kallol & Ahmed, 2024). These events provided fertile ground for diverse media narratives, as media employed different framing strategies to report on the same developments. How national dailies framed narratives of the 12th NPEB is fully unexplored. Guided by framing theory, this study aims to investigate how the narratives of the 12th National Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh were framed by the leading national dailies, and which frames were predominantly used. To what extent did media framing strategies vary across different national dailies?

Literature Review

Framing political events, particularly in election coverage, media outlets strategically reinforce specific social and political interpretations to

influence audience perception about political issues and institutions (Entman, 1991; Tankard et al., 1991; D'Angelo, 2002; Dimitrova et al., 2005; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Rhee, 1997).

In election coverage, the media's framing choices can either present a balanced view or introduce bias that skews public discourse (Erosy, 2010). Research by Noman (2019) on the 2016 U.S. election coverage in Bangladeshi newspapers suggests that local media displayed biased reporting, favoring Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump. Similarly, Akhther and Islam (2019) found that Bangladeshi media displayed a strategic bias in covering the country's 11th national parliamentary election, reinforcing pro-government narratives and minimizing opposition voices.

Alieva (2021) highlighted the prevalence of the "game frame" in U.S. media coverage of the 2016 presidential election, where journalists focused on competition rather than policy issues, potentially deepening political polarization. Islam and Ferdous (2014) emphasized that media outlets filter and frame information before presenting it to audiences, affecting how political realities are perceived. Comparative content analysis by Gan et al. (2005) of election news in Singapore's The Straits Times and France's Le Monde revealed distinct ideological influences, with both newspapers relying on the "horse race" frame but differing in their emphasis on policy issues.

Hasan (2020) examined the framing of Bangladesh's 11th parliamentary election in newspapers from Bangladesh, India, and Britain, found that the media focused on conspiracy, intimidation, and conflict, while Indian media highlighted economic and strategic game frames. Similarly, Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2012) found that U.S. election coverage emphasized strategic framing more than Swedish media, which relied on issue-based framing. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) revealed that different news outlets prioritize different frames, with serious newspapers favoring responsibility and conflict frames, while sensationalist outlets emphasized human interest.

Schuck et al. (2013) analyzed the framing of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections across 27 EU member states, concluding that conflict and strategy frames dominated coverage, overshadowing policy discussions. Muñiz et al. (2018) found similar trends in Mexican gubernatorial elections, with television prioritizing the strategic game frame while the press emphasized conflict. Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2009) revealed that media systems shape framing choices, with Swedish

outlets focusing on policy issues while Belgian media favored strategic game frames. Similarly, Nwaoboli and Abiodun (2023) found that Nigerian newspapers covering the 2023 presidential election relied heavily on attack tones and strategy frames, minimizing substantive policy discussions.

Theoretical Framework

Framing theory, rooted in sociology and psychology (Ardevol-Abreu, 2015), is widely applied across social sciences (Entman & Usher, 2018; Chong et al., 2007; Bryant & Miron, 2005) specially in journalism and political communication, as news media select, emphasize, exclude, and elaborate events of their interest (Scheufele, 1999; Nelson et al., 1997). The concept was first introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) as Frame Analysis, where he described framing as the use of interpretative structures that help individuals perceive and make sense of messages. Building on this, Entman (1993) defined framing as the process of making certain elements of an issue more salient while downplaying others to construct meaning. He suggested that framing is achieved through carefully chosen keywords, symbols, metaphors, and visuals to shape audience interpretation (Entman, 1991, 2007). Framing lacks a fixed definition, as scholars have examined it from diverse perspectives over the years (Abdullah, 2018). Hoffner (1998) defined framing as the selection and prominence of certain information over others. Tankard et al. (1991) identified framing as the basic organizing principle of news, involving selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. Parenti (1993) emphasized that framing is shaped by exposure, placement, tone, headlines, visuals, and language. D'Angelo (2017) described the presentation of written, spoken, graphical, or visual messages that contextualize a topic for audiences, enabling them to interpret complex media coverage.

Materials and Methods

This study employed the content analysis method with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A total of 561 registered daily newspapers are published from the capital city of Bangladesh (Department of Film and Publications [DFP], 2025). Based on their wide circulation and prominence, four national dailies were selected as the sample, namely Bangladesh Pratidin, Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, and Daily Sun. Among them, Bangladesh Pratidin, Prothom Alo are published in the Bangla language,

and The Daily Star and Daily Sun are published in English. Data were collected from November 15, 2023, to January 11, 2024, covering the period from the announcement of the election schedule to the cabinet oath-taking ceremony following the 12th NPEB. A total of 3,622 news articles, including opinion pieces, editorials, interviews, and feature stories related to the 12th NPEB were published in four prominent national dailies. Each article was considered the unit of analysis. The development of a codebook was guided by predefined frames and codes outlined by De Vreese (2005). The data were manually gathered from printed copies of selected newspapers, encompassing both objective and subjective categories, following the approach of Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005). In the objective categories, various aspects of news treatment were examined, including news genre, folder-wise news placement, page-wise news placement, and news column coverage. In subjective categories, data were collected, categorized and analyzed based on seven predefined frames named: (i) Game Frame (ii) Human Interest Frame (iii) Intimidation Frame (iv) Issue Frame (v) Conflict Frame (vi) Economic Frame (vii) Election Conspiracy Frame (Alieva, 2021; Hasan, 2020; Gan et al., 2005; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Patterson, 1994). A second independent coder was trained and analyzed a randomly selected sample of 15% (543) of the news articles to assess the inter-coder reliability of the study. The agreement percentage for the framing was 96%, which was deemed acceptable according to Neuendorf (2002).

Results
A total of 3,622 news articles were published in four prominent dailies within that timeframe. Table 1 outlines a detailed breakdown of the published news articles.

Descriptive Details of News Articles	(n=3622) % (n)
News Genre	
Hard News	3445 (95%)
Soft News	177 (5%)
Folder Wise News Placement	
Upper Folder	2389 (57%)
Lower Folder	1780 (43%)
Page Wise News Placement	
Front Page	1163 (32%)
Inside Pages	1927 (53%)
Back Page	532 (15%)

Descriptive Details of News Articles	(n=3622) % (n)
News Column Coverage	
One column	1531 (42%)
Two column	1139 (31%)
Three column	736 (20%)
Four column	138 (4%)
Five column	38 (01%)
Six column	40 (01%)

Table 01: Descriptive details of news articles

Ninety-five percent of the news articles were published as hard news, covering everyday events, and 5% of the articles were categorized as soft news, offering a more analytical or interpretative perspective on the election. The analysis of folder-wise placement of news articles showed that more than half of the articles were placed in the upper section of the newspaper pages, ensuring higher visibility, with 57% of the total coverage. The remaining 43% of the articles were positioned in the lower section. In terms of page-wise placement, news articles related to the election appeared regularly across almost every page. The majority of them were found on the inside pages, accounting for 53% of the total coverage, followed by the front page at 32%, and the remaining 15% appeared on the back page. The findings on column-wise formatting of news articles indicate that the one-column layout was the most prevalent, making up 42% of all articles. The two-column format ranked second, covering 31%, while the three and four-column layouts accounted for 20% and 4%, respectively. The five and six-column formats were the least utilized, each contributing only 1% of the total content.

Notably, the frequency of frames across the newspapers followed a largely similar pattern. Table 2 illustrates the framing strategies employed by individual newspapers.

Newspaper Wise Framing	Bangladesh Pratidin (n=946) % (n)	Prothom Alo (n=927) % (n)	The Daily Star (n=882) % (n)	Daily Sun (n=867) % (n)
Game	88 (09%)	94 (10%)	77 (09%)	80 (09%)
Human Interest	37 (04%)	48 (05%)	55 (06%)	50 (06%)
Intimidation	212 (22%)	196 (21%)	189 (21%)	183 (21%)
Issue	103 (11%)	83 (09%)	91 (10%)	87 (10%)
Conflict	345 (36%)	309 (33%)	293 (33%)	290 (33%)
Economic	27 (03%)	39 (04%)	41 (05%)	56 (06%)
Election Conspiracy	134 (14%)	158 (17%)	136 (15%)	121 (14%)

Table 02: Usage of various frames in the dailies

The Conflict frame emerged as the most dominant across all dailies, with Bangladesh Pratidin (36%), Prothom Alo (33%), The Daily Star (33%), and Daily Sun (33%) emphasizing political tensions and unrest during the election. The Intimidation frame consistently ranked second, appearing in 22%, 21%, 21%, and 21% of the total coverage, respectively. This was followed closely by the Election Conspiracy frame, which accounted for 14%, 17%, 15%, and 14% of the coverage, highlighting concerns over allegations of electoral irregularities and manipulation.

However, slight variations emerged in the rankings of the fourth and fifth most prevalent frames: the Issue frame and the Game frame. In Bangladesh Pratidin, The Daily Star, and Daily Sun, the Issue frame ranked fourth, comprising 11%, 10%, and 10% of the coverage, respectively, indicating a relatively greater emphasis on policy discussions and party manifestos. In contrast, Prothom Alo ranked the Game frame fourth. Similarly, in Bangladesh Pratidin, The Daily Star, and Daily Sun, the Game frame was the fifth most dominant, each allocating 9% of their coverage to it, reflecting a tendency to depict the election as a strategic contest among political parties. Conversely, in Prothom Alo, the Issue frame ranked fifth at 9%.

Furthermore, the Human Interest and Economic frames consistently received the least coverage across all newspapers. The Human-Interest frame accounted for 4% of total coverage in Bangladesh Pratidin, 5% in Prothom Alo, 6% in The Daily Star, and 6% in Daily Sun. Similarly, the Economic frame was the least prevalent, comprising 3% of total coverage in Bangladesh Pratidin, 4% in Prothom Alo, 5% in The Daily Star, and 6% in Daily Sun. This trend suggests that the newspapers prioritized political tensions, security threats, electoral manipulation, and unrest over financial implications, economic development, and personal narratives related to voter experiences.

The coverage employed multiple framing techniques, with certain frames being more dominant than others. Table 3 presents an analysis of how the 12th NPEB was framed by various newspapers.

News Frame		(n=3622) % (n
Game	Highlights polling data, candidate standings, campaign evaluations, public perception, candidate performance, and predictions of winning or losing (Alieva, 2021; Hasan, 2020; Gan et al., 2005).	339 (09%)
Human Interest	Presents news with an emotional or personal angle, making events relatable and engaging for readers (Hasan 2020; Gan et al., 2005; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).	190 (5%)
Intimidation	Highlights fear, harassment, arrests, mass arrests, threats, humiliation, false charges (Hasan 2020).	780 (22%)
Issue	Focuses on the general aspects of the election, such as EVM usage, ballot distribution, and voter turnout, as well as broader issues, contemporary agendas, and party manifesto commitments (Alieva, 2021; Hasan, 2020).	364 (10%)
Conflict	Emphasizes disputes, disagreements, criticism, conflicts, violence, killings, or any form of controversy between parties (Hasan 2020; Gan et al., 2005; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Patterson, 1994).	1237 (34%)
Economic	Stresses economic development and compares the situation in terms of development and economic growth (Hasan, 2020; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).	163 (05%)
Election Conspiracy	Focuses on election manipulation, government or party conspiracies, abuse of power by the ruling party, and bias within public administration, police, security forces, and government institutions (Hasan 2020).	549 (15%)

Table 03: Varied Framing Techniques Used by Newspapers

The Conflict frame was prevalent in 34% of the total coverage. This frame placed a strong emphasis on political disputes, confrontations, violence, and controversies between parties. For example, an article in The Daily Star highlighting a clash between the Awami League and BNP reported:

> Thirty-five people were injured in a clash between leaders of the Awami League and BNP during a blockade in front of the C&B office in Sherpur, Bogra, at around 11:15 yesterday.

The Intimidation frame was also widely reported, accounting for 22% of the news articles. It focused on harassment, arrests, and threats, particularly from the ruling Awami League toward Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP. For example, an article in Prothom Alo reporting on the mass arrests of BNP leaders stated:

> Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Ainjibi Forum, a body of pro-BNP lawyers, yesterday alleged that 20,326 leaders and activists were arrested in more than 837 'fabricated and ghost cases' filed after October 28.

The Election Conspiracy frame appeared in 15% of the coverage, reflecting widespread media attention on allegations of electoral manipulation, government bias, conspiracies involving candidates or parties, and abuse of power. For instance, an article in Prothom Alo reported:

> Jamaat-e-Islami has rejected the announced election schedule for the upcoming parliamentary election, labeling it a 'government blueprint schedule.' They believe the Election Commission announced this schedule to provide the ruling party with an opportunity to secure victory in an uncontested field.

This article underscores concerns about electoral fairness, reflecting opposition skepticism toward the Election Commission's impartiality.

Issue-based framing was observed in 10% of the total articles. Election-related information, such as the use of electronic voting machines, ballot distribution, voter turnout, and party manifesto agendas, were in it. An example from Bangladesh Pratidin, which states:

> Voting is scheduled today from 8 AM to 4 PM, with all constituencies opting for paper ballots. Most polling stations will receive their ballots this morning. Approximately eight lakh members of various forces are on the ground to facilitate smooth polling processes.

This article highlights the logistical and procedural aspects of the election, emphasizing the measures taken to ensure an orderly voting process.

The Game, Human Interest, and Economic frames were the least prevalent. The Game frame accounted for 9% of the coverage, while Human Interest stories made up 5%, and news articles employing the Economic frame also constituted approximately 5%. The game frame focused on aspects that assess candidates and campaigns based on polls,

positions, candidate perception, performance, and election outcome predictions, making these elements more prominent than other considerations. One example from the Daily Sun states:

> The absence of BNP in the election leaves the stage open for a duel between AL and independent candidates, with the ruling party contestants poised to win easily in most of the seats.

This article focuses on the strategic positioning of parties and the election outcome, framing it as a competitive game rather than a substantive policy discussion.

The Human-Interest frame highlighted unique election-related stories that resonate with readers on a personal level. For instance, an article in Bangladesh Pratidin focused on the struggles of individuals who depend on driving for their livelihood, emphasizing the hardships caused by road blockades during elections. The report quoted Jaglu, a bus driver, who expressed the impact of the situation, saying, "When the wheels of the bus turn, our stomachs are fed, and life moves forward. But if the bus doesn't run, our income comes to a halt."

The Economic frame was identified in a limited number of articles. It focused on events in terms of their economic impact, discussing economic development, and comparing situations in the context of economic growth. For example, an article in The Daily Star states,

> The country's real estate sector has been suffering due to a drop in sales and investments in this sector, resulting from economic headwinds and political unrest ahead of the election.

Discussion

A count of 95% of election news was hard news, and the majority of news items were positioned inside pages and in upper areas for optimal visibility, and a one-column news format was most used. Reporting was focused on concise hard news, indicating a prioritization of immediacy over in-depth analysis. Conflict frame, found most dominantly used, indicates a strong media focus on disputes, confrontations, violence, killings, and controversies among political parties. Such reporting tends to emphasize conflict, given that politics inherently involves a high degree of conflict, tension, and disagreement (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; De Vreese et al., 2001; Patterson, 1993; Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012). This tendency may stem from the audience's greater interest in conflict-driven events, as conflict holds significant news value and enhances audience

interest (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012; García-Perdomo, 2017). Intimidation emerged as the second most prominent frame, indicating that the newspapers placed significant emphasis on incidents of harassment, arrests, and threats, particularly those allegedly carried out by the ruling party against opposition members. Hasan (2020) observed that both Bangladeshi and British media extensively highlighted the intimidation frame during election coverage, portraying a climate of fear in which opposition candidates and activists encountered considerable challenges in campaigning. Similarly, Frye et al. (2016) and Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. (2019) identified voter intimidation and vote-buying as major issues in election reporting, with their studies revealing the prevalence of such practices during the 2011 Guatemalan general election and the 2010–11 Russian election campaigns. The third most prevalent was the Election Conspiracy frame that encompassed narratives related to electoral manipulation, vote rigging, governmental bias, and alleged conspiracies involving political parties or individual candidates. Such framing contributes to diminishing public trust and escalating political instability, a broader public skepticism regarding the integrity of the electoral process. Similarly, Hasan (2020) observed that the Election Conspiracy frame was significantly featured in both national and international media coverage. The fourth was the Issue frame, which is also found same by Hasan (2020). But this finding contrasts with the results of Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2012), who found that journalists in Sweden predominantly employed the Issue frame, reflecting a journalistic culture that emphasizes substantive political discourse over strategic or game-centered reporting. Limited presence of the Issue frame in election reporting may restrict the public's exposure to in-depth policy discussions.

Similarly to this study, Hasan (2020) noted, the Game frame may attract audience interest, it has been criticized for its potential negative effects. Framing politics as a strategic game rather than a substantive policy debate may reduce audiences' understanding of political issues and contribute to increased political cynicism and distrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2002; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). Ultimately, such framing can contribute to what Cappella and Jamieson (1997) term a "spiral of cynicism," which may undermine democratic engagement and weaken public trust in the political process (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Norris, 2000). About the Human-Interest and Economic frames, findings align with the results of

Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) study, which reported that both the Economic and Human-Interest frames were among the least frequently used in the context of European election coverage manifesting emotionally resonant stories related to the election, aimed at engaging readers on a personal level to sustain audience interest by framing electoral events through personal experiences and emotional appeals (Bennett, 1995; Hasan, 2020). Although the Economic frame is commonly observed in election coverage due to its broad relevance and high news value (Neuman et al., 1992; Graber, 1993), the findings of this study contradict that trend.

Very minimal differences were found in how the election was framed across the newspapers. This finding demands further investigation. Scholars widely argue that media outlets cover issues in varying ways depending on their editorial policies, ownership structures, news sources, advertisers, institutional affiliations, nature of the media whether public or private, or subjective or objective as influenced by national political and media systems (Norris et al., 1999; Hasan, 2020; Gan et al., 2005; Baum & Potter, 2008; Islam, 2018).

The results aligned with Entman's (1993) notion of framing theory, which asserts that journalists tend to emphasize specific aspects of an event or issue, making them more salient to promote a particular interpretation for the audience based on their interests. National dailies selectively highlighted particular facets of the election, amplifying their significance to shape public understanding of the electoral process.

Conclusion

This study focused on identifying pre-established news frames, analyzing the electoral narratives using only four leading national dailies as its sample, which may be considered a sampling weakness. This study utilized seven existing frames; however, there may be others that are more salient to the election-related news. Future studies should consider examining a larger timeframe and news outlet levels, and the rank should be refined by circulation rates.

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