




Research Article - Araştırma Makalesi

THE IMPACT OF PARTISAN MEDIA ON MINORITY GROUPS: INCIVILITY AND POLARIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

ABSTRACT

This research article explores the intricate relationship between partisan media and its effects on minority groups—specifically African Americans, Latinos, and Asians—in American political discourse. By analyzing news headlines from major cable news networks such as CNN, Fox, and MSNBC, the study investigates how selective framing and biased coverage influence the portrayal of these minority groups. Utilizing sentiment analysis on a dataset from LexisNexis, the study identifies a predominance of negative tones in news headlines related to these groups. The findings reveal how partisan media contributes to political polarization by reinforcing existing biases and fostering echo chambers. This polarization exacerbates societal divisions by shaping public perceptions in ways that deepen prejudices and conflict. The study underscores the need for more inclusive media practices to mitigate the adverse effects of partisan coverage and promote a more equitable and informed society.

Keywords: Partisan Media; Minority Groups; Political Discourse; Selective Framing; Media Bias

 Yassine Ismaili
Eötvös Loránd University



Received/Geliş Tarihi
30 May 2024

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi
05 August 2024

Publication/Yayın Tarihi
30 August 2024

**Corresponding
Author/Sorumlu Yazar**
Yassine Ismaili
ismi.yassine@gmail.com

DOI: 10.69494/jirps.1492964

Cite this article

Ismaili, Y. (2024). The impact of partisan media on minority groups: Incivility and polarization in American political discourse. *Journal of International Relations and Political Science Studies*, (11), 28-46.



Content of this journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License.

Introduction

Partisan media significantly influences public perceptions of vulnerable minority groups through selective framing and bias. In today's media landscape, outlets with distinct political leanings often tailor news coverage to reinforce the biases and preconceptions of their audiences, a phenomenon known as selective exposure. This process creates echo chambers where individuals are exposed primarily to information that aligns with their preexisting views, thereby widening political polarization (Garrett, 2009, p. 270; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, p. 34).

Partisan media frequently portrays minority groups—such as Latinos, Asians, and African Americans—negatively, particularly concerning issues like crime, immigration, and cultural differences (Bleich et al., 2018). Such biased framing not only perpetuates stereotypes but also contributes to fractious societal divisions by altering the way in which audiences perceive and relate to these communities. Indeed, research conducted by Valentino et al., (2004), confirms the cause-and-effect nature of partisan media and political polarization through the reinforcement of strong partisan dividing lines as a result of prejudiced media coverage, leading to increased discord within society (p. 351). This introduction sets in context how partisan media really makes an impact on public discourse and affects attitudes toward minority groups in the United States, hence forming a stage through which understanding could proceed with respect to how such polarization, driven by the media, results in bigger rips within society.

I. Literature Review

A. Partisan Media and Bias

Partisan news media have become prevalent, broadcasting news that caters to specific political ideologies. Prior (2013) agrees that cable television provides selectivity in that people can choose news media that favor present choices. This, according to Prior, is what is referred to as selective exposure, of which it renders the media space fractured; therefore, people are ever listening to individuals' opinions that reflect their own (p.110). Garrett (2009) argues that selective exposure is much more likely to strengthen attitudes rather than just maintaining them, which can further exaggerate the effects of political polarization through a type of news consumption that confirms ideological orientation and reinforces people's views on polarized public matters (p. 267). Iyengar and Hahn (2009) find that those most politically involved are most likely to seek out and be persuaded by news from sources they perceive as aligning with their partisanship, thus continuing the pattern of selective exposure (p. 25).

Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) add to this point by showing that the development of partisan media also means increased skepticism toward news sources outside a person's ideology. Such selective skepticism is a further conduit in polarizing public opinion in that people become more entrenched in their ideological positions (p. 227). Moreover, Stroud (2010) states that this behavior no longer stays within the confines of news consumption but has spillover effects onto platforms of social media, in which people would now tend to follow and engage with others who post contents that best suit their beliefs, hence further entrenching selective exposure within the digital age (p. 557).

More recent studies conducted during the presidency of Trump shed more light on this. For instance, Benkler et al. (2018) argue that "increasingly, the media ecosystem has become polarized." That is to say, conservative media created a large part of an alternative reality for their audiences. This alternative reality has huge bearings on political discourse and public perception alike (p. 312). Likewise, according to Pew Research Center (2020), the habits of news consumption among Americans have polarized along partisan lines: Republicans and Democrats trust different news sources and perceive reality.

Levendusky (2013) further argues that partisan media can lead to further increases in affective polarization, wherein the concerned individuals disagree not only on political issues but also bear negative feelings toward members of the opposite party. These kinds of affective polarizations give way to increased social division and decreased willingness to engage in bipartisan cooperation (p. 611). Furthermore, according to a recent article by Guess et al. (2018), at least some kinds of partisan media exposure modulate political legitimacy perceptions and even democratic institution distrust among strong partisans.

While these studies provide valuable insights into selective exposure and media fragmentation, it is crucial to link these findings to the hypothesis of the current study, which investigates the impact of media partisanship on minority issues. By understanding the mechanisms of selective exposure and its impact on political polarization, we can explore how media partisanship influences public perception and discourse surrounding minority issues. This connection is essential to demonstrate why the selected literature is relevant and how it addresses existing gaps in research. The literature, however, reviewed highlights the importance of understanding selective exposure and media fragmentation in the context of political polarization. However, there is a gap in examining how these phenomena specifically impact minority issues.

The articles chosen are crucial because they provide a foundation for exploring the broader implications of media partisanship. By addressing this gap, the current study aims to contribute to the understanding of how partisan media influences public opinion and policy regarding minority communities.

Studies have shown that partisan news media have gained increased prevalence where it delivers news that is directed to specific political ideologies. Prior (2013) was in agreement that cable television and the internet had allowed selectivity where people could choose news outlets that reinforced their prior beliefs in what they hear and read on a routine basis; this is referred to as selective exposure (p. 101). This has in turn created the fragmentation of the media environment where one predominantly gets their views upheld.

The selective exposure proposed by Garrett (2009) is more likely to act as a mechanism for attitude strengthening rather than merely maintaining attitudes and beliefs. Consequently, it has the potential to exacerbate political polarization. It is even possible that news consumption that reinforces a person's ideological orientation can turn someone into an entrencher with polarized public views (p. 268). However, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) have shown that this trend is even more accentuated in high-politically-involved people, who are more likely to look for and trust in news sources that show their partisan leanings (p. 33).

B. Incivility in Political Discourse

Increased incivility in political discourse has gone hand in hand with such partisan media. Incivility, understood as impertinence and rudeness in behavior, has transformed itself to become emblematic of most political communication in America. Research has identified the use of uncivil terms along with an uncivil tone as common strategies used by partisan media to appeal to and inflame their audience (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 23). This use of incivility is not stylistic in nature but strategic in an attempt to draw upon the emotions that would serve to increase audience loyalty (Borah, 2013, p. 460).

The term partisan, however, has negative connotations. Engaging in media-driven incivility may particularly be viewed as trivial. However, one needs to acknowledge that being partisan per se is not negative. Instead, it reflects great support for a particular party or ideology, which many people feel is very positive—a way of expressing their political identity and creed. However, the manner in which partisan media channels implement incivility to engage their audience helps foster a more hostile and polarized political environment.

In this sense, partisan media often turn to incivility as a tool for strengthening and mobilizing their base, contributing to polarization. The feeling or expression of incivility may convey an association with partisanship. The objective will be an understanding of how public political discourse has been altered through the articulation of the use of uncivil rhetoric by partisan media that contributes to a more contentious and polarized political landscape.

According to Mutz (2016), viewers are more attentive during uncivil discourse with heightened emotional responses to it, while Gervais (2017) showed how exposure to incivility might heighten political participation by eliciting strong emotional reactions. Some researchers, such as Mutz (2016) and Gervais (2017), have argued that media incivility might prove effective at capturing audience attention but evoke strong psychological impacts (p.18).

According to Mutz (2016), viewers are more attentive during uncivil discourse with heightened emotional responses to it, while Gervais (2017) showed how exposure to incivility might heighten political participation by eliciting strong emotional reactions.

Brooks and Geer (2007) have also pointed out that information in political ads generally carries incivility in partisan media, which may instantly generate negative effects on political participation. On one side, it effectively mobilizes the core supporters, while on the other side, it tends to mislead the moderate and undecided voters. This process gradually diminishes the turnout of voters and thus declines democratic participation (p. 11). On the one hand, media incivility can effectively mobilize core constituencies; for example, Sobieraj and Berry (2011) demonstrate that uncivil discourse can actually enhance political participation among partisan viewers. On the other hand, it tends to alienate moderate and independent voters, thereby feeding political cynicism and leading to growing distrust in the media, as has been noted by Mutz (2015). This can be the process that gradually dampens voter turnout and general democratic participation, as supported by studies such as Mutz and Reeves (2005), which show that exposure to uncivil political talk can drive down the urge to participate in politics among less partisan people.

C. Polarization and Public Opinion

The link between partisan media and public opinion has been more widely discussed, with some empirical evidence claiming that partisan media contribute to political polarization (Prior 2013; Levendusky & Malhotra; Garrett et al., 2019).

Regular exposure to partisan news sources leads one to be more politically polarized; a person becomes extreme in his personal views. Thus, this effect is further reinforced for an individual who regularly accesses sources of partisan news, which only deepens the ideological gaps among the electorate (Davis & Dunaway, 2016). The relationship between partisan media and public opinion has been widely discussed, and concrete evidence tends to indicate that partisan media further spur political polarization. For example, Stroud (2010) found that routine exposure to partisan news sources tends to polarize those in the sample politically, moving them toward extreme personal views (p. 557). Furthermore, Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) have suggested that this effect is deepened for those who habitually access partisan news, further widening the ideological schisms among the electorate (p. 214).

Levendusky (2013) went a step further to say how partisan media reinforces already-held beliefs but also builds new ones. This is possible because partisan outlets always have in them the debunking abilities of swinging perceptions and reactions that people have towards political events by the mode of information presentation in ideological consonance with that ideology (p. 611). By framing news and events in ways that best serve particular ideological perspectives, partisan media manage to powerfully influence and sometimes even shift public opinion. Thus, the shaping of public opinion can have very important consequences with respect to political behavior in wider terms, such as those related to voting patterns and civic engagement.. Also, Baum and Groeling (2008) indicate the influence that partisan media holds in agenda setting; through story selection and framing, partisan outlets determine what the public will come to view as important and in what way these matters should be viewed (p. 348). In this way, they come off as having an edge to alter discourse within the public sphere and drive on the mechanism of polarization.

D. The Role of Social Media

This relationship between partisan media and political polarization has even become more complex with the rise of social media. Most of this major news issue content is ever-increasing and more often distributed through social media, which has positioned them in the league of becoming important news sources. According to Bakshy et al., (2015), users of social media subsequently have a high probability of paying attention to the news that resonates with their political predispositions, hence deepening selective exposure and adding to echo chambers where discordant views are seldom heard (p. 1130).

However, Tucker et al., (2018), argue that algorithms used to personalize content on social media increase the polarization of politics. By surfacing information that resonates with user preferences, the algorithms create feedback loops through which users become exposed to more and more extreme views, creating echo chambers that result in the sowing of divisiveness into the political landscape. This worsens not just differentials but also fosters incivility because contentious and outrageous content is promoted. Political polarization is strengthened by social media interactions that magnify the social identity processes involved. Social validation from engaging with politically like-minded others on social media strengthens partisan identity and, in turn, hostility toward political out-group members (p. 53).

The role that social media has played in politics has been noticed more during the COVID-19 period and with the rise of AI. For instance, Cinelli et al. (2021) found that during the pandemic, misinformation cascaded over social media very fast, hence increasing political polarization and affecting public opinion related to health measures (p. 5). Further, Pappalardo et., (2020) found that AI-based algorithms of social media platforms amplified echo chambers, leading to increased political extremism with reduced exposure to a wide range of viewpoints (p. 14). These studies thus put forward the twin effect of social media working positively and negatively and hence require measures concerning the effects of negative tones on minorities when viewed through the lenses of political polarization.

E. Partisan Media Frames and Minority Groups

Much of the research on partisan media has focused on their effect on mainstream consumption (Stroud, 2010). Increasingly, however, a small but growing level of literature examines the impact of partisan media on minority populations such as Latinos, Asians, and African Americans (Mastro & Stamps, 2018; Abrajano et.al., 2020). Biased framing and coverage can shape selective perceptions of these racial or ethnic media groups. For instance, evidence has it that partisan media seek to represent minority groups of immigrants and people of color in negative terms by focusing on crime and immigration issues and cultural separateness from the mainstream culture (Heather & Emily, 2019, p. 13; Tukachinsky et.al, 2017, p. 546). This selective framing may only end up further stereotyping these groups and enhancing racial and ethnic tension in societies.

For example, negative media depictions of their groups are known to create influences on prejudice and other poor attitudes (Appel & Weber, 2021, p. 10).

This is even worse when the same is reiterated and reinforced by partisan media outlets, which, once again, would have their vested interests in presenting some kinds of narratives to audiences. More abstractly, partisan media frames are believed to impact minority political behavior and engagement. Such empirical research has shown that slanted coverage can shape how minority voters view candidates, parties, and issues and, hence, may well sway their vote (Mingxiao et.al, 2018, p. 1094), and in those elections where the turnout of such minorities can change the final result, slanted coverage does affect whether they will show up to vote.

II. Methodology

The methodology of the research in this section centers on a mixed-method approach with both qualitative and quantitative elements, underpinned by a coding system developed by Benson (2014). This coding system allows for analysis that makes use of the headlines of articles as the primary sampling unit. Examining headlines without paying attention to the text itself makes the analytical process easier and more focused. Headlines are attention getters and heuristic shortcuts (Nisar & Bleich, 2020); hence, they help in understanding the general tone and framing of any news articles.

Cable network headlines not only indicate the subject and summarize the major information of the news article, but they also attempt to assist the reader in understanding the meaning of the text (Bonyadi & Samuel, 2013). The content perceived by readers through headlines has proved to affect the way people perceive news much better than the article's full text (Ifantidou, 2009). Although focusing on headlines does not render full texts superfluous, headlines provide a valuable measure of public perceptions of groups and topics of general interest, as well as reaffirm and shape consumers' attitudes toward these groups and topics. The cable networks that were chosen to examine their headlines are: Cable News Network (CNN), Fox Cable Network (Fox), and MSNBC. We chose these three because they are sometimes referred to as the "big three"(Pew Research Center, 2020), and also because they have both liberal and conservative bias.

The sampling strategy employed is stratified purposeful sampling. This approach ensures that the sample accurately reflects the distribution of headlines from each cable network over time and includes a comprehensive representation of the networks' coverage. The author conducted sentiment analysis on all the headlines of those cable networks using the LexisNexis dataset. Sentiment analysis empirically determines the tone of a headline by examining occurrences of positive and negative words in a corpus of documents(Bhonde et al., 2015).

For this reason, we use the LexisNexis database to extract news articles from all sections of Cable News Network, Fox Cable Network, and MSNBC between November 8, 2016 and November 8, 2021 that contain root words associated with each of our groups. Here are the root words:

African Americans OR African American OR Black American OR Black Americans
Asian Americans OR Asian American
Latinos OR Latino OR Latino OR Latinos

We next removed articles that were not connected to our groups of interest by removing those that merely included extraneous phrases like "Latina". Initially, we did not search for root words such as Chinese, Japanese, or Mexican American. This decision was made to maintain the focus on minority groups who are citizens or permanent residents within the US, rather than immigrants who are often identified by their country of origin. Including such root words would significantly broaden the scope of our study, necessitating a fundamental redesign of our data collection, sampling, and analysis processes. Our current approach ensures that the study remains manageable and maintains its analytical rigor by concentrating on well-defined and specific groupings.

These selections guarantee that all of the articles in our dataset are directly connected to our selected groups of interest. For our five-year analysis, we kept all of the articles published within the given timeframe. Our sampling method employed an analytical strategy to inspect those selected headlines, removing duplicates and those with neither positive nor negative tone.

This method ensured that the sample accurately reflected the headline distribution from each cable network over time. Table 1 presents the quantity of headlines published by the three cable networks over five years, along with the final sample.

The qualitative method was employed to conduct a discourse analysis to gain an understanding of the framing and tone of the headlines. This qualitative component was the analysis of language in the headlines to establish if any patterns of selective framing and political discourses were evident. We therefore relied on some key political science and international relations scholars, including Entman (1993) in framing theory, Marcus (2000) on the influence of political communication, and Baum (2003) on media effects and public opinion. Finally, we integrated the ideas of Goffman (1959), self-presentation, and framing, as well as Kingdon, with thoughts on policy agendas and political processes.

Our approach allows us to situate our discourse analysis within the framework of leading theories and assert that the cable networks purposefully implement strategies of selective exposure and framing.

Table 1. Distribution of CNN, FOX and MSNBC Headlines, 2016–2021

	Final Database			Final Sample		
	CNN	FOX	MSNBC	CNN	FOX	MSNBC
African Americans	10000	3357	2954	1000	335	295
Latinos	7262	2549	1866	726	254	186
Asians	8139	5107	1840	813	510	184

There are two methods to code the database: computer-assisted coding and human coding, which will undoubtedly help in the coding of a large volume of text—for example, coding the models using machine learning and lexical sentiment analysis reliably. The approaches work well with many words per text in a database. Because of the probability that headlines may include some metaphors or idiomatic expressions that might pose challenges to computer-assisted coding and affect the validity of the interpreted headlines, the author used human coding to increase the validity of the results.

For computer-assisted coding, LexisNexis automatically classified and coded headlines tone as negative when found. For human coding, the author and an assistant created a codebook to classify and code each headline either negative or positive after reviewing the classification of headlines tone coded by LexisNexis. According to our classification and coding, positive headlines refer to groups who are victims to verbal or physical attacks and those who successfully contribute to the political, economic, and development of the country. Negative headlines refer to perpetrators and those who reflect negative values within society. Table 2 shows examples of negative and positive tones.

Table 2. Sample Headlines with Positive or Negative Tone

	CNN	FOX	MSNBC
Positive	Student makes history as first African-American lead in Mobile Ballet in Alabama	Black Friday Deals Already Here? Payouts to Separated Migrant Families?	President Trump Pledges to Unite Divided Country after African-American History Museum Visit; Republican Lawmakers Grilled at Town Halls
Negative	Detroit Police chief calls Tlaib's comments 'racist' after she suggests facial recognition tech analysts should be African American	Biden Ignores Key Details in Asian Hate Crime Surge; Dems Care About the Perpetrators, Not the Victims; Media's Hate Crime Double Standard	They're rapists...all have AIDS': Some of Trump's comments on immigrants, minorities

The variable measured was the overall sentiment of headlines for each group. This sentiment was determined by subtracting the count of negatively-toned headlines from the count of positively-toned ones, and then dividing by the overall count of headlines assessed. The formula to compute this sentiment is:

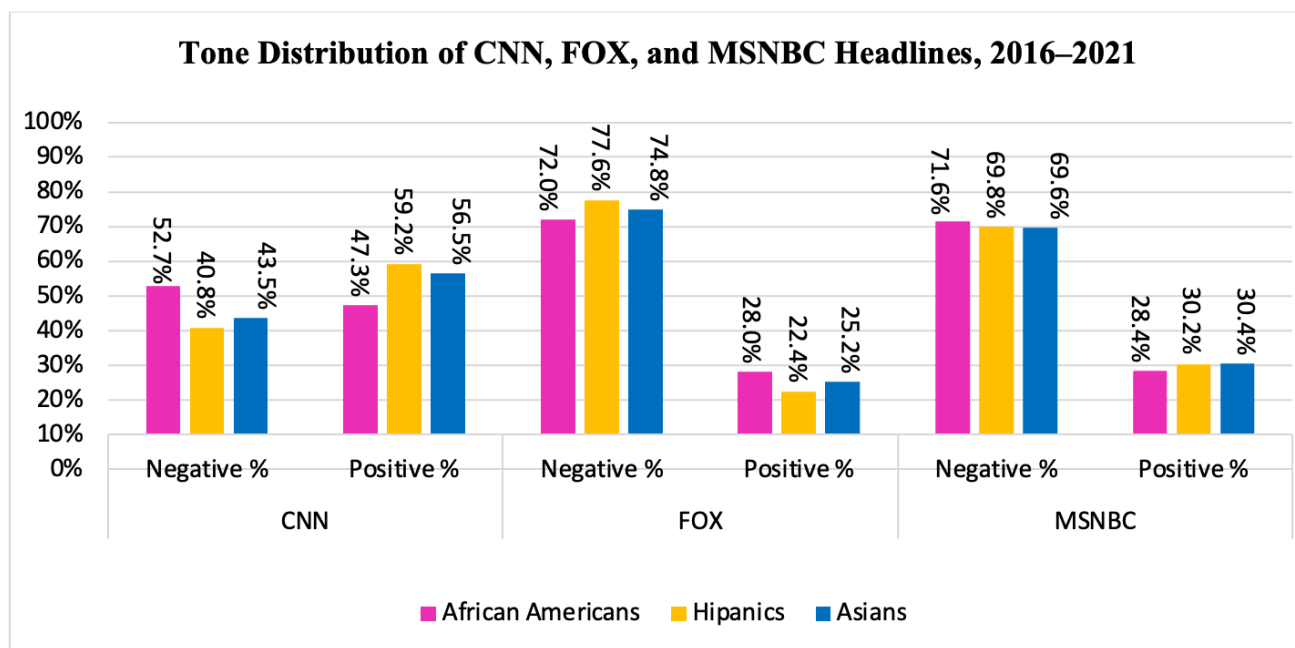
$$Net\ tone\ (g) = \frac{Headlines\ with\ Positive\ Tone\ (g) - Headlines\ with\ a\ Negative\ Tone\ (g)}{Total\ Number\ of\ Coded\ Headlines\ (g)}$$

The sentiment score for a group can vary from -1 (all headlines are negative) to +1 (all headlines are positive). For example, CNN had 776 assessed headlines about Latinos, with 430 being positive and 296 being negative. The sentiment score for Latinos on CNN is $[(430 - 296) / 776] = +0.17$. To compare the coverage of different groups by each of the three cable networks, we calculate an index of headline sentiment using this formula.

III. Findings

In general, when comparing the tone distribution of each cable network, we notice that the negative tone in the three cable networks is higher in the three groups in comparison to the positive tone. African Americans coverage in Fox news and MSNBC score the highest percentage, with 72% and 71.6% respectively, while CNN news has a lower-negative tone than Fox and MSNBC, with 52.7%. We also notice that the negative tone in Fox news is higher than in CNN and MSNBC. African Americans, Latinos and Asians are more negatively portrayed in Fox than in other cable networks. See figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Overall tone distribution of CNN, FOX, and MSNBC headlines, 2016–2021



When examining the net tone of headlines of the three cable networks for each group, we find notable differences in coverage:

For CNN:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{African Americans: Net tone} &= \frac{473 - 527}{1000} = -0.05 \\ \text{Latinos: Net tone} &= \frac{430 - 296}{776} = +0.18 \\ \text{Asian Americans: Net tone} &= \frac{459 - 354}{813} = +0.12 \end{aligned}$$

For Fox News:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{African Americans: Net tone} &= \frac{94 - 241}{335} = -0.43 \\ \text{Latinos: Net tone} &= \frac{57 - 197}{254} = -0.55 \\ \text{Asian Americans: Net tone} &= \frac{128 - 381}{510} = -0.49 \end{aligned}$$

For MSNBC

$$\begin{aligned} \text{African Americans: Net tone} &= \frac{84 - 211}{295} = -0.43 \\ \text{Latinos and Asian Americans: Net tone for both groups} &= \frac{56 - 130}{186} = -0.39 \end{aligned}$$

Table 3. Net Tone by Cable Network and Ethnic Group

Tone	CNN						FOX						MSNBC					
	African Ame		Latinos		Asians		African Ame		Latinos		Asians		African Ame		Latinos		Asians	
	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%	Frame ct.	%
Positive	473	47.3	430	59.2	459	56.5	94	28	57	22.4	128	25.2	84	28.4	56	30.2	55	30.4
Negative	527	52.7	296	40.8	354	43.5	241	72	197	77.6	381	74.8	211	71.6	130	69.8	128	69.6
Net Tone	-0.05		+0.18		+0.12		-0.43		-0.55		-0.49		-0.43		-0.39		-0.39	
Total	1000		726		813		335		254		510		295		186		184	

In examining the viewer numbers in the table above, it is essential to clarify how these figures relate to the overall analysis of partisan media coverage. The fluctuations in viewer numbers can indicate shifts in audience engagement with different news outlets, which may reflect their editorial choices and the perceived credibility of their reporting.

This context is crucial for understanding the subsequent analysis of news coverage, particularly regarding Latino issues.

As highlighted in the training articles, Fox News has a notably more negative sentiment score for Latino news coverage compared to MSNBC, with scores of -0.55 and -0.39, respectively. This indicates that Fox's portrayal of Latino-related news is significantly more negative than that of MSNBC.

Furthermore, while MSNBC ranks second in terms of negative sentiment, it is important to note that the difference in coverage volume is also relevant. According to Figure 2, Fox News has a total of 667 headlines related to Latino issues, while MSNBC has 639. This difference of 28 headlines suggests that Fox not only presents a more negative tone but also covers Latino issues more extensively than MSNBC, which may influence viewer perceptions and engagement.

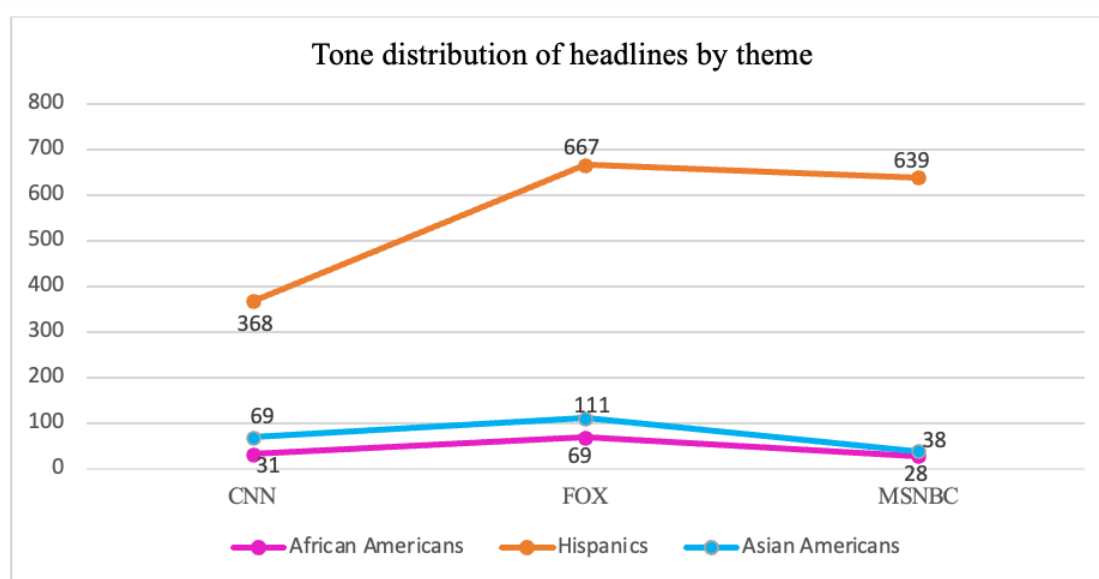
Our findings, however, indicate that the overall sentiment for each group aligns closely with previous research. Figure 1 and Table 3 validate H1. African Americans are depicted more negatively than Latinos and Asians by differences of +0.23 and +0.07 on CNN, less negatively by differences of -0.12 and -0.06 on Fox, and more negatively by a difference of -0.04 on MSNBC. The notable differences in headline sentiment among the three groups support the widely accepted notion that Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans are often portrayed negatively in the United States.

The divergent tones across the headlines of the three cable networks require a detailed explanation to clearly establish what these differences entail. It is important to delve into the kinds of topics that were covered and specifically what the nature of negative portrayals was regarding each group over the four-year period, in an attempt to provide an answer as to whether these negative portrayals tend to further confirm this preliminary claim that political polarization is fueled by the media. Such tone differences should be located within the broader context of polarization to ensure that the findings are consistent with the article's initial assertions about the media's role in shaping political attitudes.

The findings show that Latinos news were frequently covered when immigration issue has been debated in public, particularly during the 2016 and 2020 general elections. 368 headlines negatively covered Latinos in CNN, while Fox and MSNBC outnumbered it with 667 headlines for Fox and 639 headlines for MSNBC.

The topics in which African Americans' news were negatively covered and appeared in crime-related issues, including the events of police brutality against African Americans and deaths caused by police such as the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, in addition to Black Lives Matter movement. Yet, the number of headlines about African Americans is smaller than number of headlines about Latinos, with 31 headlines in CNN, 69 headlines in Fox, and 28 headlines in MSNBC. While headlines about Asian Americans, the number is approximately close to that of African Americans and significantly smaller than that of Latinos, with 69 headlines for CNN, 11 headlines for Fox news and 38 headlines for MSNBC (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Tone distribution of headlines by theme



III. Discussion

In this section, we analyze the tone of coverage of three major news networks: Cable News Network (CNN), Fox News Network, and MSNBC. We compare them with the overall tone concerning their respective affiliations with three major minority groups in the United States: Latinos, Asians, and African Americans. From this news headline dataset, we try to unearth the tone utilized by these networks in their coverages of the news related to these groups. These networks collectively reached an audience of approximately 3.8 million people in the United States in 2021. During the prime news time slot (8 to 11 p.m.), CNN's audience decreased by 25% from 1.1 million in 2021 to 828,000 in 2022. MSNBC's audience also declined by 6%, from about 881,000 to 827,000. In contrast, Fox News witnessed an increase in its audience from 1.9 million in 2021 to 2.1 million in 2022, representing a 10% increase (Pew Research Center, 2023). These viewership patterns underscore the importance of understanding how each network's coverage potentially shapes public perception.

A. Tone of Coverage and Political Polarization

The results show that differences in tone toward Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans are apparent in coverage on all three stations—CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. Such differences might be explained by their different political leanings. A case in point, Fox News, a traditionally conservative station, had largely negative coverage of Asian Americans in the COVID-19 period. This complements findings from extant literature on COVID-19 stigma that associated Fox News with it; hence, showing those who relied more on Fox News were more likely to have stigmatizing attitudes against Asian Americans (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Cho et al., 2020). In addition, Fox News frequently bashed Latinos in its coverage of Latino news, especially during debates of immigration issues, which help further anti-immigrant discourse, fostering stereotypes and prejudices against Latinos and immigrants (Reny & Manzano, 2016; Fujioka, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

Fox News typically holds a negative tone in its coverage, typical of its general editorial line on such sensitive subjects, including conservative political viewpoints, which tend to hold a caution toward immigration policies and minority rights movements on the back foot. The coverage is but one reflection of network politics, and, in essence, it contributes to the very problem: the polarization of public opinion on these issues. In a way, Fox News is priming its audience with these negative frames so that it goes out and conceptualizes these minority groups more negatively, which helps division across those frames.

In contrast, CNN and MSNBC, known generally as liberal networks, used a positive or even indifferent tone when addressing minority groups. However, MSNBC has also been shown to have negative reporting since historical analysis showed its poor portrayal of Asian Americans during the 1998 Winter Olympics (Tuan, 1999). It helps to illustrate the fact that while political leanings affect reporting, it is not the only issue. Their views on the coverage of minority groups are rather similar, as both CNN and MSNBC reverse their general stance—part of their broader editorial stance—toward strong social justice and inclusivity. This is in coherence with the literature stating that liberal media outlets would more often frame minority issues in a supporting and compassionate way (Holtzman et al., 2011; Feldman et al., 2012).

B. Influence of Partisan Media on Public Perception

The role of partisan media in shaping public perception is evident from our analysis. According to Shim (2016), negative portrayals of minority groups portrayed by Fox News reflect its general ideological perspectives, closely aligned with conservative and Republican views.

These findings indicate that through selective framing, the quality is very instrumental in reinforcing already held biases and increasing political polarization. Fox News silences the voices of most issues on immigration and minority rights, hence fitting into a broader rhetoric of marginalization, leading to increased social stratification and intergroup hostility. Research shows that exposure to partisan media, particularly those with a conservative bent, significantly impacts their viewers' attitudes toward minority groups and is likely to lead to the formation of more negative perceptions pertinent to them (Feldman et al., 2012; Reny & Manzano, 2016).

Any analysis of political polarization cannot be complete without the role of media in shaping public perception. A story on the news, more so on minority groups, can go to a great degree in influencing public opinion and reinforcing existing biases. Partisan media outlets present news items in ways that are commensurate with their ideologies, thus creating echo chambers in which viewers are bombarded constantly to entrench any preset belief (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). Such exposure to partisan media content may result in increased polarization as people grow further entrenched in their ideological positions.

C. Broader Implications and Future Research

These findings highlight the broader implications of media coverage with respect to political polarization and social cohesion. Particularly, these cable networks are relevant platforms in respect of how public discourse on minority groups is framed or otherwise set within the greater agenda. Accordingly, the negative tone that characterized Fox News' coverage comports with a growing literature regarding the impact of partisan media on societal attitudes, such as (Feldman et al., 2012; Lajevardi, 2019). Comparing the audiences of CNN and MSNBC with the viewers of Fox News, there is a drop in both, while that for Fox News increased. This change in viewership points to increased ideologically homogeneous media exposure, deepening an already biased exposure and echo chambers.

Future research should further refine the scope of this study, perhaps increasing the number of media outlets under investigation and studies that are adequately longitudinal to trace changes over time. Researchers could also consider studying moderating variables associated with the amount of coverage the cable networks provide, in which case they would recognize how cable networks of different ideologies cover minority news. Briefly, the difference in tone regarding coverage for minority groups between CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC serves to underscore how huge a role the media play in setting public perception and political dynamics.

The overwhelmingly negative coverage of Fox News contrasts to those of a more neutral or positive tone for CNN and MSNBC; the greatest contrast, in fact, contributes to the wider ideological divides that cast long shadows on American media. These results tell us that partisan media can change people's public attitudes toward minority groups in ways that create greater societal divisiveness and heightened polarization in politics.

Conclusion

The proliferation of partisan media has significantly impacted political discourse in the United States, contributing to increased incivility and polarization. Research indicates that partisan outlets reinforce existing biases, shape public opinion, and influence political behavior through selective exposure, agenda-setting, and framing. The rise of social media has further amplified these effects, creating echo chambers and feedback loops that deepen ideological divides. Understanding the role of partisan media in shaping political discourse is crucial for addressing the challenges posed by political polarization and fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry.

Bibliography

Abrajano, M. A., & Hajnal, Z. L. (2020). The politics of race and immigration in the United States. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2016.25>

Appel, M., & Weber, S. (2021). The influence of media on prejudice and attitudes. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 33(1), 10-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217715543>

Arceneaux, K., & Johnson, M. (2013). Changing minds or changing channels? Partisan news in an age of choice. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.737424>

Baum, M. A. (2003). Soft news and political knowledge: A reexamination of media effects on democracy. *Political Communication*, 20(2), 173-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600802426965>

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics. Oxford University Press.

Benson, P. (2014). Narrative Inquiry in Applied Linguistics Research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 34, 154-170. <https://doi:10.1017/S0267190514000099>

Bhonde, A., Kaur, S., & Kaur, R. (2015). Sentiment analysis of news headlines. *International Journal of Computer Applications*, 116(18), 1-5.

Bonyadi, A., & Samuel, A. (2013). The role of headlines in news articles. *Journal of Communication Studies*, 45(2), 123-135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013494863>

Cho, H., Li, W., Cannon, J., Lopez, R., & Song, C. (2020). Testing three explanations for stigmatization of people of Asian descent during COVID-19: maladaptive coping, biased media use, or racial prejudice?, 26(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13557858.2020.1830035>

Davis, N. T., & Dunaway, J. L. (2016). Party polarization, media choice, and mass partisan-ideological sorting. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 272–297. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw002>

Dhanani, L. Y., & Franz, B. (2020). Unexpected public health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic: a national survey examining anti-Asian attitudes in the USA. *International Journal of Public Health*, 65(6), 747–754. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S00038-020-01440-0/TABLES/2>

Feldman, L., Maibach, E. W., Roser-Renouf, C., & Leiserowitz, A. (2012). Climate on Cable: The Nature and Impact of Global Warming Coverage on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC, 17(1), 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161211425410>

Fujioka, Y. (2011). Perceived Threats and Latino Immigrant Attitudes: How White and African American College Students Respond to News Coverage of Latino Immigrants, 22(1), 43–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2011.546743>

Garrett, R. K. (2009). Echo chambers online? Politically motivated selective exposure among Internet news users. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(2), 265–285. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01440.x>

Gil de Zúñiga, H., Correa, T., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Selective Exposure to Cable News and Immigration in the U.S.: The Relationship Between FOX News, CNN, and Attitudes Toward Mexican Immigrants, 56(4), 597–615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732138>

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.

Heather, M., & Emily, S. (2019). Media framing and minority groups. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 13–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1574221>

Holtzman, N. S., Schott, J. P., Jones, M. N., Balota, D. A., & Yarkoni, T. (2011). Exploring media bias with semantic analysis tools: Validation of the Contrast Analysis of Semantic Similarity (CASS). *Behavior Research Methods*, 43(1), 193–200. <https://doi.org/10.3758/S13428-010-0026-Z/FIGURES/1>

Ifantidou, E. (2009). Newspaper headlines and relevance: Ad hoc concepts in ad hoc contexts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(4), 699–720. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.PRAGMA.2008.10.016>

Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x>

- Kingdon, J. W. (1984). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. Little, Brown.
- Lajevardi, N. (2019). The Media Matters: Muslim American Portrayals and the Effects on Mass Attitudes, 83(3), 1060–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711300>
- Marcus, G. E. (2000). Emotions in politics. In D. P. Green & J. S. Shapiro (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political psychology* (pp. 1-30). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.221>
- Mastro, D., & Stamps, K. (2018). The impact of media on minority populations. *Communication Research*, 45(4), 546-570. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110481129-018>
- Mutz, D. (2016). *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400865871>
- Pew Research Center. (2023). Cable News Fact Sheet. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/cable-news/>
- Sui, M., Paul, N., Shah, P., Spurlock, B., Chastant, B., & Dunaway, J. (2018). The role of minority journalists, candidates, and audiences in shaping race-related campaign news coverage. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(4), 1079-1102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018762078>
- Nisar, H., Bleich, E. Group status, geographic location, and the tone of media coverage: Jews and Muslims in New York Times and Guardian Headlines, 1985–2014. *CMS* 8, 3 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0153-3>
- Prior, M. (2013). Media and political polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16, 101-127. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242>
- Reny, T., & Manzano, S. (2016). The negative effects of mass media stereotypes of Latinos and immigrants. *Media and minorities*, 4, 195-212.
- Shim, K. (2016). Subjectivity in media source perception: Fox news versus NPR. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 5(2), 177–197. https://doi.org/10.1386/AJMS.5.2.177_1
- Stroud, N. J. (2010). Polarization and partisan selective exposure. *Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 557-576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01497.x>
- Tuan, M. (1999, March 1). *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?*. Rutgers University Press. <https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/forever-foreigners-or-honorary-whites/9780813526249>
- Tukachinsky, R., Mastro, D., & Yarchi, M. (2017). The impact of media on perceptions of minority groups. *Journal of Communication*, 67(4), 546-570. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2017.1344669>
- Valentino, N. A., Hutchings, V. L., & Williams, D. (2004). The Impact of Political Advertising on Knowledge, Internet Information Seeking, and Candidate Preference. *Journal of Communication*, 54(2), 337–354. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02632.x>