Does Political Balance Exist in Fox News' Coverage?

Nianlong Dai, Professor Beth Leech

✴ Abstract

In the era of media prosperity, Fox News, as the most significant political news provider in the United States (According to Pew Research Center's research, 16 percent of participants consider Fox News their primary source of political news, which is higher than any other media), influences the political orientation of voters to manipulate election results through various means, such as overemphasizing, reporters' interpreting, and disregarding news, etc. In order to make their reporting seem more objective and reliable, politically biased media may gain credibility for themselves by covering more news with different political perspectives during non-significant times, which is called political balancing. In order to verify whether political balancing exists in the mainstream media, sixty Fox News reports during the period of 2016 election were randomly selected and analyzed. According to the result, Fox News put statistically significant more positive coverage of Democrats after the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, won the 2016 election. The findings of this research are substantial since awareness of the media's political balancing will benefit voters in making rational choices for consequential elections. Meanwhile, political balancing could be necessary for researchers conducting studies of journalism.

1   Introduction

The news media, as the main, or even the only, way for the general public citizens to obtain information about government and social issues, is deeply influenced by a small number of people, including journalists, government officials, and various interest groups. Although public opinion plays a vital role during the election and decision-making process in the United States, the perspective of citizens could be easily affected, and the most significant influential factor will be the news media. In other words, elites' leverage in media coverage allows them to achieve their goal of controlling the government by influencing the political views of voters. The media influences political affairs through different attitudes. When the press reports positively about a policy, its readers are more likely to support it. Conversely, readers are more likely to oppose the issue if the news media express a negative attitude towards that issue. However, the reality of media-driven voting severely damaged the functioning of the democratic system since voters are going to vote for propaganda masters instead of political experts. In order to alleviate the media's domination of public opinion, people need to realize that the news media coverage may be biased or deceptive.

However, these biases are not straightforward enough to easily detect since news media are going to conceal their political leanings in order to make them seem objective and impartial. One of the crucial ways news media use to express objectivity is balancing between major political powers, the Democrats and Republicans. Therefore, it is highly possible for news outlets with clear political leanings (such as Fox News and New York Times) to publish more stories that are beneficial to other political parties during unimportant time periods in order to gain the public trust of their entire coverage. In order to verify whether the news media will balance between political powers by increasing positive coverage of other political parties, I conducted research on whether Fox News put more positive coverage of Democrats to balance between political powers after Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election.

2   Literature Review

Political bias in the media has been a severe problem for more than a hundred years, even before the establishment of the modern news industry. According to David Abrahamson's article, *The Rise*

of The New Partisan Press: Forward into the past, "a politically biased from journalism was dominant before the advent of the penny press in the 1830s" (Abrahamson, 2006, p.2). Based on Abrahamson's research, there is a clear trend of an increasing number of politically biased news with the development of various media, from traditional newspapers to radio news, television news, and even current social media news. The article went through the history of non-partisan news, which was widespread across the nation for a couple of decades in the late 19th century but eventually corroded and replaced by partisan, biased news. Therefore, Abrahamson's research proved that politically biased news had been a serious problem, and it will not disappear with the emergence of new media like Twitter. On the contrary, news industries will keep expanding their influence in our political system, which explains the increasing frequency of politically biased news in mainstream media.

By assessing its readers' political affiliations, we can determine the political preference of a media outlet. Based on the Pew Research Center's survey of mainstream media readers, most of the mainstream media has a large portion of readers identifying themselves as affiliated with a specific political party. Suppose a great portion of readers of a media outlet identifies themselves with the same political party. In that case, it indicates that this media tends to include more positive coverage of that specific party since people are much more willing to read those articles they agree with. According to Jeff Grabmeier's research, people are more likely to choose to focus on stories that reinforce their original views because "they don't want their views to be challenged by seriously considering other viewpoints" (Grabmeier). Among those biased media, Fox News and New York Times are the most typical examples in which most of its readers are affiliated with the same political party. The Pew survey shows that 93 percent of Fox News readers identify themselves as Republicans, while 91 percent of New York Times readers identify themselves as Democrats. Since this survey allows us to identify mainstream media's political preference, it will be significant to

tell whether the news media carried out a political balance in its coverage.

The 2016 presidential election is the best example of studying the crucial role of the news media plays in the political system of the United States since the influence of the media on election results was most evident in the 2016 election. Furthermore, Donald Trump's campaign's heavy investment in the media industry (According to CNN's estimates, the Trump campaign spent more than $100 million on ads during the 2016 election) and the 2016 election results demonstrated the significance of the news media, including traditional media and social media, in influencing public voting preference. According to Qihao Ji's research article, *Moralizing Campaign Coverage: A Computerized Textual Analysis of New York Times' Reporting on Clinton and Trump During the 2016 Presidential Election*, the New York Times's relatively neutral and objective coverage of the election process and candidates may have been the main reason Hillary Clinton lost that consequential election. Based on the computerized analysis of extensive news articles during the period of 2016 presidential election, the New York Times, as the main propaganda outlet for the Democratic Party, displays a greater degree of neutrality than Fox News. As the election date approached, more and more news about the election was being sent out. Meanwhile, Trump's approval rate continued to climb, and he defeated Clinton on election day and became the 45th president of the United States, which proves that Republican coverage, Fox News, is more effective in winning the election. Therefore, Ji's research implies that biased news is more likely to affect readers' minds than neutral stories. In addition, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and other "Blue States", state that typically vote for Democratic candidates, chose to support Trump in 2016 election, which shows that neutral reports cannot even consolidate their views of the original supporters.

In the current news media, especially the periods before election dates, there has been a great number of politically biased news that contain slander and smearing content of the candidate from the other party. The article, *How American Media Framed 2016 Presidential Election Using Data*

Visualization, by Iuliia Alieva mentioned that the visualization of data led to an escalation of the media war, as these visualizations of charts and data portrait the election as an adversarial game. In other words, candidates of different political parties will no longer be portrayed as friends who hold different political perspectives but as enemies (the most prominent example of a game-like campaign is the 2016 presidential election). Therefore, the current situation of severe polarization in American politics has forced different parties to conduct more influential ways of political propaganda, which include more offensive content, such as the coverage of political scandals. In order to make the "game" look more intense, some media even fabricate fake news during the campaign to attract readers' attention. Based on Hunt Allcott and Mathew Gentzkow's research on news in the 2016 election, nearly every American adult read at least one fake news story during the 2016 campaign, and more than half of them expressed their profound belief in those fake news. However, even if the news has been proven to be a false accusation, the price paid by the media could be nothing more than an apology or compensation, while the public pressure those fake news created during the campaign may lead to election failures. Of course, the news media could reach the same goal by reporting facts in different ways, such as over-emphasizing, obfuscating reports, and conducting interpretive reports. Therefore, we should be cautious about the news that contains radical views on a certain political party or candidate (no matter positive or negative) since it is important for us as voters to distinguish possible biased news to make reasonable choices.

Qun Wang includes his research on post-election self-examination of the entire news industry in his article, *Problems and Solutions for American Political Coverage*. Wang finds out that most of the news media are going to have a post-election self-examination on the "individual, routine, organization, institutional, and social system level" (Wang, 2018, p.4) of their reports during the election to see if they complied with the duties of journalists, reporting with a objective and unbiased perspective. However, Wang's research shows that the reflection among news media "focused more on the routine level while problems at individual and organizational levels were not prominently examined" (Wang), which indicates that the severe problem of political bias in articles during elections has not been taken seriously. However, in order to gain more leverage among the entire journalism industry, news media must make themselves more objective to be accepted by more of the general public, which may be the reason for the increasing number of positive reports on the opponent's political party after the election.

David Nicholas Hopmann introduces the concept of media balance in his article, *Political Balance in the News: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings*, which points out that media coverage, especially coverage of elections, should focus more on factual content and treating each candidate with the same standard. Also, Hopmann argues that election news should be done by neutral nonpartisan journalists while receiving standard regulations. This article was significant since it gives a possible explanation for a limited number of neutral and objective news media in the United States—the two-party political system. According to Hopmann's research, the severe problem of politically biased news also occurs "in countries with only two viable prime minister candidates" (Hopmann, 2012, p.1), just like in the United States. Therefore, biased media exist as a common problem among two-party system countries like the United States, and if the media change its attitude toward the opposing political party after the election, it is not for the purpose of reporting the facts since such reports conflict with their own political interests. The only reasonable explanation for such interest-conflicted reports is that news outlets are trying to balance between political powers.

3   Research Methods

In order to test whether Fox News put more positive coverage of Democrats to balance between political powers after Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, 60 news stories were collected directly from the official website of Fox News.

Because Fox News has a clear political preference, leaning toward the Republican Party, and played a decisive role in the 2016 presidential election, I chose Fox News as my only source of news articles. Accordingly, this article is a targeted study of Fox News and does not imply similar problems that may exist among other news outlets.

For my 60 stories, 30 stories were collected from four months before the election (07/08/2016 to 11/08/2016), and the other 30 stories were collected in the four months after the election (11/09/2016 to 03/09/2017) while every twentieth story was selected.

In order to test Fox News' attitude towards Democrats, I was thinking of using "Democrats" as my search keyword on Fox News' official website. However, there are only two stories with the word Democrats in its title. Therefore, "Clinton" was being used as the search keyword since Clinton was the presidential candidate of the Democratic party in 2016 and the majority of Fox News reports about Democratic policies, such as healthcare, the

environment, abortion rights mentioned Clinton during the election period. Thus, "Clinton" could be the best proxy for the ways that Fox News portrays Democrats.

Sixty selected news articles were coded and statistically analyzed from different aspects, including their attitude towards Democrats, whether information on Democrats' political scandals was included, and whether a reporter's interpretation was included. One of the most significant factors is Fox News' attitude towards Democrats, which was coded through interpretation of the tone of the news articles. Those articles are classified according to negative, neutral, or positive valence. Through the statistical analysis, if it turns out that Fox News has a better attitude toward the Democratic Party after the general election results, such as more positive reports or fewer mentions of the Democrats scandal, we will have evidence to conclude that Fox News is trying to balance between political after the general election powers.

4   FINDINGS/RESULTS

			Time		
			This story published before Trump win the election	This story published after Trump win the election	Total
Scandal	Not about Democrats political scandals	Count	19	26	45
		% within Time	63.3%	86.7%	75.0%
	About Democrats political scandals	Count	11	4	15
		% within Time	36.7%	13.3%	25.0%
Total		Count	30	30	60
		% within Time	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

FIGURE 1

Comparing news articles from two time periods (four months before and after the election day), the result of the content analysis shows that Fox News' coverage of the Democrats' political scandal significantly dropped after Trump won the election. According to the table above (FIGURE 1), there is 36.7 percent of Fox News articles contain

content about the Democrat scandal, while most of them regarded either Hillary Clinton's email controversy or Bill Clinton's Lewinsky scandal. However, the number of Fox News articles that included the Democrat scandal quickly dropped after the day Donald Trump won the election, which only accounted for 13.3% of all Fox News articles.

Reporting scandals about the opponent's political party is one of the critical means used by politically affiliated media to politically attack the opposing party or candidate. These reports on the Democrat scandal are extremely negative for Democrats because these reports and the harsh wording in articles, such as "criminal Clinton", are devastating to the popularity and public opinion towards the Democratic Party. After the election, Fox News substantially reduced its coverage of the Democratic scandal, which is statistically significant since the value of Kendall's tau-b is 0.03, which is smaller than 0.05. Therefore, the smaller coverage of Democrats' scandals is a sign that Fox News has turned its attitude towards the Democrats better, and it is also a means of balancing between political powers.

Another determinant variable to see if Fox News has attempted to balance political powers after the 2016 presidential election is its different attitude toward the Democratic Party in articles in different periods of time. The diagram is shown in FIGURE 2 below.

Before Trump won the election, there is 66.7 percent of articles on Fox News held a negative attitude towards the Democratic party, which is two times more than Fox News articles that held a positive attitude towards the Democratic party.

According to FIGURE 2, the proportion of positive articles about the Democratic party increased from 13.3% to 33.3%. Therefore, it is statistically significant to conclude that Fox News had a much better attitude towards the Democratic party since the value of Kendall's tau-c for attitude versus time is 0.005, which indicates that Fox News' attitude towards the Democrats has improved massively as the result of the election came out. Fox News' uncharacteristically favorable attitude toward Democrats is evidence of its attempt to balance political power after publishing numerous biased stories before the election date.

Crosstab

			This story published before Trump win the election	This story published after Trump win the election	Total
Attitude	Negative	Count	20	10	30
		% within Time	66.7%	33.3%	50.0%
	Neutral	Count	6	10	16
		% within Time	20.0%	33.3%	26.7%
	Positive	Count	4	10	14
		% within Time	13.3%	33.3%	23.3%
Total		Count	30	30	60
		% within Time	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

FIGURE 2

The following diagram (FIGURE 3) shows the comparison of the interpretation level (the degree of independent analysis and creative liberty taken by a Fox writer) in Fox News articles before and after Trump won the election.
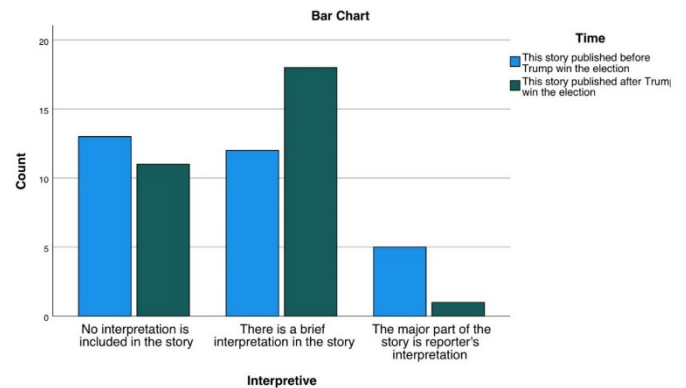

FIGURE 3

Based on the results of content analysis and the bar chart above (FIGURE 3), there is no statistically significant difference between the number of interpretive news before and after the election day (Kendall's tau-b value: 0.883).

Therefore, it is statistical confident to conclude that even though most Fox News stories before the election are meant to attack and harm the public credibility of the Democratic party, the majority of the content of their news stories is event-based. Furthermore, without statistically significant differences between the numbers of interpretive news before and after the election day indicates that political balance is not done by switching different types of news, but in more straightforward ways,

such as reducing the number of times mentioning Democrats scandal or increasing the quantity of positive reporting towards Democrats.

Overall, there is enough statistically significant evidence to conclude that Fox News, as a typical partisan media affiliated with the Republican party, did put more positive coverage of Democrats in order to balance between political powers after the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, won the 2016 presidential election.

5   DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Through the content analysis, we are statistically confident that Fox News did publish reports that did not conform to the political interests of the Republican Party at unimportant time periods in order to achieve political balance and express its principle of objectivity. Since the data used in this study was only collected from Fox News, the results do not possess external validity. More research and relative data are necessary if it is to be proven that political balancing also exists among other news outlets. According to this research, the effect of the time period on Fox News' political attitudes was demonstrated. Thus, further research on the modern news industry, especially Fox News, should be conducted during the time period when that media is in a critical competitive situation, such as the election period. In this way, more effective analyses of media will be made, and the general public will better understand the actual intention contained in reports they are reading to make rational decisions that are in their best interests in the era of media flourishing ■

6   BIBLIOGRAPHY

[1] Abrahamson. (2006). *The Rise of the New Partisan Press: Forward into the Past. The Journal of*

Magazine Media, 8(1), 0–0. *HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1353/JMM.2006.0007*

[2] Alieva, Iuliia. (2021). *How American Media Framed 2016 Presidential Election Using Data Visualization: The Case Study of the New York Times and the Washington Post*. Journalism Practice, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print), 1–27. *HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1080/17512786.2021.1930573*

[3] Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. 2017. "*Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.*" Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31 (2): 211-36.

[4] Grabmeier, J. (2009, May 28). Study: Americans choose media messages that agree with their views. Phys.org. Retrieved March 19, 2023, from *HTTPS://PHYS.ORG/NEWS/2009-05-AMERICANS- MEDIA-MES-SAGES-VIEWS.HTML*

[5] Grieco, E. (2020, August 18). *Americans' main sources for political news vary by party and age*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved December 20, 2022, from *HTTPS://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/FACT-TANK/2020 /04/01/AMERICANS-MAIN-SOURCES-FOR-POLITICAL-NEWS-VARY-BY-PARTY-AND-AGE/*.

[6] Hopmann, D. N., Van Aelst, P., & Legnante, G. (2012). *Political balance in the news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings*. Journalism, 13(2), 240–257. *HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1177/1464884911427804*

[7] Ji, & Zhao, W. (2021). *Moralizing Campaign Coverage: A Computerized Textual Analysis of New York Times' Reporting on Clinton and Trump During the 2016 Presidential Election*. Journalism Practice, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print), 1–15. *HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1080/17512786.2021.1976071*

[8] Wang, Napoli, P. M., & Ma, Y. (2018). *Problems and Solutions for American Political Coverage: Journalistic self-critique in the wake of the 2016 presidential election*. Journalism Practice, 12(10), 1241–1258. *HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1080/17512786.2017.1394209*

Nianlong Dai graduated summa cum laude from the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University–New Brunswick, in May 2023, holding a B.A. in Political Science and a minor in Psychology. Under the guidance of Professor Beth Leech, Nianlong conducted an in-depth analysis of media behavior during the 2016 presidential election and completed this research paper. Over the course of four years in university, he developed an interest in political theory and engaged in targeted study of political viewpoints proposed by various philosophers. Since graduation, he has been employed as a Political Analyst at a financial advisory corporation in New York City. In addition, he plans to pursue a law degree after a period of work and aspires to become a legal practitioner in his future career.