

Essay

Fred Vultee

The culture wars

Right-wing media and the salience of societal security in the 2024 elections

Abstract: The 2024 US election points to the political value of insecurity: a sense that mutually cherished cultural referents are in peril, fueled by a steady flow of episodic yet correlated news. This information does not have to be false; through repetition and salience, isolated events create an image of a country in peril and a leader-in-waiting prepared to rescue it. In a closely divided electorate, a well-oiled partisan press aimed at half of the voters has the edge over a traditional media system trying to reach all of them.

Keywords: Fox News, crime, desinformation, Agenda Setting, securitization theory

The 2024 US presidential election underscores the role of securitizing discourse in shaping how the voting public sees and understands issues – particularly how issues are elevated as threats that require extreme measures and a firm hand to apply them. This discourse brought issues as disparate as immigration, women's sports, and corporate diversity policies together into a single target for the right wing of a closely divided electorate. The results of this media-fueled »culture war« reflect recent elections in other NATO nations and offer insights on elections to come.

Securitization theory (BUZAN/WÆVER/DE WILDE 1998) reflects tensions in the late 20th century between orthodox security studies and efforts to broaden their reach (VULTEE 2022). A fundamentally constructivist approach, securitization creates a space for societal/cultural matters – for example, »the sustainability ... of traditional patterns of language, culture and religious and national identity and custom« (BUZAN/WÆVER/DE WILDE 1998: 119) – alongside such traditional

sites of security as the political system, the economy, and the military. In the structure outlined by Buzan et al., a »securitizing move« begins when an actor makes the case for an existential threat to a cherished »referent object,« seeking consent to move the issue beyond politics and into the anything-goes realm of security for the duration: a »global war on terror,« for example, or Donald Trump's 2015 demand for a »total and complete shutdown« on Muslim immigration. Though securitization is a theory of politics rather than media, these messages gain strength through media processes: agenda-setting (the prominence of issues) and framing (how properties of those issues shape events into »news«).

Identity – an »us« to share »our way of life« – is »the organizing concept of the societal sector« (1998: 119), in this case the imperiled identity of the beleaguered white Christian male (or at least of the world he sees himself as destined to rule). This is the »hijacked victimhood« (HRONEŠOVÁ/KREISS 2024) employed by leaders like Trump and Viktor Orban »to preserve or expand a dominant group's power« (2024: 1). In the US, the target might be the liberals who have »marginalized them from mainstream political discourse«; in Europe, a »Brussels dictate« might let »migrants and minority groups ... victimize nation-states and their pro-family policies« (2024: 6).

The idea of a socially constructed threat to a socially constructed victimhood creates particular challenges for the beleaguered media system through which political information reaches the public. Storied US newspapers that have come under control of technology barons found their editorial autonomy compromised during the campaign. The *Los Angeles Times's* owner blocked an editorial endorsing Trump's Democratic opponent, Kamala Harris, and promised a »bias meter« (RAINEY 2024) to address the concerns of the conservative audience it hoped to win over; with the support of owner Jeff Bezos, *The Washington Post's* new publisher declared that, »returning to our roots,« the paper would no longer editorially endorse presidential candidates (LEWIS 2024).

On social media, the tech entrepreneur Elon Musk became a lavish and vocal supporter of Trump and his causes before turning his attention to Europe. He has streamed his conversation with Alice Weidel, leader of Germany's far-right AfD, and shares content promoting that party as a »movement to rebuild Germany and lead Europe out of globalist control.« While his relations with the UK right wing are more complex, he has also promoted the anti-immigration cause there – while maintaining his attacks on the supposed threat of DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) to the cultural values he advocated. In an electorate as closely divided as the US in 2024 (Trump's margin of victory in the popular vote was about 1.5 percentage points), the role of social media in boosting and sustaining issues for the partisan press leaves the professionalized media at a disadvantage. The existential threats portrayed at the highly popular Fox News Channel – to public safety and the economy as well as to an embattled »our way of

life« – might be built from exceptionally small events, but through repetition and amplification, they look bigger and more constant for that audiences.

Newspaper endorsements, of course, are less a reflection of public opinion than of publishers' prerogatives; their goal is admittedly persuasive, and their outcome is largely symbolic. The role of social media stands closer to the original concept of media agenda-setting: in the phrase that McCombs and Shaw (1972) borrowed from earlier work on the coverage of foreign policy, the news does not tell people what to think as much as what to think about. As McCombs and Shaw (1993) affirmed in a retrospective two decades later, agenda-setting is less about attitude change than about a transfer of knowledge: the facts out of which a threat is constructed.

Not all of that knowledge is equal. Political parties' spread of misinformation on social media is associated not simply with populism but a »radical-right populism« reflecting »exclusionary ideologies« (TÖRNBERG/CHUERI 2025: 2) – and a »misinformed electorate« works to those parties' advantage. Earlier research supports the idea that the right-wing media's audiences are more likely to know things that are not true and not to know things that are true. Presented with three misperceptions about the second us-Iraq war – about »weapons of mass destruction,« strong connections to al-Qaida, and world support for the us invasion – Fox users were the most likely to hold at least one of those views; users of us public broadcasting services were the least likely to hold any (KULL/RAMSEY/LEWIS 2003). Survey research in fall 2024 found that users of Fox and farther-right media outlets not only prioritized different issues than users of national newspapers or other cable networks but knew different things about those issues. They were more likely to give wrong answers about data trends in crime, immigration, and the economy, and those giving wrong answers were more likely to lean Republican (IPSOS 2024).

Those findings do not by themselves show that people learned false information from Fox News, or that Fox never presented accurate information on those issues. But a study of top stories at the Fox homepage, foxnews.com, from 2022 through 2024 underscores the importance of salience and frequency in the transfer of information. Put another way, if episodic crime connected to immigration, particularly when those seen as the most vulnerable are the victims, is always the top story, aggregate data about declines in immigration or crime is less likely to leave a lasting, or opinion-shaping, impression, if it reaches the audience's attention at all. As with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) study of the newspapers of 1968, no method could – or should – capture every bit of content in an issue, but a determination of »major stories« can stand as a measure of editorial practice and audience reception. Episodic crime helps illustrate the process.

A bill that advanced rapidly through the newly seated us Congress in 2025, which would »mandate federal detention of immigrants lacking legal status accused of theft, burglary and other similar crimes« (SUTER 2025), was named for a nursing student who was murdered while jogging in Georgia in February 2024.

(A Venezuelan man who had entered the us illegally was convicted of the murder that November.) Her death was the top story at the Fox homepage at least once a day for the next eight days: the search for a suspect, comments from the expected presidential candidates (Trump and incumbent Joe Biden), and reactions from friends. Other stories about immigration, the border, and crime attributed to Venezuelans also reached the top of the page. On the ninth day, the Georgia story did not appear among four captures of the top 10 stories – but two other articles attacking the administration’s border policies did.

A similar case that had been among top stories for a week in 2023 – a woman found dead near a hiking trail in Maryland – returned to the top of the page in 2024 when a Salvadoran who had also immigrated illegally was accused in her death. Her family later spoke at the Republican convention that formally nominated Trump for the presidency; on the first day of his return to office, Trump declared a »national emergency« at the us southern border (*Guardian* 2025).

The cultural connections among immigration, media, and right-wing anger were clear after rioting followed the stabbing deaths of three young girls – falsely blamed on Muslim immigrants – at a party in England. A columnist for the *New York Post* (a corporate cousin of Fox News) saw »huge lessons for America« in the unrest: essentially, since the police »were clearly holding back something about the identity of the suspect,« the rioting was an understandable response to the resulting online rumors (MURRAY 2024). In other words, if the public had only been told it was a Black person born in Wales in the first place, they wouldn’t have had to attack those mosques.

On either side of the Atlantic, the border is an issue of both physical and societal security. Another of Trump’s first-day proclamations – declaring it federal policy that there are »only two genders, male and female« (GUARDIAN STAFF 2025) – points to the unique role of gender diversity as a peril to right-wing culture. That order landed on fertile ground, as had Trump’s campaign discourse. Stories about a trans athlete on the woman’s swim team at a Pennsylvania college were among the top stories on the Fox homepage for 18 of 33 days beginning in January 2022; a trans athlete on a college volleyball team in California, six times in the month preceding the election – and nine times in the ensuing four weeks. At a rally the weekend before the election, Trump praised another women’s team that, in his terms, had defied »the radical left’s gender insanity« (MORIK 2024).

With economic topics, the issue is less an overflow of episodic information than a deficit in ongoing information. In 2022, the monthly government report on us consumer inflation was among the top stories on the Fox News homepage at least once on the day of its release – until September, when its continuing decline apparently made inflation less enticing. Hurried readers, or even attentive ones, can surely be forgiven if they do not update their knowledge from information that isn’t made salient for them.

Misperceptions or misinformation can also reach the news agenda through a side door. An accusation that partisan bias, or DEI-driven ineptitude, hindered the response to a natural or technological disaster might have little staying power by itself, but once it draws a denial – or a demand for further inquiry from friendly legislators or social media commentators – it receives another boost beyond the original. The sparks of existential danger do not have to be large when they land on the dry tinder of self-proclaimed victimhood. Even if parts of a security claim are made from whole cloth (a supposed surge in drug-smuggling from Canada), the securitization structure is clear: Trump’s order imposing tariffs on imports from Canada, China, and Mexico proclaimed that »the extraordinary threat posed by illegal aliens and drugs ... constitutes a national emergency,« with tariffs lasting »until the crisis is alleviated« (THE WHITE HOUSE 2025).

Commentators have suggested for much of this century that US candidates can seem to be speaking to two different countries in the same campaign. The 2024 results suggest that it is at least safe to say that candidates are heard through two different media systems: a well-oiled party press creates one reality, and a fractious set of organizations still adhering to public service ideals creates another. The party press seems content to serve its half of the country a select menu of existential peril. As for the other, *The Washington Post* announced a new mission days before Trump’s inauguration: »Riveting storytelling for all of America.« Whether it is contested or not, a securitizing move is news for both.

About the author

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