

The Media and Evangelical Politics: A Comparative Analysis of Framing

Mengyuan Zhao

Abstract:

This paper analyzes the influence of partisan media, particularly MSNBC and Fox News, on constructing polarized views of Evangelicalism in the context of the 2024 American presidential election. It focuses on how each media outlet frames the evangelical movements under presidential candidates Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, emphasizing the differences in how values of religion are framed to achieve political objectives. By comparing the contrasting framing, the essay illustrates how both outlets selectively emphasize radical elements to reinforce pre-existing biases. This selective framing not only skews public perception but also contributes to motivated reasoning, deepening political polarization. Ultimately, the essay argues that media framing in evangelical contexts distorts religious values for political gain, exacerbating social division.

Keywords: Evangelicalism, 2024 Election, Framing, Motivated Reasoning, Partisan Polarization

Introduction

The phrase “In God We Trust,” has held fundamental value in the hearts of many Americans to the extent that it is printed across all US bills. In fact, the values of Christianity have been entrenched in government, consistently influencing and driving the course of American politics throughout history. But as religion becomes embedded in politics, many virtues and beliefs are manipulated, succumbing to politicians’ vicious battles for power. Simultaneously, the prominence of media can drive these ideas to a polarized extreme in the context of presidential elections. In the 2024 election, religion has become a pivotal topic in both the campaigns of Republicans and Democrats. While Evangelical fervor in support of Trump

has been widely covered in the media, less light is shed on the recent mobilization of evangelicalism under the Kamala Harris campaign. This paper examines the role of media in facilitating polarized views regarding Evangelicalism in the 2024 election by analyzing two partisan news outlets, specifically Fox News, which is mainly tailored towards Republicans, and MSNBC, which has a primarily democratic audience.

Defining Framing

Framing is the way in which news and information are presented in the media, selecting “certain aspects of a perceived reality to make them more noticeable” (University of Edinburgh, 2022). This often leads to information being conveyed in a more simplistic na-

ture or being left out, blinding the public from a multitude of perspectives. The way information is framed largely determines the public's perceptions, understandings, and opinions. The language conveyed by media "serves as the cognitive framework in which we understand the world around us" (Aalai, 2017).

Comparing Evangelicalism Portrayed in Partisan Media MSNBC frames Evangelical support for Trump as radical and irrational by reporting it with a skeptical tone. Following Trump's failed assassination attempt, MSNBC presented interviews of Trump supporters calling the event "divine intervention" (Diaz-Balart, 2024). This was followed by photos of slogans, such as "protected by the hand of God," printed on Trump campaign shirts and music videos with lyrics calling the event "prophesized" (Diaz-Balart, 2024). MSNBC showed a series of quotes from interviews of Evangelical Trump supporters, with claims of a need to "protect the babies" and "put the Ten Commandments back in our classrooms" (Diaz-Balart, 2024). MSNBC then linked these views to violence by underscoring how one woman who took part in the interview was also involved in the January 6th insurrection. These bizarre examples confirm stereotypes of radical Christians who support Trump's campaign while linking this support to anti-democratic values. On the other hand, MSNBC has portrayed the evangelical movement for Kamala Harris in a much more positive light, defining it as a progressive movement benefiting the working class. MSNBC reports a recent Democratic campaign "Evangelical Christians for Kamala Harris" as a promising step towards securing votes from traditional Republican voters in support of Harris in the upcoming election (Reidout, 2024). At the same time, MSNBC repudiates Trump's adherence to the values of Christianity, defining his supporters as followers of a "conservative", "mean," and "selfish" version of Christianity instead (Reidout, 2024). The outlet then suggests that many Republicans are "fed up" with Trump and have taken favor with Kamala's more inclusive religious views. MSNBC reinforces that "not all Christians are white" and emphasizes the presence of "Red-Letter Christians" who support Kamala's campaign (Reidout, 2024). These Red-Letter Christians break the stereotype of Evangelical Christians by using religion as a means to advance social justice including civil rights. MSNBC connects this evangelical support for Kamala to her humble past that many find relatable, emphasizing Kamala's work experience at McDonald's while contrasting it to Trump's inheritance of his father's company. This reaffirms the notion that the Harris Evangelical campaign is for the benefit of the middle class and liberals who seek social justice.

In contrast, Fox News has reported the new Evangelical movement for Harris from an overtly negative perspec-

tive, framing the movement as a threat to core conservative values. It labels Kamala's campaign as being "diametrically opposed to biblical ethics" on issues involving gender and abortion (Watters, 2024). Instead of focusing on Harris, Fox News devoted more coverage to one of the hosts of Harris's Christian campaign. Although the campaign has several hosts, Fox News repeatedly referenced and singled out Ekemini Uwan, a black activist and theologian, in an attempt to undermine the Christians for Harris campaign. Through emphasizing quotes from Uwan saying that "whiteness is wicked," Fox News portrays Uwan as an enemy of the white demographic, and thus an enemy of the Republican party (Hall, 2024). The outlet further reports how Uwan advocated for the "destruction of police departments," by referencing her podcast from 2020 in which she called for less government budget to be allocated towards police (Hall, 2024). Fox News goes as far as to conclude that Uwan's "progressive demands," represent her desire to establish "a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants" (Hall, 2024). This emphasis on selective quotes while gatekeeping critical information allows Fox News to create a destabilizing image of the Christians for Harris campaign. Simultaneously, Fox News reinforces the idea of Trump being in perfect alignment with the Christian Faith. The outlet challenges a video segment displayed in the Harris Campaign, reporting how Rev. Franklin Graham called out Harris on social media for "trying to mislead people" with the video of an interview with his father Billy Graham and Trump (Alexander, 2024). Fox News quoted how his father "appreciated the conservative values and policies of President Trump." The article ended with a prayer led by Franklin Graham, "thanking God for saving Trump's life." In this way, Fox News exploits top-of-mind thinking to reinforce the idea that the failed assassination attempt on the former president was a divine event while undermining the Harris campaign.

Although MSNBC and Fox News frame the development of evangelicalism in fundamentally differing ways, they share similarities in the way they selectively report radical developments that support their agendas while gatekeeping necessary information to put events into their proper contexts. Both MSNBC and Fox highlight the most extreme aspects of evangelicalism when it is used to support causes of the opposing political party: MSNBC emphasizes the most controversial quotes of Trump supporters while Fox News allocates the most time on a contentious host in Harris's Evangelical campaign. Both outlets skew the meaning of Evangelicalism away from its purely religious context, exploiting religion as a political tool. Despite neither Democratic nor Republican leaders fully conforming to the virtues of Christianity, both parties have devout supporters who believe their party's politics align

with religion due to increased motivated reasoning. These supporters have pre-existing conclusions that blind them to the faults of their party leaders, causing them to neglect contradictions between political and religious ideals and seek information that confirms their opinions rather than reason logically. The polarized framing from Fox News and MSNBC confirms people's biases, further worsening the presence of motivated reasoning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the way MSNBC and Fox News frame evangelicalism in the election creates two separate stories for two distinct audiences. For the Democrats, Evangelicalism embodies a progressive fight for justice, but for Republicans, it is the cornerstone in protecting conservative values. The media reaffirms these divergent definitions of what it means to be Christian, polarizing beliefs while preventing the public from fully understanding the broader picture. In the case of Evangelicalism in politics, framing exacerbates the public's motivated reasoning by acting as a source of confirmation bias. Since news and information are framed by partisan media in a way that repeatedly affirm biased views rather than encouraging the exploration of contrasting perspectives, media inherently contributes to creating the polarized society we live in today.

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