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Media Framing and The Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021

Abstract

It is no secret that today's media landscape is saturated with various narratives and frames that dictate how political events and debates are consumed by the American public. This paper seeks to analyze how national and local media outlets frame the Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021, one of the numerous voting bills that followed the 2020 Election. My expectation is that these sources will vary in terms of their partisan skew as a result of their geographic location and the ideologies of their viewers. This qualitative media analysis focuses on how each publication does or does not align one of two sides of the partisan debate surrounding voting legislation, being voter suppression versus election integrity.

Keywords

Voting, Media, Framing, Voting Rights, Texas

Disciplines

American Politics | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Journalism Studies | Political Science

Comments

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Media Framing and The Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021 (SB 1)

Introduction

On September 7, 2021, Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed the Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021 (SB 1) into law. The bill, which went into effect on December 2, contains several key provisions. Specifically, the bill prohibits both drive-through and 24-hour voting, which were used during the pandemic, outlaws the practice of sending unsolicited mail-ballot applications as well as the enhancement of ID requirements for voting by mail, and places more stringent requirements on those assisting individuals in their voting process, among a few other new regulatory changes (Ura 2021). As expected, this bill was controversial from the start and provided for significant debate regarding both the constitutionality and ethics of the new provisions. The question this paper seeks to address is how the media framing of this law varies by news outlet? Specifically, the purpose of the research is to determine if and how there are discernable differences in the way local and national media sources covered this bill. I expect that coverage will convey competing narratives of election integrity and voting suppression with partisan skew determined by the geographic location and viewership of each source.

The motivation for this question and project is that generating a better understanding of how the media portrays issues, specifically highly partisan ones, may impart insight into the overarching role of media in the polarization that characterizes our political atmosphere today. For example, if the evidence demonstrates that media outlets have an understanding of polarizing

partisan narratives and seek to cater to their opinions of their viewing base, we may be better able to approach our own media consumption.

Literature Review

Narratives are an important force within the political sphere. Generally, “scholarship has also come to recognize that narrative patterns are a crucial tool for the study of human thought and that examining the ways in which we ‘story the world’ can contribute to our understanding of how we make meaning” (Shenhav 2006, 245). Essentially, narratives are a human mechanism used to understand and conceptualize real-life events, thus giving them significance and meaning. Furthermore, past scholarship and “examinations on political discourse show that it relies extensively on narrative patterns. This is partly the result of the human tendency to rely on narrative as a way of understanding the world and endowing it with meaning” (Shenhav, 246). If political discourse relies heavily on narratives as a way of giving meaning to political events and issues, the logic would follow that media outlets, as primary contributors and distributors of political discourse, would also incorporate and utilize the power of narratives. Gurevitch et al. summarize the relationship between narrative and media by saying, “politics provided the raw materials and television packaged it, subtly reconstructed it, and delivered it to audiences” (Gurevitch 2009, 165). This description speaks to a fundamental aspect of media framing and narratives which is that they are not always overt. Framing political events in a manner that conveys meaning and values within a narrative structure makes use of subtle techniques that can be as simple as word choice or neglecting to include a certain fact. Narratives and media framing can come in all shapes and sizes. Laura Akers describes the concept of “metanarratives” by saying they are, “the stories that groups tell themselves about who they are and where they’re headed” (Akers 2020). She describes the idea that the media frames issues within a larger set of

values with each event spun to convey the way that the consumer should feel. When thinking about what groups within our society use media framing to convey and impose a set of values and opinions two come to mind, the Republican and Democratic Parties.

In Robert Entman's paper *Media Framing Biases and Political Power: Explaining Slant in News of Campaign 2008*, he gets at how media framing works to shape public opinion through capitalizing on events within the political sphere. He writes, "Frames can perform up to our functions: define problems, specify causes, convey moral assessments, and endorse remedies. Framing works to shape and alter audience members' interpretations and preferences through *priming*...frames introduce or enhance the availability and apparent importance of certain ideas for evaluating a political object" (Entman 2010, 391). This description shows how the media can frame "political objects" with relative ease and subtlety while conveying a lens through which the public can evaluate the political world around them. To apply this framework to a contemporary issue, take the nationwide political battle over voting reform following the 2020 election. Brakkton Booker summed up the framing battle well by saying, "voting is most often called the most sacred right adult Americans have. And depending on whom you ask, the flurry of legislation in state legislatures and at the federal level will either make access to the ballot box easier and protect the integrity of the elections - or it will amount to voter suppression. No middle ground to be had" (Booker, 2021). By framing voting reform bills in this dichotomous way, liberals and conservatives define the issue of elections very differently and endorse remedies that reflect this inherent disagreement about the nature of the issue.

Another aspect of media framing worth discussing is how media outlets choose the way they frame a political event or issue. According to Jurkowitz et al., "the preference for news sources based on party identification and party ideology affects the partisan makeup of the

audience of each outlet” and “some adults only got political news in the past week from outlets whose audience mostly share their political views” (Jurkowitz et al. 2020). Since certain outlets draw from specific partisan groups, the logic would follow that their coverage and biases may skew in favor of those viewpoints to boost their ratings and revenue. One of the apparent reasons for this tendency of citizens to consume media in this partisan manner is that, “in a news media environment characterized by abundant choice, it is becoming increasingly easier for Americans to choose news sources slanted toward their own political views rather than sources providing more diverse perspectives” (Dilliplane 2011, 287). Essentially, the vast array of media choices fosters the inherent tendency of viewers to be drawn to the sources that best represent their affiliations and opinions. It’s not only political media outlets that are diversified in terms of the number of options, but rather all media in general. For example, in today’s media landscape, “greater choice allows politically interested people to access more information and increase their political knowledge. Yet those who prefer nonpolitical content can more easily escape the news” (Prior 2005, 577). News outlets are not blind to this phenomenon and understand that while their objective is to report the news, they benefit from increased readership and attention. For example, a 2014 study “showed that audience clicks affected the subsequent placement of stories on news websites, but not vice versa” (Lee & Tandoc Jr. 2017, 439). These findings demonstrate that news outlets benefit from a greater understanding of their audience. Therefore, if they recognize that their audience reflects certain partisan opinions, they may engage in framing that caters to those subsequent viewpoints.

Methods and Data

Beginning with data, the basis for this paper is online news publications coming from three categories: national media, outlets based in large Texas cities, and local media. The

methods for analyzing these media outlets focused on understanding and determining how each category framed the Election Integrity Protection Act in terms of the partisan narratives of voter fraud versus election integrity. Specifically, the methods for evaluating the publications include looking at diction, content, and whether the overall presentation of the article aligns with a particular partisan narrative. Examples of factors examined include how the bill is referenced, quotes included in the article, and the choice of words in describing the effects of the law. Determining whether a given source aligned with partisan skew is achieved through assessing how strongly a publication appears to side with either the election integrity or voter suppression narrative. The assessment of narratives through the inclusion of political quotes, word choice, and manner of referencing the bill, among other factors, determined the frame being employed by a given source.

Hypotheses

In looking at the varying sources of local news and larger media outlets based in Texas, as well as national news outlets, I expect to see a few specific results. Overall, I expect that the coverage of the Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021 will follow a pattern of partisan narrativization. More specifically, I believe that the coverage will fall into two modes of framing with one casting the law as a necessary step to ensure the security and sanctity of American elections, and the other portraying the law as voter suppression and a threat to the ability of participatory democracy to function freely. As for the three categories of news outlets, my expectation is, for national media, that their coverage will skew to the partisan leanings and opinions of their viewership. For example, classically “liberal” outlets such as MSNBC will support the narrative that the Texas voting law is a threat to the right to vote. On the other hand, outlets like Fox News may push or support the opposite narrative. As for both local news outlets

and larger media sources within Texas, I expect that their coverage, in terms of narrativization, will skew depending on the partisan leanings of the geographic areas in which they are based. For example, outlets based in larger cities, which tend to be more liberal, may have coverage casting the bill in a negative light. However, smaller publications based in rural areas, which tend to be more conservative, might show positive coverage of the bill and discuss its role in aiding election security. While I do expect to see this skew determined by the political affiliations and opinions of both readers and geographic area, local news outlets may present a less polarized and narrativized coverage of the law as they could be insulated from the reach of national news narratives. To conclude, I expect that media framing of the Texas voting law will be divided among the competing partisan narratives of election security and voter suppression while varying by news outlet depending on the geographic location and viewership of the source.

National News Outlets

The basis for the evaluation of national news outlets is that the primary liberal narrative and frame for the Election Integrity Protection Act is that it amounts to voter suppression while the primary conservative frame is that the same bill reflects the securing and protection of American elections. Overall, the trend with national news outlets, consisting primarily of online news articles, is that they reflect the dominant partisan skew of their viewership. One of the primary ways that outlets reflected the assumed views of their consumer base is through the inclusion of perspectives from that respective party. For example, the *New York Times* (NYT), which the Pew Research Center confirms has a majority liberal or Democratic-leaning audience, includes quotes from Democratic politicians vehemently criticizing the bill (Jurkowitz et al. 2020). Specifically, one excerpt from a *NYT* article reads, “Democrats immediately objected, denouncing the prospect of a dark-of-night vote on a measure that Senator Borris L. Miles, a

Democrat from Houston, said people in his largely Black and Latino district called ‘Jim Crow 2.0’” (Corasaniti 2021). By including the comparison of this law to the voter suppression associated with Jim Crow, the author frames the voting changes as stemming from nefarious motivations and having disastrous effects on democracy. In addition to the inclusion of such quotes, other forms of “subtly reconstructed” media frames employed by Democratic-based outlets include referring to the bill in certain, valued manners (Gurevitch 165). For example, a common trend among such outlets was the use of phrases such as “Texas governor signs new GOP voting restrictions into law” (Politico 2021). By using “voter restrictions” instead of the actual name of the bill, the author frames the bill as restrictive, instead of securing. Lastly, while a lot of liberal-leaning outlets used these more subtle means of categorizing the law as suppression, others were blunter. For example, an *MSNBC* article reads, “Texas has embarked upon a campaign to make it more difficult for registered voters to cast their ballots” (Vladeck 2021). Overall, the outlets with more liberal consumers cast the Texas voting law as suppressive and harmful to equal access to the ballot.

Outlets with conservative bases employ similar methods of framing as those with liberal bases and tend to have coverage that falls into the category of the narrative that the Texas voting law helps safeguard elections and prevent voter fraud. For example, *Breitbart*, a conservative-leaning publication, includes quotes from Republican politicians such as “after the bill’s passage, its author, state Sen. Bryan Hughes, a Republican, said ‘All of these pieces put together will give us a secure system for everybody...anyone who tells you there’s no voter fraud in Texas is telling you a very big lie’” (Bliss 2021). Clearly, the inclusion of quotes like this one represents a significant departure from outlets like the *NYT*. Additionally, *Fox News*, in referring to the bill, described it as a “bill that aims to protect elections and promote election integrity”

(Morris 2021). Again, when considering that outlets like *Politico* framed the bill as “voter restrictions,” it’s very clear that *Fox News* is playing a significantly different tune as referring to the bill by its actual name emphasizes its necessity in protection elections. Overall, outlets with more conservative viewership frame the bill in line with conservative narratives and the idea that the bill is integral to electoral integrity.

Large News Outlets in Texas

In comparison to national news outlets, large media sources within the state of Texas tend to present both the narrative of voter suppression and election protection yet balance coverage more evenly. In other words, these news sources, which are largely based in the bigger cities of Texas, are more likely to acknowledge the partisan debate and narrativization but in doing so attempt to frame the issue in a more objective light as an issue subject to significant debate. For example, the *Austin American-Statesman*, a large publication out of Austin, TX, includes quotes from Governor Abbott like, “election integrity is now the law in the state of Texas” coupled with other quotes such as, “LULAC strongly opposes this attack on our voting rights and freedoms because they have one and only purpose - to dilute our voice at the ballot box” (Lindell 2021). The inclusion of both competing quotes demonstrates the attempt to cover the debate surrounding the bill rather than frame the law as inherently negative or positive. Additionally, in examining the headlines for articles from these sources, they appear significantly more likely to refer to the bill as the “Texas voting bill” or something similar in comparison to the national news sources whose headlines represented value assessments and judgment (Ura 2021). While the general findings suggest outlets based in large Texas cities tend to present both partisan narratives and frame the bill in a comparatively more objective light, there certainly are outliers. For example, the *Houston Chronicle* characterizes the bill as “a major step toward becoming the

nation's largest state where the GOP is making voting harder" (Coronado 2021). On the other end of the spectrum, a publication called the *Texas Public Policy Foundation* fired back saying "The Chronicle misleads on election integrity" (Maynard 2021). Overall, media outlets in larger Texas cities generally give a more objective frame and take less overt stances on the law.

Texas, although commonly considered to be an overwhelmingly Republican state, is fairly split politically. According to the Pew Research Center, 39% of adults in Texas identify as Republican while 40% identify as Democratic (Pew Research Center). Although the split in terms of party affiliation is relatively even, the plurality of adults in Texas remains conservative while only 21% identify as liberal (Pew Research Center). Based on this data, and the hypothesis that media skews framing based on consumers and geographic makeup, we should see media in the state be more conservative. However, given that these outlets are based in cities, there may be a more nuanced explanation. Grace Franke-Ruta writes, "All major U.S. newspapers are based in cities. Cities in America are mainly run by Democrats, because they are populated, by and large, with Democrats" (Franke-Ruta 2013). Taking all these factors together, a possible explanation for the balance seen in the media of Texas's cities is that the tendency for a Democratic skew based on the publications' location within these cities counterbalances the necessity to temper that liberal framing due to the overall conservatism of the Texas population.

Local Media

Local news outlets in Texas appear to stay away from partisan narratives and framing more so than the previous two categories of news outlets. The general takeaway from these local sources, the majority of the newspapers, is that they tend to report on the facts, include a quote or two, and leave it at that. Whereas national media is very partisan and big-city outlets acknowledge and occasionally feed narratives, local media appears less concerned. For example,

the extent of reporting from the *Wharton Journal Spectator* is summed up by the line, “Election bill passes House along party lines” (Borders 2021). Furthermore, local news sources were altogether less likely to have extensive coverage of the voting bill. In searching for sources to analyze, many online publications lacked in-depth or even coverage at all. Perhaps one of the reasons for this phenomenon is that local papers focus more on inherently local issues. For example, even in one of the local articles covering the bill, a section was included in the publication that discussed how “near the downtown square, about 60 protestors gathered to object to the voting legislation” which shows how relevancy for these smaller outlets is determined by events unique to that locality (Wellerman 2021).

These findings contradict conventional logic that may expect local sources in Texas to present a conservative frame due to the partisan makeup of these smaller, often rural localities. For example, Gregg and Wharton Counties, which contain two of the local sources analyzed, are overwhelmingly Republican with each voting for Donald Trump at about 70% in the 2020 Election (Data USA). A reason why we may see local news not take on controversial issues or push, or even acknowledge partisan narratives is because local media is inherently less polarized. The News Literacy Project writes, “one surprising result of the decrease in local news coverage...the populace tends to become more polarized” and “the increase in partisanship is due to people consuming more national news” (News Literacy Project). Therefore, local news may be insulated from the partisanship and skew that plagues national media which may be why the sources analyzed here contained little to no mention of partisan narratives regarding the voting law.

Discussion

The evidence gathered among the three categories of new sources leads to a few conclusions. First, a clear pattern of framing exists in which the Texas voting law is framed as either voter suppression or necessary to protect the sanctity and security of elections. Second, it is logical to conclude that the national news media presents the most partisan narratives by far. It was near impossible to find any national source that failed to fall into one of the two categories of narrativization. Third, concerning State and local media sources, a significant number of contributing factors affect the framing of such issues. For example, the partisan makeup of Texas, geographic location of the news outlet, and trends regarding the type of media source all seem to contribute to the framing of the election-related issues.

Conclusion

Media framing is a powerful tool for crafting and distributing political narratives. As this paper has discussed, methods of framing and narratives can vary widely depending on the outlet, issue, and category of publication. The framing of the Election Integrity Protection Act demonstrates how seemingly subtle differences in word choice and content can affect the partisan slant of the article. Overall, the reach of narrativization is pervasive throughout the media and is almost always incorporated into the coverage of political events.

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