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Shaping the Narrative: Examining News Coverage of Voter ID Laws in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This study is the first to examine US news coverage of voter ID laws. Voter ID requirements are central to ongoing political debates about voting procedures. Despite rare cases of voter fraud by impersonation and the strong polarization over voter ID among partisan elites, there is a surprising broad bipartisan support for voter ID among the American public. Using a range of inductive computational content analysis methods, we analyse news coverage of voter ID requirements from 2013 to 2023. We find coverage differs by outlets political leaning and demonstrate a link between news media discourse and elite framing on the issue. Donald Trump's voter fraud allegations, however, appear to have substantially shaped left-leaning media coverage from 2016, raising concerns around whether this might have helped amplify electoral conspiracies, instead of offering the public alternative ways of thinking about voter ID laws.

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News media; framing; automated content analysis; agenda setting; democracy; misinformation

This study analyses news coverage of voter identification (ID) laws in the United States (US). Voter ID laws are part of a broader set of restrictive voting measures largely introduced in response to concerns about electoral fraud, despite available data finding extremely low levels of voter fraud by impersonation (Eggers, Garro, and Grimmer 2021; Goel et al. 2020). While voter ID requirements date back to the 1950s, the rate at which these laws are passed has drastically increased since 2021 (Brennan Center for Justice 2023).

Voter ID requirements are at the center of contemporary political debates about voting practices (James and Garnett 2020). This electoral policy issue is highly polarized amongst political elites. Republican elites generally endorse restrictive or stringent voting measures like strict voter ID requirements (Bentele and O'Brien 2013). In contrast, Democratic elites generally advocate for expansive voting procedures and oppose voter ID requirements, due to their potential impact on access to voting, particularly for disadvantaged groups who are statistically less likely to own the required ID to vote (Hicks et al. 2015).

However, despite the substantial, growing partisan divisions over many other electoral policies and the increasing controversy over voter ID among political elites (Pew Research

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Center 2021), there is a surprising broad bipartisan consensus among the American public in support of voter ID laws (Kane and Wilson 2021; Pew Research Center 2021). Somewhat paradoxically, most Democrats (61%) support voter ID requirements while simultaneously advocating for expansive voting processes, and despite being generally less inclined to believe in widespread voter fraud (Kane and Wilson 2021; Pew Research Center 2021).

A possible explanation for this can be offered by looking at news coverage of voter ID. News media serve as a vital source of information about changes in policies (Soroka and Wlezien 2022) and play an important role in communicating party elite cues to the public (Langer and Gruber 2021; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Merkley and Stecula 2018; Taber and Lodge 2016; Zhang et al. 2022; Entman 2010). This is particularly the case with highly controversial policy issues such as voter ID, as political elites are more likely to use the media strategically to advance their position (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016).

The surprising high level of support for voter ID among Democratic voters however has led various scholars to suggest that they may not be “in tune” with their party and are less likely to receive cues from party leaders than their Republican counterparts (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Conover and Miller 2018; Udani 2017; Udani, Kimball, and Fogarty 2018). Yet, despite various survey studies and opinion experiments finding news consumption to play an important role in forming opinions towards voter ID and voter fraud (Benkler et al. 2020; Goidel, Gaddie, and Goidel 2019; Pennycook and Rand 2021; Pew Research Center 2021; Pyrhönen and Bauvois 2020), to date, news coverage of voter ID remains unexplored. The few studies analysing news coverage have largely focused on *voter fraud* coverage (Benkler et al. 2020; Faris et al. 2017; Fogarty, Kimball, and Kosnik 2022; Van Der Meer, Hameleers, and Ohme 2023), missing the broader debate about voter ID within which voter fraud conspiracies are embedded.

This study examines news media coverage of voter ID requirements from 10 high circulation US mass media news sources across the ideological spectrum between 2013 and 2023. We analyse variations in news attention to this contested policy issue and apply complementary content analysis methods to inductively explore coverage. Overall, the findings presented help contextualize links identified in the literature between elite framing, individual predispositions and public support for voter ID and provide important insight into a key, yet understudied domain shaping public opinion.

Background

The Framing of Electoral Laws

News media serve as a vital source of information for the public about electoral laws. Survey and experiment-based studies demonstrate the news media’s crucial role in shaping confidence in the electoral system and attitudes towards voter ID requirements in the US (Bowler and Donovan 2016; Udani, Kimball, and Fogarty 2018; Udani and Kimball 2018, 403), often along partisan lines. Partisan media can shape perceptions of issues like voter ID, contributing to a polarized public opinion environment (Faris et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2024; Langer and Gruber 2021; Yarchi, Baden, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2021). This is especially the case with highly contested political issues such as voter ID requirements, as political actors likely use the media strategically to advance or “index” their position (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Bennett 2016; Entman 2010; Sevenans 2018; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). Individuals

may also choose media that aligns with their existing beliefs, which can further reinforce such partisan divides (Tyler, Grimmer, and Iyengar 2022).

While mainstream news editors do not always push specific policy framings (Entman 2010), journalists' framing choices are often influenced by the elite discourse available to them. When there is relative consensus amongst political elites, news coverage tends to be narrow and uncritical and follow elite framing (Entman 2010). Conversely, significant elite disagreement tends to generate more diverse and critical media coverage.

However, despite intense disagreement over voter ID among partisan elites, there is a surprising bipartisan consensus of support for voter ID requirements among the public (Pew Research Center 2021). Studies find Republican voters are generally more likely to believe in widespread voter fraud than Democratic voters (Monmouth University 2023; Persily and Stewart 2021; Stewart 2022, 2023a, 2023b) and more likely to support voter ID requirements (Valentino and Neuner 2017). However, somewhat paradoxically, a majority of Democrats (61%) also support voter ID requirements. This support exists alongside their advocacy for expansive voting processes, their party's strong opposition towards voter ID, and despite Democratic voters being generally less inclined to believe in widespread voter fraud (Valentino and Neuner 2017).

Findings from public opinion studies suggest that the debate surrounding voter ID among political elites has been somewhat "indexed" following partisan lines (Bennett 2016), as there still appears to be a partisan divide among the public on voter ID laws that mirrors party positions (93% of Republicans support voter ID compared to 61% of Democrats)(Pew Research Center 2021). However, the surprising support by most Democrats has raised questions around the extent to which Democratic elite framing of voter ID is effectively reaching their constituents. This has led various scholars analysing public opinion to conclude that either Republicans have won the "framing war" over voter ID (Conover and Miller 2018; Fogarty et al. 2015; Udani 2017) or that the conflict over voter ID at an elite level has not "filtered down to the mass public" (Kane and Wilson 2021).

Dynamics of Voter ID Support and Media Influence

While recent survey data finds a broad bipartisan support for voter ID requirements, attitudes towards voter ID laws have changed over time. From 2006 to 2008, Gronke et al. (2019) report a small gap between Republican and Democratic voters supporting strict voter ID requirements. Conover and Miller (2018) attribute this initial consensus to the "voter fraud" frame dominating the news environment. Studying public opinion towards voter ID, they find "following the news" did not help Democrats decipher their party's position on voter ID.

However, between 2008 and 2014, public opinion shifted significantly, specially from Democrats (Stewart, Ansolabehere, and Persily 2016). By 2014, Democratic support for photo ID laws had fallen from 70% to 51.8% (Stewart, Ansolabehere, and Persily 2016), suggesting Democrats became more discerning of cues regarding their party's position. Despite speculation by Stewart, Ansolabehere, and Persily (2016) that this gap would continue to widen, recent surveys indicate a disruption in this trend from 2016, with Democratic support increasing up to 61%, while Republican backing remains high at 93%.

Various scholars have attributed this disruption to Trump's appropriation and dissemination of the voter fraud narrative. Benkler et al. (2020) studied news coverage of voter fraud, finding that by presenting "the elite" at large—including establishment Republicans—for not addressing (unsubstantiated) widespread voter fraud, Trump's rendition of voter fraud transcended partizanship. As a result, he was able to effectively spread his "disinformation campaign" about voter fraud, by expanding his reach beyond the right-wing media ecosystem to outlets used and trusted by Americans outside his political base (Goidel, Gaddie, and Goidel 2019; Pyrhönen and Bauvois 2020). Research by the Pew Research Center (2021) also finds that among both Republicans and Democrats, those who only consume news from outlets with right- or left-leaning audiences, respectively, are the most likely to have heard a lot about mail-in voter fraud on the 2020 election.

Kane and Wilson (2021) argue that the strong public consensus on voter ID since 2016 results, in large part, from a limited awareness among both Republican and Democratic voters of the policy's controversy. Their findings suggest that the intense and growing elite-level debate over voter ID is not effectively reaching the public. While literature on Trump's voter fraud claims has increased, it has left a gap in understanding the broader discourse on voter ID within which these narratives are embedded. Analysing this information environment is crucial to understand how news outlets with varying political orientations, especially left-leaning ones, frame voter ID requirements.

To determine if significant events led to an increase in salience from the media and whether this increase is consistent across the political spectrum, we pose the following research question:

- **RQ1:** How has the level of attention in the coverage of voter ID changed over time, and are there differences in attention dynamics depending on the political orientation of news outlets?

While analysing levels of attention of voter ID in news coverage is crucial to understand the extent to which the issue is reaching the public, the way news media outlets frame voter ID can impact how people understand the issue. RQ2 therefore explores the framing of voter ID, considering potential differences based on the political orientation of the news outlets:

- **RQ2:** Does the framing of voter ID vary depending on the political orientation of the news outlets?

To understand how the framing of voter ID might have evolved in coverage, we pose the final research question:

- **RQ3:** Has news framing changed or developed over time, particularly since Donald Trump mobilized false claims of widespread voter fraud?

Methodology

Inductive Approach: Beyond a Dichotomy of Frames

To date, various studies exploring public attitudes towards voter ID have employed a framing theoretical framework, defining elite rhetoric as consisting of two broad frames: the Republican argument that voter fraud justifies voter ID laws (the “voter fraud frame”) and the Democratic argument that the laws are discriminatory (the “voter suppression frame”) (see for example, Biggers and Hanmer 2017; Conover and Miller 2018; Edelson et al. 2017; Gronke et al. 2019). However, despite the scholarly focus on frames in various experimental studies, the actual study of how voter ID laws are framed is limited. Moreover, studies using this dichotomy often build on Atkeson et al. (2014), despite this study briefly illustrating arguments used in a 2008 Supreme Court case to ultimately analyse public opinion. This is an important gap since the language used in Supreme Court cases, by politicians and by news outlets may differ due to their distinct contexts.

This study therefore departs from the premise that news coverage of voter ID might not fall as neatly into the frame dichotomy around their effect (preventing voter fraud vs. causing voter suppression) largely employed to classify discourse on voter ID to date. While it is tempting to develop a new typology of frames on this issue, clearly demarcating them, doing so would risk falling into a similar oversimplification, potentially overlooking more nuanced aspects of the framing process. We therefore primarily focus on the *process of framing*, which encompasses the inductive identification and analysis of themes, narratives, arguments, and elite cues that shape news discourse of voter ID laws.

To do so, we apply computational content analysis methods to systematically analyse news coverage. This methodology is considered appropriate because it is particularly well-suited to analyse emerging phenomena (Walter and Ophir 2019), and allows researchers to identify patterns and relationships in texts that may not be immediately apparent through traditional methods of language analysis (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). Similar methodologies have been applied in relevant studies on news media language, such as Liu and Yu’s (2023) corpus linguistic analysis of COVID-19 coverage, Chuaikun and Wijitsopon’s (2023) combined quantitative and qualitative approach to studying sustainability news, and Mastawi and Al-Abbas’s (2023) corpus-assisted content analysis of COVID-19 and Swine Flu coverage.

Given the aim of this research is to identify differences in coverage along ideological lines, these methods also offer a quantifiable way of comparing and contrasting different datasets. However, the role of the researcher is crucial to interpret the outputs’ meaning. This interpretation is, in turn, informed by both the immediate linguistic context, the broader social context in which the discourse unfolds (Bremner 2023) and the researchers’ understanding of the analysed texts and relevant literature (Gries 2017; Partington 2013). Such a hybrid approach of combining computerized content analysis methods with a close reading and analysis of the text enables a more reliable and valid combination of quantitative/empirical and qualitative/interpretative examination.

Data

We explore news coverage of voter ID from January 2013 to January 2023 by 10 mass-market/top news media across the partisan spectrum (news outlets on the right: *Breitbart*,

Daily Caller, Fox News, NY Post, Washington Times, and left: *Washington Post, USA Today, The New York Times, Huffington post, CNN*). To determine the ideological orientation of news sources, we followed Faris et al. (2017) media partizanship scale derived using the sharing patterns of Twitter users who retweeted Trump or Clinton during the 2016 U.S. election. The outlets selected are based on the available data covering the timeframe of interest. As the media outlets were chosen because of their potential to influence and reflect the views of their audience, to understand the framing of voter ID, both opinion pieces and journalistic news are viewed as equally relevant (Hooper, Aiello, and Hill 2022).

2013 was chosen as the starting point as the rate at which states introduced voter ID laws substantially increased following the 2013 Supreme Court case *Shelby County vs. Holder*; the preclearance required by states with a history of racial discrimination (section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965) was deemed unconstitutional, which allowed these states to enact voting laws without approval by the Justice Department or a Federal Court.

All articles mentioning the keywords “voter ID” or “voting ID” or “voter identification” at least once were collected. The articles gathered are not exclusively about voter ID but capture topics where voter ID is mentioned and brought up in coverage. This intentional decision was driven by a curiosity to explore the broader context in which voter ID is discussed and gain insights into why it is brought up in media coverage.

Articles were retrieved from NexisUni and Mediacloud.¹ The software package Lexis-NexisTools (Gruber 2023) was used in R to convert articles from NexisUni into a dataframe and to remove duplicates. The module newsplease (Hamborg et al. 2017) was used in Python to retrieve articles from Mediacloud urls. The final corpus excluding duplicates contains 4,255 articles (6,137,399 words), 2,547 articles from left-leaning and 1,708 articles from right-leaning news media.

Methods and Analysis

We explore news coverage by using a range of inductive content analysis methods. As in other forms of computerized text analysis, the original text was pre-processed and modified to reduce its complexity (see Appendix A). First, to address **RQ1** and examine news media attention towards voter ID over time, article counts per month are plotted by left and right-leaning outlets. We conduct a correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the news media sets (right-leaning vs left-leaning outlets). Second, to address **RQ2** and identify language variations between the two news media sets, three complementary computerized content analyses are conducted:

A **(2a)** proportion shift analysis of news headlines is first conducted to identify the words most strongly associated with each news media set. Headlines play a crucial role in conveying information to readers, summarizing and highlighting key topics or themes. To understand the context and meaning of these terms, we then generate a **(2b)** semantic network from headlines in each news media set. Unlike the proportion shift analysis, which compares word frequencies, semantic networks help us assess whether the same word is used differently, even if it’s used to a similar degree. For instance, a semantic network can show unexpected associations, highlighting complex discourse that might be missed by simply examining top words. By visualizing these connections, semantic networks help us identify how terms interact within the media landscape, offering insights into how different media outlets frame issues. Using the Force

Atlas algorithm in Gephi software, we position nodes (representing words) closer when more strongly associated. This makes it easier to capture semantic associations among words found in the headlines of each media set.

These complementary content analyses are conducted with the aim of inductively identifying linguistic patterns and key words. As aforementioned, the corpus contains articles where voter ID is mentioned at least once and therefore the article content might not be exclusively about voter ID. The linguistic patterns identified could therefore refer to important topics, narratives or events connected to the issue of voter ID and/or potentially suggest ways in which the policy is specific framed.

To identify ways in which news outlets specifically cover voter ID requirements, we zoom into the word context of voter ID. To do so, the top words associated to the term “identification” are identified by **(2c)** training two separate word2vec embedding models on articles’ main body from left and right-leaning news media.² Word embeddings are particularly useful to capture complex relationships between words. As results are highly sensitive to single documents, corpus size, and document length, a bootstrapping method is used to ensure stable, consistent results (Antoniak and Mimno 2018).³

To address **RQ3** and understand over time language variations in news coverage, Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) scores are calculated for the key terms identified. Words with high TF-IDF scores are both frequent in a specific document and rare across the entire collection, and therefore are considered more relevant to a specific document. Compared to simply counting word frequencies, TF-IDF scores provide a more nuanced measure of term importance by accounting for both the term’s frequency within a specific document and its rarity across the entire corpus. This approach highlights terms that are uniquely significant to particular contexts rather than solely commonly occurring words. To visualize changes in TF-IDF scores over time, we combine articles published *per month* by each news media set. By tracking changes in TF-IDF scores over time, we can determine whether certain terms gain or lose importance in news coverage.

The last analysis stage involves critically examining key terms and patterns in the original text to confirm if the initial interpretation aligns with concrete formulations within the text under analysis. To do so, we generate a list of sentences with the identified keywords in their immediate context.

Results

This section presents the findings from the analyses conducted. The subsequent Discussion section delves into the implications and meanings of the identified key words and linguistic patterns.

RQ1: Article Counts per Month and Media Ideology

Figure 1 below displays news article counts per month by left and right-leaning news media. The first vertical line shows the date in which the *Shelby County vs Holder* decision was made. The subsequent lines indicate Midterm and General Elections. Since voting procedures were substantially changed during the Covid pandemic, the second yellow line shows when the first COVID-19 restrictions were implemented.

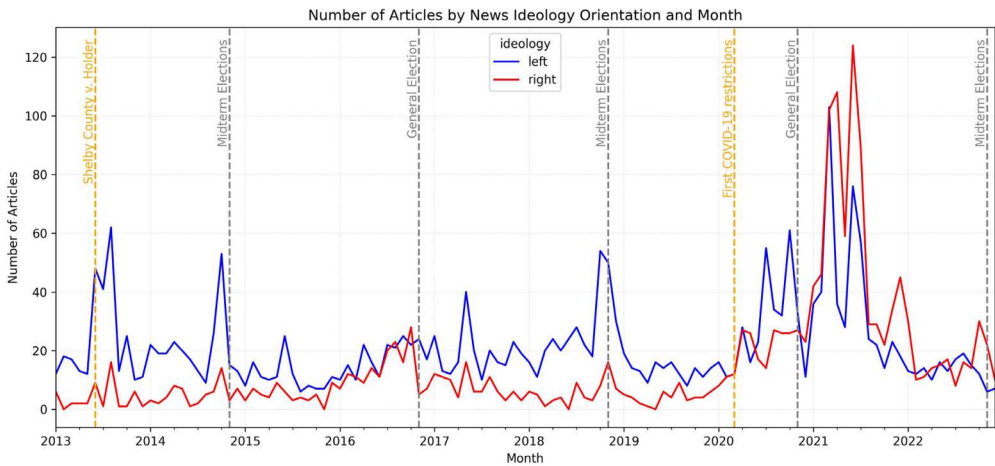


Figure 1. Article count by news media ideological orientation.

Overall, the analysis shows a surge in the number of articles mentioning voter ID in recent years, particularly since 2021. There's been a notable 173% increase in article counts across congressional sessions, increasing from 568 in the 2013–15 period (113th Congress) to 1557 in 2020–2022 (117th Congress). There has also been a shift in the ideological distribution of these articles; the 113–115th Congresses saw a higher proportion from left-leaning news media, while right-leaning coverage gained prominence from the 116th Congress onward. This coincides with the final two years of Donald Trump's presidency (Jan 2019 – Jan 2021).

The correlation analysis conducted resulted in a moderate positive relationship, with a significant correlation coefficient of 0.4 ($p < .001$).⁴ This indicates that as news media coverage from the left increases, there is a tendency for news coverage on the right to increase too, and vice versa.

This relationship is particularly evident during the largest increase in attention from both media sets which occurs from January 2021, marking the start of the 117th Congressional session. We see a drastic increase in coverage by both media sets from March to July 2021, which coincides with the passage of both expansive and restrictive voting bills. Most notably, the For the People Act or H.R.1 passed in March by a Democratic House majority, aimed at expanding voting rights, and facilitating mail-in voting, alongside Republican backed controversial Texas voting bills such as HB 3 and SB 1 filed in June, which aimed to instead impose stricter ID requirements for mail-in voting. Moreover, news attention generally increases around midterm and general elections for both sets of media, suggesting that the issue of voter ID becomes particularly salient during electoral periods. These instances highlight the interconnectedness of news attention from left and right-leaning media.

The moderate strength of correlation however suggests this association is not particularly strong and that there are differences in media attention that contribute to this. For instance, we find that from May to July 2013, news attention is largely driven by left-leaning news media, right after the *Shelby County vs Holder* Supreme Court case decision in June 2013. Coverage from right-leaning media also increases from 2016,

coinciding with Donald Trump’s candidacy, and specially from March 2020, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RQ2: Language Variations in Coverage

Figure 2 below illustrates the 20 most significant terms differentiating voter ID coverage by news media ideology. Scores for each word are normalized on a 0–100 scale, with the highest absolute value set to 100 for comparative analysis. A positive score signifies a higher likelihood of usage in right-leaning media headlines, whereas a negative score

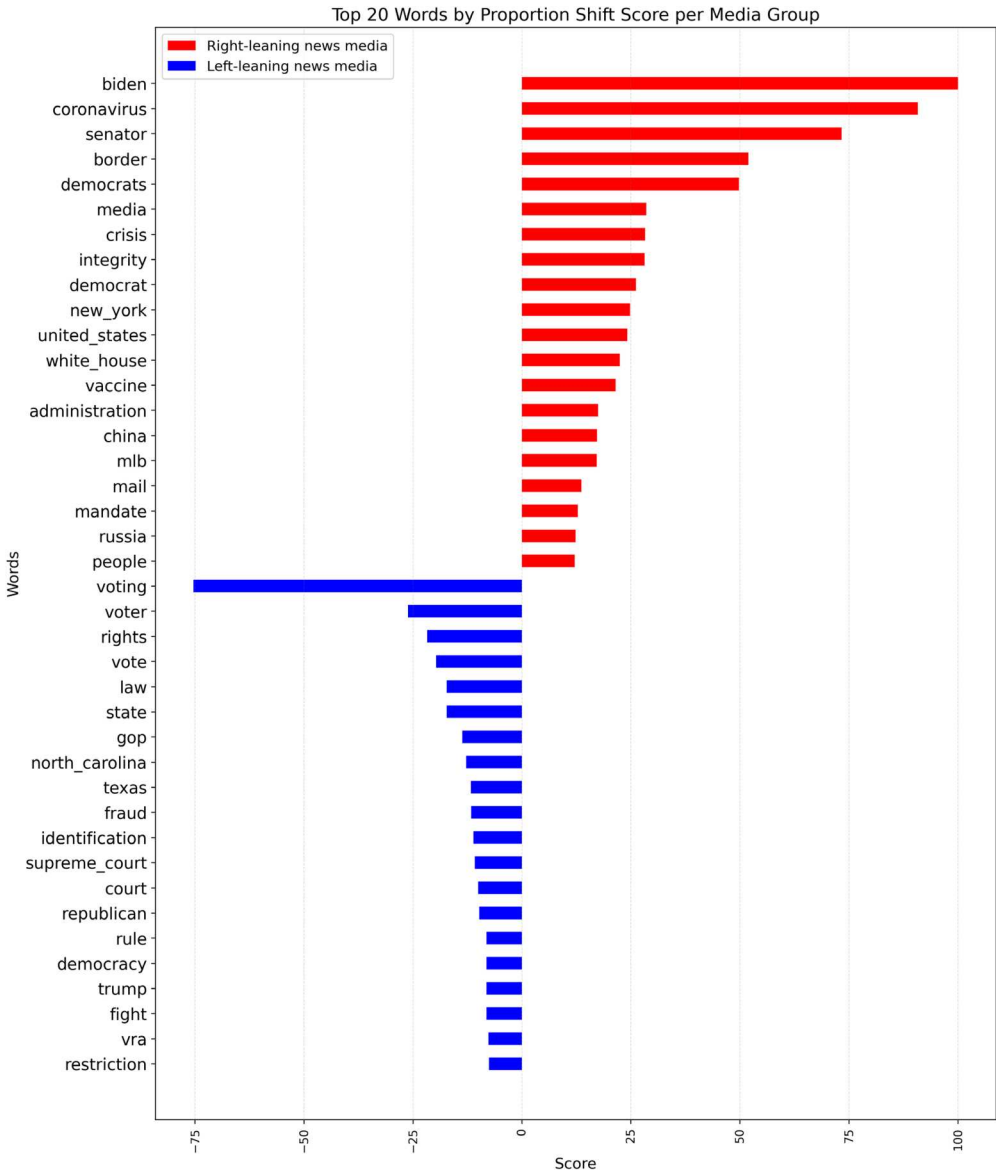


Figure 2. Word shift graph comparing Right vs Left-leaning news headlines.

suggests the word is more frequent in left-leaning news media. The magnitude of the score indicates the strength of the shift toward one side. Words with a score close to 0 are equally used by both left and right-leaning media outlets.

In [Figure 2](#), the leading terms linked to right-leaning media are *Biden*, *coronavirus*, *senator*, *border*, and *Democrats*. *Biden* has the highest deviation from neutrality (score of 100), indicating more frequent use in right-leaning media. Other terms associated with right-leaning news include *media*, *crisis*, and *integrity*. In left-leaning coverage, the top 5 terms are *voting*, *voter*, *rights*, *vote*, and *law*. Additional key terms from left-leaning media are *North Carolina*, *G.O.P. (Grand Old Party or Republican Party)*, *Republican*, *Supreme Court*, *democracy*, *black*, and *VRA (Voting Rights Act)*. Surprisingly, the term *fraud* is more prevalent in left-leaning media than in right-leaning outlets. We explore the relationship between voter ID and these key terms in the following Discussion section.

RQ3: Key Terms Over Time Variations

[Figure 3](#) shows the significance of key terms over time by plotting their TF-IDF scores within the article content, grouped by month. The importance of the term *fraud* in news coverage from the left jumps in 2016, with two spikes in November 2018 and November 2022. While the term *G.O.P.* becomes more frequent from 2020, *North Carolina* diminishes in relevance. In right-leaning news coverage, there are also temporal variations of key terms. For example, terms like *Biden*, *democrats*, *media*, *coronavirus*, and *integrity* have seen an increase in importance from 2020.

To understand the context in which these terms are used, two semantic networks are generated from right and left-leaning media headlines ([Figures 4](#) and [5](#), respectively). The word size is determined by its count and colored based on the proportion shift analysis scores (i.e., depending on whether they are relatively more frequent in one set of news media compared to the other). Terms scoring below 5 are considered neutral and colored in black.

In the right-leaning semantic network, the key term *Biden* appears central and closely linked to other key terms such as *president*, *democrats*, *United States*, *White House*, *administration*, *coronavirus*, *left* and *border*. The key term *media* is connected to *left*, *crisis* and *Biden*.

In the left-leaning semantic network, the key terms *voting* and *rights* appear frequent and strongly connected to each other. *Supreme Court* is also connected to the terms *North Carolina*, *Texas*, *VRA* and *decision*. The key terms *black* and *voter* also appear connected. *Trump* is also mentioned significantly by both media sets, slightly more so by left-leaning media.

The state of *Georgia* is also mentioned frequently by both media sets, with a score below 5, but appears in different contexts. In March 2021, Georgia's Governor Brian passed a controversial voting law, known as the "Election Integrity Act of 2021," which introduced significant changes to the state's election procedures, including stricter voter ID requirements for requesting absentee ballots and new ID requirements for casting provisional ballots. In both networks, the term *Georgia* appears connected to the terms *all*, *star* and *game*. These terms reference the Major League Baseball's (MLB) decision to move the All-Star Game from Georgia in response to the state's controversial voting law. While in the right-leaning network, *Georgia* is connected to *democrats*, in the left-leaning network it is instead associated to *G.O.P.* and *republicans*.

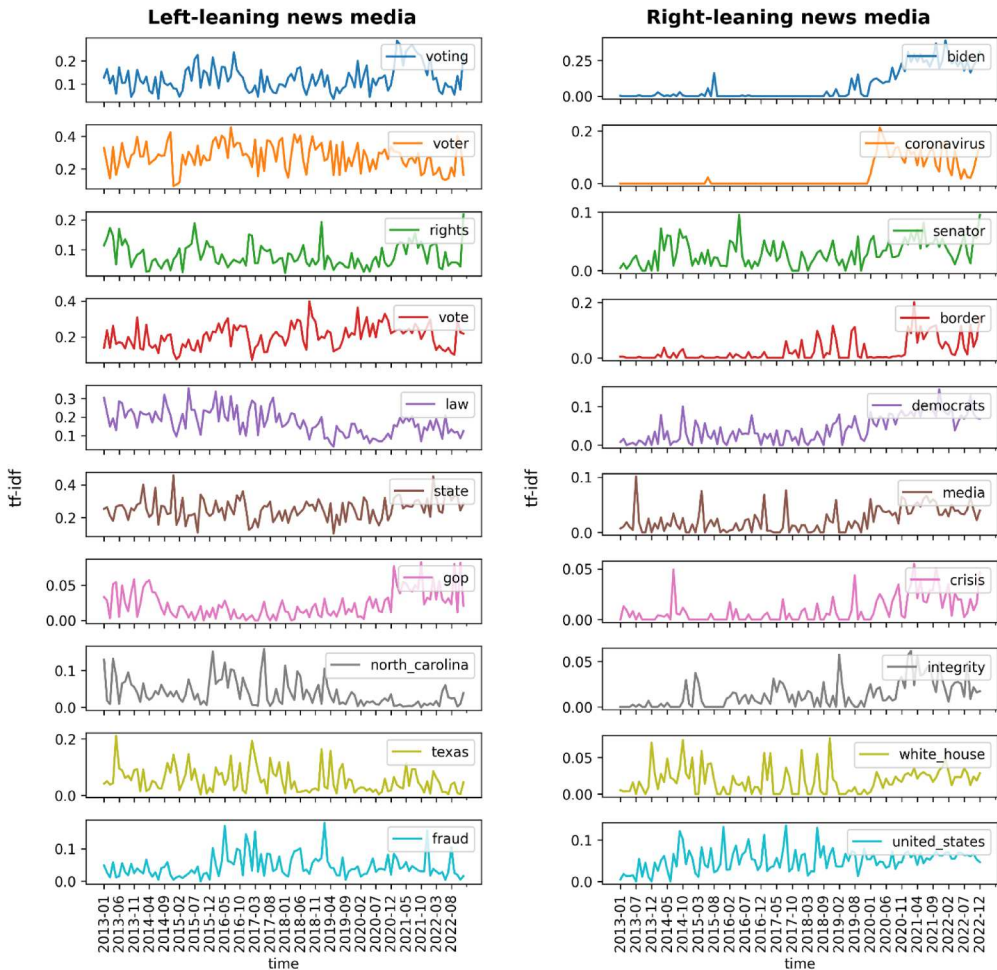


Figure 3. Left and right news media key terms. TF-IDF scores by month for top 10 words from proportion shift analysis.

To understand how voter ID is specifically discussed in the main article body, [Table 1](#) below shows the 15 words that are most associated with the target word “identification” based on their word embedding scores for left and right-leaning media. The standard deviations calculated using the bootstrap method are exceptionally low, indicating a high level of consistency across the different word embedding models. This analysis identified similar terms associated to the target word “identification” across both media sets which include *require*, *requirement*, *registration*, *form*, and *photo*. Different terms associated to “identification” by left-leaning media include *strict*, *purge*, *effect*, *acceptable*, *stringent*, and *disproportionately*. The terms *fraud*, *suppression*, and *integrity* are instead strongly associated to the target word “identification” in right-leaning news media coverage.

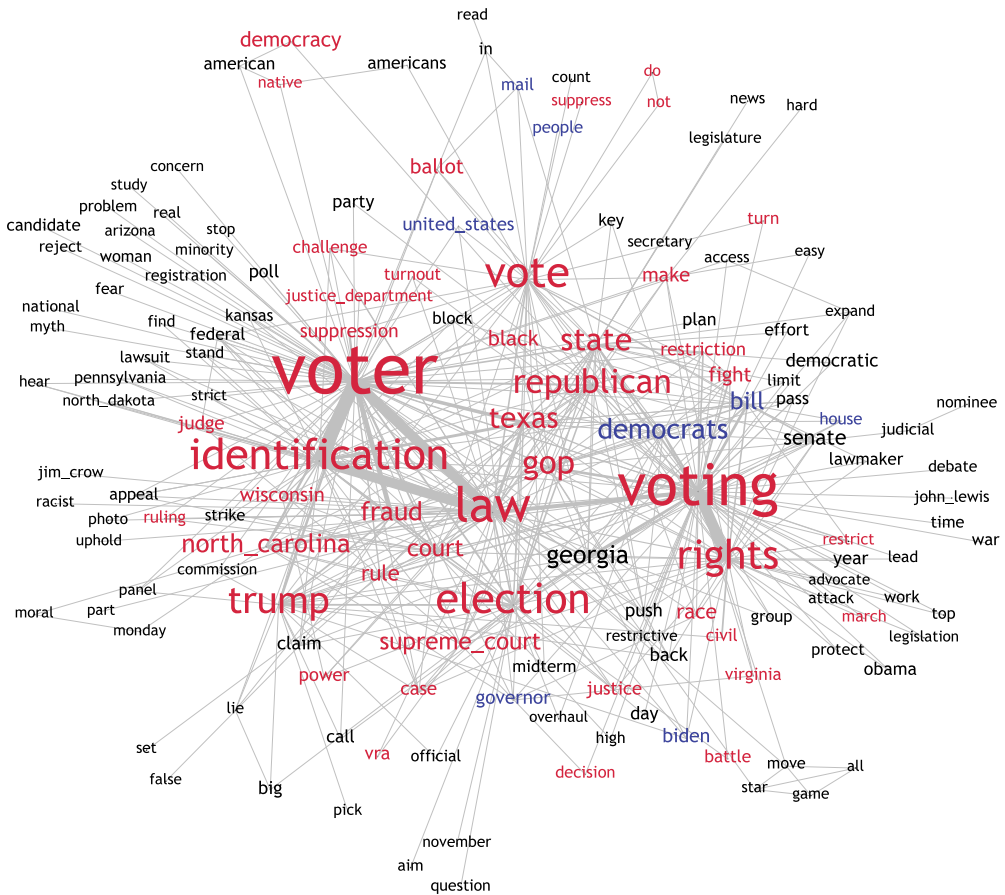


Figure 5. Semantic network of left leaning news coverage.

Discussion

The previous section described the language used in voter ID news coverage, inductively identified in the analysis. In this section, we discuss the insights generated from these outputs and their implications.

Elite Cues in News Coverage

We find evidence of a link between news media discourse and the voter ID elite frames theorized in the literature. Left-leaning news media keywords *voting* and *black*, and connections in the semantic network (for example, between *voter-suppression* and *turnout*; *voting-limit*, *restriction* and *protect*) indicate left-leaning media place attention to arguments around voter suppression caused by voter ID laws, referred to as the Democratic “voter suppression” elite frame in the literature. Additionally, the terms *strict*, *stringent*, *effect* and *disproportionately* appear in the top 15 words associated to “identification”.

Right-leaning news coverage is different. The connection between *election* to *fraud* in the right-leaning semantic network indicates an alignment with the “voter fraud”

Republican elite frame. *Fraud* also appears in the top 15 words associated to “identification” in right-leaning news coverage. Beyond associating voter ID to voter fraud, right-leaning news media link the issue to electoral *integrity*, a term appearing in the top key words differentiating right-leaning media headlines and increasing in importance. This term is also strongly associated to “identification” in the main article body.

Coverage of voter ID by left and right media also relate to forms of voter suppression and voter fraud beyond those potentially caused or prevented by voter ID laws, respectively. On the one hand, left-leaning news media link voter ID to wider efforts “to target voting rights” (07/02/2019, USA Today). For example, the term *purge* appears in the top words associated to “identification”. When exploring this term in the original headlines, we find instances of it used in relation to Ohio, a state that has been at the center of a contentious debate over its voter registration policies, particularly regarding the removal of inactive voters from the rolls.

Right-leaning media instead cover types of voter fraud beyond those generally targeted by voter ID policies. The term *ballot* co-occurs with both *fraud* and *mail*, the latter appearing among the top key words. This suggests a link between voter ID and mail-in voter fraud allegations, which were amplified by Trump during the 2020 pandemic election.

Partisan Intent and Truth Claims

In addition to news media covering the effects of voter ID laws, there are terms that suggest coverage also relates to the intent of these requirements. In news coverage on the left, the connections between the terms *attack* and *rights*, and *G.O.P* to *push* and *restrictions* suggest voter ID is framed as designed to suppress votes and portrayed as a deliberate tactic or strategy. Overall, the term *fraud* is significantly more prevalent in left-leaning media headlines, largely due to their coverage of accusations against Republicans, especially Trump, of “lying about voter fraud” (The New York Times, 05/12/2016). *Trump* is also mentioned more frequently by left-leaning media, which is in turn connected to terms such as *fraud*, *false*, *claims* and *big lie*.

Similarly, in the right media network, the term *Democrat* is connected to *push*, *attack* and *Biden* to *radical - agenda*. The terms *push* and *attack* appear neutral, implying they are used to a similar degree by both media sets, but their associations differ. While these terms are connected to *republican* in the left-leaning media network, they are linked to *democrats* in the right-leaning media network.

The terms *democrats* and *coronavirus*, connected in the semantic network, are significantly more frequent in right-leaning news headlines. When inspecting these terms in the original text, we find that right-leaning news media report voter ID in relation to electoral reforms and expansive voting bills introduced by Democratic political elites during the COVID-19 pandemic (in network: the connection of *democrats* to *bill*). These Democratic-backed voting bills are described as facilitating fraud, specifically through deceptive ballot harvesting, making it “easier to cheat in elections” (17/04/2020, Breitbart). Echoing left-leaning news outlets framing of voter ID as a partisan strategy, expansive voting bills introduced by Democrats are framed as a way to “encourage voter fraud because it helps them[Democrats] win elections” (Daily Caller, 15/04/2020) and as designed to bolster the Democratic party’s electoral performance (in network: the connection between *power* and

grab). Democratic electoral reforms, which limit states' ability to implement voting policies such as voter ID, are framed as a partisan strategy by portraying Democrats as continuing "their efforts to push nationwide vote-by-mail, a long-time agenda item of the radical left" through their voter accessibility bills (11/08/2020, Breitbart).

The term *media* is among the top 10 terms differentiating right-leaning news coverage and appears connected to *Biden* and *democrats*, both connected to *lie*, *push* and *claim*. Similar to left-leaning news outlets dismissing voter fraud allegations, inspecting these terms in the original text reveals a similar pattern in right-leaning news coverage, whereby claims of voter suppression by Democrats and left-leaning media are framed as "voter suppression conspiracies." This aligns with Goidel, Gaddie, and Goidel's (2019) findings that allegations of rigged elections extend beyond voter fraud to include claims of media bias.

The term *suppression* appears among the top 15 words associated to "identification" in right-leaning coverage. When inspecting instances of this term in the original text, we find that right-leaning media also paraphrase arguments about voter ID causing voter suppression to undermine them. Democrats are framed as "Desperate To Brand Voting Integrity Measures As Racist Suppression" (headline: Daily Caller, 08/07/2021) and the "Left labeling election integrity reforms as 'Jim Crow'" as "a lie and insulting to Blacks" (Washington Times, 19/04/2021). Exploring the original text revealed instances when quotation marks were used to question the veracity of voter suppression narratives, to convey the idea of "so-called," "alleged," or "supposed", and undermine what's being quoted (for example, "Jim Crow", voter ID as "racist" or enabling "suppression").

Voter ID Through Values / Principles

Public opinion research shows moral conviction (Udani and Kimball 2018) influences attitudes towards voter ID. We find news media moralize the issue of voter ID by appealing to norms and principles. This is evident when exploring coverage about the state of *Georgia*, which is frequently mentioned by both media sets.

While in the right-leaning semantic network, *Georgia* is associated with *democrats*, in the left-leaning network, it is linked to the *G.O.P.* and *republican*. In both networks, *Georgia* appears connected to the terms *all*, *star*, and *game*. Examining the original text, we find right-leaning media reported on Major League Baseball's (*MLB*) decision to move the All-Star Game from *Georgia* in response to the state's controversial voting law. There are instances where this move is described as hypocritical by right-leaning outlets, as "MLB requires photo ID to pick up tickets from Will Call but boycotts *Georgia* for voter ID law" (03/04/2021, Fox News).

In contrast, left-leaning media appeal to a human rights discourse to challenge voter ID requirements passed in states like *Georgia* (in network: connection between *Georgia* and move to *rights*). This narrative predominantly structures left-leaning coverage, with key terms such as *rights*, *civil* and *justice*. Left-leaning outlets instead frame the All-Star game move through this lens. The key term *rights* also appears connected to terms such as *fight*, *John Lewis* and *march*. Representative John Lewis (D-GA, 1987–2020) was an American statesman and civil rights activist, who led the first of three Selma to Montgomery marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. The marches were part of a broader voting rights movement underway in Selma and throughout the American South,

contributing to passage that year of the VRA of 1965. The key term *VRA* is also connected to *supreme court*, *case* and *decision*, highlighting left-leaning news media emphasized the 2013 Supreme Court case *Shelby County vs. Holder* in their coverage (in network: *Supreme court* and *court* are connected to the terms *rights* and *strike*). This Supreme Court case removed the preclearance to enact voting laws required by states with a history of racial discrimination. These terms indicate left-leaning news framing of voter ID as linked to a history of racial discrimination, covering these requirements as “part of a long history of voter suppression” (31/07/2020, Washington Post).

Emotions play a crucial role in mediating our cognitive judgements by redirecting and intensifying attitudes on issues (Ervas et al. 2021). Metaphorical violence language (for example, through the connections between *rights* and *attack*, *assault*, *slam*, *break*, *battle*, *sweep*, *block*, and *voting to war*) is used by left-leaning media to describe the implementation of voter ID requirements. This use of violence metaphors by left-leaning media is interesting as this language has been typically associated with conservatives’ moral system and discourse (Williams 2014). Violence metaphors are also present in right-leaning media coverage to depict voter accessibility bills, and by extension, Democrats, as attacking the integrity of elections with their proposed “federal takeover” (in network: the terms *law* and *attack*, *rip*, *strike*, *battle*, *assault*, and *hit* are connected).

Conclusions

This study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore news media coverage of voter ID requirements. It contributes to the growing literature on voter ID by finding a wider range of frames and narratives in news coverage than previously theorized. This includes associations of voter ID with effects extending beyond those directly linked to the policy and discussions around the intent behind voting restrictions and expansions.

While left-leaning news media portray voter ID laws as designed by Republican elites to lower minority turnout, right-leaning news media similarly portray Democrats’ electoral reforms as increasing voter fraud and therefore also as a strategy to benefit their electoral performance. We find right-leaning outlets reported on expansive voting bills introduced by Democratic elites, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The framing of voter ID is also implicit in how these bills are covered. Conover and Miller (2018) find moral conviction has become important in shaping how citizens respond to elite messaging about voter ID. We find electoral laws are also moralized in news coverage, with violence metaphors deployed across both media sets.

These differences in coverage content depending on the ideological orientation of the news media analysed demonstrate that news coverage is, to a certain extent, mirroring the parameters of elite debate on the issue of voter ID. However, we find Donald Trump to structure news coverage by both media sets from 2016, with left-leaning news media significantly paraphrasing his voter fraud allegations to undermine them. Contrary to expectations from existing literature, the term *fraud* appears more frequently in left-leaning media headlines, while *suppression* did not emerge as a key term in either the keyness analysis or word embedding analysis. This raises questions around whether reporting on Trump’s voter fraud claims might have helped further amplify them, instead of offering the public alternative ways of thinking about voter ID laws. The

substantial reporting of Donald Trump's voter fraud allegations in news coverage about voter ID, especially by left-media coverage, raises concern considering that research finds that efforts to correct misperceptions about voter fraud do not decrease support for voter ID laws from Democrats and may paradoxically heighten Republicans' support (Kane 2017). Van Der Meer, Hameleers, and Ohme's (2023) recent findings also suggest that efforts to warn the public about the threat of misinformation can increase general distrust in authentic news.

In their public opinion study, Conover and Miller (2018) conclude that "Republicans have won the "framing war" over voter ID, largely neutralizing the Democratic voter suppression frame, even among average Democrats". We find that right-leaning outlets not only neutralized the "voter suppression" frame but explicitly questioned its veracity, frequently emphasizing narratives about left-wing media bias and alleging conspiracy when covering Democratic voter accessibility bills. This dynamic adds a layer of complexity to the issue, as accusing "the other" of conspiring could contribute to media malaise or the erosion of trust in the media at large (Van Der Meer, Hameleers, and Ohme 2023). Studies find that an increase in audience distrust of the news media can further contribute to the growing polarization of the American political system and further reduce citizens' trust in democracy (Tsfati and Ariely 2014).

This finding also raises methodological considerations regarding dictionary-based analyses of discourse, where specific words are seen as inherently partisan without examining their context. Measuring levels of polarization through language differences (see for example, Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy 2019; Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020) might miss these instances where the same term (for example, "suppression") can be re-appropriated to develop a counter-frame or paraphrased to undermine its veracity.

While this study offers insights into the news discourse surrounding voter ID, the coverage of other bills, especially by right-leaning media, meant more rigorous qualitative investigation was needed to fully discern how these different electoral bills were covered. Further research would benefit from expanding the scope to include other contentious electoral policies, both expansive and restrictive, as search terms. Further attention should also be paid to the unique features and audience engagement strategies of each news outlet (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2023) and consider including images in the analysis.

Given the complexity of how events trigger media attention—such as coverage of Democratic voter expansion bills, Supreme Court cases, state-specific events—a potential avenue for future research is conducting a time series analysis to further explore temporal changes in media coverage. The graph of monthly article counts, combined with the correlation analysis of news attention across the two media sets, provided a bottom-up exploration that revealed patterns which should be further investigated to better understand dynamics in news attention.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the potential for media bias to intensify partisan divisions and contributes to the growing literature on voter ID. By applying inductive computational analyses techniques combined with a qualitative approach, the findings underscore the need for more comprehensive understanding of news framing of voting laws, to better understand its potential effect on public perception and policy outcomes.

Notes

1. Articles from The New York Times, Fox News, and USA Today were retrieved via NexisUni due to their availability on the platform, while articles from Breitbart, Daily Caller, NY Post, Washington Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, and CNN were accessed via URLs through MediaCloud.
2. The data is processed in Python using the gensim package's word2vec implementation. To prepare the text for model training, NLTK's punkt tokenizer is applied for sentence segmentation. The chosen method for generating word embeddings is continuous skip-grams, a variant of n-grams. In this approach, contextual order is preserved, and similar words are mapped or embedded to proximate points in the vector space, sharing heightened cosine similarity values. This method relies on cosine similarity, a widely employed distance metric in embedding analyses.
3. We employ the bootstrap method to train 100 models. In each iteration, we print the top 20 words associated with the term "identification" using the most_similar() method of the Word2VecKeyedVectors object. A dictionary is constructed to tally the frequency of each word within the top 20 associated words with "identification" in each model. This process identifies the most common words. We extract the top 15 words linked with "identification" across all models, retrieve their scores in each model, and calculate the mean and standard deviation of these top words.
4. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated, which is suitable when the relationship between the variables might not follow a straight line but could still show a consistent trend. Correlation coefficients can range from -1 to 1. 1 indicates a perfect positive relationship, -1 indicates a perfect negative relationship, and 0 indicates no relationship.

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Data Availability Statement

The news content analysed in this study is subject to copyright restrictions and, therefore, cannot be shared publicly. The scripts and code underpinning the analysis are available in a public repository. These can be accessed at <https://osf.io/asb8k/>.

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Appendix A

The step-by-step preprocessing process is outlined below.

- (1) Removing Infrequent Words: Words in the main text occurring less than 3 times were removed.
- (2) Removing Irrelevant Words: Specific words with little meaning from the maintext and title columns were removed. These are words that do not belong to the actual coverage but were picked up when scrapping the articles (for example, ADVERTISEMENT, VIDEO CLIP, BEGIN, etc.).
- (3) Capitalization Standardization: After removing these words, the corpus was converted to lowercase.
- (4) Removing Stopwords: The stopwords were removed using a predefined list of English stopwords from the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK), https://www.nltk.org/nltk_data/. The stopword list used is based on the NLTK library: Bird, S., Klein, E., & Loper, E. (2009).
- (5) Finding and Compounding Bigrams: Top bigrams in the corpus were identified and joined with `_`, which largely included names of people, roles and states. Donald Trump, Joe Biden and variations were analysed as "trump_" and "biden_", respectively.
- (6) Symbol Removal: Symbols were removed from the corpus, keeping underscores, "@", ".", and "£."
- (7) Word Replacement: Top words in the corpus were explored, finding instances of word abbreviations which were replaced with the full word (for example, dem. was converted to democrat).
- (8) Lemmatization: We applied lemmatization to the corpus using SpaCy and NLTK, preserving certain words like "media", "voting", "rights", so that these are not changed to medium and right.
- (9) Creating a Column with Full Stops: To run the word embedding analysis, we duplicated the maintext column, and removed fullstops from one of them. The presence of full stops is needed to split the corpus into sentences in the bootstrapping method.