Analyzing "Democracy-Framed Journalism":
The Case of Media Coverage of Election Deniers During the 2022 U.S. Midterm Elections

According to the U.S.-based Washington Post (Blanco, Wolfe, & Gardner, 2022), during the 2022 midterm elections in the U.S. 291 Republicans ran for office at the state and federal level while denying, contesting, or otherwise questioning the results of the 2020 presidential election. 179 of these candidates won their races.

This is a fundamental threat to democracy. If a country cannot have legitimate competitive elections despite all available evidence of their safety and security – if a political party cannot lose – then there can be no peaceful transfer of power. The logical conclusion of this played out on January 6, 2021 during the attempted coup (Cline Center, 2023) at the U.S. Capitol led by former president Trump and his supporters. It was also evident in the subsequent failure of Republican Party leaders to address, or in many cases even acknowledge, the danger of these extra-judicial attempts to hold onto power. And, January 6th was only the most visible sign of a longer process of the Republican Party leading the U.S. down a path of democratic backsliding, including through state-level reforms designed to limit electoral competition (Grumbach, 2022).

The United States is only one case of recent threats to competitive elections, albeit a particularly important and dramatic one. On January 8, 2023 in Brasilia, Brazil, supporters of outgoing president Jair Bolsonaro attacked the country's Supreme Court, National Congress, and Presidential Palace in the hopes of overthrowing a newly seated democratically-elected president. Attempts to undermine the peaceful transfer of power are not always so violent. In countries such as Hungary (Bogaards, 2018) and Turkey (Çalışkan, 2018), leaders have

consolidated power in part by limiting electoral competition through judicial and other means, including through measures cynically stated to protect the integrity of elections.

While we now have a robust body of work on what is variously called "democratic backsliding" (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) or "democratic decay" (Daly, 2019), we lack a robust normative theory of journalism's role in protecting democratic institutions, specifically in the context of elections. And, we lack both an analytical framework for assessing, and empirical evidence for judging, how well journalists respond to threats to democracy – whether they entail systematic attempts by political leaders to undermine public trust in elections, including attacks on election administrators and the legitimacy of the vote, refusals to concede, efforts to limit voting by one's opponents, or violent attempts to overthrow a government. All of these actions are designed to undermine the accountability of political leaders, and their political parties, at the ballot box and the peaceful and legitimate transfer of power.

This article brings together various threads of literature on journalism's role in democracy (e.g.: Altay et al., 2023) to develop a new normative and analytical framework of "democracy-framed journalism," and provides an empirical test of journalism's performance of this role through the case of the 2022 U.S. midterm elections. Specifically, we offer a normative and analytical framework of "democracy-framed journalism" to delineate when journalism is in the service of democratic institutions and evaluate journalism's performance during the 2022 midterm elections in the United States. Developed in collaboration with other scholars at [NAME&DESCRIPTION WITHHELD FOR PEER REVIEW], we define democracy-framed coverage as that which foregrounds democracy both as an established norm and as a political ideal. In the context of elections, this frame of coverage goes beyond just pointing out that claims of widespread voter fraud are false and not substantiated with evidence (if, indeed, there is no

evidence that irregularities occurred in a material way) – it also positions election denial as a violation of democratic norms with deleterious implications for democracy itself. It treats election denial – or ex ante assertions that a candidate will not accept the result of an upcoming election – as fundamentally different from other campaign issues. We then operationalize and apply this definition to a sample of 708 articles about 21 races around the U.S. with an election denier on the ballot. To gain insights into our findings, we also interviewed twelve journalists at different city/local, regional, and national outlets to discern their thoughts about this type of coverage.

Put succinctly, the results indicate that U.S. journalism clearly fell short of protecting democratic institutions. Our analysis revealed the limited presence of democracy-frames and a prevalence of weak statements that failed to condemn, correct, or call out election deniers on democratic grounds. News articles clearly trailed opinion pieces in democracy-framed coverage, and journalists had limited use of election administrators as sources – particularly troubling given their nonpartisan role of being tasked with election security and fairness. And, we found no significant variation across races in terms of democracy-framed coverage. It did not matter whether journalists were covering competitive or non-competitive races or working in districts with large amounts of Republicans or Trump supporters or Democratic-safe districts – media coverage across the board failed to protect against threats to democracy.

These findings underscore the urgency of addressing the growing threats to democratic institutions. They matter both in the context of this specific case – which shows U.S. journalism to be ill-prepared for fending off threats to democracy – and more broadly in offering a clear approach to assessing whether journalists and media fulfill roles of protecting democracy (e.g., Esser et. al., 2020). To-date, the international body of literature on democracy and

democratization and leading democracy indices (such as V-Democracy) are often premised on abstract evaluations of whether media is 'free' or 'not free' (defined vis-à-vis state control, such as whether media is independent or commercial.) Despite the value of these approaches – especially in allowing researchers to compare nations across the world through aggregate measures – as our empirical work demonstrates, they likely do not capture journalistic performance in the actual contexts when it matters most: here the critical case of elections.

As such, this paper's contribution lies in offering a normative and analytical framework for empirically evaluating journalistic performance in protecting democratic institutions. It proceeds in three parts. First, we detail the literature on journalism and democracy, focusing especially on work that has analyzed the role of journalism in democratic contexts, including post-conflict societies. We then detail our methods and results for this study. We conclude with consideration of the many barriers to the realization of democracy-framed coverage.

Literature Review

While there are very well-established bodies of literature about journalism's roles in democratic societies, there are surprisingly few works that detail *specifically* how journalism is situated vis-à-vis the functioning of democratic, and especially electoral, institutions. For example, there is a very well-established body of normative journalism literature, which in turn complements empirical studies of journalists' own ideal roles as well as those posited in legal understandings (Ananny, 2018; Nielsen, 2017; for a review and critique, see McDevitt, 2022). To summarize, these roles include providing accurate information, holding powerful figures and institutions accountable, facilitating public debate and deliberation, encouraging participation in democratic life, seeking truth or trustworthy information, and representing the public and public opinion to those in power. More broadly, scholars such as Alexander (2006) and Green (2008)

have seen journalism in terms of the power as the people's gaze over the powerful, ensuring a form of civic morality as a means of accountability.

While journalism's role in democracy is clearly implied in this work, to-date scholars have generally not expressly articulated journalism's role vis-à-vis threats to democratic institutions, such as elections. This could be given the comparatively recent phenomenon of "democratic backsliding" (the slow erosion of democratic institutions and norms) in the United States and the democratic west – marked by an increasing array of things such as outright attempts to contest the legitimacy of elections without evidence, growing attacks on democratic norms (such as demonizing opponents and undermining the rule of law), and portrayal of political opponents as existential threats (Jee et al., 2022). It also reflects the field of political communication and journalism's comparative blindness to questions of race, ethnicity, colonialism, and social difference – which, when considered, paint a far more variegated story of the U.S. and Europe's democratic histories and journalism's role in often upholding political and social power (e.g.: Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016; Freelon et al., 2023a, 2023b; Bedingfield & Forde, 2021; Richardson, 2020; Spurr, 1993; Subervi-Vélez et al., 2020).

There is extensive literature on media's role in bringing about democratization. For example, Voltmer (2013) details the extensive scholarship on media's role in transitional democracies. As she notes (ibid.), work on developmental media theory (or media development theory) generally presumes political development *toward* increasingly liberal democratic systems, which is captured in the "social responsibility" theory of the press that is normatively oriented towards media's role in fostering social solidarity (Hachten and Scotton, 2012; McQuail, 2010). Developmental journalism (Wasserman, 2018) has the same emphasis on media's role in promoting social collectivity in states making transitions towards democracy.

Meanwhile, there is a robust literature on comparative media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2012), but in general it is focused on stable western democratic systems (Chakravartty and Roy, 2013).

There is comparatively less work, and less consensus, on journalism during complicated democratization processes – which can last decades and which might feature periods of regression – or threats to deconsolidation after democracy is established (Voltmer, 2019; Wasserman, 2020). As scholars have suggested, democracy is not a steady-state condition, but a continually performed achievement based on a set of conditions and contexts rooted in history (Cohen & Hopkinson, 2023; Cianetti, Dawson, & Hanley, 2020). Cianetti et al. (2020) argue that presumptions of linear decline (or progress) often elide far more complicated political realities on the ground and the range of different experiences that democracies may have depending on the context they occur in. That said, despite its considerable strengths, much of the comparative democracy literature has rather thin conceptualizations of 'media' (which, in turn, inform conceptions of political systems used by media scholars).

In many veins of the literature on democratic backsliding scholars focus on the role of political institutions (such as parties) and laws. For example, a central finding in this literature is that we have moved from outright coups to slower processes of constitutional erosion brought about by the efforts of anti-democratic leaders and political parties (Cianetti et al., 2019; Jee et al., 2022; McDevitt, 2022). The key actors in this drama are often elected leaders and parties in power that, over time, undermine competitive elections (such as passing laws to favor one political party), norms such as respecting a legitimate opposition (such as through 'enemies of the people' language), and the rule of law (such as through the appointment of people with partisan interests to justice offices or the politicization of the judiciary).

Importantly, for our purposes, when media are considered in this body of literature, they are often conceptualized as a measure of civil liberties or an independent check on the ruling party (or the target of it) – not as a potential source of backsliding or decay. For example, deeply influential literature presumes that freedom of expression and pluralist sources of information are cornerstones of democracy, such as the influential *Varieties of Democracy* framework and its vdem index which is the most significant typology of global varieties of democracy (Coppedge et al., 2020).

And yet, it is exactly these expressive and media freedoms, presumed to be democratic in one literature, that are of growing concern to media, political communication, and journalism scholars. To take just two examples, free expression might facilitate mis- and disinformation during Covid (see Persily and Tucker, 2020) and alternative sources of information might include QAnon, the right-aligned global conspiracy movement (Lukito et al., 2023).[1] Specifically in the U.S. case, non-state, commercial media such as Fox News and Breitbart can engage in coordinated disinformation campaigns as part of loose networks of partisan, ideological, or identity affiliates – including advancing the institution of the Republican Party when it is formally in power, or striving to gain it back (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018; Costley-White, 2018; Peck, 2019; Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, 2011). Or, these outlets (and dozens of others like them) can engage in tireless baseless criticism of democratically-elected governments

[1] The *Varieties of Democracy,* or vDem, framework is the most influential approach in the field to measuring democracy and degrees of media freedom in that context. This is their methodological approach: "E Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index: Finally, Dahl's concept of polyarchy includes a conspicuously nonelectoral aspect: freedom of expression. Staying true to his widely accepted concept thus necessitates employing a core set of indicators capturing overall media freedom (Behmer 2009), such as active state censorship of print/ broadcast media, media self-censorship, and harassment of journalists. In addition, polyarchy requires freedom of discussion in society at large, for both men and women (Skaaning 2009). It also includes four indicators of media content to capture Dahl's (1971) "alternative sources of information": whether the media is biased against opposition parties and candidates, whether major print and broadcast outlets routinely criticize the government, and whether they represent a wide range of political perspectives, as well as general repression of cultural and academic expressions of political dissent."

or electoral processes in ways that undermine the legitimacy of those in power (Betz and Henrickson, 2023). Even a legacy press that is independent and commercial and adheres to professional journalism standards might fail to protect, or even actively undermine, electoral institutions given norms such as objectivity and balance that work against institutional communicators alerting the public to threats (Eddy, 2021; Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021), to say nothing of the vast commercial incentives that shape journalistic coverage towards grabbing and holding a public's fleeting attention (Munger, 2020).

In the end, free expression and free media (including social media) can enable political actors – including those in and outside government – to coordinate disinformation and harassment campaigns and manipulate discussion to obfuscate, elide accountability, undermine the workings of democratic institutions, and challenge a shared set of facts. Indeed, freedom of expression and free media can be tools in the service of those would undermine democracy itself. As Haggard and Kaufman (2021) note, authoritarian leaders can "exploit deep liberal commitments to free speech" to manipulate and control media, create intimidation, discredit opponents, undermine truth, create confusion and mask weakening institutional safeguards, and narrowly target vulnerable citizens.

As such, we need both a more clearly specified analytical framework for journalism's role in protecting democratic institutions, especially elections, as well as to assess the performance of the press in democratic societies. We have bodies of work on journalism in authoritarian states (e.g. Moon, 2023) or semi-authoritarian states (Medeiros and Badr, 2022), but we know comparatively less about journalism and media's potential role in fueling social and political divisions or state actors' use of sympathetic media to undermine political opposition in

consolidated democracies (McNair, 2018), or their exploitation of press norms to erode sources of accountability.

Journalists, and journalism as an institution more broadly, potentially play large roles in defending democratic norms and institutions, especially around elections, or weakening them. In a fascinating study, for instance, Geiß (2023) finds that journalistic roles map onto political systems, such as the degree of democratization, and that in transitional democracies journalists can be activists that shape the country's future (towards democracy or authoritarianism). Other scholars have detailed the normative role of journalism in post-conflict societies, especially focused on elections in new democracies. The "peace journalism approach" (Awobamise, Jarrar, and Owade, 2020; Arregui, Thomas, and Kilby, 2022) analyzes the role of the media in potentially calming social tensions in advance of elections to avoid violence.

However, in comparatively consolidated democracies, such as the U.S., Hungary, or India, threats to democracy might come from one party or political leader – and as such journalists have to put aside concerns over social solidarity or polarization in order to clearly identify the democratic threat for the public. This is required of a communicative institution that serves as a 'gatekeeper' of democratic, and specifically electoral, institutions (Alexander, 2006; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Eddy, 2020). Recently, Eddy (2020) argued that journalism institutions work as "civil gatekeepers" when they respond to threats to democratic norms and institutions – but also that this should be analyzed empirically given the many competing pressures and norms for journalists (such as professional norms of objectivity and balance), offering an analytical framework and empirical test of journalism's role as a "civic gatekeeper."

Building from this work, we define "democracy-framed coverage" as that which: foregrounds democracy both as an established norm and as a political ideal. In our normative

view, journalists have a responsibility as a communicative institution of democracy to help secure elections, and especially to clearly and repeatedly alert the public to false claims of voter fraud, strategic campaigns to undermine public confidence in elections, and the failures of candidates to embrace election results. These are all dangerous violations of democratic norms, threats to free and fair elections, and ultimately attempts to subvert legitimate processes for holding, or transferring, power. As such, democracy-framed coverage *requires* a clear interpretation of intentions, especially in the context of strategic attempts to manipulate public perceptions for electoral or power advantage.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study is: does U.S. election coverage include democracy-frames when journalists cover candidates who have denied the results of free and fair elections. To answer it, we conducted a content analysis of media coverage of 2022 candidates who denied the results of the 2020 elections, including in both news articles and opinion pieces. Based on previous literature, we had three hypotheses about democracy-frames in press coverage.

First, we anticipated that the utilization of democracy-frames in news articles would be limited. In cases where media outlets consider themselves independent and adhering to professional journalism standards, they might not adopt democracy-framed coverage, given professional norms such as objectivity and balance, which likely hinder jouranlists from effectively alerting the public to threats (Eddy, 2021; Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2021; Hughes et al., 2023). In addition, commercial incentives might also lead journalists to avoid alienating parts of their audience as well as focus their time and energy on attention-grabbing aspects of the campaign trail (Pickard, 2018).

Second, following a similar logic, we expected that the number of weak pro-democracy statements will exceed that of strong statements in news articles. We expected that weak statements (such as mentioning a candidate's denialism without refuting it) allow journalists to acknowledge the existence of denialism without actively challenging or refuting it, thus minimizing potential controversy. Even more, while election denialism is based on false claims and misinformation, journalists may feel obligated to present it simply as a viewpoint or opinion held by a segment of the population (Egelhofer et al., 20202; Parks, 2020). Lastly, stronger statements (such as analyzing actions of election denial as a political tactic designed to gain power outside of the electoral process) typically require journalists to invest time and effort into researching and providing evidence to contextualize denialist claims (Braun and Eklund, 2019). In many newsrooms, resources are limited, and journalists need to prioritize their commitments. Weaker statements may be quicker and easier to produce, allowing journalists to cover a broader range of topics within their resource constraints.

Third, we compared news articles and opinion pieces regarding democracy-frames. Journalists may be hesitant to take a strong stance against denialist claims due to concerns about potential backlash, including accusations of bias or partisanship (e.g.: Pajnik and Hrženjak, 2022). As such, we believe that news articles will be less likely to use democracy-frames compared to opinion pieces. We also anticipated that opinion pieces will have more strong statements than news articles because writers of opinion pieces would find it comparatively easier to take a clear and assertive stance against denialist claims. Unlike news articles, opinion pieces are not bound by the same requirements of journalistic norms, which may allow authors to actively challenge and refute the false claims associated with election denialism.

Fourth, we examined whose voice was used as sources to make pro-democracy statements. Particularly of interest was whether election administrators were included as sources in news coverage, which we consider a critical part of democracy-framed coverage. Including administrators as sources highlights their civic role and the democratic values of impartiality, accuracy, and accountability, potentially enhancing public trust in the electoral process (e.g.: Udani et al., 2018).

Finally, we posed a set of questions related to whether the following factors would have an impact on the news coverage of election denying candidates. We tested whether the partisan composition of the district (majority Republican or Democrat or split) brings about noticeable variations in the news coverage of candidates (given potential journalistic concerns about the trust of their audiences). For the same reason, we anticipated that differences in Trump's vote share during the 2020 election in the district, specifically below 50% versus over 50%, would lead to significant differences in the coverage of election deniers. And, we asked whether the competitiveness of the race, ranging from closer margins (48-52%) to solid wins above 55%, would result in meaningful differences in the news coverage of election denying candidates (with the idea that a closer race would mean fewer strong statements about election denialism).

Methods

As detailed above, we use the U.S. 2022 midterm elections as our case of democracy-framed coverage. The U.S. provides an ideal case here because it has reasonably well-established national electoral institutions since the enforcement of universal suffrage in the 1960s, yet also considerable threats to free and fair elections – including systematic efforts on the political right to undermine public confidence in elections, efforts to legally limit participation of political opponents through electoral rules (such as around voter identification) (Grumbach, 2021), and

the express attempt by a sitting president to prevent the peaceful transfer of power through an attempted auto-coup on January 6, 2021 (Cline Center, 2023). As such, analyzing how journalists covered the 2022 elections in cases where candidates who denied the results of the election in 2020 were on the ballot provides a unique opportunity to evaluate journalism's role vis-à-vis democratic institutions.

Sampling of the races

To determine our sample, we used *the Washington Post*'s tracking of 2020 election deniers (Blanco, Wolfe, & Gardner, 2022) as a reference. Initially, we carefully selected 28 races that represented a diverse range of regions/districts, considering their varying partisan compositions, levels of support for former President Trump in the 2020 elections, and significant competitiveness. To ensure thorough analysis, we assessed the availability of local news coverage for the 28 races using the ProQuest database, subsequently excluding from the final sample seven races that lacked any local news coverage in the database. As a result, the final sample included 21 races: Alabama 4th Congressional District, Arizona Governor, Arizona Secretary of State, California 20th Congressional District, Georgia Senate, Michigan 3rd Congressional District, Michigan Attorney General, Michigan Governor, Michigan Secretary of State, North Carolina Senate, Nevada Secretary of State, Nevada Senate, New York Governor, Ohio Senate, Pennsylvania Senate, Texas Governor, Virginia 2nd Congressional District, and Wisconsin Governor.

Sampling of news articles

The data collection method for the content analysis involved a systematic process of searching, downloading, and cleaning local news articles from the Proquest database. Search

strings included the name of either candidate anywhere in the text (including the title and body of the article) and a list of news outlets covering the state the race took place in. For the national news coverage, we collected data for three national news outlets: *The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today*. For the local news coverage, we built the list of news outlets for each state, using the News Deserts Database—a proprietary database owned by the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.[2]

Using each search string, we were able to download a total of 2,788 news articles. One of the researchers and a research assistant then examined the articles to exclude those that were not written in English, not published by one of the news outlets we included in the search strings, and those that were only lists of candidates' names endorsed by the news outlet.

Next, we selected a stratified sample for different types of races. For the attorney general race, house congressional races, and secretary of state races, we coded all articles. For the governor and senate races, we did a stratified random sample for each race in these two categories. Therefore 50 random articles were included in the sample for every governor and senate race. Sometimes, there were duplicate articles when the article covered more than two types of races, resulting in a smaller number of articles in the final sample. Coders reported as irrelevant articles that were not an opinion piece or a news article (e.g., a list of endorsements or advertisements) and not related to any of the candidates or races included in our sample (e.g., someone else with the same name with the candidate). In the end, the dataset of local news coverage included 589 news articles and 119 opinion pieces.

Table 1

[2] For additional information about the composition of our database and the context of our research, visit their website at https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/, particularly the methodology page at https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/methodology/.

National and Local News Coverage Data Breakdown by Race Type

Race type	News articles	Opinion piece	Total
National news coverage	21	11	32
Local news coverage			
Senate race	178	39	217
Governor race	276	38	314
House (district) race	38	17	55
Secretary of state race	45	12	57
Attorney General race	31	2	33
Total	**589**	**119**	**708**

Codebook and variables

The codebook captured essential details of the news coverage, encompassing the headline, publication date, author/byline, and the number of races covered within each news story (up to three races). To provide comprehensive analysis, we structured the codebook into two sections. The first section contained variables pertaining to the news story as a whole, while the second section focused on variables specific to individual races covered within the news story.

The first section included democracy-frames and sources used for democracy-frames. *Democracy-frames* were the primary subject of this study. They serve as a powerful tool for media to protect democracy. For example, in framing election denial as a threat to democratic norms and institutions, journalists can convey the importance of accepting election results, respecting the will of the voters, and ensuring the peaceful transition of power. Democracy-frames highlight the necessity of fairness, the rule of law, and the necessity of a party being able

to lose in a democracy. Through democracy-frames, journalists could also provide a counter-narrative to disinformation and misinformation by clearly refuting false claims of voter fraud and other forms of election manipulation by conveying the implications of election denial for democratic governance and civic participation. By promoting public understanding that election denial undermines the foundations of democracy, these frames play a crucial role in safeguarding democratic institutions and processes, fostering electoral accountability, and preserving the core values and principles that underpin democratic governance. Thus, we coded whether democracy was used as the central theme in the narrative and operationalized this concept as a binary variable: either the narrative was primarily structured around democracy-frames, or it was not.

Sources used for democracy-frames. We also examined the types of sources utilized in presenting democracy-frames based on whether democracy-frames were presented in voices of the journalist, members of the opposing party (including opposing candidates and party representatives), outside experts (non-partisan experts such as civil society members, election administrators, or professors), or the public, including gathering public opinion through protests, social movements, or interviews with individuals on the street. We gave election administrators more attention by coding them separately as they are particularly important sources when it comes to election news coverage due to their roles ensuring the integrity of the electoral process and addressing any potential irregularities or disputes. We initially coded whether the voice was present in the headline, the body of the news article, both headline and body, or not present at all, but later aggregated them into a binary variable due to little difference between the locations.

The second section included variables coded for each race mentioned in the piece (up to three races). First, *type of race* was coded to identify which race was included among the 21 in our sample. *Mentions of race* were coded to identify whether the race or candidate was

mentioned in the news article (nominal). *Mentions of election denialism* were coded to identify whether the news article mentioned the term "election denialism" or related terms (in the headline, body, both, or not at all.)

Strong and weak pro-democracy statements about election denialism. For strong statements, we were looking for journalistic assertions of truth, which means correcting or asserting that the claim is false. Such statements often involve providing evidence, citing court rulings, or referring to verified facts to counter the false claims associated with election denialism. Weak statements encompass mentions of election denialism without any correction. This variable captures instances where election denialism is mentioned by journalists without actively challenging or correcting the denialist claims. Both variables were coded using four nominal categories: 'Yes, headline,' 'Yes, body,' 'Yes both headline and body,' and 'not at all.'

We coded multiple variables regarding information that provides context about the anti-democratic candidate and their denial of the election. *Mentions of candidates questioning the 2020 election* was coded for two types of candidates: (a) the election denialist candidate of the race and (b) other candidates or political leaders other than the candidate of the race. *Official endorsement made by former president Trump.* This variable specifically focused on capturing instances where there is a verifiable and explicit statement made by Donald Trump regarding his endorsement of a candidate. It excluded claims from candidates or others without verifiable evidence, such as self-made assertions of endorsement by Trump. *Statement about the election denier candidate's previous or current refusal to accept the results or concede in 2022*. This variable focused on capturing instances where the candidate who denies the validity of the 2020 election made explicit statements about their refusal to accept the election results or concede

defeat in 2022. All four variables were coded using four nominal categories: 'Yes, headline,' 'Yes, body,' 'Yes both headline and body,' and 'not at all.'

Reliability

Reliable data can be operationally defined in two ways: (a) as data that remain constant throughout variations in the measuring process (Kaplan & Goldsen, 1965, pp. 83-84) and (b) as data that can be replicated elsewhere, demonstrating that coders concur on the readings and interpretations of the given text (Krippendorff, 2019).

To ensure reliable data for our content analysis, we used a three-step process: (a) developing a codebook with communicable and practical instructions, (b) having coders go through a training program to anticipate all possible complications of the texts and update the codebook and coding instructions accordingly, and, lastly, (c) producing reliability data—independent from the actual study.

We trained twelve undergraduate coders on a training dataset, which included 10 articles separate from the actual content analysis study.[3] To assess the agreement among coders, we utilized Cohen's kappa coefficient, a widely used measure of intercoder reliability. The results indicated a high level of agreement among the coders, with an average Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.81, with all variables showing more than 90% agreement. We followed the guidelines provided by Landis and Koch (1977) to interpret the strength of agreement. According to their classification, a kappa coefficient of 0.81 falls within the "almost perfect" agreement range. This demonstrates a high level of consistency among the coders in applying the coding scheme to the articles.

[3] These students were enrolled in a semester-long undergraduate research course.

Regular meetings with the coders took place to address any questions, clarify ambiguities, and discuss challenging cases. We also implemented consistency checks throughout the coding process. Coders received a random subset of articles in their assigned batches that was assigned to another coder as well. We compared the coding results among the coders to assess intercoder reliability and identify areas of disagreement. With the multiple pairs of coders, the average Cohen's Kappa coefficient was 0.85 across variables, with all variables showing more than 90% agreement.

Qualitative Data

We reached out to approximately 120 journalists that we identified through our dataset of articles published in the course of the election in these races. Despite our best attempts, our availability to secure interview participants was limited. In a number of cases, journalists cited asking their editors and having to then decline us. Most were unresponsive to multiple requests. In the end, we were able to conduct interviews with 12 journalists from a range of city/local (3), state (4), and national (5) media outlets. Of those, nine journalists were from newspaper or media sites, and three were from broadcast outlets (one each of city, state, and national outlets). Two were opinion commentators (one national and one city outlet.) All interviews were conducted 'on-the-record' with journalists able to declare any statement 'off-the-record,' 'on background,' or 'not for attribution' at their discretion. However, because of the few journalists willing to speak at all, and conditions requested by a number of the journalists we secured interviews with, we made the decision to report all of this data not-for-attribution.

Trained teams of two undergraduate researchers conducted the interviews following a collectively developed interview map. We performed two rounds of coding. For the first round, the entire research team inductively coded either five or six transcripts, but in a way that was

sensitive to the larger themes of the study and the analytically guided interview questions. Every transcript was coded by three different individuals at this stage. We then had a research meeting to discuss these open-ended themes and codes (n=115) we developed, as well as pull exemplar quotes. For the second round, we had the same approach, but now with more formal deductive coding (based on the themes and codes from the first round) while also doing another round of inductive coding. What resulted was eight themes and 44 subthemes, which we combined to create the narrative of findings below.

We present the qualitative data in the discussion section here because they should be understood as a suggestive complement to the content analysis data. Perhaps not surprisingly, all the journalists we spoke too stated their outlet did coverage related to election deniers well, which suggests to us social desirability bias in both the sample and results. At best, these interviews are illustrative of what journalists *perceive* are best practices for how to cover election deniers, as well as the perceived tensions that they faced over things such as conveying democratic threats and maintaining the trust of Republican audiences.

Results

The utilization of democracy-frames in news articles was limited.

For our first hypothesis, we examined the percentage of news articles that used democracy-frames. A simple descriptive statistic showed that only six percent (36 out of 589 articles) of the news articles included democracy-frames in their election coverage. None of the national news coverage used democracy-frames; all 36 news articles that used democracy-frames were from city/local news outlets.

The number of weak statements exceeded that of strong statements in the news articles.

We tested our second hypothesis with two different units of analyses. First, we tested if the number of weak statements in news articles exceeded that of strong statements per race. Here, each race was considered as the unit of analysis, and an article could be coded up to three times for different races. A two-sample Z-test showed that the proportions of the strong and weak statements were significantly different. The test statistic (z = -2.02) showed a *p value* of 0.044, providing evidence of the significant difference. The effect size was found to be small (*h* = 0.11), indicating a minimal magnitude of difference between the proportions. Thus, although our results indicated a statistically significant higher prevalence of weak statements (12.03%) compared to strong statements (8.74%), the disparity observed was relatively small compared to the whole sample. In other words, both strong and weak statements had a low presence in our sample of news articles.

Next, we tested the same hypothesis but with the news articles as the unit of analysis. Because we coded up to three mentioned races for each news article, if any of the races included in the piece included a strong statement, it was considered that the news article had a strong statement. The percentage of news articles that included at least one strong statement was 9.51 percent (56 out of 589), while for weak statements the percentage was slightly higher with 13.58 percent (80 out of 589). The difference between these two percentages were statistically significant with a z score of -2.188 and a p value less than the .05 threshold ($p = .03$).

More opinion pieces than news articles had democracy-frames and strong statements, as we anticipated.

We had two hypotheses related to the comparison between the percentage of democracy-frame in news coverage versus that in opinion pieces. First, the percentage of democracy-frame being used was higher fo the opinion pieces, at 19.33 percent (23 out of 119), compared to the

six percent observed in news articles. A two-sample Z test showed that with a value of z = 4.72, and with a p value less than .0001, there was a significant difference between the two samples.

Next, we also compared the percentage of strong statements within news articles with those of opinion pieces. As we expected, 15.13 percent (18 out of 119) of opinion pieces had at least one strong statement, 5.81 percent point higher than news articles (9.51 percent). The difference, however, lacked power to be statistically significant with a p value of $p = .067$ (z statistic = 1.83).

Few articles included election administrators as sources.

Unlike other sources, we considered the use of election administrators as sources democracy-frame regardless of whether they directly addressed election denialism or democracy. Out of the total sample of 589 news articles, only 35 articles (5.94%) had election administrators as their source. Other sources used in democracy-frames included journalists' own voice (5.26%), opposing party members in relation to the anti-democratic candidate (6.96%), outside experts (1.87%), the public (1.19%), and others (1.53%).

District differences did not matter for the presence of democracy-frame

As detailed above, we had three hypotheses to test variations of democracy-frames and relevant key variables with the partisan composition of district, Trump's vote share in 2020, and the competitiveness of the race. To test these hypotheses, we counted the occurrences of each variable by race (because up to three races were coded for each article, the number of the races is bigger than the number of the articles coded.) Independent T-tests failed to reject all three hypotheses, indicating there were no differences in how election deniers on the ballot were covered across races that varied along these dimensions. Nonetheless, we found some interesting correlations among the key variables: see Appendix A.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop a normative and analytical framework of democracy-framed journalism that could be applied globally in assessments of the press’s ability to protect against democratic threats, especially in the context of elections. We see this as a cornerstone of journalism’s normative commitment in democratic states given the centrality of electoral institutions to securing all other forms of freedoms (Dahl, 2008), including expression and assembly. We also view this journalistic commitment as becoming necessarily increasingly important as established democracies around the world face increased threats. Taken together, we believe that democracy-framed coverage offers a minimalist, yet clear, conceptualization of journalism’s normative role in democratic states, and provides an analytical and empirical framework for evaluating press performance.

In application of this framework to the case of the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, our findings that journalism clearly fell short. Democracy-frames, which clearly communicate the importance of elections and clearly identify threats to them, were distressingly limited, appearing in only 6% of news articles. And, weak statements outnumbered strong ones. Taken together, journalists, as custodians of the public interest, failed to actively challenge false claims. Moreover, news articles lagged behind opinion pieces in terms of democracy-frames, indicating that journalists failed to take a clear and assertive stance against denialism as part of their routine coverage from the campaign trail. Even further, our study exposed the limited inclusion of election administrators as sources in news coverage, with only 5.94% of articles featuring these non-partisan officers of elections. The relative prevalence of the opposing party members' voice is particularly concerning due to the potential misinterpretation of democracy-frames as being

partisan in nature. Finally, our investigation found no significant differences across races in terms of democracy-worthy coverage, signaling that these challenges are pervasive.

Given the urgency to confront mounting threats to democratic institutions in countries around the world, one question that we had throughout this project is *why* – why do we see so little coverage of anti-democratic threats to elections? Turning to our interview data, we suggest here what journalists *perceive* to be behind successful, or unsuccessful, democracy-framed coverage.

Editorial Processes

Five of the journalists in our interviews cited having an express editorial process around, or at the very least a set of explicit conversations about, how to cover election deniers on the ballot in 2022. These journalists were from different outlets and did not include opinion writers (who all stated they were on their own with how they approached election deniers). The editorial processes described by these journalists ranged from having editorial team meetings devoted to fleshing out how to cover election deniers to having individual editors guiding coverage for journalists. One journalist described their outlet having "boilerplate" (personal communication) text (a strong statement) that was inserted into every story the newspaper was producing on election deniers on the ballot. Journalists who discussed these types of interaction with editors all cited in various ways that this process was there to guide individual journalists covering elections and standardize the approaches of the outlet across races.

The remainder of journalists cited being more on their own when it came to how to handle the characterization of election deniers. Some of these journalists reported having conversations with editors, but they were less structured and practice seemed to be more emergent and contingent on the evolution of these races. In this subset of responses, decision-

making was less deliberative or intentional. As one participant (personal communication) reported, "[journalists and editors] discussed it [election deniers] privately, but not in a robust way as you would expect on such an important topic." Another (personal communication), stated that "I don't remember specific conversations. I think everyone was just making it up as they went, because it was so unprecedented."

Journalistic Orientations

The news journalists, almost universally, grounded the professional understanding of their roles on epistemological grounds. Namely, they saw themselves and their institution in terms of creating and conveying public *facts.* Although they centered democracy as a concern, and resoundingly espoused the idea that democracy was important and under threat – they squarely grounded their own role in information provision terms. In other words, none of these journalists mentioned seeing their roles in terms of making an 'affirmative' case for democracy, such as educating the public about the importance of the peaceful transfer of power or legitimate elected rule. There was an implied sense that the audience would share these thoughts with journalists, but it was implied.

Nearly all of the news journalists we spoke with framed their, and their outlet's, orientation in terms of being 'truthful,' 'accurate,' and 'objective.' We take these to be journalists' perceived ideal orientations – they relayed their commitment to the facts, including asserting those facts when it came to candidates that threatened democratic institutions and processes. At the same time, however, when asked about their practices we received a more nuanced picture that threatened these ideals and might explain the low prevalence of democracy-frames and strong statements in the sample. Even while espousing ideals, journalists also

discussed wanting to be 'balanced,' and discussed how difficult that was when election deniers were on the ballot.

For example, we discerned that journalists adopted reporting practices to navigate the tensions inherent in being truthful about threats to democracy, while also wanting to be balanced (i.e.: nonpartisan) in their coverage. One journalist cited avoiding 'partisan' words and phrases about democracy, while also still conveying democratic threats. For example, this journalist (personal communication) cited how since 'democracy'-related themes were a Democratic [Party] talking point, they deliberately avoiding using similar language to candidates while still working to convey a similar message (i.e.: that elections are safe and secure). Another journalist (personal communication) cited not using the label of "election denier" which, in their view, was unnecessarily pejorative and political as a label. Better, in this person's view, to describe empirically what the candidate did and said in the context of the actual safety and security of elections (an example of adopting strong statements).

Working against this, another news journalist stated that being 'balanced' meant *not* continually repeating the threat to democracy that some candidates represented. Another journalist cited that because people would be familiar with an election denier's record, they made the decision to not continually remind their audiences of this fact and instead focused on other issues. In a finding similar to Eddy's (2021), another suggested that they highlighted concerns about denialism, but balanced it against other, more positive, things about the candidate.

Concerns Over Trust

All of the journalists in the sample touched on another important concern in various ways, their relationship with, and maintaining the trust of, their audiences. A majority of the news journalists we spoke with cited maintaining, losing, or regaining the trust of audiences as a

main concern, and thought about their coverage through this lens. Journalists referred to 'polarization' being a significant concern in various ways and having to navigate entrenched partisans interested in only believing their side. As one journalist (personal communication) put the challenge: "And so I think, you know, as much as partisan media has a place, I think our role is to continue to be like as objective as possible while documenting like the objectively insane things that are happening."

One way some of four of our interviewees resolved this tension was to clearly delineate between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' audience members. One journalist (personal communication) explicitly cited that they would not be able to gain, or maintain, the trust of "hardcore election denialists," in the words of one journalist, but they did think that there was a broader "middle" that was open to factual appeals, including corrections to election denialism. It was this group –the reasonable, sensible, and open-to-being-informed audience – that these four journalists cited imagining and writing for. As another journalist (personal communication) put it, "I think as long as you are telling the truth, and you're not trying to put any sort of slanted coverage together, then an objective person should be able to recognize that…"

Only one journalist spoke about this in expressly partisan terms, but others clearly implied that this applied mostly to the Republican portion of their audience (if only because of the clear evidence that election denialism was rooted in the Republican Party). We discerned journalists implicitly referring to seeking to maintain the trust of these reasonable Republicans. One important reason was framed in terms of democracy – maintaining the trust of this audience, in particular, would preserve the important epistemological dimensions of American democracy, a shared set of facts that people believe in and that must be the basis for political decision making (and, by extension, the legitimacy of those who provide these facts).

What Was Missing from These Accounts

As important as what was said was what was not. Of particular note, in keeping with the lack of explicit mention of partisanship, very few journalists discussed anything related to political power. In keeping with much of public discourse, election denialism was presented through the lens of an 'information deficit' model – where people just did not have enough information or were not reasonable about that information. This stands in contrast with what might be thought of as a 'power' model – that politicians and their supporters might be embracing denialism to gain or hold onto power, and that this benefitted them in clear ways. There was also very little mention of race and ethnicity across any of these interviews, even as most political and social scientists center this in their understandings of contemporary political conflicts in the U.S. (Jardina & Mickey, 2022; Takahashi et al., 2022). Indeed, there was in general the reliance on ideas of things like 'polarization' to the exclusion of an analysis of the stakes of politics and contemporary political conflicts (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has significant implications for the role of journalism in safeguarding democracy. It is evident that we find ourselves—globally—at a crucial juncture in safeguarding democratic institutions. The challenges faced by democratic institutions transcend borders, making it imperative for journalists worldwide to recognize their pivotal responsibility as guardians of democratic processes. By underscoring the significant limitations of journalism in preserving the vitality and resilience of democratic societies, we provide a normative and practical framework to the performance of journalism in protecting democracy.

It is imperative for journalists to rise to the occasion and fulfill their critical responsibility as gatekeepers of democratic processes. And yet, as our study shows, there is a pressing need in

practice for journalists to fulfill their responsibility as gatekeepers of democratic processes, especially in the face of increasing threats to democratic institutions. The findings of our study emphasize the urgent need for journalists to champion democracy-worthy coverage, actively promoting the importance of protecting electoral institutions and challenging false claims.

Our democracy-oriented journalism framework aims to foster a global research agenda on the vital role of journalism in safeguarding democratic institutions. We believe that journalists have the ability, and the responsibility, to alert the public as to democratic threats – and to that end, must develop the processes and practices that can clearly center these in their work. Based on our interviews, embracing the challenge of democracy-worthy journalism as a core principle would require investments in editorial processes, resources, training, and guidelines that prioritize the protection of electoral institutions and the dissemination of accurate information. We believe that by doing so, media organizations can strengthen the bond of trust with their audience and contribute to a healthier democratic ecosystem – especially through focusing on those members of the audience that share commitments to democratic values, are willing to lose elections, and privilege shared facts and knowledge-producing institutions as a basis for democratic decision making.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Correlations among variables (for news articles)

	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]	[8]
Mentions of election denialism [1]	1							
Election denier questioning the 2020 election [2]	.897**	1						
Other candidates or political leaders questioning the 2020 election [3]	.908**	.718**	1					
Strong pro-democracy statements [4]	.909**	.949**	.753**	1				
Weak pro-democracy statements [5]	.904**	.967**	.758**	.895**	1			
Trump's official endorsement [6]	.766**	.601**	.766**	.596**	.688**	1		
Election denier's refusal to accept 2022 election results [7]	.530*	.588**	.342	.618**	.643**	.410	1	
Election denier's refusing to answer whether they accept the results in 2022 [8]	.561	.670**	.233	.630**	.639**	.230	.640**	1

Appendix A demonstrates the correlations among key variables we measured and tested. It is notable that most of the variables showed high positive correlations with each other. For example, mentions of election denialism showed strong positive correlations with all other variables except for the mention of election deniers refusing to answer whether they accept the results in 2022. When journalists mention election denialism in their news stories, they do so by depicting both election deniers and other candidates or political leaders questioning the 2020 election. Journalists were likely to use strong and weak pro-democracy statements, mentioning Trump's official endorsement of the election denier, and the election denier's refusal to accept 2022 election results.