

Media Bias and Democratic Backsliding: Evidence from U.S. Media Bias and Presidential Interventions

Xingyuan Zhao

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between partisan media bias and democratic backsliding by investigating two key mechanisms. First, I explore whether political leaders actively reduce media independence by creating biased narratives through their public communications. Second, I assess how media bias that distorts reality affects democracy backsliding. Using evidence from U.S. crime reporting, presidential social media interventions, and cross-national data, I argue that partisan media bias enlarges the gap between actual and perceived performance, creating conditions that allow support for drastic changes and favor democratic backsliding. This study contributes to understanding how elite rhetoric shapes media coverage and how distorted information environments undermine democratic stability.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, elite rhetoric, media bias, populism, crime coverage

MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Recent events in the United States have revealed a concerning pattern in the relationship between political leadership, media coverage, and public perception. President Trump has repeatedly called out democratic leaning cities for high crime rates and deployed the National Guard to combat crime in these areas. These interventions have been accompanied by extensive media coverage, particularly from partisan outlets, emphasizing crime problems in the said cities. Republican social media and right-wing legacy media have consistently amplified narratives about rising crime in urban, Democratic-controlled areas.

However, a major discrepancy emerges when examining actual crime data. According to the FBI Crime Data Explorer (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2025), the actual crime rates in many of these cities tell a substantially different story than the narrative promoted by political leaders and echoed in partisan media coverage. This gap between reality and media representation raises fundamental questions about media independence, the role of political elites in shaping information environments, and the consequences for democratic governance.

This research addresses this question: How do political leaders generate biased narratives to enable democratic backsliding?

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

The discrepancy between actual crime rates and media narratives reveals a fundamental gap in our understanding of democratic backsliding. While existing literature establishes that media bias exists and that better performance provides more stable regimes, evidence that poor actual performance causes democratic backsliding remains limited. This research is expected to address this gap by showing that it is not actual performance but perceived performance that matters—partisan media bias enlarges the gap between perceived and actual performance, creating support for drastic changes that favor democratic backsliding. The research also intends to clarify the mechanism through which elite rhetoric shapes information environments, going beyond simple documentation of media bias to show how political leaders actively create and amplify distorted narratives that undermine democratic stability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Bias and Partisan Coverage

There is strong academic consensus that media bias exists in contemporary news coverage. Research has documented partisan bias in news media coverage of political leaders and events (Niven 1999; Niven 2001). Studies examine how partisan use and perceptions shape news consumption, with research analyzing patterns in cable news programming (Coe et al. 2008). The phenomenon of ideological selectivity in media use has been documented, showing evidence of how audiences engage with politically aligned media sources (Iyengar and Hahn 2009).

Research has also examined media bias in specific coverage domains. Studies analyze news media’s relationship with stereotyping in crime news coverage, examining linguistic patterns in reporting (Gorham 2006). More recent research extends analysis to partisan differences in coverage of specific events, including mass shootings in the United States (Shah 2021). Additionally, scholarship examines how news media partisanship shapes coverage of policy issues and technologies, finding that partisan orientation influences framing and emphasis in reporting (Shaikh and Moran 2024).

While early research argued that objective news topics were not affected by partisan bias (Niven 1999; Niven 2001), subsequent work demonstrated that partisan selective exposure extends even to “soft” subjects such as crime (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). Recent developments, however, present a further evolution in this dynamic. Political elites now directly contest objective data through social media platforms, creating alternative narratives that contradict official statistics. Recent presidential communications about crime explicitly diverge from FBI data, with the White House claiming crime is “out of control” despite official statistics showing otherwise (The White House 2025). This represents a new phase: political leaders are not merely benefiting from existing media bias or selective exposure patterns, but may be actively generating competing factual claims about objective crime data that partisan media outlets follow suit.

Democratic Backsliding and Performance

The evidence on how socioeconomic performance affects democratic stability is mixed. Better socioeconomic performance indeed provides more stable regimes (Carothers and Hartnett 2024). But evidence that lack of such performance causes democratic backsliding remains limited. In some cases, governance failures drove voters toward backsliding leaders. Brazil’s Lava Jato corruption scandal alienated citizens from mainstream parties and turned them to Bolsonaro (Hunter and Power 2019). El Salvador’s violent crime crisis led citizens to embrace Bukele (Economist 2019). It is worth noting that the perception of performance such as corruption also contributed to backsliding in India in 2014 and Mexico in 2018 (Sridharan 2014; Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene 2021). On the other hand, Achen and Bartels (2016) show that voters’ perceptions of governmental performance may be only loosely tied to objective facts. Examining twelve cases across diverse regions, Carothers and Hartnett (2024) find that in eight of twelve cases inequality was trending downward before backsliding began; poverty levels decreased in nine of twelve cases, substantially in India and Poland; and in several cases—Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Poland, and Turkey—growth was relatively high by regional and global standards. Governance failures such as corruption and crime played an important role in five cases—Brazil, India, Mexico, El Salvador, and the Philippines. Only three cases—Brazil, Hungary, and Tunisia—experienced major economic downturns before backsliding. While actual performance shows mixed results in causing backsliding, the perception of performance becomes a factor worth examining.

The literature on democratic backsliding has also established that backsliding leaders win elections when voters embrace promises of disruptive changes. In the pivotal elections that brought backsliding leaders to power, voters were embracing the promise of significant, even disruptive change in economic, social, or political domains (Carothers and Hartnett 2024). These voters were not throwing their support behind political figures who openly advocated ending democracy; many appeared to be trying to save democracy by giving it a reform-oriented reset (Carothers and Hartnett 2024). This suggests the potentiality that fabricating crises and exaggerating performance gaps can be a powerful tool for backsliding leaders to win elections by promising drastic changes.

MAIN ARGUMENT

I argue that political leaders strategically generate biased narratives to shape media coverage. The resulting partisan media bias systematically distorts reality in coverage, reducing perceived performance relative to actual performance. This enlarges the gap between actual and perceived government performance, creating more support for disruptive changes and hence enabling democratic backsliding.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Political leaders’ strategic communications increase the gap between actual and perceived performance.

Hypothesis 2: Media bias that distorts reality, creating more support for disruptive changes,

enables democratic backsliding.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Test 1:

The first test examines whether political leaders increase media bias by creating biased narratives. The unit of analysis is state-time observations, allowing for systematic comparison across different contexts and periods. The dependent variable is the gap between actual and perceived performance, operationalized as the difference between actual crime rates from FBI data and the intensity of media coverage of crime in the same location and time period.

The key intervention here is President Trump’s Truth Social posts about crime in specific regions, namely Illinois and District of Columbia, which serve as interventions that can be precisely timed and measured. The analysis will control for baseline crime rates, state voting records, and temporal and regional fixed effects. The expected outcome is that political leaders’ strategic communications increase the gap between actual and perceived violent crimes, particularly when those narratives align with partisan media outlets’ ideological orientation and when the state is controlled by the opposing party.

Test 2:

The second test examines whether media bias that distorts reality increases the support for disruptive changes and enables democratic backsliding. The unit of analysis shifts to country-year observations, enabling cross-national comparison.

The dependent variable is democratic backsliding, measured using V-Dem indices that capture various dimensions of democratic quality and erosion. The key independent variables include media bias measured using the UnBIAS Classification Bert on the media article in the researched countries. The analysis will control for actual economic performance, and regional and temporal fixed effects. The expected outcome is that democracy backsliding is more likely to occur in countries with media bias that distorts reality.

DATA SOURCES

This research utilizes multiple data sources and generates new variables. Crime rate data comes from the FBI Crime Data Explorer, which provides crime statistics across U.S. cities and states and allows tracking of temporal trends in various crime categories.

Media coverage data will be collected through CNN and Fox News APIs, enabling systematic collection of news coverage about crime and allowing comparison between outlets with different partisan orientations.

The said two variables will then be used to generate the gap between actual and perceived performance.

Media bias measurement draws on the International News Media Bias Dataset, an extensive dataset available through HuggingFace that allows validation and extension of bias measures

across different contexts. If that is not available, I will use the UnBIAS Classification Bert to classify the media articles into different bias levels.

Presidential communications will be automatically collected from Truth Social posts, enabling precise measurement of elite intervention timing and content.

Finally, democratic quality data comes from V-Dem indices, which provide cross-national measures of democratic backsliding with multiple indicators of democratic quality and institutional performance across time.

METHODOLOGY

The first test will use a difference-in-differences design that specifies the dummy variables for the first treatment group and relative time from the intervention. This approach allows for causal inference of how the elite rhetoric intervention affects the outcome variable of two treated units that are treated at different times.

The second test will use a cross-national regression model that controls for regional and temporal fixed effects.

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