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## Polarized disinformation. The coverage of US presidential election by Polish TV

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** Analysis of how the 2020 US presidential election was covered and framed by Polish television news programs, and whether the polarization of media and politics in Poland was reflected in the studied content, influencing its bias.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The analysis of the coverage of the US presidential campaign by three nationwide TV news programs – TVN, TVP and Polsat by using content analysis with elements of framing analysis and comparative analysis.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The article consists of four parts: the first explains the methodology of the study, the second discusses how presidential elections are covered and framed and what influences the national media being interested in covering foreign events. The third part presents the results of the study, and the last contains the discussion and conclusions.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The coverage was dichotomous and there was a correlation between the political affiliation of the media and their choice of framing. The media used a combination of game, strategy and conflict framing that highlighted differences between Trump and Biden in terms of the election results and their personal attributes. We found that the electoral rivalry was portrayed as a conflict between the candidates and that the Polish media constructed “enemy” images of candidates and voters depending on their political sympathies.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The polarization of media and politics in Poland was reflected in the coverage of the US election. The broadcasters placed Polish political conflicts in the context of the US campaign. It shows that foreign events may be covered by national media through the prism of political bias.

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**KEYWORDS:**

presidential election, tv coverage, polarization, disinformation, media framing

## INTRODUCTION

Presidential elections in the United States attract the attention of the global media. European countries often cover events in this country. The broadcasters must take into account that the average person outside the US has limited knowledge of its election procedures. Most people form their views about the electoral rivalry in the US based on the media coverage, which may be influenced by different factors. For example, the relationship between the covering state and the United States, or sympathies of domestic media towards US politicians and political parties. The politicization and polarization of the Polish media (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019) may be an important factor of the coverage. In this study, the relations of Polish political actors with the candidates for the 2020 presidency, may affect how these candidates are framed, and whether the coverage is biased or not. In this paper, we explore the coverage of the 2020 United States presidential election by three Polish television news programs, as television is still one of the most important while also one of the most biased media to cover election (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007). It can also favor emphasizing conflicts between given actors and groups.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The aim of the study was to analyze how the 2020 US presidential election was covered and framed by Polish television news programs,

and whether the polarization of media and politics in Poland was reflected in the studied content, influencing its bias.

We created three research questions:

RQ1: How do the contents published by the analyzed media differ?

RQ2: How were the presidential candidates and their voters presented and framed?

RQ3: How was the electoral rivalry between Joe Biden and Donald Trump presented?

In this study, 57 materials on the US election, broadcasted by three TV news programs – “Wiadomości” on TVP (21 materials), “Fakty” on TVN (20 materials) and “Wydarzenia” on Polsat (16 materials) – have been analyzed. We analyzed the collected news using content analysis (the main research method) with framing elements and comparative analysis. We looked at data published from October 25 to November 20, 2020. We assumed that the coverage would start to increase a week before the election date (November 3rd). Due to the several-day process of counting votes and the controversy with the legality of the election, we decided that the almost one-month research period would allow us to capture key events from the election coverage. We also noticed a decrease in the intensity of the coverage after November 20, which justifies the choice of research period.

We examined the evening editions of news programs of three nationwide TV stations – TVP, TVN and Polsat, which differ in terms of ownership, editorial line and politicization. TVP is a public service medium, and TVN and Polsat are privately owned (Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2013). While Polsat is considered a commercial and politically neutral medium, (Dopierała & Ossowski, 2018) the issue of political sympathies seems clear in the case of TVP and TVN. TVP as a public broadcaster remains under the influence of the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS), while TVN expresses conditional support for opposition parties (Seklecka, 2017). Studying media that have diverging political sympathies and could favor different presidential candidates, will allow us to observe differences in the coverage and whether it was biased or not.

When qualifying the materials for analysis, we followed the criterion of the topic – the presidential election. Several stories on the election (research units) could appear in a single broadcast. We

included all of them in the analysis. We analyzed the research units using a codebook consisting of 28 single-choice, multiple-choice and open questions concerning, e.g., the subject of the material, sources of information and the way the candidates were presented. For this study we have asked questions about the actors in the materials: how the presidential candidates and their voters were framed; how the election rivalry and relations between the candidates were presented. The materials were analyzed by two coders, and to test reliability we conducted an inter-coder agreement test on a sample of six research units (10% of all materials). In the test we left out the open questions. Our agreement rate was over 80% for the 23 categories we tested.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The coverage and framing of presidential elections

What people learn about political elections usually depends on how the media chooses to inform about the course of the race. One of the important factors in this process is framing, which might be manifested in news through “keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). When analyzing media framing, attention should be paid to three fundamental aspects: the method of selecting information, how the information is given exposure (Scheufele, 2000) and how issues are defined and interpreted. How information is selected and presented in a certain order is an interpretative procedure determining the way the message is perceived. In the case of reporting on election campaigns, media are responsible for defining the election issues and deciding when to give them exposure.

The media provide structured interpretation patterns that help to understand their content. Thanks to framing of facts and thematic-problem framing, the audience receives an understandable message. Assuming that the essence of framing concerns the presentation of news (Capella & Jamieson, 1997) one can attempt to analyze how individual media cover political events. In pluralistic media systems, various formats of framing political events coexist and compete (e.g. CNN vs Fox News). It is of key importance to identify the

reasons for choosing a given method of framing, and to assess the consequences of this choice.

In election coverage, the most often used types of frames are: game frame (horse-race frame), strategy frame and conflict frame (Aalberg et al., 2012). The game frame simplifies the election issues. It focuses on winners and losers, refers to opinion polls, and uses the language of sport and war to increase the attractiveness of the coverage, just like in the case of the conflict frame (Valentino et al., 2001). The strategy frame is more candidate-oriented and the attention is put on the strategies of politicians, and external and internal conflicts are highlighted (Binderkrantz & Green-Pedersen, 2009). In the framing of politics a departure from issue-oriented frames in favor of personal frames (candidate-oriented) and conflict frames, can be observed (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

The coverage of foreign election campaigns by domestic media does not have to be impartial. Covering events with two opposing groups may lead media to sympathize with one of these actors and construct an enemy image of the opponent. The construction of an enemy image through negative stereotypes and demonization, can emphasize the division into “us” and “them” (Galtung, 2006). “They” are usually described as evil and threatening to “us”. Taking into account the process of mediatization and personalization of politics, it can be said that the media are able to create an enemy image in the audience’s minds and transfer the existing socio-political conflicts in the political arena to that of the media (Entman, 2010).

### The coverage of foreign events by domestic media and the problem of bias

According to the concept of news values and its factors, a given story will be published and properly exposed if it meets certain factors, e.g.: unexpectedness, negativity, timeliness, familiarity, proximity and personalization (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Unexpectedness relates to rare events; negativity has to do with the conflictual character of the event and its negative consequences; timeliness concerns the topicality of the event; personalization concerns focusing on specific actors, which can lead to the creation of an emotional bond between

the audience and the actor being covered. Personalization can also be associated with elitism. The media usually search for information about elite nations and politicians, who also often become their main sources of information and can impose an interpretation of events (Fong & Gek Koon, 2019). In this way, the media may consciously or not be a propaganda tool in the hands of politicians, and sometimes spread their disinformation.

Although the coverage of foreign events by the national media should be unbiased, this is not always the case. Coverage bias of foreign news may result from familiarity and proximity to the event, e.g. political or ideological connections between the covering and the covered state. It can make countries that are our allies be presented positively, and those defined as enemies negatively (Kempf, 2012). Domestic media, especially politicized ones, can give more attention and positively portray actors that are supported by national politicians whom these media sympathize with. This is an example of intended political bias (Hopmann et al., 2012). The Polish media system is highly politicized and polarized, which is the result of strong divisions on the political scene (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019). Therefore, foreign events and actors may be covered through the prism of political bias, which can be crucial in the case of the coverage of the US presidential election.

## RESULTS

### Framing of candidates and voters

Tables 1,2,3 and 4 present the framing of Donald Trump, Joe Biden and their voters. When compiling the list of frames we first wrote down all the terms (both quotes and statements from sources) through which these actors and their actions were described. Next, we created a list of dominant frames for each of the actors. Although frames can also be manifested through audiovisual mechanisms (Entman, 1993), we decided that language would be a more meaningful variable.

13 types of frames were distinguished for Trump, 12 types of frames for Biden, and 12 and 11 types of frames for their voter groups. Attributes of candidates concerning their political skills, views, relation to society and election result (Table 1, 2). Voters were defined

through the prism of sociodemographic variables, views and actions (Table 3, 4).

The most common attribute of Trump was “loser of the election” (Table 1). This is how TVN most often portrayed him (18 frames). The materials referred ironically to Trump’s inability to come to terms with his defeat and not accepting the election result, and his talk about election fraud (“They may be trying to steal this election from us” [Trump]). TVP defined Trump as an “election winner” the most (4 frames). Trump was often framed neutrally in terms of his function as the “president” (19 frames). His political competency was also often referred to (18 frames), it was mainly Trump’s concern for the economy and the security of the United States that was highlighted (e.g. “supports freedom of speech, supports entrepreneurs, limited the transfer of illegal migrants” [Trump voter], “This is a choice between Biden’s depression and Trump’s boom” [Trump] – TVN). It was mostly TVP that portrayed Trump in this positive way (12 frames). Trump was also often defined as an “actor spreading false news and disinformation” (10 frames). This was connected with Trump’s questioning of the legality of the election, accusing Biden’s staff of election fraud. TVP and TVN most often referred to Trump in this way (4 frames from each medium). In contrast, being an “actor spreading false news” was the least common attribute used to describe Biden (1 frame, Table 2).

Table 1. Frames used to describe Trump

Category	TVP	TVN	Polsat	Total
Loser of the election	8	18	8	34
Election winner	4	0	1	5
Competent politician and strong leader	12	5	1	18
Incompetent politician	3	4	1	8
Conservative politician	4	3	1	8
President of all Americans	5	2	0	7
An enemy of the people	1	6	0	7
President [office]	8	11	0	19
Republican [party] candidate	6	2	0	8
Criminal and corrupt politician	0	1	0	1
Global politician	10	1	0	11
Actor spreading false news	4	4	2	10
Other	12	10	2	24

Source: Authors.

Trump's main opponent was also framed mainly in the context of the election result and his political skills (Table 2). The dominant attribute of Biden was "election winner" (23 frames) and this is how he was most often portrayed by TVN (10 frames). In particular, Biden's advantage in the polls was mentioned ("a winner with a number of votes never received by any candidate" – TVN). Biden was also defined through the prism of his professional experience and senatorial career ("45 years in politics" – TVP) and his high competence and plan for national politics ("If he wins, everything will change, he has a different idea for politics and interstate relations" – TVN) (21 frames). TVN (9 frames) and TVP (8 frames) often described Biden in this way. It can be seen that Biden was frequently framed as the opposite to Trump, and vice versa (Table 1, 2). Apart from the reference to the election results, an example of dichotomous framing may also be the perception of Biden as a "liberal/leftist politician" (2 frames) and Trump as a "conservative politician" (8 frames), or the recognition of the Democratic candidate as an "anti-globalist" (2 frames) and the president solely as a "global politician" (11 frames) (Table 1, 2).

Table 2. Frames used to describe Biden

Category	TVP	TVN	Polsat	Total
Experienced and competent politician	8	9	4	21
Incompetent politician	5	1	0	6
President of all Americans	3	7	3	13
An enemy of the people	2	3	0	5
Election winner	9	10	4	23
Democratic [party] candidate	8	8	0	16
Liberal/leftist politician	1	1	0	2
Anti-globalist	1	1	0	2
Global politician	1	2	1	4
Criminal and corrupt politician	6	8	0	14
Actor spreading false news	0	0	1	1
Other	5	6	1	12

Source: Authors.

Voters were described in a dichotomous way as well, but some similarities in how they were covered are noticeable, especially when it comes to their most common attribute, which is "followers" (Table 3, 4). In the case of Trump's voters, attention was paid to



support for their beloved president expressed by participating in rallies (22 frames) (“thousands of supporters at rallies arguing that their candidate will win the fight for the White House” – TVN). Similar phrases were used to describe the “followers” of Biden (“celebrating in the streets, in front of the White House” – TVN) (13 frames).

“Protesters” is also a common attribute of both groups of voters (8 frames in the case of Trump’s and Biden’s supporters). By “protesters” we mean groups that can act in either a peaceful or hostile manner. Biden’s voters (5 frames) were more often described as hostile and aggressive protesters than Trump’s supporters (1 frame). In the case of Biden’s supporters being hostile “protesters”, specific groups of actors were indicated (“aggressive militants with Antifa and BLM emblems”, “leftist brawlers”) and such phrases were used especially by TVP. Polsat, in turn, when describing Trump voters as hostile “protesters”, mentioned that “some of the protesters were armed”. Trump supporters were also described as peaceful “protesters”, mainly by TVP, fighting against Biden’s supporters and feeling obliged to “protect and support the president” [Trump voter].

Table 3. Frames used to describe Trump’s supporters

Category	TVP	TVN	Polsat	Total
National and ethnic minorities	2	0	2	4
Protesters	5	0	3	8
Followers	11	8	3	22
Conservative/right-wing	3	0	0	3
Americans	1	2	0	3
Inhabitants of red states	4	5	0	9
Inhabitants of small cities	2	1	0	3
Young voters	1	0	0	1
Women	1	0	0	1
Undecided [voters]	2	0	0	2
Victims of [Democratic] election fraud	2	1	0	3
Other	4	4	1	9

Source: Authors.

An important attribute of Trump’s voters was also their place of residence – “inhabitants of red states” (e.g. “inhabitants of Texas and Ohio” – TVP) (9 frames). The political views of Biden’s “leftist/liberal” followers were highlighted (e.g. “socialist, communist nation”

[Trump voter] – TVP) (8 frames). The views of Biden’s voters were emphasized by the public broadcaster, mainly in a negative way (8 frames).

The least frequently used frames for both groups of voters concerned sociodemographic variables, e.g. the age (1 frame) and gender (1 frame) of Trump’s electorate, and economic factors in the case of Biden’s supporters (“low and middle class” – 1 frame).

Table 4. Frames used to describe Biden’s supporters

Category	TVP	TVN	Polsat	Total
Low and middle class	0	0	1	1
Protesters	6	1	1	8
Leftist/Liberals	8	0	0	8
Americans	2	4	0	6
Young voters	1	1	1	3
Women	1	1	0	2
Inhabitants of blue states	2	3	0	5
Inhabitants of big cities	4	0	1	5
Undecided [voters]	2	0	0	2
Followers	6	2	5	13
Other	4	7	1	12

Source: Authors.

## THE US ELECTION AS AN ELECTORAL CONFLICT

In examining how the presidential election was covered in terms of conflict frames, we created six framing categories as alternative definitions of this phenomenon (Table 5). The first category (“neutral – as a political process”) is not evaluative and does not focus on the personal or ideological dimensions of the election. The categories “rivalry/conflict between Trump and Biden” and “rivalry/conflict between Republicans and Democrats” relate precisely to the definition of the election as a fight between specific actors (personalization) or parties (group conflict). The category of “conflict between left and right” relates to the ideological dimension of the conflict. Apart from referring to the views of the candidates, it includes non-political actors (e.g. social groups) and foreign actors (e.g. states and foreign left-wing and right-wing politicians associated with the candidates).

The category “Trump vs the rest of the world” is about presenting the election as a fight by the general public against the president and his victory. It is about the presentation of Trump as a public enemy.

The 2020 US presidential election was mainly presented as “rivalry/conflict between Trump and Biden” (28 materials). Especially TVP (10 materials) and TVN (12 materials), covered the election in this way. The names of these candidates were often mentioned in the context of the election and they were the most common sources of information. They mainly made statements critiquing each other’s actions. One of the TVP materials even used the word “war” to describe the fight between Biden and Trump, which confirms the conflictive nature of electoral rivalry. The election was also presented neutrally, “as a political process” (14 materials), which was the second most popular out of the six defined categories. It was mainly Polsat that covered the election in this way (8 materials). The least frequent definitions of election rivalry was as a “conflict between Democrats and Republicans” and “Trump vs the rest of the world” (2 materials from each of the categories).

Table 5. How the election rivalry was presented

Category	TVP	TVN	Polsat	Total
Neutral – as a political process	3	3	8	14
Rivalry/conflict between Trump and Biden	10	12	6	28
Rivalry/conflict between Democrats and Republicans	1	1	0	2
Conflict between left and right	2	3	0	5
Trump vs the rest of the world	2	0	0	2
Other	3	1	2	6

Source: Authors.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the study was to analyze how the 2020 US presidential election was covered and framed by Polish television news programs, and whether the polarization of media and politics in Poland was reflected in the studied content, influencing its bias.

How the campaign was covered was influenced by the political affiliations of the Polish TV broadcasters (Dobek-Ostrowska,

2019). TVP and TVN had almost dichotomous ways of presenting the election topics, visible primarily in the exposure of the attributes given to candidates and their voters (Table 1–4), which answers the first research question. Polsat was the most neutral, which may be due to this medium being less politicized than the rest (Dopierała & Ossowski, 2018). The political elites might influence how certain actors are framed by the media (Fong & Gek Koon, 2019). The ruling party – PiS, which has “colonized” the public broadcaster TVP (Bajomi-Lazar, 2014), had close relations with Trump’s administration. In turn, the Polish opposition, which is conditionally supported by TVN (Seklecka, 2017), supported the election of Biden as president.

All media preferred a mixed variant of framing, consistently combining game frame and strategic frame (Aalberg et al., 2012). In the latter case, there is a clear overrepresentation of the use of personal frames and conflict frames in the research period. This choice of framing suggests that the media strive to simplify foreign issues as much as possible (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and focus it around a clear victory (Biden) or defeat (Trump) in the election. This way of framing the candidates was dominant. The conflict frame contributes to increasing the attractiveness of the news which was reflected in the brutalization and the use of the language of war to describe the electoral rivalry (Valentino et al., 2001). The applied candidate frames are multidimensional. We not only found references to the simplified dichotomy of “winner” vs “loser of the election”, but also to personal attributes of both politicians (e.g. “competent politician and strong leader”, “global politician” – Trump, and “experienced and competent politician” – Biden) (Table 1, 2), which answers the second research question. References to the candidates’ political attributes go beyond the terms of the game frame, showing similarities to the issue-oriented format (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Voters were shown in a way similar to the candidates, emphasizing differences in their views and where they come from (Table 3, 4) (second research question).

Our research also points to fundamental differences in how the media framed the rivalry between Trump and Biden. A correlation can be observed between the political affiliation of the media and their choice of framing. TVP and TVN usually applied a conflict frame to the coverage. “Rivalry/conflict between Trump and Biden”

was their dominant way of presenting the electoral rivalry as being hostile (Table 5), which answers the third research question. In the case of TVP sympathizing with Trump, the conflict framing of the rivalry also touched on Biden's voters, who were presented in negative terms such as hostile "protesters" attacking supporters of the president, or "communists" as part of the "leftist/liberal" framing category (Table 4). This negative language was often used by the journalists themselves, both from TVP and TVN. It shows that the Polish media constructed "enemy" images of candidates and voters through linguistic demonization, depending on their own political sympathies. The conflict frame used in the coverage not only fostered an emotionalization of the content, but also allowed the broadcasters to place Polish political conflicts in the context of the US presidential campaign. The dichotomous perspective highlighting divisions between actors with the use of "us" vs "them" rhetoric (Galtung, 2006), does not only apply to the candidates and their voters, but was also extended to the Polish media and political forces. For TVP "we" meant supporters of Trump and PiS, while "they" were supporters of Biden and TVN viewers supporting the political opposition in Poland. It proves that the polarization of media-politics in Poland was reflected in the studied content, which could have influenced the political bias of the coverage (Hopmann et al., 2012).

A limitation of our study could be the methods and tools we used. Content analysis is descriptive and quantitative in nature. By supplementing it with framing analysis, we wanted to make the study more explanatory. The qualitative part of the research can be perceived as subjective as it is up to the coders to decide if a given frame is visible in the material. We tried to solve this problem through testing intercoder agreement. The "frame" category could be expanded to include audiovisual elements since we analyzed TV coverage. The small number of Polish studies on the coverage of US elections from the perspective of media and communication have made it difficult to carry out broader comparative analyses.

Future studies could investigate the coverage of US elections in various types of media. An interesting idea for future research could also be to compare how the election was covered by Polish and US media. It may be interesting to check whether the American media used the same mechanisms for covering the US election as the Polish

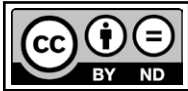
media, and whether the conflictual side of the event was featured in a similar way in both countries.

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