

The Effects of Elite Attacks on Co-Partisan Media: Evidence from Trump and Fox News

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Abstract

Individuals seeking news content face a variety of options in the current media landscape, yet scholarly research provides little evidence regarding the conditions under which they might become more or less open to different partisan news outlets. Drawing on the case of Donald Trump's critiques of Fox News, I argue that elite rhetoric plays an important role in this process for members of both parties. I first conduct an original content analysis of Trump's tweets from 2017-2020 and find that he increasingly attacked Fox News on this platform. Notably, Trump's increasingly critical rhetoric about Fox correlates significantly with decreases in both Fox's daytime and primetime ratings. Two survey experiments shed light on how individuals respond to this intra-party conflict, and I find Trump's rhetoric affects both Republicans and Democrats. Republicans view Fox as less conservative and more critical of Trump when exposed to his critiques of the outlet. However, Republicans do not change their viewing habits until Trump promotes an alternative to Fox like OANN. Democrats respond to Trump's rhetoric by updating their perceptions of Fox's coverage and bias as well as increasing their willingness to watch the channel, both in isolation and relative to an alternative like OANN. The results suggest elite rhetoric is instrumental in shaping views of and demand for partisan outlets among members of both parties, and can elevate more ideologically extreme sources among followers. Thus, elite rhetoric serves as a meaningful cue for individuals navigating an increasingly fragmented partisan media landscape.

I don't like what they're doing at Fox News... They have people on that network that are horrible, vicious... You have people that are unbelievably against us and viciously, and they spew lies—commentators. I'm not happy with Fox. I will tell you that right now. People think I should be happy—I'm not happy with Fox at all.

—Donald Trump, June 2020 (Brody 2020)

For decades, Fox News has dominated the partisan media landscape. The channel, which has embraced a right-leaning reputation since its inception, faced little competition from other conservative outlets and consistently won the cable news ratings wars with its consolidated Republican audience (Ladd & Podkul 2020). Yet recently, right-wing alternatives like One America News Network (OANN) and Newsmax, which often spread conspiracy theories in their unwavering support for Trump, have experienced surges in attention and ratings (Mimms 2021; Stelter 2020). Roughly 21% and 14% of Republicans regularly rely on Newsmax and OANN, respectively, for political news (Mitchell 2021). Journalistic accounts suggest Trump's rhetoric encouraged once loyal Fox News viewers to turn against the channel in 2020 after calling Arizona and the election for Joe Biden (Barr 2020). Notably, Republicans' trust in Fox News fell from 0.46 (on a 0-1 scale) pre-election to 0.39 post-election (difference: $p < 0.001$, two-tailed) in the ANES 2020 Social Media Study.

The aforementioned example suggests the power of elite rhetoric to affect the reputations of partisan media. Voters seeking political news face a variety of options in the fragmented media landscape. This paper examines the ways in which elite communication affects perceptions of and demand for partisan media, and finds elite critiques of co-partisan outlets is a meaningful cue for individuals navigating the available media options. Focusing on the case of Trump and Fox News (henceforth, "Fox"), I study the frequency and effects of his critiques of this outlet. I also study his promotion of right-wing Fox alternatives like Newsmax and OANN. Trump's attacks on Fox and promotion of more extreme alternatives represent a particularly consequential case given the latter's lack of journalistic norms, election denialism, and spread of conspiracy theories that cause real-world harm (e.g., Pizzagate or downplaying COVID-19) and promote racist, prejudicial stereotypes (Darcy 2020; Mimms 2021). Exposure to such content could lead to the further

spread of prejudice (Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas 2020) while also threatening democratic ideals like informed debate and decision-making (Egelhofer, Boyer, Lecheler, & Aaldering 2022).

This paper extends our understanding of the importance of politicians' rhetoric in shaping views of the press beyond studies of mainstream, non-partisan outlets (e.g., Ladd 2010, 2012; Smith, 2010). In recent years, populists such as Trump, Marine Le Pen in France, Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil have criticized the media, which aligns especially with the anti-elitism tenant of populist ideology (Fawzi 2019). Notably, such leaders have not limited their criticisms to mainstream media, particularly in the US context. In addition to Trump's anger at Fox after the 2020 election (Barr 2020), he previously attacked Fox anchors like Neil Cavuto or now ex-Fox anchor Chris Wallace (e.g., Baragona 2019). On the left, Bernie Sanders has criticized the *Washington Post* and MSNBC for coverage he feels is biased toward corporate interests and against him (Farhi & Johnson 2020). Given these trends in populist, polarizing figures attacking co-partisan news for perceived biased coverage coupled with the increasingly fragmented media landscape, it is crucial that scholarship examine whether and how elite rhetoric might guide individuals toward some partisan outlets and away from others.

Previous work highlights the tight link between Fox and Republicans, making the case of Trump and Fox a potentially difficult test. Fox is influential over viewers' (e.g., DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Hopkins and Ladd 2014) and elites' (Clinton and Enamorado 2014; Arceneaux, Johnson, Lindstädt, and Vander Wielen 2016; Arceneaux, Dunaway, Johnson, and Vander Wielen 2020) behavior. By studying Trump's critiques of Fox, I provide a more nuanced view of the relationship between these two entities and a different perspective on the relationship between partisan media and co-partisan elites more generally. Drawing on work that highlights the centrality of party leaders to their followers when navigating intra-party conflict (Agadjanian 2021; Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022), I argue that when the Trump and Fox clash, Republicans will side with the former. Rank-and-file members of the opposition party will also perceive greater distance between Fox and Trump when he attacks the channel. I posit greater negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster 2018) against Trump relative to Fox will then guide Democrats to side with the outlet in

responding against Trump.

I first conduct a content analysis of Trump's tweets about Fox throughout his presidency to demonstrate the prevalence of co-partisan media attacks, and find he increasingly criticized Fox. Over time analyses suggest these attacks correlate significantly with declines in Fox's daytime and primetime ratings. In the second empirical section, I examine the individual-level effects of this rhetoric in two survey experiments that varied exposure to real tweets from Trump criticizing Fox. The first study also varied exposure to a Fox anchor's defense against Trump while the second also examined Trump's promotion of one of many right-wing alternatives to Fox, OANN. The findings suggest elites can significantly affect views and consumption of co-partisan media, as exposure to Trump attacking Fox changes Republicans' and Democrats' perceptions of Fox's bias. Regarding consumption, Democrats seemingly respond with greater negative partisanship toward Trump than Fox and become more open to watching Fox, while Republicans' viewing habits remain the same until another option (e.g., OANN) is promoted by Trump. Thus, views about and demand for partisan media are not static. Instead, elite rhetoric serves as a meaningful signal to individuals navigating the partisan media landscape.

Elite attacks on the news media

Elite rhetoric is consequential for views about mainstream news (for overviews, see Archer 2020; Ladd and Podkul 2020). Given their influence over public opinion (Zaller 1992), politicians' criticisms of mainstream media cause co-partisans' evaluations of the institutional press to worsen (Ladd 2012). Elites who attack media outlets typically do so with the goal of countering unflattering coverage by increasing perceptions of the news source's bias; notably, they can increase perceptions of bias even when there is none (Smith 2010). When politicians criticize mainstream media and co-partisans' views of the press become more negative, individuals also become more open to partisan instead of mainstream sources (Ladd 2012). Thus, elite rhetoric can shape views about and even demand for mainstream media (Ladd 2010, 2012; Smith 2010).

While informative, previous scholarship has primarily focused on elite rhetoric about the institutional press and not the consequences of politicians' rhetoric about *partisan* media outlets. Yet news consumption today is largely characterized by selective exposure (Stroud 2008), and technological advancements have increased the number of partisan outlets from which individuals can choose. Further, populist leaders who have used platforms like social media to increasingly attack the press (Egelhofer, Aaldering, & Lecheler 2021) have not spared in-party outlets from their critiques. Populists view media as part of an oppositional, elitist political establishment that is positioned against them, and therefore, biased (Fawzi 2019). Notably, prominent American populists have extended this sentiment to co-partisan media at times: Trump and Sanders have publicly critiqued Fox and MSNBC for coverage they perceive as biased against them (e.g., Barr 2020; Farhi and Johnson 2020). Given this rhetoric and the growing number of partisan outlets, it is crucial that research examine the effects of elite communication about partisan news sources.

I posit elite rhetoric about partisan media—like Trump's critiques of Fox or promotion of far-right alternatives—will serve as a meaningful cue to individuals navigating the media landscape. I focus on attacks on co-partisan news instead of attacks on out-party media because the latter are unlikely to affect supporters' views given their overwhelmingly negative misperceptions of oppositional outlets (Peterson & Kagalwala 2021). Moreover, such “politics as usual” rhetoric (a Democrat attacking Fox or Republican attacking MSNBC) typically has weak persuasive power (Baum & Groeling 2009). Conversely, attacks on in-party media are likely consequential because they are unexpected and costly. Costly messages, such as those that could jeopardize the relationship between politicians and co-partisan media, are viewed as more credible than “cheap talk” because they inflict harm to the speaker (Baum & Groeling 2009). Similarly, individuals view unexpected, costly messages as a signal of accuracy (Calvert 1985; Searles, Smith, & Sui 2018). Attacks on co-partisan outlets may be perceived as costly, and thereby, may be more persuasive.

Intra-party politician and media conflict on the right is particularly pressing to understand. Conservative elites have historically attacked mainstream media for alleged liberal bias (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan 1999). Because Republicans are more exposed to media attacks (Watts et al.

1999), they are likely more susceptible to cues regarding media bias (Egelhofer et al. 2022; Smith 2010). However, the literature has yet to determine the effects of elite cues criticizing co-partisan outlets as Trump has done with Fox. Within-party conflict like Trump attacking Fox could also encourage his followers to consume far-right alternatives that spread harmful conspiracy theories (Darcy 2020; Mimms 2021). Indeed, far-right outlets like OANN and Newsmax have recently become popular among conservatives (Mitchell 2021). Understanding the role elite rhetoric may have played in their rise is critical, as these sites threaten democratic norms of free debate based on shared facts (Egelhofer et al. 2022).

I build on previous work examining intra-party conflict to inform expectations about politician vs. co-partisan media conflict. Followers generally side with their party leader when navigating within-party conflict (Agadjanian 2021; Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022). Drawing on their theory of leadership-driven motivated reasoning, Filindra and Harbridge-Yong posit that “partisans make decisions on intra-party conflicts by using the leader as a cue” (2022, p. 2). Partisans are drawn to and cue off of their party leader more than other in-group members because the leader is more representative of and central to the group. This, coupled with a desire to be close to and protect the in-group, results in followers siding with the party leader during intra-group conflict (Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022).¹ I build on this work by examining intra-party conflict between prominent leaders and co-partisan news. When Trump attacks Fox as biased and signals that his followers should change the channel, Republicans should side with him in updating their views of Fox’s bias and willingness to watch the outlet.

Negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster 2016, 2018), or dislike or negative affect toward the political opposition, helps us understand responses from individuals not in the leader’s party (Democrats, in this case). When a leader attacks their own media, they are essentially out-grouping the media outlet, creating distance between the two entities. Consequently, the power of negative partisanship in shaping views about the outlet is weakened compared to before and relative to the leader attacking the outlet. Thus, while Democrats would typically view Fox negatively

¹This can occur due to prior affect for the leader but also the leadership position itself (Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022).

given its association with the opposition, negative partisanship will be a weaker force in shaping their views of Fox when Democrats observe Trump criticizing the channel; Fox is now being out-grouped by the opposition. Therefore, when Trump attacks Fox, Democrats will not update their views of and willingness to watch the outlet in line with Trump’s rhetoric, but should essentially side with Fox over Trump as their negative partisanship toward Fox weakens.²

Trump’s Twitter attacks on FNC: 2017-2020

The first goal of this paper is to document the frequency of Trump’s attacks on Fox. From the end of the 2016 campaign through his first year in office, Trump tweeted frequently about the media (about 20% of the time), and posts about Fox represent a sizeable amount of those tweets (Meeks 2020). During that period, Trump mostly attacked non-conservative media (Meeks 2020), yet more recently, he has generated headlines for publicly attacking Fox (e.g., Baragona 2019).

To gain systematic evidence of Trump’s criticism of Fox throughout his presidency, I conducted a content analysis of all of his tweets about the outlet from his inauguration (January 20, 2017) through November 7, 2020, the day the major networks declared Biden president-elect. My analysis builds on Meeks (2020), which examined Trump’s tweets through his first year in office. Following Meeks (2020), I used the Trump Twitter Archive, a public database that employed the Twitter Scraper script to download and archive tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account. I focus on Trump’s tweets because they are an unfiltered window into his thoughts and were consumed by millions. Older voters may not have seen his tweets on Twitter, but they were often featured in the news, as journalists view tweets as newsworthy (McGregor & Molyneux 2020).³

I searched for tweets that include “@Fox” to encapsulate mentions of @FoxNews, @FoxBusiness, and @FoxandFriends; doing so returns 915 tweets.⁴ I then categorized each tweet using a modified version of Meeks’s (2020) coding protocol consisting of two key categories: (1) *neg-*

²See experimental section for more discussion.

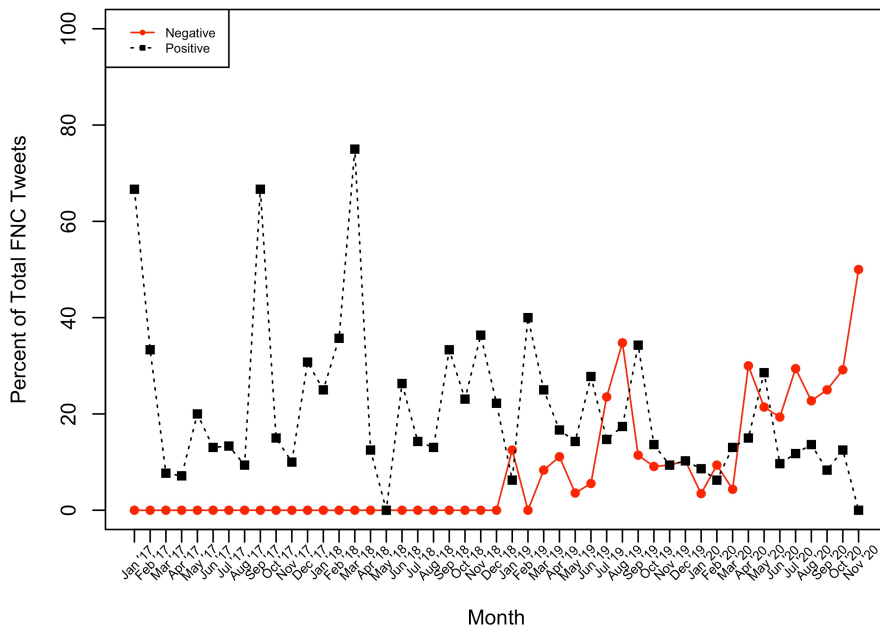
³The online appendix reports Trump generally increased his mentions of different news outlets over time, but his attention focused more on Fox than others or the phrase “fake news.”

⁴Given this, I do not capture every mention of specific Fox personalities. Reassuringly, mentions of Fox primetime hosts during this time are only around 1% of non-@Fox tweets.

ative tweets that allege Fox is biased or that attack Fox’s credibility, lack of success, or on-air personalities; and (2) *positive* tweets that praise Fox’s credibility, success, or on-air personalities.⁵

Figure 1 illustrates Trump’s positive and negative tweets about Fox as a percentage of his total monthly tweets mentioning @Fox. Trump praised Fox more in the early years of his presidency: positive tweets comprised a mean of 24.419% of his tweets about Fox in 2017 and 26.405% in 2018 yet dropped to 19.136% in 2019 and 11.582% from January 1-November 7, 2020. Interestingly, Trump did not attack Fox from 2017-2018, yet his negative tweets comprised 11.628% of his Fox tweets in 2019 and 22.205% from January 1-November 7, 2020. In 2020, the percentage of Trump’s negative tweets about Fox was roughly double that of tweets explicitly praising Fox.

Figure 1: Trump’s Tweets about Fox News by Month (%)



I next examine the relationship between Trump’s negative tweets about Fox and Fox’s ratings. I collected monthly Nielsen Media Research ratings from January 2017 to November

⁵A graduate student blind to my hypotheses coded one-third of the tweets to provide greater confidence in the classifications. Inter-coder reliability was high: kappa=0.91 and 0.82 for negative and positive tweets, respectively. See online appendix for coding protocol and more on ICR.

2020 for Fox, MSNBC, and CNN using information from Fox press releases.⁶ I estimate the effect of the percentage of Trump’s negative tweets about Fox each month on monthly ratings, lagging the tweets by one month to capture the correct temporal order of the relationship of interest. I control for *Time* and *Time*² to account for time trends across this period, monthly fixed effects to control for fluctuations due to monthly news cycles (December is the suppressed baseline), the lagged dependent variable, and in one set of models, ratings for the other two networks to account for general trends in cable news viewership. Robust standard errors are used.

Table 1 presents results for primetime (columns 1-2) and daytime (columns 3-4) ratings. Across all columns, the coefficients for Trump’s tweets criticizing Fox are negative and significant. Since the lagged dependent variable is controlled for, this suggests Trump’s disparaging tweets correlate with a negative change in Fox’s monthly ratings. Substantively, column 1 suggests a one standard deviation increase in the percentage of Trump’s negative monthly tweets about Fox corresponds with a decrease of 269,698 in Fox’s primetime ratings which hover around a mean of 2,690,722 in this period. Trump’s attacks on Fox seem to reduce Fox’s real-world viewership.⁷

In summary, Trump’s negative tweets about Fox increased throughout his presidency and correlate negatively with Fox’s ratings. This suggests his rhetoric has important implications for Republicans’ perceptions of and demand for Fox, but does not provide definitively causal evidence. Further, the effects of this rhetoric on Democrats are unclear from this aggregate-level analysis. Therefore, the second empirical section uses two survey experiments to understand the individual-level effects of Trump’s attacks on Fox.

The individual-level effects of Trump’s attacks on FNC

I conducted two online survey experiments using Qualtrics: Study 1 was fielded March 3-10, 2020, while Study 2 was fielded October 21-22, 2020. Both were single-session 15-minute-long studies

⁶When quarterly or annual ratings were reported, I use those with other monthly data to calculate missing months.

⁷Results do not change substantively when using monthly changes as the DV or accounting for the departures of key figures like Roger Ailes. Models that do not lag the main IV produce smaller yet significant effects. See online appendix.

Table 1: Trump’s Negative Tweets About FNC and FNC’s Ratings

	(1) Primetime Ratings	(2) Primetime Ratings	(3) Daytime Ratings	(4) Daytime Ratings
Negative FNC Tweets	-22,450.574*	-21,915.150*	-13,955.232***	-14,005.452**
Lagged (%)	0.011	0.022	0.001	0.001
Time	-30,702.625	-26,562.436	-10,524.871	-7,614.009
	0.096	0.114	0.162	0.384
Time ²	1,277.030*	1,155.513**	481.957*	419.452*
	0.011	0.010	0.016	0.037
FNC Primetime Ratings	0.407**	0.229		
Lagged	0.006	0.294		
MSNBC Primetime Ratings		0.251		
		0.344		
CNN Primetime Ratings		0.218		
		0.316		
FNC Daytime Ratings			0.564***	0.474**
Lagged			0.000	0.005
MSNBC Daytime Ratings				-0.041
				0.902
CNN Daytime Ratings				0.162
				0.583
Intercept	1,185,822.864*	982,005.749	504,256.313*	536,587.754
	0.020	0.106	0.040	0.054
Monthly FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>N</i>	47	47	47	47
<i>R</i> ²	0.851	0.869	0.831	0.835

Note: Cell entries are coefficients with two-tailed *p*-values below. * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001, two-tailed.

that used Lucid Theorem, a platform that targets convenience samples in the US balanced on age, ethnicity, gender, and region.⁸ Like other studies of elite cues (Agadjanian 2021), I randomized exposure to real-world content to improve external validity. The first study varied exposure to a 2019 tweet from Trump criticizing Fox and Fox anchor Neil Cavuto’s on-air response to that tweet. The second varied exposure to versions of a 2020 tweet from Trump criticizing Fox and promoting OANN. Respondents then evaluated Fox’s bias and stated their willingness to consume Fox. Study 2 included identical questions for OANN to gauge views of the two outlets.

⁸See online appendix for both studies’ sample demographics. Lucid recruited individuals and provided incentives such as reward points for participating after individuals completed the study (see Coppock and McClellan 2019).

Hypotheses

I draw on literature highlighting the importance of party leaders (Barber & Pope 2019), particularly when partisans navigate intra-party conflict (Agadjanian 2021; Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022), to argue that individuals will side with their leader when s/he is in conflict with co-partisan media. In the case of Trump vs. Fox, Republicans will side with Trump despite Fox's typically strong influence over them (e.g., DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007). Trump has been and remains the leader of the GOP; rank-and-file Republicans report liking Trump more than other GOP politicians (Bartels 2018). Thus, I expect Republicans will exhibit leadership-driven motivated reasoning (Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022) and side with their party leader over co-partisan news.

When individuals view an oppositional leader in conflict with co-partisan media, negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster 2018) helps explain their responses. When Trump attacks—and thereby, out-groups—Fox, Democrats should view the channel with decreased negative partisanship than before and relative to Trump. Fox is now the “enemy of their enemy,” thereby, Democrats may see the channel as less extreme and become more open to watching its content than they otherwise would. Conversely, the null is possible as individuals may not respond to the oppositional leader's rhetoric since s/he is not their party leader. Indeed, Trump's rhetoric does not affect Democrats' opinions in other domains (Barber & Pope 2019).

Politicians who attack media outlets are strategic and typically accuse media of bias toward a specific party or ideology (Egelhofer et al. 2021) and/or against them (Fawzi 2019). Doing so helps counter negative coverage by increasing perceptions of the outlet's bias, even when there is none (Smith 2010). Elites may also seek to shift followers' consumption patterns away from sources they perceive as unfavorable and instead, toward friendlier ones. Trump, in particular, not only attacked Fox but also encouraged his followers to abandon the channel for alternatives like OANN. Thus, politicians' rhetoric might signal which outlets to avoid *and* which outlets to watch. Given these motivations, I examine how partisans respond to conflict between a politician and co-partisan media outlet by measuring their (1) perceptions of the outlet's bias and (2) willingness

to consume its content. In the experimental studies, I follow previous work (Smith 2010) and consider views about Fox's general ideological bias as well as a more specific type of bias centered around the politician by asking about Fox's coverage of Trump. I also measure likely consumption of Fox and a Fox alternative (OANN).

Expectations for Perceptions of Bias. H_1 : Trump's attack on Fox will cause Republicans and Democrats to view Fox as more critical of Trump and less conservative than they otherwise would. Though similar effects are expected, they are due to different reasons. Republicans will engage in leadership-driven motivated reasoning (Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022) and update their views of Fox in accordance with Trump's attack. Democrats' negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster 2018) against Fox will weaken and they will view the outlet as less ideologically extreme than they otherwise would. This is tested in Study 1.

Expectations for Consumption. H_{2a} : Trump's attack on Fox will cause Republicans to decrease their consumption of Fox, and his promotion of Fox alternatives will cause Republicans to increase their consumption of those alternatives. In siding with Trump, Republicans should be more likely to abandon Fox when he denigrates it and want to watch the alternatives he promotes. H_{2b} : Trump's attack on Fox will cause Democrats to increase their consumption of Fox, and his promotion of Fox alternatives will cause Democrats to decrease their consumption of those alternatives. Democrats should move in opposition to Trump's suggestions about which outlets to avoid (Fox) and watch (OANN). Study 1 tests expectations for Fox; Study 2 tests expectations for Fox and OANN.

Finally, one way journalists might combat elite attacks is to defend themselves (Pingree et al. 2018). Though the press has been reluctant to stick up for itself out of fear of "becoming the story" or violating norms of "objectivity" (Todd 2018), their increased coverage of elite attacks over time (Watts et al. 1999) effectively leaves these critiques unrefuted (Crawford 2006). Journalists have called on their peers to stand up for themselves (e.g., Todd 2018) to regain credibility, and research suggests they can do so by explaining reporting (Curry & Stroud 2017), providing fact checks and defending themselves (Pingree et al. 2018; Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020).

However, a Fox journalist's defense against Trump may ultimately deepen the perceived divide between Trump and Fox, causing backlash among Republicans. Co-partisan critics of leaders (e.g., Mitt Romney criticizing Trump) can be penalized for their dissent because "partisans may perceive in-party criticism of the leader as a threat, motivating them to reaffirm their own good standing by dismissing the critic" (Filindra and Harbridge-Yong 2022, 7). Filindra and Harbridge-Yong (2022) find low-status in-party critics (e.g., a hypothetical Republican senator who criticizes Trump) are viewed with lower favorability and seen as less loyal to the party. Here, a Fox journalist's defense against Trump might cause Republicans to "penalize" Fox, viewing it as more biased against Trump than before and becoming less willing to watch the channel. Conversely, in viewing the defense as a rebuke of Trump, weaker negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster 2018) toward Fox should cause Democrats to see Fox as even less ideologically extreme and be more willing to watch it.

Expectations for Journalist Defense. H_{3a} : When a Fox journalist defends Fox against Trump, Republicans will view Fox as more critical of Trump and less conservative and be less willing to watch Fox compared to only hearing Trump's attack. H_{3b} : When a Fox journalist defends Fox against Trump, Democrats will view Fox as more critical of Trump and less conservative and be more willing to watch Fox compared to only hearing Trump's attack. I test this in Study 1. Notably, no response to the defense is a possibility for both partisans. Republicans may not change their opinion about Fox if the journalist is seen as a high-status dissenter. Filindra and Harbridge-Yong (2022) find high-status dissenters are neither penalized nor rewarded for criticizing the leader; they are only rewarded if the leader violated a serious norm. Democrats may not respond to the journalist simply because they are not in the same party.

Study 1

Study 1 examines the effects of Trump's attacks on Fox as well as whether Fox journalists can defend themselves against such critiques. I use a real tweet from Trump referencing the 2020

election. On August 28, 2019, he tweeted: “. . . I don’t want to Win for myself, I only want to Win for the people. The New @FoxNews is letting millions of GREAT people down! We have to start looking for a new News Outlet. Fox isn’t working for us anymore!”⁹ In response, Fox anchor Neil Cavuto defended Fox against these critiques on air, noting he does not work for Trump.

Study 1 had 2,479 respondents. After answering items measuring partisanship, views on Trump and Sanders, typical partisan media consumption, and demographic information, participants were randomly assigned by Qualtrics to one of four conditions: (1) a control group; (2) a condition that saw the above tweet from Trump; (3) a condition that saw Trump’s tweet plus a transcript of Cavuto defending Fox against the tweet; and (4) a condition that saw Trump’s tweet plus watched a video of Cavuto’s defense.¹⁰ In the results, I combine the third and fourth conditions because there were no significant differences in effects between the two.¹¹ Finally, respondents answered questions about Fox’s coverage of Trump and general ideological bias, likely Fox consumption, and approval of Trump.

Results

I regress each outcome on dummy variables representing the treatments; the control group is the suppressed baseline. Each model is run separately by Democrats and Republicans given my hypotheses. Conditions were balanced on key demographics, so covariate adjustment is not needed.¹²

Beliefs That Fox is Critical of Trump. As a first measure of bias, respondents characterized how critical they felt Fox is toward Trump on a five-point scale spanning “not at all critical” (0) to “extremely critical” (1) of Trump. Table 2 presents the results. In the control, Democrats view Fox as less critical of Trump than Republicans ($p=0.000$). Reading Trump’s attack on Fox significantly

⁹This is similar to the majority (55%) of the negative tweets in the content analysis, in that it attacks Fox and alleges Fox is biased.

¹⁰See online appendix for all study treatments and variable wordings. The control group did not see any content; they proceeded directly to the outcome variables.

¹¹Conflicting research suggests why this occurred: emotions in video could make it more powerful (e.g., Yadav et al. 2011); yet, reading text can cognitively engage people more than passive viewing (e.g., Adelaar, Chang, Lancendorfer, Lee, and Morimoto 2003). See online appendix for results with defenses separated.

¹²The experimental results by party in Tables 2 and 3 were specified prior to the experiments. Though the studies were not pre-registered, a grant application submitted prior to Study 1 served a function similar to pre-registration.

Table 2: Views About Fox News

	(1) Critical of Trump: Reps	(2) Critical of Trump: Dems	(3) Conservative Bias: Reps	(4) Conservative Bias: Dems	(5) Consume Fox News: Reps	(6) Consume Fox News: Dems
Attack	0.066* 0.013	0.072** 0.006	-0.059* 0.030	-0.054* 0.046	0.023 0.481	0.062* 0.039
Attack+ Defense	0.042^ 0.071	0.098*** 0.000	-0.008 0.720	-0.075** 0.001	0.017 0.544	0.089** 0.001
Intercept	0.473*** 0.000	0.289*** 0.000	0.570*** 0.000	0.705*** 0.000	0.586*** 0.000	0.328*** 0.000
<i>N</i>	925	1,164	924	1,161	924	1,161
<i>R</i> ²	0.007	0.016	0.006	0.009	0.001	0.010

Note: Cell entries are coefficients with two-tailed *p*-values below. ^ *p* < 0.10, * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001, two-tailed.

increases views among Republicans ($b=0.066$, $p=0.013$) and Democrats ($b=0.072$, $p=0.006$) that the channel is critical of Trump. Exposure to the defense of Fox had no additional effect. Among Republicans ($p=0.285$) and Democrats ($p=0.240$), the Cavuto defense did not differ significantly from the Attack condition. This suggests partisans cued off of Trump, not Cavuto.

Perceptions of Fox’s Ideological Bias. Respondents also evaluated Fox’s bias using a five-point scale ranging from “extremely liberal” (0) to “extremely conservative” (1) with “neither liberal nor conservative” at the midpoint. In the control, Democrats view Fox as more extreme than Republicans ($p=0.000$). In the Attack condition, Republicans side with Trump and view Fox as less conservative ($b=-0.059$, $p=0.030$). Cavuto’s defense, however, cancels out Trump’s tweet ($p=0.720$ compared to the control; $p=0.032$ compared to the Attack). Trump’s tweet causes Democrats to view the channel as less ideologically extreme ($b=-0.054$, $p=0.046$). Cavuto’s response, however, does not change Democrats’ opinions any further ($p=0.373$ compared to Attack).

Willingness to Consume Fox. Respondents were also asked, “In the next seven days or so, how likely are you to read or watch news from Fox News?” and could answer on a five-point scale spanning “not at all” (0) to “extremely” (1) likely. Trump’s tweet urged his followers to find a new outlet but Republicans seemingly did not listen, as there are no significant treatment effects. Among Democrats, the attack increases their stated Fox consumption compared to the

control ($b=0.062$, $p=0.039$), but Cavuto's defense does not affect consumption further ($p=0.283$). Yet again, Democrats cue off Trump, not Cavuto. Democrats may be engaging in some expressive reporting since partisans are seemingly resolute in consuming like-minded news (Peterson & Iyengar 2021); even still, this increased willingness to watch Fox at least suggests a rare moderation in views of the opposition.¹³

Discussion. Study 1 finds Republicans updated their perceptions of Fox's bias in alignment with Trump's rhetoric, supporting H_1 's expectations that they would side with Trump and view Fox as more critical of him and less conservative. However, Trump's rhetoric did not change Republicans' likely consumption of the channel, going against H_{2a} 's prediction of a negative effect. Finally, Cavuto's defense was ineffective for two of the three outcomes, going against H_{3a} 's expectation that Republicans would penalize Fox after exposure to this dissent. The lack of punishment suggests Republicans do not necessarily view Fox journalists as low-status dissenters.

Trump's tweet caused Democrats to view Fox as more critical of Trump and less ideologically extreme, supporting H_1 's prediction. Similarly, Democrats state a greater willingness to watch Fox than they otherwise would, supporting H_{2b} . Interestingly Cavuto's defense was ineffective among Democrats, which goes against H_{3b} 's expectation that a Fox dissent against Trump would encourage Democrats to view the outlet as even less biased and be more willing to watch it. This could be because Democrats do not have a strong connection to Cavuto and are less likely to be influenced by his statements.¹⁴

Notably, Trump's rhetoric had no effect on Republicans' willingness to consume Fox, yet Fox's historical dominance may have made it difficult for Republicans to imagine an alternative. Having a viable alternative can be important for decisions to avoid certain products (Kam & Deichert 2020). Trump frequently pairs his attacks on Fox with the promotion of far-right outlets like OANN. His mentions of these outlets increased over time (see online appendix), and his administration showed favoritism toward OANN (e.g., admitting their reporters into press briefings).

¹³See online appendix for robustness tests controlling for pre-stimulus Fox consumption and analyses examining changes in pre-/post-stimulus consumption.

¹⁴To alleviate concerns about attention paid to Cavuto, I drop those who didn't spend 60 seconds on these pages, which leads to only three small differences. See online appendix.

Therefore, Study 2 pairs Trump’s critique of Fox with an endorsement of OANN, which might remind Republicans of an alternative while also giving them “permission” to veer from Fox.

Study 2

Study 2 had 3,010 participants. The treatments use a real tweet from Trump and randomly vary exposure to: (1) a control condition¹⁵; (2) an attack on Fox by Trump; (3) the attack on Fox plus his promotion of OANN; or (4) the attack on Fox with the OANN promotion and part of Cavuto’s defense from Study 1 in text. The condition with only an attack displayed a portion of Trump’s tweet stating, “@FoxNews is not watchable during weekend afternoons. It is worse than Fake news @CNN.” (This is milder than Study 1’s stimuli.) The OANN promotion adds, “I strongly suggest turning your dial to @OANN. They do a really ‘Fair and Balanced’ job!”

Respondents first answered questions about demographics, partisanship, and views on Trump and Biden. Qualtrics then randomly assigned participants to one of the four conditions before answering questions regarding their likely consumption of Fox and OANN and the outlets’ coverage of Trump and ideological bias. I focus on the consumption variables in the main text for clarity and brevity, and report the other outcomes in the online appendix for comparability between experiments.¹⁶

Results

The regression analyses report the results for dependent variables measuring the relative demand for Fox and OANN plus demand for each outlet individually. The difference variable directly compares respondents’ reported demand for OANN to that of Fox,¹⁷ and allows me to quantify the effect of each condition on consumption of Fox vis-à-vis OANN. Willingness to consume

¹⁵The control saw only a message asking them to report their opinions about the news and Trump on the next page. All conditions saw this.

¹⁶Conditions 3 and 4 are combined in analyses because there are no differences in effects, further underscoring the ineffectiveness of journalists’ defenses. See online appendix for results with conditions separated. Respondents took part in another study, but study order was randomized and only changes one result for Democrats, noted below.

¹⁷Question order was randomized.

Table 3: Willingness to Consume OANN and Fox News

	(1) Difference Measure: Reps	(2) Difference Measure: Dems	(3) Consume Fox: Reps	(4) Consume Fox: Dems	(5) Consume OANN: Reps	(6) Consume OANN: Dems
Attack	0.076* 0.013	-0.007 0.774	-0.039 0.170	-0.012 0.675	0.038 0.199	-0.019 0.474
Attack + OANN	0.115*** 0.000	-0.043* 0.036	-0.033 0.175	0.018 0.454	0.082** 0.001	-0.024 0.273
Intercept	-0.247*** 0.000	-0.083*** 0.000	0.637*** 0.000	0.380*** 0.000	0.390*** 0.000	0.297*** 0.000
<i>N</i>	1,228	1,369	1,228	1,369	1,229	1,369
<i>R</i> ²	0.015	0.004	0.002	0.001	0.009	0.001

Note: DVs in columns 1 and 2 subtract Fox from OANN. Cell entries are coefficients with two-tailed *p*-values below. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, two-tailed.

the outlets is recoded for each to range from “not at all” (0) to “extremely” (1) likely. Then, responses for Fox are subtracted from responses for OANN. Positive values indicate a greater likelihood of consuming OANN than Fox; negative values indicate the opposite. Theoretically and empirically, this variable ranges from -1 to $+1$. The independent variables are dummies representing the condition with solely Trump’s attack on Fox and conditions with the Fox attack + OANN promotion. The pure control is the suppressed baseline, and results are run by party. Conditions were balanced on key demographics, so covariate adjustment is not needed.

Examining willingness to consume OANN relative to Fox in Table 3, columns 1-2 highlights the influence of Trump’s rhetoric on partisan media demand. In the Trump Attack ($b=0.076$, $p=0.013$) and Attack+OANN ($b=0.115$, $p=0.000$) conditions, Republicans reported a greater relative openness to OANN vis-à-vis Fox than they otherwise would. Breaking down these results by outlet suggests the bulk of the movement lies in Republicans’ demand for OANN. Column 3 indicates willingness to consume Fox is in the expected direction, but is not significant for the Attack ($b=-0.039$, $p=0.170$) and Attack + OANN conditions ($b=-0.033$, $p=0.175$). Regarding OANN, Republicans become much more open to the channel when Trump endorses it ($b=0.082$, $p=0.001$). The coefficient for the Attack condition is also positive, but is insignificant ($b=0.038$, $p=0.199$; difference between treatments, $p=0.082$). Republicans especially respond to Trump’s rhetoric when

he promotes an alternative to Fox. Considering the breadth of Fox alternatives and the zero-sum nature of audience attention, such shifts toward outlets like OANN help explain the ratings losses for Fox in Table 1. Notably, OANN and Newsmax experienced surges in ratings toward the end of Trump's presidency (Stelter 2020), when he increasingly tweeted about these outlets (see online appendix) and increasingly attacked Fox. OANN reported a 40% increase in ratings in the fourth quarter of 2020 (Richwine 2020). Newsmax's 7pm show increased viewership from 80,000 to 800,000 during this time, and its audiences started to rival Fox's in the key 25-54 demographic after Election Day 2020 (Stelter 2020).

Among Democrats, relative demand for the outlets is unaffected by Trump's attack alone ($b=-0.007$, $p=0.774$), while those in the Attack + OANN condition were less likely to watch OANN vis-à-vis Fox ($b=-0.043$, $p=0.036$).¹⁸ In Column 4, the results for Fox are insignificant in the Attack ($b=-0.012$, $p=0.675$) and Attack + OANN conditions ($b=0.018$, $p=0.454$). Similarly, for OANN the coefficients are in the expected direction but insignificant for the Attack ($b=-0.019$, $p=0.474$) and Attack + OANN ($b=-0.024$, $p=0.273$) conditions. The results suggest there was modest movement toward Fox and away from OANN among Democrats in the Attack + OANN condition only.

Discussion. Study 2 finds Republicans' stated demand for partisan news is affected by elite rhetoric. Republicans took Trump's rhetoric seriously and reported a greater willingness to watch OANN vis-à-vis Fox than they otherwise would, especially after hearing him promote this Fox alternative. Analyses separating the outlets suggest much of the movement was in relation to OANN, indicating elites can elevate alternative co-partisan outlets when they are unhappy with established ones. This aligns with H_{2a} 's expectation that Republicans would increase their consumption of Fox alternatives that Trump promotes.¹⁹ When Trump attacks Fox and promotes OANN, Democrats become modestly less willing to watch OANN vis-à-vis Fox, in alignment with H_{2b} 's expectation that Democrats would move in opposition to Trump's rhetoric about which outlets to avoid (Fox)

¹⁸This fades for Democrats who saw the study second and is the only result affected by order.

¹⁹As reported in the online appendix, Republicans in the Attack + OANN condition viewed Fox as less conservative and more critical of Trump than OANN compared to Republicans in the control. Unlike Study 1, Republicans did not significantly change their views about Fox alone after seeing the stimuli; instead, they updated their views about OANN to align with Trump. The weaker findings for Fox could be due to the milder attack on Fox in Study 2.

and watch (OANN).

Conclusion

While Republicans have sought to discredit the media for decades as biased (Watts et al. 1999), I find such attacks are no longer confined to mainstream or oppositional news (Meeks 2020). Instead, Trump increasingly attacked Fox on Twitter during his presidency, which adds nuance to existing narratives suggesting Fox's influence over elites (e.g., Clinton and Enamorado 2014). Even more, Trump's negative tweets correlate with significant losses in Fox's ratings, suggesting this rhetoric resulted in real-world changes to views about and demand for Fox.

The experimental studies find Trump's attacks on Fox led Republicans to view the outlet as less conservative and more critical of him. Interestingly, Republicans' viewing habits were not affected by Trump's rhetoric until he promoted a viable alternative like OANN. Only then were Republicans seemingly willing to change the channel. Yet given the multitude of online, podcast, and streaming right-wing alternatives to Fox, it seems conservative elites can promote changes to their followers' viewing habits with relative ease. Democrats responded to Trump's attack by viewing Fox as less conservative and more critical of Trump than they otherwise would, and their consumption of Fox increased both in isolation and relative to OANN. Finally, Cavuto's defense of Fox against Trump was largely ineffective, suggesting journalists' attempts to fight back against elite attacks neither hurt nor help opinion about their outlet. Together, the results provide evidence rich in external and internal validity that elite rhetoric is an important signal for individuals navigating a highly fragmented, partisan media landscape.

The findings also suggest scholarship would benefit from including a wider range of conservative outlets beyond Fox in surveys given Trump's ability to elevate alternative right-wing sources. Additionally, scholars might study elite rhetoric about media among prominent politicians on the left, particularly Sanders's attacks on MSNBC and the *Washington Post* for coverage he feels is biased toward corporations (e.g., Allsop 2019). Limitations to the present study provide

further opportunities for future work. Research might examine different Fox personalities accusing Trump of a serious norms violation, as high-profile dissenters may be rewarded for in-party dissent if it is perceived as protecting the party's reputation (Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022). The present research also faces limitations in not asking about media consumption pre-treatment in Study 2, and not using the same critiques of Fox across the two studies. While I used real tweets to heighten external validity, the difference in strength of attacks limits comparability.

Importantly, Trump's attacks on Fox represent a playbook for elites seeking to discount unflattering Fox polls or stories and instead promote far-right alternatives. DCInbox's archive of Congressmembers' official e-newsletters finds Republican legislators mentioned OANN four times in 2017 but 39 times in 2021; Newsmax was mentioned nine times in 2017 and 457 times in 2021. Thus, conservative elites are seemingly adopting Trump's rhetoric about far-right media, something voters have rewarded them for in other domains (Arceneaux & Truex 2022). Scholarship might further examine the conditions under which non-Trump Republicans influence constituents' media habits. Leadership-driven motivated reasoning (Filindra & Harbridge-Yong 2022) suggests aligning such rhetoric with the party leader, or positioning oneself as leader of a salient in-group, will be most effective.

In sum, the results suggest politicians' rhetoric about partisan media is an important cue for individuals navigating the fragmented media landscape. Elite communication can change views about and demand for established partisan outlets like Fox and elevate more ideologically extreme alternatives. Such findings shed light on recent polling suggesting 41% and 31% of Republicans trust Newsmax and OANN, respectively (Economist/YouGov 2022). Even more, this rhetoric is normatively consequential: by elevating sources that promote harmful conspiracy theories and mis- or disinformation (e.g., Mimms 2021), democratic norms of free debate and informed decision-making are threatened (Egelhofer et al. 2022).

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