Tripodos, number 60 | 2026 |
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 21-09-25
Accepted: 16-03-26
OnlineFirst: 08-09-26s
Final publication:

Fear as a Hybrid Frame: Media Framing on WhatsApp During the 2024 United States Presidential Campaign

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This article analyses the media framing strategies employed by Spanish-language Latin American news outlets in their coverage of the 2024 United States (US) presidential campaign. Drawing on a quantitative content analysis, 262 news articles from six countries —collected through the outlets' official WhatsApp channels— were coded for the presence of strategic, thematic, and fear-related frames. Findings confirm the predominance of the strategic frame (97.7 %), the prevalence of the thematic frame (87 %), and the prominence of fear as a hybrid framing device (74.8 %), whose presence was significantly correlated with both strategic and thematic frames. While fear did not intensify during predefined key weeks, its temporal variation suggests more complex narrative modulation. Fear does not operate as an isolated category but rather as a cross-cutting emotional resource that amplifies other framing structures. This study provides empirical evidence of WhatsApp's role as a curated channel for distributing editorial content and contributes to the broader debate

Este artículo analiza las estrategias de encuadre mediático empleadas por medios hispanoamericanos en la cobertura de la campaña presidencial de Estados Unidos de 2024. A partir de un análisis de contenido cuantitativo, se codificaron 262 artículos periodísticos de seis países —identificados a través de los canales oficiales de WhatsApp de los medios— para detectar la presencia de encuadres estratégicos, temáticos y relacionados con el miedo. Los resultados confirman el predominio del encuadre estratégico (97,7 %), la persistencia del encuadre temático (87 %) y la relevancia del miedo como un dispositivo híbrido de encuadre (74,8 %), significativamente correlacionado con ambos tipos de encuadre. Si bien el miedo no se intensificó durante las semanas clave predefinidas, su variación temporal sugiere una modulación narrativa más compleja. El miedo no opera como una categoría aislada, sino como un recurso emocional transversal que amplifica otras estructuras de encuadre. Este estudio proporciona evidencia empírica del papel de WhatsApp como un canal de distribución curado para contenido editorial y contribuye al

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.60.03

on affective hybridization in electoral framing within closed digital environments.

debate más amplio sobre la hibridación afectiva en el encuadre electoral en entornos digitales cerrados.

Keywords: *media framing, fear, electoral campaigns, WhatsApp, emotional framing.*

Keywords: *encuadres mediáticos, miedo, campañas electorales, WhatsApp, encuadre emocional.*

The 2024 United States (US) presidential campaign unfolded in a context marked by polarization, digital disinformation, and institutional uncertainty. Narratives surrounding crime, migration, economic decline, and electoral integrity shaped a fertile discursive laboratory for the study of media framing. This research is situated within the broader agenda of political framing studies in Spanish-language media, building on previous analyses of the 2016 electoral process (Velásquez, 2021).

The analysis distinguishes between generic and issue-specific frames. Generic frames —strategic and thematic— have been widely applied in the study of electoral coverage (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006; Muñiz, 2015). Recent scholarship, however, highlights the need to integrate situational frames that capture the emotional dimensions of political discourse. In this regard, the fear frame is revisited as a particularly relevant category in contexts of crisis and polarization (Velásquez, 2021).

The fear frame is characterized by the representation of explicit threats, the anticipation of potential harm, and the use of linguistic or visual resources designed to trigger alarm (Entman, 1993; Romani, 2013). Rather than functioning as an isolated category, fear acts as an affective intensifier that frequently coexists with strategic and thematic frames. In the coverage of US elections by Spanish-language outlets, it has been shown to play a transversal role in reinforcing narratives of competition and conflict (Velásquez, 2021).

The choice of the US case is grounded in its geopolitical centrality and symbolic resonance within the global information environment: coverage reflects both editorial interests and broader political imaginaries, drawing on the well-documented impact of emotional rhetoric on US political polarization during electoral periods (Domínguez-García *et al.*, 2023). The use of WhatsApp as a distribution channel introduces a relevant methodological dimension, as it provides access to curated editorial content disseminated by media outlets in closed digital environments.

This article seeks to address three research questions:

- RQ1: Which frames dominate the coverage of the 2024 US presidential campaign in the selected outlets?

- RQ2: What patterns of co-occurrence emerge among strategic, thematic, and fear frames?
- RQ3: Which actors are most frequently associated with fear as a narrative resource?

THEORIES OF FRAMING AND FEAR IN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

Frames constitute organizing principles of media discourse through which information is structured, and audience attention is directed toward certain aspects while omitting others (Entman, 1993; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015; Abdel-Raheem, 2017; Quintana Pujalte, 2020). These cognitive structures, shaped by culture and experience, are activated through words, images, and narrative resources (Ramírez Friedrichsen and Matus Lobos, 2022; Luo and Ling, 2023). They fulfill key functions in problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and the proposal of solutions (Entman, 1993).

The conceptual foundations of framing are rooted in both cognitive psychology and sociology (Sádaba, 2001) and it has been consolidated as a research program within communication studies (Koziner, 2015). From the former, Gregory Bateson (1972) introduced the notion of the frame as an interpretive schema; from the latter, Erving Goffman (1974) formalized it as an experiential structure that organizes social perception (Koziner, 2013; Chihu Amparán, 2021; Ramírez Friedrichsen and Matus Lobos, 2022). Frames reduce the complexity of reality and facilitate its interpretation (Abdel-Raheem, 2017; Güran and Özarslan, 2022). Over time, the approach has also incorporated phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspectives (Aruguete, 2011, 2015; Koziner, 2013).

Within communication studies, scholars such as Gaye Tuchman (1978), Todd Gitlin (1980), William Gamson and Andre Modigliani (1987), and Robert Entman (1993, 2003) consolidated framing as a methodological tool for discourse analysis. Robert Entman, in particular, defined framing as the selection of aspects of reality that are made more salient, and emphasized its simultaneous operation across sender, message, receiver, and culture. Unlike agenda-setting theory, which explores which issues are prioritized in the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; López-Escobar and Llamas, 1996; Aruguete, 2017), framing investigates how those issues are interpreted (Igartúa and Humanes, 2004; Sádaba, 2008; Valera Ordaz, 2016).

In electoral contexts, frames not only organize narratives but also shape the emotional tone of political discourse circulating in the public sphere. Framing is therefore essential for understanding meaning construction, the symbolic positioning of political actors, and the activation of collective emotions during campaigns (Tagle *et al.*, 2021). In highly polarized scenarios, the media do not simply define *what* to think through thematic selection but also *how* to think —and, in the case of emotional frames such as fear, *how* to feel about the competing actors and proposals. Emotional framing configures affective perceptions that directly influence political behaviour (Maier and Nai, 2020).

GENERIC AND ISSUE-SPECIFIC FRAMES IN ELECTORAL CONTEXTS

Framing does not operate as an abstract notion but as analytical structures that reveal how the media organize narratives during electoral processes. A distinction is typically made between generic frames —recurrent structures such as conflict, strategy, or responsibility— and issue-specific frames, which are more sensitive to particular circumstances (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012; Lengauer and Höller, 2013). Generic frames transcend specific cases, reflecting journalistic routines and editorial priorities.

In electoral coverage, two generic frames are especially relevant: the strategic frame and the thematic frame. The strategic frame portrays politics as a competition, emphasizing tactics, polls, and the dichotomy of winners and losers (Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008; Aalberg *et al*., 2012; Muñiz, 2015). This frame has been associated with negative effects, such as shifting attention away from substantive issues, reducing civic learning, and amplifying emotions like anxiety or disengagement (Vreese and Semetko, 2002; Rinke *et al*., 2013; Dimitrova and Kostadinova, 2013; Schmuck *et al*., 2017; Walter and Ophir, 2020).

In contrast, the thematic frame emphasizes programmatic, ideological, and causal content (Koziner, 2013; Piñeiro-Naval and Mangana, 2018). Its deliberative potential has been documented in multiple political systems, although it often remains overshadowed by the game frame (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006; Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012). Cross-national comparisons show that the prevalence of one or the other varies across journalistic cultures, with significant implications for the quality of democratic deliberation (Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008; Aalberg *et al*., 2012; Rinke *et al*., 2013; Walter and Ophir, 2020).

In Hispanic America, this distinction acquires special relevance in contexts of polarization, media concentration, and populist leadership. Studies such as those by Carlos Muñiz (2015) and Nadia Koziner (2013) confirm the hegemony of the game frame and the frequent recourse to emotional strategies to mobilize affect and construct symbolic enemies.

Issue-specific frames complement this analysis by capturing situated narratives around topics such as immigration, security, or national identity (Vreese, 2005). Their combination with generic frames provides a denser understanding of media discourse.

This article examines the articulation between strategic and thematic frames and a specific frame of increasing relevance: fear, understood as an emotional category that co-occurs with other frames and intensifies their persuasive impact in scenarios of polarization and uncertainty.

FEAR AS A SPECIFIC FRAME

A growing body of research demonstrates that media frames influence the electorate's emotional responses, particularly fear and anxiety, which shape attitudes and decision-making in highly competitive contexts (Gross, 2008).

Within this perspective, emotional framing has become a key dimension for analysing how specific frames —especially fear— affect risk perception, political behaviour, and affective polarization (Maier and Nai, 2020). Such frames can generate anxiety that redirects attention toward certain actors, functioning as persuasive tools that mobilize or consolidate ideological alignments.

Fear is thus conceptualized as a specific, rather than generic, frame particularly suited to representing threats in contexts of crisis. It is activated through linguistic and narrative resources that induce feelings of insecurity or anticipation of an adverse future. It has been empirically identified in Hispanic American coverage of US elections (Velásquez, 2021) and conceptualized as a rhetorical device that intensifies negative emotions to reinforce ideological cleavages (Chihu Amparán, 2021; Cuéllar Rivero, 2024; Garde Eransus, 2025).

In this study, fear is operationalized as an empirical category defined by ad hoc criteria. Unlike strategic or thematic frames, which provide transversal logic, fear operates as an affective intensifier in contexts of polarization and narrative contestation. Its coding relied on features validated in previous studies, such as the use of connotative terms ("disaster," "collapse," "invasion"), warlike or decadence metaphors, and visual elements evoking collective insecurity. This systematization enabled precise identification of the affective dimension within electoral media discourse.

FEAR AS A POLITICAL EMOTION AND MEDIA NARRATIVE

In political and media discourse, fear is one of the most recurrent and exploitable emotions. Its polysemy allows for multiple interpretations: as an affective disturbance in the face of imminent harm (Domínguez, 2003), a passion that motivates action (Suárez Torres, 2020), an unpleasant state triggered by real or symbolic threats (Romani, 2013; Valdez Zepeda *et al.*, 2014), or a cultural construction instrumentalized for media and electoral purposes (Barei, 2020). These perspectives converge in underscoring its malleability and functionality for power, capable of either inhibiting or activating collective action, shaping attitudes, and reducing deliberative reasoning (Formoso Araujo, 2017).

Corey Robin (2009) distinguishes between external fear —which fosters cohesion against exogenous threats— and internal fear, mobilized to discipline and exercise social control. In polarized electoral contexts, fear-based emotionality is articulated through the so-called *fear vote*: narratives that associate risks with an adversary while presenting one's own candidacy as the only safe alternative (Valdez Zepeda *et al.*, 2014; Aguilar Ramírez, 2022). These discursive strategies seek to shape perceptions, voting intentions, and ideological loyalties.

The media play a central role in this process (Cazorla *et al.*, 2022). As David Altheide (1997) argues, fear is constructed through problem frames that portray events as exceptional and urgent threats, displacing complex analysis in favour of alarmist narratives. In digital environments such as WhatsApp, these logics are amplified: immediacy, suspense, and emotionality favour a "communicative thriller" dominated by polarization and a sense of impending

disaster, where fear becomes viral content functional to electoral infotainment (Moret *et al*., 2022).

From the perspective of emotional framing theory, fear is best understood through the interaction between *fear appeals* and persuasive structures. Effective messages combine threat (severity + vulnerability) with a viable solution (self-efficacy + effective response), articulated either as a *gain frame* (benefits of acting) or a *loss frame* (costs of inaction) (Romani, 2013). In the US context, this pattern appears in discourses portraying the adversary as a threat to democracy, the economy, or national identity.

These frames directly affect public deliberation: emotional saturation weakens critical capacity, reinforces binary logics, and fosters affective rather than rational allegiances (Altheide, 1997; Formoso Araujo, 2017). Research on punitive populism in Hispanic America (Chevigny, 2003; Moreno Velador and Figueroa Ibarra, 2013) demonstrates how such logics criminalize opponents, stigmatize social demands, and prioritize security over justice.

Fear thus becomes an affective interpretive frame that conditions both coverage and reception in polarized transnational contexts. It does not merely operate as an isolated resource but as a narrative mechanism that dramatizes risk, sharpens ideological divisions, and enhances the persuasive force of electoral discourse.

The literature on framing demonstrates that electoral discourse is shaped by both generic frames (strategic and thematic) and issue-specific frames, among which fear has gained growing prominence. Generic frames structure political competition and thematic content, while issue-specific frames capture context-dependent narratives such as immigration, security, or national identity.

Within this spectrum, fear emerges as a distinctive frame that operates not in isolation but in hybrid forms, amplifying both strategic and thematic narratives. Conceptually, fear functions as an emotional intensifier: it frames politics through representations of threat, insecurity, and potential harm, while rhetorically dramatizing issues and enhancing their salience.

As a political emotion, fear is versatile, capable of inhibiting or mobilizing collective action, and is strategically deployed by political actors across the ideological spectrum. As a media narrative, it is constructed through problem frames and *fear appeals* that pair perceived threats with promised solutions, thereby reinforcing polarization and shaping audience responses.

Taken together, this framework positions fear not as a marginal or secondary element, but as a transversal resource embedded within broader framing practices. Its hybrid character highlights the intersection of emotional, strategic, and thematic logics in the mediatization of contemporary electoral campaigns, providing the conceptual basis for the empirical analysis presented below.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative approach, grounded in the systematic content analysis of news articles published by selected Spanish-language news outlets. The corpus was constructed from content distributed through the outlets' official

WhatsApp channels, which served as a mechanism for identifying and retrieving the material. The research focuses on the 2024 US presidential election and forms part of a comparative agenda on media framing in electoral contexts.

The corpus consists of 262 units of analysis corresponding to news articles published by media outlets in six countries. All pieces were identified through official WhatsApp channels, which redirected users to content published on the outlets' websites. The collection period spanned 16 weeks (88 days), beginning with the first presidential debate and concluding with election week. This timeframe covers the most intensive phase of the US electoral calendar, including debates, party conventions, candidate changes, and major political events. This temporal delimitation allows for the systematic observation of framing dynamics during the most intensive phase of the campaign, where media narratives tend to reach their highest frequency, variation, and strategic articulation, making it methodologically suitable for capturing both dominant patterns and temporal fluctuations in framing.

Inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) articles distributed via official WhatsApp profiles and originally published on the outlets' websites; (2) publicly accessible and verifiable at the time of collection; and (3) publication within the defined temporal range. Replicated pieces from other platforms were excluded if they were not originally produced by the outlets' websites.

The sample included fourteen outlets selected from among leading outlets within their respective national media landscapes, as well as their active use of official WhatsApp channels during the observation period. The selection of countries was initially informed by demographic evidence on the composition of the Hispanic population in the United States. Based on data from the Pew Research Center, countries with at least 1 % representation within the US Hispanic population —such as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Spain, and Argentina— were considered as primary analytical contexts due to their structural connection to US electoral dynamics (Piña and Martinez, 2025). However, this criterion functioned as an initial reference framework rather than a definitive inclusion rule. The final composition of the sample was determined by the empirical availability of analysable content: only countries whose media outlets generated publications that met all inclusion criteria —namely, distribution through official WhatsApp channels, accessibility without subscription barriers, and publication within the defined temporal range— were retained. Consequently, some countries that met the demographic threshold were not represented in the final corpus, not due to lack of media relevance, but because they did not produce eligible units of analysis under the conditions established in this study. The United States was included as the central political context under analysis, allowing the study to examine how leading Spanish-language outlets based in the country cover their own electoral process.

The outlets that met the operational criteria of content accessibility and consistent activity on WhatsApp were:

- Argentina: *Clarín* (center-right, critical of Peronism), *Infobae* (liberal orientation, regional scope), and *La Nación* (conservative tradition).

- Spain: *El Confidencial* (conservative, economic-political focus), *El Diario* (progressive, cooperative model), *El Mundo* (center-right, critical of socialism), and El País (center-left, liberal-democratic reference).
- Colombia: *El Tiempo* (historically centrist) and *Semana* (opinion magazine with a conservative turn).
- The Dominican Republic: *Diario Libre* (the country's first free newspaper, pluralist orientation).
- United States: CNN en *Español* (global news, centrist profile), *La Opinión* (leading Latino daily in Los Angeles), and the television networks *Telemundo* and *Univision*, both strongly oriented toward migration, health, and civil rights coverage.

The analysis relied on a dichotomous coding scheme designed to identify the presence or absence of three frames: strategic, thematic, and fear. An additional variable of dominance was included to determine the prevailing frame in cases of co-occurrence. Operational definitions of each variable were adapted from prior studies and applied consistently within this context. To ensure transparency and replicability, a detailed codebook was developed specifying the operational definitions, coding rules, and inclusion criteria for each variable. The codebook provided explicit guidelines for identifying the presence or absence of each frame, minimizing ambiguity during the coding process. Although the analysis was conducted by two researchers and no formal intercoder reliability test was performed, internal consistency was reinforced through the systematic application of these predefined criteria across the entire corpus.

- The strategic frame was recognized through references to polls, competition, winners/losers, or warlike-political language.
- The thematic frame was identified through substantive arguments, policy proposals, or causal explanations of public problems.
- The fear frame was captured through textual or visual expressions associated with threat, collapse, invasion, insecurity, or disorder.

Each category was operationalized into dichotomous variables (present/absent), following definitions validated in previous research and adapted to the discursive context of the 2024 campaign.

- Strategic frames (S1-S5): winners/losers, campaign strategies, political consequences, polls and public opinion, and conflict among actors.
- Thematic frames (T1-T5): policy proposals, ideological positions, social implications, social problems, and thematic debate.
- Fear frames (F1-F8): fear of the future, fear of the candidate, alarmist statistics, historical references, social indignation, anti-fear campaigns, fear as differentiator, and fear as driver of action.

Coding was performed individually by the authors, applying the criteria defined in the codebook and coding template. No formal intercoder reliability test was

conducted, which constitutes a methodological limitation. However, internal consistency was reinforced through the systematic application of predefined coding rules and rigorous variable definitions.

The empirical analysis was guided by five hypotheses concerning the frequency, co-occurrence, and contextual distribution of frames in Hispanic American coverage of the 2024 US presidential campaign:

- H1. During peak periods (debates, conventions, weeks preceding the election), the use of the fear frame will increase.
- H2. Fear will correlate with the strategic frame, intensifying narratives of competition and conflict.
- H3. Its use will vary according to the ideological affiliation of the actor, being more frequent in right-wing oriented coverage.
- H4. In key events, fear will surpass strategic and thematic frames in frequency.
- H5. Across the corpus, fear will appear in more publications than generic frames.

Statistical analyses included Chi-square tests (associations between frames, actors, and sources), non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis) to compare high-intensity versus regular weeks, and Spearman correlations to examine associations between frames. Results revealed weak but significant correlations between fear and both strategic and thematic frames, suggesting patterns of co-occurrence and discursive hybridization.

The use of WhatsApp channels as a mechanism for data collection responds to their growing role as curated distribution tools for editorial content directly linked to outlets' websites. The platform provides relatively stable access to editorial decisions regarding content dissemination, offering a controlled entry point for framing analysis.

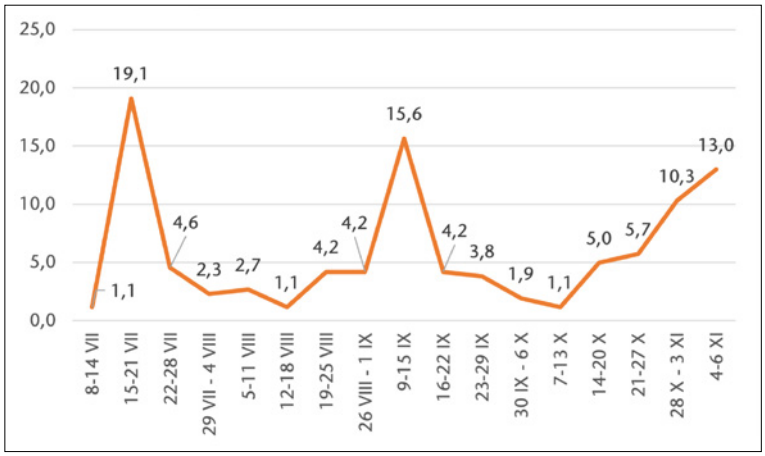
Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the closed nature of WhatsApp prevents observation of user interaction and secondary circulation of content beyond the original distribution. Second, some outlets were excluded due to inactivity during the observation period, which may have affected the representativeness of certain editorial lines or regions. Finally, the reliance on WhatsApp as a content identification mechanism implies that relevant coverage not distributed through this channel was not included in the corpus, reflecting a deliberate methodological focus on curated distribution practices as a specific layer of the contemporary media ecosystem.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the analysis of 262 publications disseminated by Hispanic American media through their official WhatsApp channels during the 2024 US presidential campaign. The coding focused on three main frames —strategic, thematic, and fear— considering their frequency, co-occurrence, and relationship with actors and key events.

Across the 16 weeks analysed, four moments stood out: the second week (July 15-21), which accounted for 19.1 % of the sample and was marked by the first attack against Donald Trump and the withdrawal of Joe Biden; the ninth week (September 9-15), with 15.6 %, corresponding to the presidential debate and the second assassination attempt on Trump; and the sixteenth (October 28-November 3, 10.3 %) and seventeenth weeks (November 4-6, 13 %), which corresponded to election week.

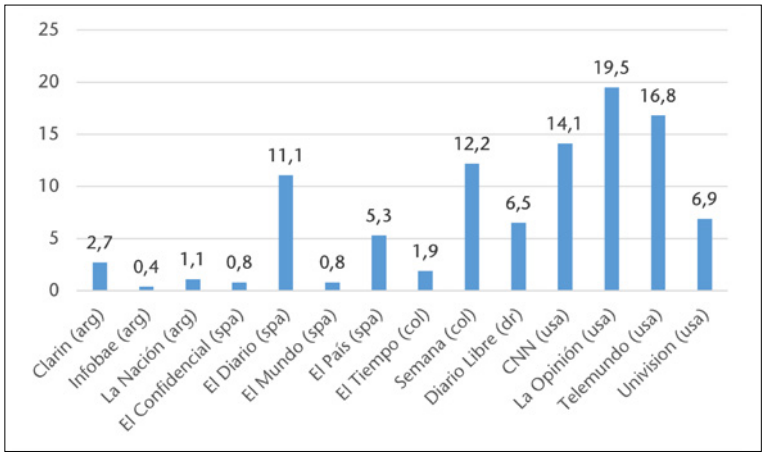
Figure 1. Chronological distribution of the sample



Source: Authors' elaboration.

In terms of geographical distribution, US outlets accounted for 57.3 % of the sample, followed by Spain (17.9 %) and Colombia (14.1 %). The Dominican Republic (6.5 %) and Argentina (4.2 %) had smaller representations. At the outlet level, the three most frequent sources were US-based: *La Opinión* (19.5 %), *Telemundo* (16.8 %), and *CNN en Español* (14.1 %). Only two others exceeded 10 %: Colombia's *Semana* (12.2 %) and Spain's *El Diario* (11.1 %).

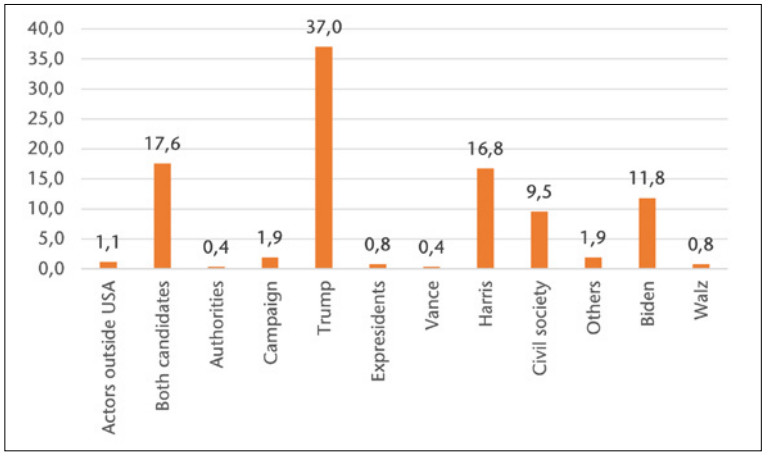
Figure 2. Percentage distribution of outlets in the sample



Source: Authors' elaboration.

The most visible actor in the coverage was Donald Trump, appearing in 37.0 % of the sample. He was followed by Kamala Harris (16.8 %) and the category "Both candidates" (17.6 %), reflecting a strong emphasis on direct comparison. Other actors received less attention: Joe Biden (11.8 %), Tim Walz (0.8 %), and JD Vance (0.4 %). Civil society appeared in 9.5 % of the sample, while the category "Campaign" accounted for 1.9 %. Authorities, former presidents, and external actors were marginally present, indicating a focus on the main contenders.

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of actors in the sample



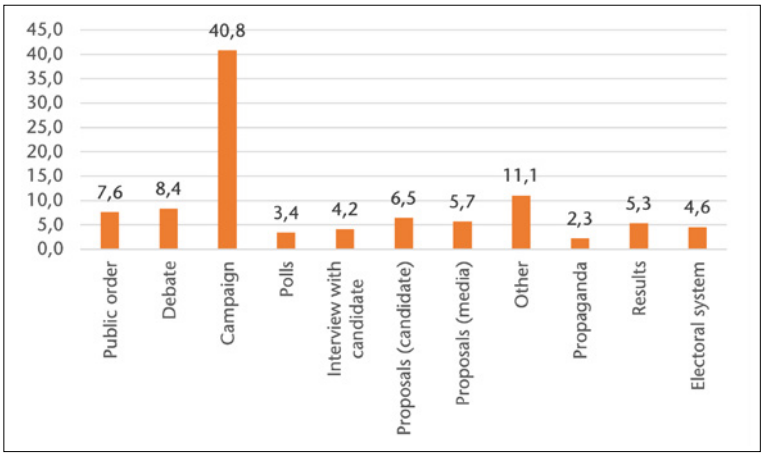
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Thematic analysis revealed a clear prioritization in the media agenda. "Campaign development" concentrated 40.8 % of the coverage, followed by "Other"

(11.1 %) and "Debate" (8.4 %). With lower presence were "Public order" (7.6 %) and "Candidates' proposals" (6.5 %). The least frequent were "Results" (5.3 %), "Electoral system" (4.6 %), "Polls" (3.4 %), and "Propaganda" (2.3 %).

This distribution underscores an editorial orientation toward the "spectacle" of the contest, centred on strategies and events, at the expense of programmatic content. The low visibility of policy proposals (6.5 %) and political analysis suggests a form of journalism more focused on competitive narratives than substantive policy issues, potentially generating a disconnect between media agenda and citizens' concerns.

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of themes in the sample

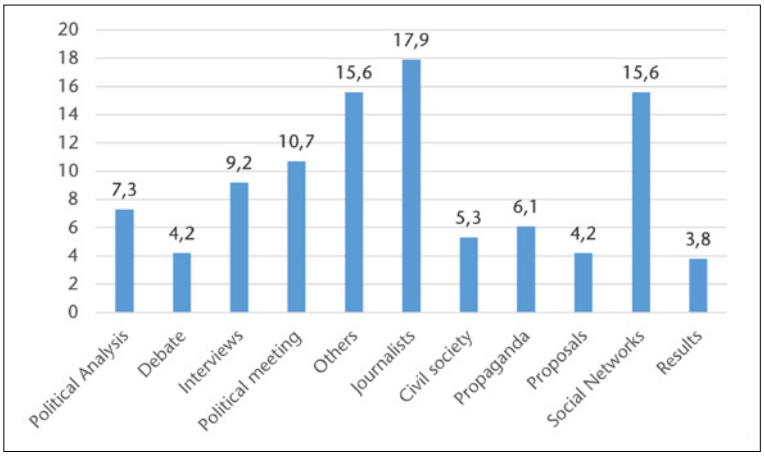


Source: Authors' elaboration.

Regarding sources, journalists were the most frequently cited (17.9 %), followed by social networks and the category "Other" (both 15.6 %). This demonstrates that campaign discourse was dominated by both traditional media and digital platforms, alongside unclassified sources. Political rallies (10.7 %) and interviews (9.2 %) also had notable presence, reflecting the importance of candidates' public appearances.

Less frequent were political analysis (7.3 %), propaganda (6.1 %), civil society (5.3 %), debates (4.2 %), and proposals (4.2 %). The limited visibility of policy proposals and results (3.8 %) reinforces the finding that coverage was centred more on protagonists and public events than on programmatic content or electoral outcomes.

Figure 5. Percentage distribution of sources in the sample



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Analysis of the 2024 US presidential campaign coverage shows a discourse structured mainly around the strategic frame, accompanied by thematic frames and frequent use of the fear frame. Overall, these findings suggest journalism oriented toward competition and emotional mobilization, with less attention to policy debate.

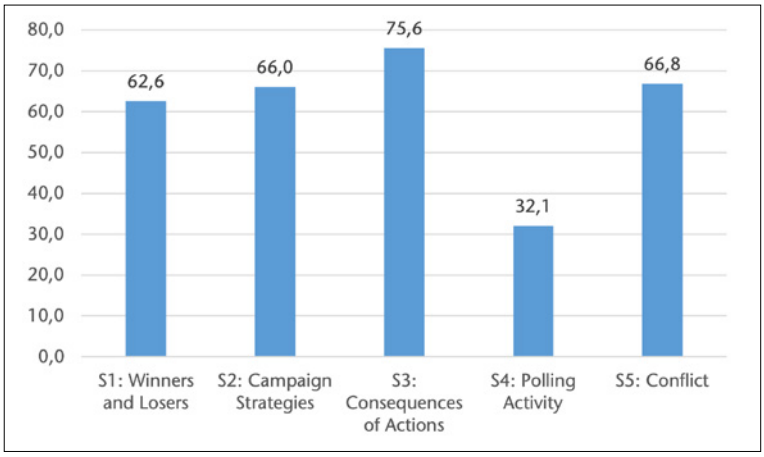
Table 1. Distribution of frames in the sample

Frame Type	Frequency	Percentage
Fear	212	80.9 %
Strategic	256	97.7 %
Thematic	228	87.0 %

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Within strategic frames, political consequences (E3, 75.6 %) predominated, followed by conflict among actors (E5, 66.8 %) and campaign strategies (E2, 66.0 %). The winners/losers category (E1) was also frequent (62.6 %), while polls and public opinion (E4) appeared only 32.1 % of the time, indicating that strategic framing focused more on competition than on polling.

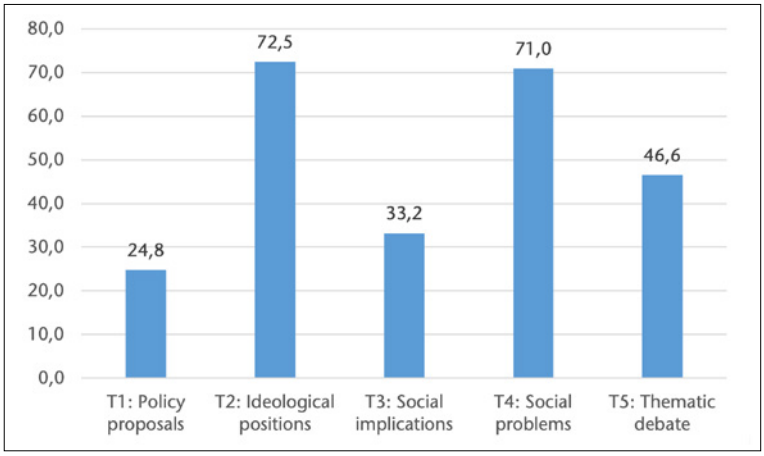
Figure 6. Presence of strategic frames in the sample



Source: Authors' elaboration.

For thematic frames, ideological positions (T2, 72.5 %) and social problems (T4, 71.0 %) were most prominent. Less frequent were thematic debate (T5, 46.6 %) and policy proposals (T1, 24.8 %), suggesting limited attention to concrete solutions despite identification of problems and positions.

Figure 7. Presence of thematic frames in the sample

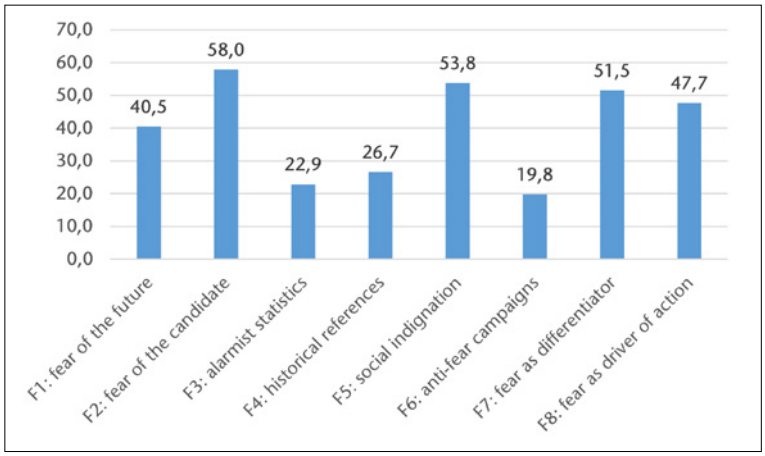


Source: Authors' elaboration.

Regarding fear frames, the most common were fear of the candidate (M2, 58 %), social indignation (M5, 53.8 %), and fear as a differentiator (M7, 51.5 %). These results highlight the centrality of threat and social unrest in media narratives.

Less frequent were anti-fear campaigns (M6, 19.8 %) and historical references (M4, 26.7 %), suggesting limited reliance on defensive narratives or analogies with the past.

Figure 8. Presence of fear frames in the sample

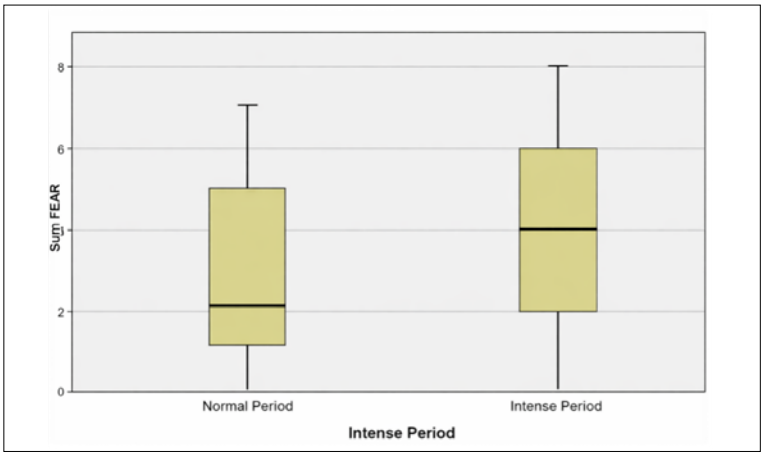


Source: Authors' elaboration.

To test the hypotheses, statistical analyses were performed on the variables coded in the data matrix. Derived variables were created to operationalize the three frame types, the actors' ideological affiliation, and the electoral calendar. Because the main variables were categorical or discrete counts, nonparametric tests were used (Mann-Whitney U, Spearman's correlation, chi-square, Kruskal-Wallis, Friedman, and Cochran's Q).

Hypothesis 1. During peak periods of the campaign, outlets intensify the use of the fear frame. A Mann-Whitney U test shows significant differences in fear usage between high-intensity weeks and regular weeks (U = 7,712.50; Z = 3.007; p = .003). Mean ranks were 125.21 versus 98.67, confirming a higher presence of fear during key moments such as debates, conventions, and the week preceding the election.

Figure 9. Distribution of fear-frame intensity (Sum_MIEDO) by week

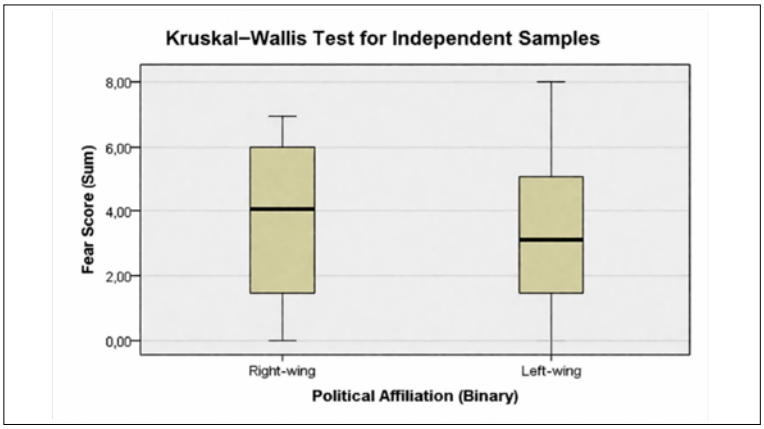


Source: Authors' elaboration.

Hypothesis 2. The fear frame is associated with strategic frames. Spearman correlations indicate positive associations with both the thematic frame (ϱ = .570, p < .001) and the strategic frame (ϱ = .461, p < .001). This suggests fear does not merely reinforce competition and conflict; it also co-exists with thematic explanations, operating as a hybrid frame that intensifies both confrontational and substantive tones.

Hypothesis 3. The use of fear varies by ideological affiliation. A Kruskal-Wallis test shows no significant differences (H = 1.344; df = 1; p = .246; n = 175). Although descriptive variation is observable, it is not statistically significant, indicating that political affiliation did not systematically condition fear's presence.

Figure 10. Boxplot comparing use of the fear frame (Sum_MIEDO) by the main actor's ideological affiliation



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Hypothesis 4. In key events, fear is used more than strategic and thematic frames. A Friedman test on publications from high-intensity weeks (Periodo_Intenso = 1) —presidential debates and conventions— reveals significant differences (χ^2 = 48.017; df = 2; p < .001; n = 136). Fear attains the highest mean rank (2.38), followed by strategic (2.02) and thematic frames (1.60), confirming that at moments of maximal political tension, the media prioritize emotionally mobilizing narratives.

Hypothesis 5. Fear is more frequent in the overall corpus than the other frames. Cochran's Q test, appropriate for contrasting dependent dichotomous variables, revealed significant differences among the three types of frames (Q = 42.51, df = 2, p < .001, n = 262). In terms of frequency, strategic frames appeared in 256 of the 262 texts (97.7 %), thematic frames in 228 (87.0 %), and fear frames in 212 (80.9 %). Thus, although fear was widely present, the hypothesis is not supported, since it did not surpass the generic frames in the overall coverage.

Taken together, the findings indicate that fear frames constitute a significant component of Hispanic American coverage of the 2024 US presidential campaign, although their operation does not conform to a single or exclusive pattern. While the fear frame was more prevalent during periods of heightened electoral intensity and positively correlated with strategic frames, additional evidence nuances these trends: fear was more strongly associated with thematic frames than with strategic ones, and its distribution was not significantly conditioned by the actors' political affiliation. Moreover, strategic frames proved to be the most prevalent overall, outnumbering both fear and thematic frames, suggesting that a competitive logic continues to dominate media treatment of the electoral process. Taken together, these findings delineate a more complex narrative landscape in which emotional, strategic, and substantive elements coexist,

overlap, and mutually reinforce one another in the construction of political-media discourse.

FEAR, STRATEGY, AND HYBRID NARRATIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that fear operated as a relevant media frame in Hispanic American coverage of the 2024 US presidential campaign, not as an isolated category but articulated alongside distinct discursive logics of political reporting. Rather than forming a single pattern, fear combined with both strategic and substantive elements at different moments and around different actors. The first empirical result is its intensification during periods of heightened political visibility (H1) —debates, conventions, and the days preceding the election—, a statistically confirmed pattern that points to the emotional ritualization of coverage: outlets amplify fear at moments of maximum exposure.

This behaviour fits the structural logic of political mediatisation, in which conflict, urgency, and risk move to the centre as the decision point approaches. Contrary to expectations, fear was more strongly associated with the thematic frame than with the strategic frame (H2 and H5). Its positive correlation with frames focused on proposals, problems, and positions suggests that fear functions as a transversal intensifier capable of amplifying both electoral confrontation and the dramatization of substantive content. This aligns with work showing how fear migrates across issues, heightening the perceived salience of social problems (Altheide and Michalowski, 1999). Consistently, prior studies note that fear reinforces thematic narratives and contributes to defining collective risks and threats (Breen *et al.*, 2006; Cannon and Irani, 2011). In this sense, fear is not merely a vehicle for competitive discourse; it is also a resource that dramatizes policy content and magnifies the relevance of structural problems.

With respect to actors' ideological affiliation (H3), no significant differences were found: leaders on the right and the left mobilized fear in comparable proportions. This supports the notion of fear as a cross-cutting frame not restricted to a particular ideology (Altheide and Michalowski, 1999; Scheufele, 1999). At the same time, it contrasts with studies in which fear was predominantly instrumentalized by dominant actors, as in the construction of immigrants as a threat in Ireland (Breen *et al.*, 2006). The evidence here suggests that fear-driven emotionalization is an adaptable tool used according to the narrative opportunities of each context.

Although prominent in key events, fear did not displace the strategic frame, which dominated more than 97 % of the corpus (H4 and H5). This invites a more nuanced reading: competition remains the organizing axis of electoral coverage, but it is intensified by an emotional layer that dramatizes its consequences. Rather than substitution, the pattern is one of dual intensification: strategy structures the narrative, while fear adds urgency and dramatization.

Taken together, the results support the view that fear is neither an independent nor an ideologically biased frame; it is an adaptable resource that integrates with other frames to increase the efficacy of political discourse. Hispanic American coverage of the 2024 campaign thus presents a hybrid narrative in which conflict, fear, and thematization overlap and mutually reinforce one another. In this hybrid schema, fear becomes a narrative device that dramatizes both electoral competition and its substantive implications, reinforcing the emotional impact on audiences.

The study has several limitations. First, the inability to classify all actors ideologically led to the exclusion of some cases from the affiliation analysis. Second, the focus on digital Hispanic American outlets without differentiating editorial lines prevents more precise comparisons. Third, the binary coding scheme did not capture rhetorical intensity or affective tone. Finally, extraordinary events —such as the attack on Donald Trump or Joe Biden's withdrawal— may have produced exceptional emotional spikes not directly attributable to editorial decisions.

Building on these limitations, four directions are proposed:

1. Comparative analyses by media affiliation.
2. Incorporation of sentiment and tonality methods to measure emotional intensity.
3. Reception studies examining how audiences process these frames; and
4. Mixed-methods approaches integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses to understand the interplay among emotion, strategy, and content in contemporary electoral discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the presence and behaviour of fear as a media frame in Hispanic American coverage of the 2024 US presidential campaign. Using a quantitative design based on structured coding and nonparametric statistical tests, we assessed five hypotheses aimed at identifying patterns of appearance, discursive associations, and variations by actors, periods, and narrative frames.

Regarding RQ1, the findings suggest that generic frames dominated the narrative, both strategic and thematic, and among them, strategic frames were the most relevant ones. However, and answering RQ2, the results confirm that fear is a stable, recurrent rhetorical resource, intensified during periods of high political visibility and positively associated with both strategic and thematic frames. Its use traverses multiple actors without an exclusive ideological anchoring, challenging views that position fear as a frame subordinate to conflict or monopolized by conservative sectors. Instead, fear emerges as a cross-cutting discursive modulator, capable of amplifying both the drama of electoral competition and the emotional salience of substantive content. In response to RQ3, there were no significant actors leading fear as a narrative source, as it was present in different political affiliations.

Overall, the coverage reveals a hybrid narrative in which emotionality, strategy, and thematization converge. Fear does not replace other frames; it overlays them, densifying the representation of the electoral process. While the strategic frame remains hegemonic, the emotional dimension —particularly fear— consolidates its role as a narrative tool with its own logic. Understanding this articulation is essential not only for analysing media discourse but also for interpreting the affective climates in which contemporary political legitimacy is contested.

During the preparation of this article, the research team used ChatGPT (OpenAI) as a support tool. Specifically, the system was consulted for guidance on performing and interpreting statistical procedures in SPSS, which were applied to the analysis of the study data. In addition, ChatGPT was employed to provide assistance with editing and stylistic refinement of text drafted by the authors, and to adapt the manuscript to meet the journal's formatting and stylistic requirements. All intellectual contributions, data interpretations, and substantive revisions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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