

Fair and Balanced: The History, Operation, and Political Impacts of Fox News

by
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A PROJECT

submitted to

Oregon State University

University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the degrees of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Political Science
(Honors Scholar)

Presented on May 22, 2015
Commencement June 2016

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jonathan L. Bosworth for the degrees of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Political Science presented on May 22, 2015. Title: Fair and Balanced: The History, Operation, and Political Impacts of Fox News

Abstract approved: _____

Robert Sahr

Starting in 2001, just five years after its formation, Fox News had the largest nightly cable television news audience and has become an important participant in American news media. Despite outside claims of Fox's conservative-leaning news coverage, Fox News claims status as an objective news source presenting "fair and balanced" coverage. Fox argues that the presence of widespread "liberal bias" in mainstream media makes it appear conservative, only by contrast. This work synthesizes a number of research materials to examine possible impacts of Fox News on American politics. Through studying the history, operation, and political impacts of Fox News, I find correlations between Fox News and increased political polarization, misinformation, and Republican vote share. However, it is difficult to specify the exact impact of Fox News on those changes because Fox is only part of the larger conservative media system within the information-rich environment in which we live.

Keywords: Fox News, polarization, misinformation, voting, partisan media.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the collection of Oregon State University. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request. I also affirm that the work represented in this thesis is my own work.

Jonathan L. Bosworth, Author

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1—Introduction

“Fair and Balanced.” “We report, You Decide.” “The Most Powerful Name in News.” Regardless of political ideology, these phrases evoke powerful emotions in most who know their source. Americans live in a saturated media environment and face an increasingly frustrating political system. Launched in 17 million homes in 1996 (King) and quickly growing to approximately 94.7 million homes today (Seidman), Fox News has become a prominent figure in news media and American politics. Fox News produces all five of the highest rated shows in cable television news (Kissell).

In Fox’s meteoric rise the network gained a following of loyal viewers and “changed the way many Americans process news” (Jamieson and Capella, 48). Much has been made about the presence of an ideological slant in segments aired on Fox News. Fox News defends its status as a legitimate news organization by arguing it only appears conservative because of the “liberal bias” in all other media outlets. Others claim Fox News’ development as an advantage for the GOP and conservative movements, calling it “the greatest structural obstacle facing opponents of the right wing” and one of the most important political stories of the era (Brock, 3). This characterization implies that a single media outlet such as Fox News can have an impact on American politics.

I decided to study Fox News because of its status as the highest rated cable television station as well as its reputation for producing conservative Republican supporting media. Through informal conversations with others before researching I found people that feel either very positive or very negative about Fox News. Most responses were negative; through Oregon is probably not a good representation of the views of the United States. Through further academic research three distinct impacts of Fox News became evident. My results show a

correlation between Fox News viewers and increased levels of political polarization and misinformation, with the exception of one study. These studies are mostly correlative given the saturated media and communication networks we live in, making it nearly impossible to isolate Fox's effects. I also found studies showing causation through Fox News causing an increase in political knowledge on issues benefitting Republicans and causing an increase in Republican vote share.

Much of the research presented fits in well with broader social science research on framing. Framing effects occur when often small "changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes large) changes in opinion" (Chong and Druckman, 104). In individuals, framing occurs when people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue that causes their views to become more rigid. A strong ideological frame rests on "symbols, endorsements, and links to partisanship and ideology, and may be effective through shaping opinions through heuristics rather than direct information about the substance of a policy" (Chong and Druckman, 111). Framing also serves as an agenda setter, where problems are defined as worthy of public and government intervention (Entman, 164). Political elites can set the agenda, as can media outlets, by determining what matters to the public and framing the issue in accordance with its political ideology. Likewise framing has an "attribute" level of agenda setting where political elites and media outlets can "highlight the causes of problems, encourage moral judgments (and associated affective responses), and to promote favored policies" (Entman, 164-5). Framing is a key aspect of partisan media presentation and shows the potential influence partisan media have on viewers by producing a strong ideological frame.

It is also important to highlight the history leading to the launch of Fox News as well as the operation at Fox, which leads to having the impacts studied at length in this paper. Section 2

examines the historical causes and events that led to the development of television news, then cable news, conservative news, and finally the launch of Fox News in 1996. Section 3 examines the current operation of Fox News by analyzing the types of programming and programming strategies, including a case study of Fox's coverage of global warming, Fox's conservative ideology and relationship with the Republican Party, and finally a profile of its viewers. Section 4 examines the political impacts of Fox News: an increase among Fox News viewers in political polarization, misinformation, and voting Republican. Finally section 5 will review the results and suggest changes to ameliorate the effects of partisan media.

2—Historical causes in the development of Fox News

Before examining the operation and political impacts of Fox News, it is important to understand the developments leading to the launch and success of Fox News. Media have drastically evolved in the last century due to technological advancements in radio, network and cable television, and now online media. Newspapers gave way to radio, which gave way to network television news, which evolved into cable television news and the creation of 24-hour news networks. Fox News took advantage of this shift in media and launched a news network with sustained success. The following section (Section 2.1) examines the history of television news by illustrating the shift from newspapers and radios to television as well as the type of reporting at the height of television network news. Section 2.2 shows the rise of cable news in competing with network news beginning with the launch of CNN. Section 2.3 illustrates the history of conservative media and its success after the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine and increases in technology. Finally Section 2.4 examines the history of the Fox News Network through its launch in 1996, key actors in its development, and ratings success.

2.1—History of television news

News media have always remained on the cutting edge of technology and information sharing. The twentieth-century produced the greatest advancements in news and journalism in history, including the shift from newspapers to television. Television expanded rapidly during the 1950s with people purchasing televisions for the first time and news corporations gaining a new opportunity to connect with the consumer. By the 1960s television was the dominant news medium in the United States, enjoying the largest audience of any medium (Sahr, 3). Unlike newspapers, television news provided Americans with breaking news faster and gave moving pictures of the stories told. The “drama and imagery of televised news has the greatest potential to stir our emotions” (Morris, 58), making it a powerful alternative to newspapers. Similar to newspaper reporters, television journalists in the late 1950s and early 1960s held themselves to a high professional standard, recognized the importance of objective reporting (to the extent that it is possible), and generally treated political leaders with respect (Hallin and Mancini, 38). This respect translated to politicians having mutual respect for journalists and maintaining a generally positive relationship with the press. This is true to a lesser degree today.

Similar to the sharp rise in households owning a radio, from very few homes in 1920 to over 80 percent of homes in 1940 (West, 131), there was a rapid increase in the number of homes owning a television from 10 percent of homes in 1950 to 90 percent of homes in 1960 (West, 131). Broadcast television news expanded in the 1960s with network television news broadcasts extending from 15 minutes to 30 minutes in 1963. At that time approximately 60 percent of television viewers watched their news from the big three network news programs—ABC, CBS, NBC (West, 131). The increase in television news media coincided with the steady decline in individuals subscribing to a daily newspaper, a trend continuing today and putting hundreds of

papers out of business (West, 131). The height of broadcast news only lasted until the 1980s, when changes in media, through the emergence of cable subscriptions, created a cable television news audience beginning with CNN and contributing to the decline in network news viewership.

2.2—History of cable television news

Cable television was a breakthrough in the late 1940s by the Astoria, Oregon radio host Ed Parsons. After attending the 1946 National Association of Broadcasters convention in Chicago, Parsons was determined to bring the magic of television to his small town for his wife to enjoy—at this time television stations were only available in large metropolitan cities. Parsons used his technical background to find a spot in Astoria receiving a weak signal from a Seattle television station, ultimately settling on the roof of the John Jacob Astor Hotel. Parsons set up an antenna and eventually was able to receive a picture in his home. From this accomplishment he built a bigger signal receiving device and used coaxial cables leading to other TV sets, establishing the first community-antenna television (CATV) installation in February 1949 (John). In 1950 only 70 communities and 14,000 households had cable systems, by 2011 there were more than 5300 systems serving 34,000 communities and 60 million subscribers (FCC).

The emergence of cable television provides the viewer with more choices in all genres of television with networks competing for viewers' attention. Cable television, beginning with CNN, made the public reliant on just a few news sources and created the 24-hour news cycle where breaking news is reported instantaneously. Moreover cable television news networks are reporting on the air even in an absence of substantial newsworthy events. The availability of television remote controls contributed to changes in the industry by allowing viewers to “channel surf,” quickly and easily searching for more interesting stations when something becomes boring

(Sahr, 5). “Channel surfing” increased cable television news networks’ incentive to find visually interesting programs as well as programs that keep the viewer engaged and tuned to their station (Sahr, 5).

With more cable television viewers came more cable providers looking to pay networks to carry their programs, which providers do not do for over-the-air television such as network television news (Sahr, 5). Cable television news networks continually seek to gain viewers by providing content viewers want to see, leading to a rise in cable television news viewership and a decline in total network television news share. In 1993 network television news accounted for between 55 and 60 percent of the TV news watching audience, whereas in 2008 it accounted for just over 30 percent of the TV news watching audience (Pew Research Center “State of the News Media 2009”). Between 1980 and 2007 network TV evening news viewership declined from over 50 million nightly to viewers to under 25 million nightly viewers (Pew Research Center “State of the News Media 2009”). Oppositely cable television news networks have enjoyed substantial growth in this time period, growing from approximately 1.25 million viewers each night in 1998 to above 4 million news viewers each night in 2008 (Pew Research Center “State of the News Media 2009”). While network news and cable news are rising and falling in ratings respectively, network news still enjoys significantly higher nightly ratings.

With more cable news channels came more opportunity for political opinions to be inserted into on-air discussions. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism found that “52 percent of stories on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox offered only a single point of view on controversial issues, compared to 20 percent of stories on the national network evening news” (Pew Research Center “Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005”). This illustrates the most important impact of cable news, the emergence of the possibility of partisan news sources.

2.3—History of conservative broadcast news media

While partisan media have been a part of American politics and society for decades, the level of partisanship seen today in the media stems back to the end of the Fairness Doctrine in 1980 and the re-emergence of AM radio. The Fairness Doctrine was an FCC regulation requiring broadcast stations to report on controversial public interest issues and fairly present both sides of the issue while doing so. Once the FCC eliminated the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, partisan political talk radio emerged with programs that weren't required to present any opposing views (Sahr, 6). The Telecommunications Act of 1996 further changed radio by allowing companies to control more individual news outlets, creating the potential for hundreds of individual news outlets being controlled by one corporation from which they get their stories, as is the case with Clear Channel operating 800 radio stations (Sahr, 6). With partisan media outlets people can tune in and listen only to information they want to hear, presented in a way that reinforces their pre-conceived beliefs. Internet further exacerbates the problem by “reinforc[ing] the ability of those looking for news to seek out only sources that reflect their point of view so that they can hear, read, or see only views that support their own.” (Sahr, 6). Today one can seek out conservative media content on radio talk shows, cable television stations, and the Internet (there is also an opportunity for liberal media content in these media).

The rise of conservative media was also accompanied by a change in journalistic culture, evolving from journalists seeking to report the news to journalists seeking to interpret political developments—putting partisan spin on current events (Sahr, 9). Conservative media has been, and continues to be, more successful than liberal media in getting out its message and gaining viewers or listeners. Conservative media outlets spend a good deal of time arguing the presence of a “liberal bias”, stating all other media offers a liberal point of view and only the conservative

media sources present a fair, balanced, and objective point of view. Although conservative media generally continues to see a rise in its popularity, one conservative media outlet has risen above the rest in the short time of its operation.

2.4—History of the Fox News Network

In less than 20 years the Fox News Network has successfully transformed cable television news and reaped financial rewards. In 2011 Fox News earned an estimated profit of \$887.6 million for its parent organization News Corporation—now known as Twenty-First Century Fox, Inc. (Pew Research Center “State of the News Media” 2013). Other than Fox News, Rupert Murdoch’s 21st Century Fox owns the film division 20th Century Fox, a host of small and large newspapers around the country, and other media assets. The Chairman of the Fox News Network division of 21st Century Fox is Roger Ailes, a major player in conservative politics at the end of the 20th century. Ailes previously worked as a media consultant for Nixon, Reagan, and George H.W. Bush to craft a media image for politicians to sway the public and press to follow and support his candidates. After several ventures into the television industry, Ailes became the head of CNBC in 1993 where he more than quintupled profits and brought new television stars to the mainstream (Dickinson “Fear Factory”). Ailes’ success at CNBC brought him recognition from Rupert Murdoch who hired Ailes as the Chairman of Fox News Channel to counterweight what Murdoch saw as the bias of CNN (Dickinson “Fear Factory”).

When Fox News was rolled out and grew between 1996 and 2001, systems were upgrading from analog to digital equipment and a new wave of channels entered cable lineups with different channel positions depending on the area and provider (Martin and Yurukoglu, 8). Even during that period, Fox News did well through a unique strategy of paying cable companies to air Fox News in an effort to get Fox News into 25 million homes soon after it was launched.

The network was willing to lose \$400 million paying cable providers to carry Fox News before the network reached profitability in 2001 (Brock, 381). Regardless, Fox News quickly gained access to a large audience across the country and a platform for Murdoch and the recently hired Ailes to produce the type of network they wanted. Ailes hired John Moody, the experienced conservative journalist from *Time*, to help fill the newsroom with like-minded journalists and build up the new network.

Murdoch, Ailes, and Moody worked to control the message at Fox News and adopt a unique style. As noted by Jonathan Ladd, “Fox News, founded in 1996, adopted a more opinionated style similar to conservative talk radio. From its inception, Fox prominently featured conservative political talk shows...By late 2004, 22% of Americans reported getting most of their news from Fox. Its ratings were greater than CNN, MSNBC, and CNBC combined” (Ladd, 69). Other studies have noted Fox News’ successful business strategy in providing a conservative slant to the news and it becoming a “cultural force in the U.S. synonymous with media bias and the mixing of news and entertainment” (Martin and Yurukoglu, 7). Dickinson quotes a former anchor in saying, “All outward appearances were that it was just like any other newsroom...But you knew that the way to get ahead was to show your color—and that your color was red. Red state, that is” (Dickinson “Fear Factory”). In describing Ailes’ ability to grow Fox News in to the highest rated cable news network, a former News Corporation colleague said, “He’s got a niche audience and he’s programmed it beautifully, he feeds them exactly what they want to hear” (Dickinson “Fear Factory”).

With a conservative newsroom and anchors, the overall television audience shifted: “in 2008, 66% of viewers of Bill O’Reilly’s show identified as conservative, while 3% identified as liberal” (Ladd, 69). Ladd goes on to highlight a poll taken before the 2010 midterm election,

which found that 5% of Fox's viewers were planning to vote for Democratic candidates (Ladd, 69). Fox News was the first network to develop audio and visual presentations including "the scrolling "ticker" at the bottom of the TV screen, viewer-friendly headline updates, sound effects to introduce news segments, and dramatic multimedia visuals" (Morris, 60). From the Fox News Alert banner, to the plethora of American flags, to eye-grabbing graphics and phrases such as "Fair and Balanced" and "We report, you decide", Fox News has developed techniques that others have copied. With successful reporting techniques and covering stories in a partisan manner, Fox News holds the top of the cable news ratings and has remained for over a decade.

3—Operation of Fox News

The media's rapid development has drastically expanded the reach of the news media. Today Fox News pushes its "fair and balanced" narrative to cement their status as a legitimate news organization. However former Republican political operative David Brock, who founded the organization *Media Matters for America*, has another take on Fox News. He characterizes Fox and conservative media as "a massive fraud, victimizing its own audience and corrupting the broader political dialogue with the tacit permission of established media authorities who should, and probably do, know better" (Brock, 10). Is this true, or a case of a partisan attack against Fox News? I will describe Fox News' operation through first examining the types of programming produced by Fox News in Section 3.1. Next, Section 3.2 will illuminate the six most prominent programming strategies employed by Fox News. In Section 3.3, I present a case study of Fox News' coverage of global warming. Section 3.4 examines Fox's dominant conservative ideology and Section 3.5 demonstrates Fox's relationship with the Republican Party. Finally Section 3.6 offers a demographic and political profile of Fox viewers around the nation.

3.1—Programming Produced by Fox News

As a 24-hour news network Fox News faces the challenge of constantly producing programs throughout the day, unlike network television news that typically produces a morning show and the evening news. Depending on the day of the week Fox News produces between 15 and 18 hours of daily programming. Most of the original content in daily programming comes between 5am and 11pm, with weekends producing the fewest number of hours of programming (Fox News Channel). All the programming on Fox News is shot and produced by the network, with some parts replayed in the middle of the night, during which there are no live or new programs. The highest rated shows on Fox News Channel are those aired in primetime, that is, between 8:00pm and 11:00pm. Fox runs cable news' top-rated show *The O'Reilly Factor* between 8:00pm and 9:00pm, *The Kelly File* between 9:00pm and 10:00pm, and *Hannity* between 10:00pm and 11:00pm. For West Coast viewers these programs are aired live from 5:00pm to 8:00pm and also aired again from 8:00pm to 11:00pm. In 2014 Fox News had the top five highest rating programs in cable news with *The O'Reilly Factor*, *The Kelly File*, *The Five*, *Special Report with Bret Baier*, and *On the Record with Greta van Susteren*, all of which air between 5:00pm and 10:00pm (Kissell).

Fox News' presence has created controversy about the type of programming produced, especially in relation to their claim to be a "fair and balanced" news source. Fox executives define the weekday hours between 9:00am and 4:00pm and 6:00pm to 8:00pm as objective (nonpartisan) news, seeking to highlight objective news programs (Stelter). Washington Post writer Erik Wemple spent a day watching Fox News and found objective news produced in the daytime hours, counting nearly 40 straight up, unbiased news segments totally around 132 minutes over six daytime hours—or 360 minutes (Wemple, 4). Wemple also counted 14 equally

timed segments totaling 64 minutes where a rightward tilt was “somewhere between slight and overwhelming” (Wemple, 6).

In contrast, the magazine *Rolling Stone* ran several articles casting Fox News in a negative light. In describing Fox News Chairman Roger Ailes, Tim Dickinson writes, “Ailes has used Fox News to pioneer a new form of political campaign—one that enables the GOP to bypass skeptical reporters and wage an around-the-clock, partisan assault on public opinion” (Dickinson “Fear Factory”). Another *Rolling Stone* article highlights a full day of Fox News coverage by summing up the programming into five main talking points repeated throughout the day on various Fox programs. *Rolling Stone* categorizes Fox News in saying, “Fox may look like a news broadcast, but it’s really the advance guard of the GOP distortion machine” (Dickinson “Distort, Attack, Repeat”). While there is disagreement between news organizations regarding the level of opinion-based news produced by Fox, turning to academic sources provides a more careful and clearly defined picture.

In the Pew Research Center’s “State of the News Media 2013” the content of the three large cable news outlets (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) is compared to create a graph depicting the percentage of time each network devotes to factual reporting versus commentary/opinion. This report found that CNN has the highest factual reporting with 54 percent factual reporting and 46 percent commentary/opinion and MSNBC has the lowest percentage of factual reporting, showing just 15 percent factual reporting and 85 percent commentary/opinion (Pew Research Center “State of the News Media 2013”). Fox News is in the middle with 45 percent factual reporting and 55 percent commentary/opinion (Pew Research Center “State of the News Media 2013”). In referring to the 55-45 breakdown for Fox News, top-rated Fox host Bill O’Reilly

agreed on his program saying, “That’s about right” (Wemple, 2). Fox’s conservative lean in reporting the news is economically successful and employs proven programming strategies.

3.2—Programming Strategies

Through my research I am able to identify six programming strategies employed by Fox News. The first strategy is inviting guests sympathetic to Fox’s conservative ideology on to Fox News programs. Next I show that Fox airs and emphasizes stories that will support their ideological position. Fox also criticizes the other side and attempts to show there is no real argument, their side is correct. Fourth, Fox employs repetition in its stories and opinions throughout the day. Next, Fox argues the presence of a “liberal bias” in the media. Finally, Fox News utilizes word choice strategies in their programming to further their ideological position.

In examining these programming strategies utilized by Fox News, it is first important to note that Fox is not the only network that uses these strategies. All partisan news networks use these strategies in an attempt to gain viewers, however I focus on Fox News because of their high ratings and consistent success over CNN and MSNBC since 2001 (Morris, 60) as well as their reputation for producing conservative media. Outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC, representing the conservative and liberal perspectives, respectively, may report on the same story but inevitably arrive at different conclusions. This was the case after President Obama announced changes to immigration policy. MSNBC hailed it as a significant accomplishment and Fox News characterized it as an unconstitutional reach of power. By inserting their own opinions to the discussion Fox News and MSNBC spin issues to fit their partisan narrative, an illustration of framing. As mentioned earlier, framing is extremely important in social science literature and provides a lens with which to view the world. Framing an issue or discussion in a

certain way changes the viewers' perception of the story's implications and has a powerful ability to influence the way people think about issues and events.

The choice of guests reinforces Fox News' ability to criticize the opposition, "by and large the typical guest on these shows agrees with the host" (Levendusky, 3). Ideas from the other side are quickly shot down and countered with ideas supporting the conservative viewpoint of Fox News. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Fox News quoted Republicans four times as often than Democrats about Iraq and ten times as often than Democrats about Afghanistan, showing agreement between the anchors and guests (Aday, 153). While Fox promises it is fair and balanced, the balance is achieved by "simply inviting liberal guests—not by ensuring that their ideas will receive comparable time" (Jamieson and Capella, 49). Fox News is able to secure repeated exposure of its partisan ideas by limiting the presence of opposing viewpoints on their programs. Critiques of policy positions often turn in to a personal critique of the opposition's leaders—such as President Obama—while also highlighting the errors and mistakes of the opposition to "mock and ridicule" (Levendusky, 31-32). While traditional network news outlets seek objective journalism, increasingly cable news outlets produce programs appealing to specific ideological positions to attract viewers who are in agreement with the network's ideological stance.

Data show most viewers of ideologically slanted networks, such as Fox News, agree with the position of the network. As a result viewers hear an echo of their own beliefs and don't have to listen to political messages they don't want to hear, leading to impacts on American politics to be discussed later. For example, in framing news surrounding climate change and global warming, Fox News seeks to "carefully pick out the facts that support their side and omit the ones that work in their opponent's favor" (Levendusky, 27). Matthew Levendusky confirmed

this through conducting a careful fourteen-day study of the transcripts from Fox News, where he found several unique programming strategies from Fox News: in addition to framing stories in a way that supports their conservative views, Fox News devotes different amounts of time than other networks to stories that will promote a conservative political ideology and resonate with conservative talking points (Levendusky, 25). Sometimes Fox News refrains from airing certain stories if the stories aren't supportive of a conservative ideological viewpoint. Likewise Fox News emphasizes stories ignored by mainstream media outlets, because of the story's favorability toward conservatives. An example of this phenomena occurred during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2005. Sean Aday compared the coverage by NBC and Fox News and found Fox was more sympathetic to the Bush administration. Fox News focused more on the good news coming from the Middle East, with 29 percent of stories about Iraq and Afghanistan being good news—compared to 19 percent from NBC (Aday, 150). Fox was also less likely than NBC to report bad news in Iraq and Afghanistan (Aday, 150). Moreover both Fox News and NBC underreported the number of military deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan (Aday, 152). Politicians do the same thing in framing an issue to voters in an attempt to “mobilize voters behind their policies by encouraging them to think about those policies along particular lines” (Chong and Druckman, 106). By picking and choosing stories that fit the network's partisan stance, Fox News introduces bias into their programming, regardless of what is being said on-air.

Through providing a one-sided take on political issues and devoting more or less time to particular stories than other networks, Fox News is able to spread their conservative viewpoint. This viewpoint is spread without shouting or arguing, but rather through an opinion-based culture where one side emerges victoriously in the eyes of the host and the audience: “Shouting is not really necessary because there's no argument (nor any need for it)” (Levendusky, 28).

Without shouting Fox still provides controversy, *The O'Reilly Factor* host Bill O'Reilly said, "If you're not providing controversy and excitement, people won't listen or watch" (Alterman, 43-4). Often partisan programs on Fox News spend more time criticizing the liberal opposition than advocating for the conservative viewpoint, reinforcing selective news production and the viewpoints of the already-conservative viewers (Levendusky, 33). Anchors also hype policies and developments as crucially important issues that in reality are not, such as the planned "terror mosque" near Ground Zero, which was actually a Muslim community center.

Another strategy used by Fox News is repeating the same story throughout the day. Stories are delivered by different anchors in different shows, each adding small new elements to the story as the day progresses. By adding a new development to the same story, Fox keeps viewers tuned in to remain engaged with the stories (Levendusky, 29). Running the same story with slight changes over a period of a couple days or even a week has political effects in creating "incentives for viewers to return for more reinforcement and exposure, helping to ensure viewers receive multiple doses of the partisan effect" (Levendusky, 29).

In examining repeated media exposure Jamieson and Capella note, "an audience that gravitates primarily to conservative sources whose message is consistent and repetitive is more susceptible to reinforcement and persuasion than an audience exposed to alternative points of view" (Jamieson and Capella, 49). After the 2011 State of the Union, *Rolling Stone Magazine* monitored Fox News for a day and found five consistent talking points: first, "When Obama said 'invest' he really meant 'spend'" was used 27 times throughout the day, second, "Forget Obama's centrist rhetoric: He's actually a radical leftist" was used 20 times, next "The only way to fix the budget is to cut entitlements" was used 24 times, "High-speed rail is a bad idea; after all, Amtrak loses money" was used 9 times, and finally "Obama's budget freeze only locks in

bloated spending levels” was used 14 times (Dickinson “Distort, Attack, Repeat”). These findings are consistent with my viewing of Fox News and reflect an effort to affect viewers’ political views through repetition.

Fox News anchors and executives argue all media outlets are part of the “liberal media”, making it necessary to have an outlet such as Fox News that is critical of Democratic policies and politicians. Highlighting “liberal media bias” is popular at Fox News, using the phrase “liberal media” in over 100 stories in 2009 (Levendusky, 30). Moreover Fox News defends its conservative presentation of the news by countering that it is serving as a “counterweight” to the liberalism of the mainstream media (Jones, 179). Partisan Fox News programs paint themselves as an alternative to the biased coverage by the mainstream media and convince their audience their news is the only “real” news.

Despite their often-overt partisanship, many Fox News (and MSNBC) viewers see these networks as the only objective news source available (Levendusky, 31). Fox and non-Fox viewers recognize the contrast between Fox News and the institutional (ABC, CBS, NBC) media. One strong Republican gave the institutional media a low rating saying, “the news is very pro-liberal except Fox News” (Ladd, 103). Even employees have to further this idea; a former employee stated, “you have to buy into the idea that the other media is howling left-wing. Don’t even start arguing that or you won’t even last your first day” (Boehlert, 2). Fox also utilizes other words and phrases to get across its political agenda beyond exposing “liberal bias.”

Finally, Fox News utilizes carefully delivered word choices to sway their viewers into adopting Fox’s conservative agenda. Researchers assert that conservative opinion media such as Fox News utilize “vivid, concrete, image-oriented language” to evoke an emotional reaction and create in-group bonds to distance viewers from their enemy: that is, Democratic ideology

(Jamieson and Capella, 180). There are also reports of Fox News executives show memos sent to reporters detailing approved language to be used about health care and global warming (Alterman, 71). Research on framing in information presentation also illustrates how word choice can affect public opinion. When respondents are asked whether they would favor or oppose allowing a hate group to hold a political rally, 85% of respondents answered in favor if the question is framed with the phrase “Given the importance of free speech,” whereas only 45% were in favor when the question is framed “Given the risk of violence,” (Sniderman and Theriault, 152). Much of political communication centers around the concept of framing and the impacts it can have on political debates.

Like Fox News, Frank Luntz, one of the most influential political surveyors and consultants within the Republican Party, also employs effective word choice strategies to communicate policy issues. By conducting focus groups Luntz determines which terms are likely to be the least or most offensive to the general public and recommends his conservative clients use terms that will best further their political agenda. In his Environmental Memo Luntz advises clients to “convince [others] of your sincerity and concern for the environment” (Luntz, 132) and to use the term “climate change” instead of “global warming” because it is “less frightening” and “suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge” (Luntz, 142). In another instance Luntz promoted the term “death tax” to influential Republicans in order to sway the public from supporting estate taxes (Harmon, 127). Through an examination of broadcast transcripts between the memo’s release and the bill signing ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, and CNN all used descriptive terminology of the bill itself more often than Luntz’s “death tax” term. However Fox News used the language provided by Luntz more often than descriptive language by a total of 1057 to 785 (Harmon, 134). In total a statistically significant difference emerges

between Fox News' use of the Luntz "death tax" term and other networks' preference for descriptive terminology (Harmon, 134). Fox News employed the same tactic during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while NBC labeled the enemy in Iraq "insurgents" that were aided by some "terrorists", Fox News labeled the enemy "terrorists" far more often than "insurgents" (Aday, 155). Words are extremely powerful and Fox News has successfully utilized words and phrases to effectively further their political slant.

Before highlighting a case study of global warming coverage on Fox News, it is important to note that Fox is not the only cable news network to use the programming strategies shown above. With the exception of the "liberal bias" argument, other partisan media employ these successful strategies to best get their political messages to the viewer.

3.3—A case study of global warming coverage on Fox News

Analyses show that 97 percent of climate scientists agree global warming is occurring and is at least partially caused by humans. Among a host of other researchers, Aaron Huertas and Rachel Kriegsman note, "established climate science is clear: human activities are largely responsible for the majority of recent warming...[yet] only two-thirds of Americans accept that climate change is occurring" (Huertas and Kriegsman, 2). Some explanation for the lack of policy change lies in the success of networks such as Fox News in convincing the public global warming is not occurring and there's nothing wrong with current human energy consumption.

Using the programming strategies outlined in the previous section, Fox News reflects and reinforces the conservative mindset on climate change, also using inaccurate and dismissive portrayals of established climate science to bolster political arguments (Huertas and Kriegsman, 2). Fox News' hosts also often "disparaged the study of climate science and criticized scientists" (Huertas and Kriegsman, 4). In a study completed through analyzing cable news transcripts,

researchers found that 33 percent of Fox News' climate change segments challenged the reality of climate change, while virtually no CNN or MSNBC segments did this (Feldman et. al, 10). In a similar study researchers examined transcripts from the major three cable networks (CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News) and found differences in the way Fox and the others reported on climate change. While CNN produced accurate—meaning in accordance with the majority of climate scientists—climate change stories 70 percent of the time and MSNBC did so 92 percent of the time, Fox News produced segments reflecting an accurate portrayal of climate change only 28 percent of the time (Huertas and Kriegsman, 4).

Feldman et. al also categorized stories dismissive of climate change, defined as if at least 80 percent of the viewpoints or information challenge the reality or severity of climate change (Feldman et. al, 8). Their study found Fox News to be by far the least likely to be accepting and most likely to be dismissive of climate change; nearly 60 percent of Fox News climate change segments were dismissive of climate change, compared to no MSNBC segments and 7 percent of CNN segments. Less than 20 percent of Fox News segments accepted the presence of climate change, compared to over 70 percent of CNN and MSNBC segments (Feldman et. al, 9). By selectively presenting only facts furthering their political position, Fox News presents a factual but one-sided showing of the debate (Levendusky, 27). Selective presentation is just one of the many ways Fox News furthers its stance on climate change to the public.

While rejecting claims of global warming from climate scientists, Fox News calls the authority of climate scientists into question by arguing they can't be trusted. Additionally Fox has misrepresented the long history of climate science by asserting it "is young, it's new, built on all kinds of assumptions and data which contradict each other" (Huertas and Kriegsman, 7). Fox News also produces segments that highlight short-term trends in global surface-temperature

records that present a misleading narrative by ignoring the long-term trends of rising sea levels and melting Arctic ice, among other indicators (Huertas and Kriegsman, 5). In rejecting the findings from climate scientists Fox News hosts and guests regularly also reject climate change policies because of their assertion of inaccurate or unsure science (Huertas and Kriegsman, 8).

All of the climate change strategies used by Fox are consistent with other research findings that “Fox broadcasts were more likely to include statements that challenged the scientific agreement on climate change, undermined the reality of climate change, and questioned its human causes” (Feldman et. al, 12). A survey of Fox News viewers confirms the success of these tactics: viewing Fox News is associated with lower levels of acceptance of global warming, the opposite of CNN or MSNBC viewers (Feldman et. al, 20). While it is impossible to say that Fox News directly affects people’s opinions on climate change, or even how much affect Fox News has, there is a correlation between viewing Fox and accepting or rejecting climate change. It is unclear what came first: do people who don’t believe in climate change watch Fox News disproportionately or does Fox News convince viewers to reject climate change? This is a question for further research, but still reflects a clear picture of Fox’s one-sided presentation of climate change.

3.4 Fox’s conservative ideology

Much of Fox News’ ratings success can be attributed to the programming it produces—namely politically biased, ideologically conservative news and opinion. Despite Roger Ailes’ assertion to the contrary, studies show Fox News uses a conservative ideological slant and pro-conservative presentation of the news to attract and retain audiences sympathetic to the conservative viewpoint (Jones, 179). By analyzing transcripts from the congressional record and putting together a frequency list of two-word phrases, researchers were able to place each

congressperson on a [-1,1] ideological scale where more positive indicated more conservative. Next they compared the frequency of the two-word phrases and ideology of the speaker with transcripts from Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC and found that Fox was consistently more conservative than the other two channels (Martin and Yurukoglu, 16). Their estimates put Fox News “very close to the median Republican voter” (Martin and Yurukoglu, 16).

In an empirical study examining how often ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox News release presidential approval numbers, Tim Groeling found results of a conservative media bias at Fox News. Comparing how often Fox News reported Bill Clinton’s approval numbers dropping by 5 points versus how often they reported Clinton’s numbers raising by 5 points, Groeling found that Fox News reported a 5-point drop in approval numbers 39.3% of the time, whereas they reported a 5-point gain in approval numbers 13.7% of the time. During the Bush administration a similar trend emerged, in which Fox reported a 5-point jump in approval numbers 54.4% of the time and a 5-point dip in approval numbers 36.7% of the time (Groeling, 646). Fox News also utilized outside polling 58 times to show Bush’s approval ratings (which were usually more positive than their internal results) and also showed a willingness to use outside polling against Clinton, if it was damaging (Groeling, 651). Fox News was the only network that favored negative polls for Clinton and positive polls for Bush, suggesting a right-wing bias (Groeling, 652).

Top Obama administration officials Rahm Emmanuel and David Axelrod, respectively, described Fox as “not a news organization so much as it has a perspective” and “really not news...It’s pushing a point of view” (Ladd, 87). Moreover a letter sent from a Fox former employee states that while Chairman Roger Ailes demands to be treated as an unbiased journalist, “the cable channel he controls has an undisguised ideological agenda, which has made his protestations a bit puzzling” (Stanley). The success of the channel is a result of, by

conventional and Fox's analysis, "providing a healthy and much desired right-wing antidote to the whiny pap of the liberal hegemony... They tell the viewer, this is how to think about stories" (Beinhart, 182).

By presenting a conservative ideology through the news, Fox is seeking a conservative or ideologically independent audience that are most likely to be persuaded by Fox's tactics, a key component in the media's transformation from being a content company to an audience company (Jones, 180). Jones describes ideologically centered news in terms of aesthetic performances with dramatic elements appealing to viewers (Jones, 182). The dramatic ideological performance of Fox News allows the hosts and guests to make ideologically threatening events seem worse than they may be, creating the conception that Fox News is "the place where viewers can trust that threats will be exposed and fought against" (Jones 182-3).

Ramifications of a news network presenting a conservative ideology are that the content produced "reinforces the views of these outlets' like-minded audience members, helps them maintain ideological coherence, protects them from counter persuasion, reinforces conservative values and dispositions, holds Republican candidates and leaders accountable to conservative ideals, tightens their audience's ties to the Republican Party, and distances [viewers] from 'liberals' in general" (Jamieson and Capella, *x*). Jeffrey Jones holds that Fox has demonstrated that TV doesn't need to be "*about* politics but can *be* politics instead" (Jones, 184). By creating a politically focused network, Fox News grows economically and plays a role within conservative politics. It selectively reports or interprets stories to fit the conservative ideological viewpoint, as was seen in Fox News' de-emphasizing bad news and emphasizing good news during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in contrast to NBC (Aday, 150). Aday concluded Fox's favorable reporting toward Republicans shows that the network "not only tilts right, but serves as

a reliable megaphone for the Bush administration's arguments, including allowing administration officials (and their allies) to dominate other voices" (Aday, 157). If Fox News was truly a megaphone for the Bush administration, it might be more appropriate to consider it an alternative media source rather than fair and balanced news network as they claim.

3.5—Fox News and its relationship with the Republican Party

While Fox News and the Republican Party have no official ties and Fox maintains its position as a 'fair and balanced' news organization, questions have arisen about their relationship and coordination. Significant media figures such as Christiane Amanpour have criticized the Bush administration and "its foot soldiers at Fox News" for stifling reports on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through intimidation tactics (McChesney, 122). Likewise President Obama's White House Interim Communications Director Anita Dunn characterized Fox News as being "the communications arm of the Republican Party" (Ladd, 87) And there are reports from former employees, such as Charles Reina, that reveal "the stations managements gave daily directives on issues and angles to cover that tended to correlate with White House spin. Indeed, Roger Ailes, head of Fox News Channel, had offered advice to President Bush about how to react to the 9/11 attacks" (McChesney, 284; Jamieson and Capella, 50). Multiple reports corroborate that Ailes consulted with President Bush after the 9/11 attacks, raising the question if Fox News directly coordinates with the Republican Party. Or if Fox employees are monitoring the Bush Administration and providing coverage supporting and reiterating the Administration's talking points.

Being the most viewed cable news network gives Fox News a great deal of power within the Republican Party. A New York magazine report quoted a GOP insider as saying "You can't run for the Republican nomination without talking to Roger [Ailes]. Every single candidate has

consulted with Roger” (Sherman). When President Bush was elected in 2000, Fox News was the first network to proclaim him as the winner in Florida and thus the winner in the election. Ailes tapped John Prescott Ellis to head the network’s “decision desk”, which was responsible for calling states for either Bush or Gore, who was George Bush’s first cousin (Dickinson “Fear Factory”). Ellis admitted in an interview with the *New Yorker Magazine* that he shared the exit poll data by phone with his cousins George and Jeb Bush, who was then governor of Florida.

In an instance highlighting the similarities between the messages of the Bush administration and Fox News, both parties used the same talking points against John Kerry in the 2004 campaign, namely that he had a “flip-flop voting record” (Dickinson “Fear Factory”). Moreover in an interview with Chris Matthews on *Hardball*, former Bush Press Secretary Scott McClellan admitted that the Bush administration often would feed Fox News talking points that network commentators would recite on air, acting like spokespeople for the Bush administration (McClellan). Anchors and commentators work from daily talking points that come straight from the top, a former Fox News deputy says, “Roger gives them the spin” (Dickinson “Fear Factory”). Ailes holds a lot of the power at Fox News; former Bush speechwriter asserted “Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us, now we’re discovering that we work for Fox” (Dickinson “Fear Factory”).

Other studies point to Fox News as a semi-propagandist arm of the Republican Party by highlighting widespread agreement of Fox’s strong relationship with the Republican Party (Bartlett, 15). Without any official link between Fox News and the Republican Party it is difficult to assert a direct connection between the groups. However, numerous interconnections using similar talking points, hiring conservative reporters, and Ailes’ close connection with the Party suggests some sort of link.

3.6—A profile of Fox viewers

While it is impossible to lump all Fox News viewers into one demographic category, several unique traits characterize the average Fox News viewer. Demographically Fox News' viewers are more likely than MSNBC viewers to be white, male, southern, identify as born-again Christian, and are less likely to have a postsecondary education (Levendusky, 12). The average Fox News viewer is 56 years old; 49% of Fox News viewers are male, 93% are Caucasian, 33% live in the South, 14% have an annual income over \$150,000, and 15% have a professional degree (Levendusky, 12). The type of person who watches partisan media such as Fox News is more likely to be politically involved, follow elections "very closely", and twice as likely to report they discuss politics twice daily (Levendusky, 13). Between 2000 and 2010, Levendusky found a change in the split between Democrats and Republicans in relation to the network they regularly watched, MSNBC or Fox News. In 2000 people from both parties watched both networks about equally, but since then a steady decrease of Democrats and increase of Republicans report watching Fox News "regularly" (Levendusky, 15).

In the Pew Research Center's 2014 report on political polarization and media habits, surveys showed the people who identify themselves as consistent conservatives cluster themselves around a single news source, with 47% naming Fox News as their main government and politics news source (Pew Research Center "Political Polarization & Media Habits", 2). Similarly 31% of "mostly conservative" people watch Fox News as their main news source, a trend that declines with just 8% of politically "mixed" and 5% of "mostly liberal" people watching Fox News as their main government and politics news source (Pew Research Center "Political Polarization & Media Habits", 4). While Fox News viewers predominantly sit to the right of the ideological midpoint, they are "not nearly as far right as several other sources, such

as the radio shows of Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck” (Pew Research Center “Political Polarization & Media Habits”, 10). Respondents also reported all of the networks they received any government or political news from in the past week and the results are telling about Fox News’ audience: 24% “mostly liberal”, 39% “mixed”, 61% “mostly conservative”, and 84% “consistently conservative” viewers reported receiving their government or political news from Fox News in the past week (Pew Research Center “Political Polarization & Media Habits”, 20). The demographic groups who report trusting Fox are those that watch it most often, where people of “mixed”, “mostly conservative” and “consistently conservative” ideologies have more trust than distrust of Fox News (Pew Research Center “Political Polarization & Media Habits”, 5). Among consistently conservative viewers, majorities distrust other media sources such as MSNBC (75% distrust), NBC News (62%), CNN (61%), and ABC News, CBS News, and NY Times (all around 50% distrust) (Pew Research Center “Political Polarization & Media Habits”, 15). Additional research indicates a similar phenomenon, “the Fox News audience prefers news that shares their own point of view on politics and issues” (Morris, 74). Fox News enjoys a widespread level of support from conservatives in the country, yet the network’s ability to have a small ideologically independent and liberal following creates the potential for impacting the landscape of American politics.

4—Impacts of Fox News on American Politics

Americans are exposed to hundreds of sources of information each day and studies show relationships between viewing Fox News and political polarization, misinformation, and voting Republican. Section 4.1 examines a causal study that shows the impact of Fox News on political polarization by utilizing psychological research on partisan media and data showing changes in

political ideology after viewing Fox News and correlative studies suggesting evidence of the existence of impacts on political polarization. Section 4.2 shows the prevalence of misinformation among Fox News viewers on various issues through correlative and causal studies, however it is difficult to discern whether misinformed people watch Fox or if Fox makes its viewers more misinformed. Finally Section 4.3 illustrates the causal impact Fox News has on Republican vote share, with different studies concurring that viewing Fox News has a positive impact on voting Republican.

4.1—Political Polarization

Political polarization is defined as: “the vast and growing gap between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats” (Pew Research Center “Political Polarization”). Both Democrats and Republicans are becoming more Democratic or Republican respectively and also less willing to compromise. It is becoming more politically favorable for politicians on both sides of the aisle to show their strong party and ideological loyalty instead of their ability to build broad coalitions. Parties in the legislature are more ideologically distinct than ever before. Both Democrats and Republicans are becoming more extreme and moving further to the left or right, respectively. The two parties are becoming less and less alike, with the House polarizing faster than the Senate and Republicans moving further right than Democrats move left (Voteview). Politicians polarizing reflect the trend of the electorate since the mid-20th century: changes in partisan and ideological alignment in southern states created a solid-Republican south, increasing African American registration and voting had an influence on the Democratic Party, northern states became more liberal, and gerrymandered districts have created geographic party strongholds. This section sets out to explore Fox News’ impact on political polarization through

a study by Matthew Levendusky, exploring the impact of partisan media such as Fox News in his book *How Partisan Media Polarize America* that will serve as a framework for this discussion.

Partisan reinforcement contributes to political polarization by intensifying partisan beliefs. This can be done through the media in a variety of ways. Selective exposure experiences appear especially important: “people are more likely to consume information that confirms their pre-existing views” (Hopkins and Ladd, 120). Moreover the existence of partisan news media combined with the fact that many consumers prefer like-minded news “could lead to a polarizing feedback loop or ‘echo chamber’ where partisans can reinforce and strengthen their initial biases” (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2). In an experimental setting, researchers randomly assigned different news stories to four separate sources—Fox News, NPR, CNN, or the BBC—and asked respondents to choose which of the reports they would like to read out of four choices. The task was completed with both “hard” news (stories featuring up-to-the-minute updates using factual reports in areas such as politics, economic, and war) and “soft” news (stories that seek to entertain or advise viewers occurring in entertainment, health, or human interest stories). The study found that generally Republicans preferred to read reports attributed to Fox News and to avoid reports from CNN and NPR (Iyengar and Hahn, 19). The preference was higher regarding hard news than soft news, likely due to the political nature of hard news. About 50% of Republicans chose Fox News when faced with hard news topics, as opposed to about a 10% likelihood of choosing CNN or NPR (Iyengar and Hahn, 29). The significance of the study is not only to reinforce that Republicans prefer Fox News, but also to highlight the potential of reinforcing prior beliefs when choosing one news source.

Because of the preference of Fox News for Republicans and Fox News’ ideologically slanted programming, viewers will see and hear a message consistent with what they already

believe. This makes the Republican audience more Republican and less receptive to opposing ideas and compromise, that is, more polarized. Reinforcement also contributes to viewers feeling more distrust for opposing positions by calling their motives into question and casting them in a negative light. This, in turn, results in “viewers less willing to compromise, less trusting of the other side, and less likely to support policies attributed to the other party” (Levendusky, 136). An inability to compromise is already plaguing the American political system and a further creation of in-groups and out-groups will only make effective governance more difficult.

Framing also plays a role in individuals becoming more polarized, because when people develop a single conceptualization of an issue or event, they are likely to view the event only in accordance with their pre-established frame (Chong and Druckman, 104). Levendusky explains partisan media’s success and political polarization in terms of the psychological factors at play. He asserts humans are motivated reasoners and have “two broad classes of goals: accuracy goals (the desire to reach the correct conclusion), and directional goals (the desire to reach the preferred conclusion, the one that supports our existing beliefs). Human reasoning relies on both of these, but our directional goals are particularly strong: we process information so that it fits with our existing beliefs” (Levendusky, 50). Other studies also highlight that partisan reinforcement occurs via “motivated reasoning,” shown by Hopkins and Ladd as “those exposed to persuasive political information accept or reject it based on whether it aligns with their prior views” (Hopkins and Ladd, 120). Partisan media intensifies motivated reasoning through affirming what viewers believe by using a one-sided presentation of the news. Viewers become further polarized through an ingrained human sense of viewing the world in terms of in-groups and out-groups. When partisan media invoke in-group ties (the group with the opinion they

prefer) of viewers, people with a difference of opinion are seen as being part of the out-group, which humans have a natural bias against (Levendusky, 63).

Political polarization has been shown to increase most when people watch like-minded partisan media, such as Republicans watching Fox News. Through having subjects briefly watch like-minded, neutral, and crosscutting (going against preexisting political beliefs) news sources, Levendusky found that subjects in the neutral news position became slightly more moderate and that there was no effect on crosscutting news presentation. However, there was a significant causal effect of like-minded media: subjects exposed to like-minded media became more extreme by 0.14 on a [-1,1] scale, the equivalent of answering “strongly agree” instead of “agree” in a Likert scale policy survey (Levendusky, 74). Subjects exposed to like-minded media were 43% more likely to hold more extreme values after watching the news treatment, compared with 23% of neutral news subjects and 21% of crosscutting subjects (Levendusky, 75). Crosscutting news media only moderates viewers who perceive news sources as being credible (Levendusky, 77). Meaning that when liberals watch Fox News, their liberal views will become less liberal if they perceive Fox News to be a credible news source. The largest effects of partisan media, however, arise among those who actually want to watch like-minded news programming (Levendusky, 79). Other studies find that while partisan reinforcement in media influences those who are already predisposed to agree, it might also influence “anyone not predisposed to disagree” (Hopkins and Ladd, 129). That could include independents that are more open to a range of political arguments. Other researchers note that “cable viewers who are initially centrist quickly polarize according to their chosen channel” and, “for initially extreme cable viewers—those to the right of Fox...watching cable news exerts a centralizing force” toward the median Fox viewer (Martin and Yurukoglu, 44-5). Levendusky’s findings of a causal

polarization effect on like-minded viewers is supported by other studies that find while “Fox News access does not have effects so broad as to alter Democrats’ electoral preferences...the effects are confined to reinforcing the predispositions of Republicans and possibly persuading independents” (Hopkins and Ladd, 130). Other researchers found that the increase in polarization due to partisan cable news depends on “the existence of both a persuasive effect and a taste for like-minded news” (Martin and Yurukoglu, 5). The similar findings in different research make it clear that partisan media can have a polarizing effect, especially on those who have like-minded views to the network producing the news.

Framing research reinforces the positive effect of listening to like-minded views within a person’s political frame of reference. Chong and Druckman argue that people will move outside their political frame only when they are sufficiently motivated to do so or if they are exposed to competing frames that they deem to be legitimate or credible (Chong and Druckman, 110). The study authors continue to note, “when citizens receive different views of an issue, they choose the alternative that is consistent with their values or principles” (Chong and Druckman, 112). Likewise, when people have their political frame repeated back to them by the media, certainty and polarization increases.

In relation to watching ideologically partisan media sources such as Fox News, researchers found that multiple exposures act as a reinforcement mechanism that reminds subjects of their viewpoints and pushes them further toward the extremes (Levendusky, 88). Because their views are continuously reinforced, there should also be a correlation between watching partisan news media and attitudinal certainty on issues. Those who received multiple, instead of one, viewings of such partisan media as Fox News were increasingly likely to be more certain about their issues and thus less willing to compromise. In fact, “seeing the treatment

twice made subjects approximately 10 percent more certain of their attitudes” (Levendusky, 89). This is the equivalent of moving from answering “somewhat certain” to “certain” on a Likert scale.

Partisan media doesn’t take moderates and make them extreme; instead, it predominantly takes those that are already extreme and makes them further extreme, shifting sides farther apart (Levendusky, 141). If media bias occurs from a network through a partisan presentation of the news, then viewers are “incompletely informed about facts that are unfavorable for ‘their’ candidate. Even if citizens are completely rational and take media bias into account, they cannot recover all of the missing information” (Bernhardt et. al, 1102). With people identifying as consistent conservatives and consistent liberals nearly twice as likely to drive political discussions (Pew Research Center “Political Polarization & Media Habits”, 41), Fox’s impact of people becoming more politically polarized could have detrimental effects on society. Because most of the active and engaged partisan media viewers are also informal public political leaders, elite polarization increases along with the potential for polarization of the mass public (Levendusky, 143).

Through a more polarized public and polarized media outlets, the Republican political elites are forced to condition their media strategies in order to fit the Fox News audience. For example, a Republican politician appearing on Fox benefits from appearing to be a more extreme Republican. When these highly partisan candidates are elected to office by groups of politically polarized voters, there is a reduced incentive for elected official to compromise, change their extreme partisan stances, or allow the other side to reflect elements of their agenda. While there are undoubtedly numerous other causes of the increased political polarization in the United

States, the growth of partisan media has played a role in the partisan gridlock and resulting stalemates in the leadership in our nation's capital.

4.2—Misinformation

Misinformation, as defined by James Kuklinski, is when people “hold grossly inaccurate factual beliefs but confidently assume to know the facts” (Kuklinski, 1). Misinformation serves as a greater obstacle to evidence-based decision-making than a lack of information because of the psychological barriers of motivated reasoning. Misinformed people are certain they know the correct information. Kuklinski conducted a study in which he examined misinformation during the war in Iraq, showing that Democrats and Republicans interpreted the same factual evidence about troop casualties and about whether the U.S. found weapons of mass destruction in ways that support their existing opinion on the conflict. Republicans consistently underplayed the number of troops casualties as “not a big deal” and held that Iraq moved or destroyed their weapons of mass destruction before the U.S. invaded (Kuklinski, 3). While misinformation can come from predisposed political ideologies, there also is evidence that media consumption can contribute to the misinformation of its viewers, a point that will be developed shortly.

In another example, Fox News promulgated the “death panels” claim from Sarah Palin in noting that the Affordable Care Act health care reform bill would require end-of-life counseling. The “death panel” myth began with Betsy McCaughey, a fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, who published a commentary in *Bloomberg News* claiming that a provision in the stimulus bill would lead to government control of medical treatments (Nyhan, 8). Months later McCaughey claimed that health care legislation would result in seniors being directed to end their life through a required Medicare counseling session every five years. She was referring to a provision where funding was provided for completely voluntary advanced care planning for

Medicare recipients to consult with medical professionals once every five years (Nyhan, 9). This myth was first picked up the day it was published by Fox News host Sean Hannity and spread throughout conservative media sources, among conservative members of Congress (who mentioned it during floor speeches), and eventually was embellished to seem more extreme by Sarah Palin (Nyhan, 9-10). While independent fact-checking organizations labeled the “death panels” assertion as false, by mid-August 86% of Americans had heard of it, and 47% of Republicans believed to be true (Nyhan, 10). The spread of misinformation from media sources can stifle public debate and reasonable discussion.

Survey findings from a 2011 poll from the Public Religion Research Institute show a correlation between trust in Fox News and negative attitudes toward Muslims. In studying Republicans who most trust Fox News, 41% believe that American Muslims wish to establish Sharia law in the United States, 65% believe American Muslims haven’t done enough to oppose extremism, and 82% believe congressional hearings on extremism in the American Muslim community are a good thing (Public Religion Research Institute). Fox News viewers also have higher levels of misinformation on issues such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and climate change. To examine misperceptions about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, people were surveyed using three questions with some common misperceptions, they were: that weapons of mass destruction had been found, that there is a link between Al Qaeda and Iraq, and the majority of the world supported the war (Kull et. al, 582). Among all of the mainstream media networks, CNN, and Fox News, Fox News viewers were the most likely to have one or more misperceptions, with 80% of viewers being misinformed (Kull et. al, 582). Moreover Fox’s average rate of misperception among the three questions was 45%, a full 9 points higher than CBS News, the next highest, and 34 points higher than the lowest, which was NPR/PBS (Kull et.

al, 583). In a study of Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC viewers, researchers defined five indicators of global warming acceptance and tested them against the opinions of Fox News viewers. Despite overwhelming acceptance of global warming within the scientific community, “Fox viewing manifests a significant, negative association with global warming acceptance” (Feldman et. al, 16). They attributed this to Fox’s dismissive view toward global warming and substantial coverage of the issue—amplifying their views further (Feldman et. al, 21). Similar to the phenomenon of partisan media affecting political polarization, the global warming misinformation furthered by Fox News gives its viewers a misinformed sense of information that diminishes opportunities to address global warming on a policy level (Feldman et. al, 22).

Misinformation was common among Fox News viewers during the 2010 midterm election cycle. A study from *WorldPublicOpinion.org* showed that Fox News viewers had the lowest levels of misinformation in only one of twelve key election stories (Ramsay et. al, 19). The study also found that those who watched Fox News almost daily were significantly more likely than those who never watched it to believe nine of the twelve misinformation stories. Highlights include believing: the economy is getting worse, most scientists do not agree climate change is occurring, the stimulus legislation did not include tax cuts, and that it is unclear President Obama was born in the United States (Ramsay et. al, 20). Misinformation effects increased with increasing levels of exposure so that both Democrats and Republicans who regularly watched Fox News were more likely to have misinformation on these issues than those who did not watch Fox at all (Ramsay et. al, 20). Additional research has found that “Fox News viewers are clearly the least knowledgeable of the three audiences. While these findings do not show that Fox News performs less effectively than other TV news sources...it does point to the

possibility that Fox is most effective in capturing an audience that is more cynical and less knowledgeable” (Morris, 68).

While all of the misinformation research discussed has been correlative, a study researching the causal effect of Fox News on political knowledge yielded interesting results. This study combines data noting the availability of Fox News from 2000, 2004, and 2008 with the National Annenberg Election Studies (NAES) survey data from those same years. It found insignificant correlations between Fox News availability and political knowledge in 2000 and 2008, and a significant positive relationship in 2004—that is, there is a causal correlation between Fox News access and higher political knowledge (Schroeder and Stone, 62). These positive political knowledge effects were larger on issues favoring Republicans (Schroeder and Stone, 62). Finally Fox News access “caused knowledge to increase for issues that Fox News was most informative about (as one would expect), to decrease for issues that Fox misled on” (Schroeder and Stone, 53). In all cases of misinformation it is challenging to show causation that is whether Fox News viewers have these views because they watch Fox or whether they watch Fox because they have these views. However the study by Schroeder and Stone determined Fox News access causes an increase in political knowledge on issues favoring Republicans.

Both Brendan Nyhan and Ramsay et. al suggest those with exposure to multiple news sources were generally better informed and have lower levels of misinformation (Nyhan in *The Upshot*; Ramsay et. al, 20). Regardless of partisan leanings Nyhan posits that people consume a variety of information from a variety of sources, not just partisan media such as Fox News. Other research supports this claim by showing that the lowest levels of misinformation during the 2010 midterm elections came from those who viewed a variety of sources “suggest[ing] that misinformation cannot simply be attributed to news sources, but are a part of the larger

information environment” (Ramsay et. al, 20). While Ramsay et. al showed a greater demonstrated amount of misinformation from Fox News, Nyhan argues that it comes from our partisan beliefs, not the news we consume, “Democrats and Republicans don’t see the world so differently because they see different news; rather they see the news differently because they’re Democrats and Republicans in the first place” (Nyhan in *The Upshot*). This is an acknowledged view in other research, which notes that Fox and other conservative media sources “increase the likelihood that their audiences will consider a ‘fact’ that benefits the Democrats to be contested and as a result dismiss it” (Jamieson and Capella, 234). Additionally research highlighted in the previous section on the framing effect shows the power of one’s political frame when taking in information—people will argue to the contrary if an issue or data undermines their ideological frame.

These assertions differ from some of the findings illustrated above, which hold that the news affects the political interpretations of the people, not that the people are interpreting the news according to their own political ideologies. Given the saturated media and information-sharing environment, it is challenging to say Fox News causes viewers to be misinformed. With Schroeder and Stone’s study in mind, there is a causal link between Fox News access and higher political knowledge on issues benefitting Republicans. Even if all instances of misinformation were addressed and the correct information were presented, Kuklinski asserts there is little scholarly evidence to support the view that people will use facts if they have them, but rather that they will employ strategies to avoid the implications of any facts that challenge their political views (Kuklinski, 1). Misinformation appears to be furthered by Fox News through its partisan presentation of the news and is enhanced by the fact that people who watch the news are reluctant to recognize their political beliefs as misinformed.

4.3—Voting

Perhaps the most substantive and measureable impact of Fox News on American politics comes in its relation to voting. Every four years billions of dollars are spent on the presidential election and a host of other state and local elections, and multiple studies have shown the impact Fox News has on voting, namely that it increases a voter's likelihood to vote Republican. As previous research has shown, access to an ideologically distinctive media source reinforces the beliefs of like-minded viewers and can persuade independents as well (Hopkins and Ladd, 116; Levendusky, 75; Iyengar and Hahn, 19). Reinforcing one's political beliefs through a partisan news media source such as Fox News contributes to political polarization and also a greater tendency to vote Republican. As polarization makes people more critical of the other side, it stimulates voters to vote.

In a widely cited study completed in 2007, researchers examined Fox News' penetration in the cable news media market and cross referenced it with voting records to determine if there appeared to be a correlation between the presence of Fox News and increased Republican voting. By using demographic data and audience measures (asking respondents to recall if they've watched a channel in the past week and having respondents create a diary of all their TV watching for the week) the audience's viewing habits became available. Next researchers used voting data from the Election Division of the Secretary of State in each state. Finally researchers acquired data on the availability of Fox News by county in 1996 and 2000 to analyze the effects of Fox News on the voting and audience data captured using the above sources.

The main result of the study was that Fox News had a statistically significant impact on the elections by increasing the Republican vote share in presidential elections by 0.4 to 0.7 percentage points (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 1188). Fox News appears to have induced a small ideological shift. This effect was measured as smaller in towns with more cable channels, probably due to the influence of other viewpoints acting as a moderator (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 1189). The effect was moderated in rural areas, likely because rural areas have a greater tendency to be made up people who would already vote Republican and a smaller population of people that would change their votes with the presence of Fox News (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 1212). Additionally Fox News appears to have significantly increased voter turnout due to the “mobilization of voters and particularly conservative voters in Democratic-leaning districts” (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 1189). That is, Fox News inspires their conservative viewers to participate politically. Admittedly, a change of 0.4 to 0.7 percent seems small, however on the overall scale of voters in the 2000 election, this small percentage translates to approximately 200,000 votes shifting from the Democratic to the Republican candidate in the entire nation, in an election with a very small popular vote difference (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 1211). It is also noted, “In 2000, Fox News reached 32.8 percent of the Florida population. We assume that the Fox News effect on the 5,963,110 Florida votes cast is the same in our sample. Under this assumption Fox News shifted $0.328 * (0.055) * 5,963,110 = 10,757$ votes, a number substantially larger than Bush’s official margin of victory of 537 votes” (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 1212).

While the effects were rather high during the period of Fox’s introduction and growth between 1996 and 2000, Della Vigna and Kaplan also found that between 2000 and 2004 the effects lessened to a 0.2 percentage point increase, showing the effects as persistent over time but not increasing (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 1210). It is also of note that this study examines Fox

News' impact through only cable television, not the approximately 7 million (Seidman) viewers watching it on satellite; suggesting the effect could be higher.

Another study examining Fox News' effect on voting found a similar positive result of Fox News impacting viewers to vote Republican. In an experiment measuring the electoral effects of Fox News, researchers Gregory Martin and Ali Yurukoglu sought to determine the effects of Fox News on voting based on the channel position of Fox News in households around the United States. By using data from 1998 to 2008, researchers studied:

“(1) High quality channel lineup data that provides channel positions and availability by zip code, provider, and year, (2) individual level viewership data on hours watched by channel and year together with demographics and zip code, (3) individual level survey data on intent to vote Republican in presidential elections together with demographics and zip code, (4) county-level presidential vote shares, (5) broadcast transcripts of Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC by year, and (6) the Congressional record by year” (Martin and Yurukoglu, 5).

The set of channels in a cable lineup varies across providers and within providers across locations; channels were often allocated their positions based on the order in which they were added to a system (Martin and Yurukoglu, 8). Although with shifts in the market and some channels going out of business or changing, providers sometimes moved similar channels closer to each other, in general the ordering of channels is persistent from year to year (Martin and Yurukoglu, 8).

It was found that the average Republican vote share and hours watched of Fox News are higher when Fox News is in a lower channel position (Martin and Yurukoglu, 10). Typically the lower a cable channel's position is, the higher number of hours viewers will watch (Martin and

Yurukoglu, 12). By comparing the hours spent watching Fox News with the channel positions of Fox in different areas, Martin and Yurukoglu found an improvement of Fox News' channel position from the 75th to the 25th percentile would increase viewership by four minutes (Martin and Yurukoglu, 24). Tangibly this means if a cable provider provides 100 channels and Fox News was switched from channel 75 to channel 25 its viewership would increase by four minutes each week. By putting Fox News in a more favorable channel position and increasing viewership by an additional four minutes per week, it is estimated that a 0.9 percentage point increase toward Republican voting share would occur (Martin and Yurukoglu, 1). On the other hand watching an additional four minutes of MSNBC would contribute to an increase of only 0.7 percentage points toward Democratic voting share (Martin and Yurukoglu, 5).

This study also found Fox News is better at influencing Democrats than MSNBC is at influencing Republicans, giving Republicans a aggregate bump in voting (Martin and Yurukoglu, 43). In locations where Fox News was not available, county-level Republican vote shares on average fell by 1.3 percentage points, possibility resulting in different election outcomes in a close election (Martin and Yurukoglu, 47). While Della Vigna and Kaplan and Martin and Yurukoglu do not agree on the exact size of the increase in Republican vote share, they agree that watching Fox News causes a positive effect on voting Republican. There is also evidence that watching Fox News may serve as a function of protecting "audiences from forces that might push them to defect from the Republican Party...Limbaugh and Fox's audiences were less likely than others to defect" (Jamieson and Capella, 125). Through partisan media presentation, researchers found that electoral mistakes can occur due to lots of people voting along party lines (Bernhardt et. al, 1102). The demonstrated effects Fox News has on voting illustrate the significant impact of Fox News on the entire American political system.

5—Conclusion

In less than 20 years Fox has risen to the top of cable television news ratings and has remained there for over a decade. Utilizing such programming strategies as repetition, arguing the presence of a mainstream liberal bias, rejecting claims from the opposition, and featuring like-minded guests and hosts, Fox News has steered a clearly documented partisan news source toward success. The conservative leaning agenda at Fox News is also correlated with three impacts on American politics.

First, studies show that Fox News contributes to the polarization of the electorate and the politically active (who are most likely to watch partisan media) by increasing the ideological gap between Republicans and Democrats. The effects on polarization are highest with like-minded viewers and viewers open to opposing views. Some studies show a correlation between Fox News and polarization, and one study in particular shows a causal connection between watching Fox News and having more polarized views.

Second, studies show a correlation between Fox News and misinformation; with data showing that Fox viewers are the most misinformed viewers among all network and cable television news networks. Researchers also found that Fox News causes an increase in political knowledge on issues that benefit Republicans. It remains difficult to determine if misinformed people watch Fox more often or if watching Fox makes them misinformed.

Finally, studies show Fox News access and moving Fox to a lower television channel number causes an increase in the Republican vote share in elections, as shown in analyses

utilizing data about Fox's increased presence in new regions and channel number differences.

While the increase in vote share is low, it is enough to affect a close election.

Another possible impact of Fox News is the network's ability to influence the so-called "mainstream media." When conservative-supporting partisan stories enter the mainstream media, millions more Americans might be affected by a story that started on Fox News. A misinformed or heavily partisan story can spread to the mainstream press and even help set the nation's agenda (Levendusky, 48), as was the case with a myth about health care "Death Panels." Moreover, in a 2005 Annenberg survey of mainstream media journalists, 51% reported that Fox News had influenced the way other broadcasters covered the news (Jamieson and Capella, 51). By labeling the mainstream media as liberal, mainstream journalists are cautious about antagonizing conservatives because of the potential of being seen as a non-objective reporter. Journalistic integrity in reporting is likely to decline when journalists refrain from scrutinizing conservatives or the stories on Fox News because of fear of how they might be labeled. While Fox News might have an impact on the mainstream media through introducing stories and affecting journalists' coverage, I could not find any studies demonstrating its effects. If I worked on a long-term study comparing Fox News, mainstream media, and how Fox impacts mainstream reporting, it is likely I would find a number of stories that would not have been covered if Fox and other conservative media had not drawn attention to them. This is an area I would like to explore further in future research.

The importance of research such as mine increases as Fox News gains additional viewers and increases its ability to attract cable providers and advertisers. As more people watch Fox and other conservative media, its potential impact increases. Growing political polarization will result in more polarized political leaders being elected by a more polarized public. The elected

figures will have reduced incentive to compromise or work with the other party and our system will produce low achieving legislatures less willing to achieve bipartisan policy goals. With a misinformed public comes a skewed understanding of the problems faced by the nation and thus a lessened ability to address them. Finally a slight increase in Republican vote share by watching Fox News benefits the Republican Party's opportunity for gaining power in government—a good or bad thing depending on your political views.

While this paper focuses solely on the impacts of Fox News, Fox is only one of a number of powerful elements attempting to grow the conservative movement. Although Fox News does an excellent job of disseminating information beneficial to conservatives and saying what conservatives want to hear, the overall conservative movement is larger and more impactful. Fox News is only a fraction of the powerful conservative movement in the United States, which—unlike the opposition—speaks loudly and with one voice to enhance their political influence and power.

Republicans appear more successful than Democrats in their ability to frame issues that further their political ideology. Despite the fact that the Democratic platform is closer to the median voter than the Republican platform, many people appear to vote their moral identity rather than their self-interest (Iyengar, 2). Utilizing carefully selected framing is crucial in political communication, so that “the party more capable of integrating issues with values, and the candidate with the sound bite that more intuitively evokes the triggering metaphor for the appropriate value system, wins” (Iyengar, 2). Fox News and the conservative movement more broadly, effectively use political framing to set the agenda and promote conservative policies in government.

While research demonstrates Fox News' effects on American politics, it is inaccurate to place all the blame on the public and charge them with combatting partisan media. Media executive and politicians need to demand a non-partisan and objective presentation of the news. While it would be a risk for ratings, networks should focus on educating viewers on the issues and presenting a truly fair and balanced account of the news. Likewise, politicians need to hold themselves to a high ethical standard of honesty in political communication and stay vigilant against partisan media by confronting news networks for misrepresenting their positions or spreading misinformation.

Bruce Bartlett suggests that it is not entirely clear if Fox is a net plus or net minus for the Republican Party. While my analysis suggests there are causal and correlative links between Fox News and increased political polarization, misinformation and political knowledge on issues benefitting Republicans, and Republican vote share, Bartlett quotes political scientist Lincoln Mitchell, who suggests "Fox has now become a problem for the Republican Party because it keeps a far right base mobilized and angry, making it hard for the party to move to the center or increase its appeal, as it must do to remain electorally competitive" (Mitchell). If it becomes apparent to the Republican Party and Fox News that Fox truly is hurting the Republican Party, it is possible Fox would change their operation to demonstrably benefit Republicans. However, if Fox News is more concerned about making money (as private media organizations are), then there is the possibility Fox would continue its operation because of its success in the ratings, even if they perceived they were hurting Republicans.

After researching the history, operation, and political impacts of Fox News, I find clear correlations between Fox News and increased political polarization and Fox News viewers being

more misinformed. Studies also show that viewing Fox News causes people's views to be more polarized if they are like-minded or open to different views. Additional research shows Fox News access causes an increase in political knowledge on issues benefitting Republicans and an increase in Republican vote share. Republican vote share increases also occur when Fox News is located at a lower channel number. Fox is not the only factor contributing to the growth of conservatism in the country; rather it is a small, but very important part of the larger conservative movement that seeks to further conservative political ideology and influence.

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