

Res Publica Vol. XXXI

# Democracy





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**Vân Lê**

## Letter from the Department Chair

It is a rare pleasure to introduce the 2025-2026 issue of Res Publica, the Illinois Wesleyan Political Science department's journal of undergraduate scholarship. Since it was launched 31 years ago, the journal has been written, curated, and edited entirely by students. We are proud of this record of consistent intellectual curiosity, hard work, and commitment to excellence among our students—a record to which our authors this year contribute superbly. I would particularly like to congratulate our current editors on their discernment in selecting papers, their exceptional efficiency, and their close attention to detail (as well the unfailing politeness with which they have repeatedly exhorted me to get this letter written in time for the publication deadline). The commitment of both authors and editors has been laudable. As a result, I have enjoyed reading this work, and I have learned much from it.

The papers our editors have assembled were generated in a variety of settings and highlight the range of analytical and normative questions that intrigue our students. Three of the papers are a product of our capstone research seminar. The others are drawn from a variety of classes in History, Philosophy, and Political Science. Taken together, all these papers exemplify the productive use of theory to illuminate empirical questions. While the topics and analyses range quite widely, several themes emerge. Unsurprisingly perhaps, in an era characterized by wide-scale democratic backsliding or autocratization, several papers examine voting behavior, albeit through different analytical prisms. Thus, Emma Kudelka explains how political socialization helps us to understand why many women vote for Donald Trump. Vân Lê draws on the 'model minority narrative' to explain why Vietnamese immigrants vote conservative. And Khel Gordhan explores the uptake of ranked voting systems at the local and state level. Another group of papers focuses more directly on normative concerns. Asa Smith makes a strong case for the moral wisdom of the Michigan Supreme Court's prohibition of life-without-parole sentences for 19- and 20-year olds. Maya McGrew shows how the political framing of early literacy needs around different normative values drives differential policy outcomes. Valeria Suarez reveals the systematic gender discrimination embedded in the U.S. military's insistence on 'gender neutrality.' A cross-cutting theme in several papers is the way that socio-cultural frameworks shape political identities and inform policy outcomes. A core element in Emma Kudelka's, Vân Lê's, and Maya McGrew's papers, this theme is most prominent in Emmy Schubert's innovative analysis of the incorporation of a potentially transgressive drag subculture into the more encompassing 'imagined community' of Japanese national identity.

In sum, this collection of papers offers an unusually rich stew of thoughtful, clever, and careful social science. I commend the authors on their commitment to hard work and intellectual rigor. I thank the editors, Emma Kudelka and Brady Poisal, for their superb stewardship of a complicated process. And I recommend this work most enthusiastically for your reading pleasure. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did.

William A. Munro  
Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 and Ivan Birrer Ph.D Professor  
Chair, Department of Political Science

## Editor's Introduction

We are proud to present the 31st edition of *Res Publica*, Illinois Wesleyan University's undergraduate political science journal. After carefully reviewing and curating this year's outstanding submissions, we are confident that this edition adds another meaningful piece to the long-standing tradition of student scholarship at Illinois Wesleyan. Each paper offers thoughtful insight into complex political and social issues. We extend sincere gratitude to all who submitted their work and are honored to showcase the research featured in this volume.

This year's *Res Publica* is notable for both the breadth and depth of its topics. The papers span questions of identity, political participation, institutional power, and democratic representation, reflecting the wide range of interests and talents within our student body. From cultural analyses of nationalism and gender to studies of voting systems, media influence, public policy, and civic inclusion, these works demonstrate how Illinois Wesleyan students engage with relevant, real-world issues through careful research and critical analysis. The collection moves thoughtfully from analyses of policy reform and institutional structures to explorations of identity and narrative, culminating in studies of voting, participation, and the boundaries of democratic inclusion. The themes explored in this volume are especially timely. Questions of identity, representation, institutional power, and democratic participation are at the forefront of political discourse today, and these papers contribute thoughtful, research-based perspectives to those ongoing conversations.

A publication of this scale would not be possible without the support of many individuals and organizations. This year's cover art, designed by a member of the editorial team, visually reflects the issue's themes of identity, institutions, and civic participation through a fragmented portrait of democracy that mirrors the diversity of perspectives explored in the volume. We are deeply grateful to the professors of the Political Science Department for their continued guidance in both the classroom and the journal process. Finally, we thank Pi Sigma Alpha and the Student Senate for their ongoing support in making *Res Publica* possible. We hope you enjoy this year's selection of Illinois Wesleyan University's best political science works.

Sincerely,

Emma Kudelka and Brady Poisal, 2026 *Res Publica* Editors

## Authors' Biographies

**Asa Smith** is a senior at Illinois Wesleyan University studying philosophy and business administration on the pre-law track. He is the President of the IWU Philosophy Club, a student intern in the “Open Doors” prison literary program between IWU and Lawrence Correctional Facility, and a student research assistant at the IWU Office of Institutional Effectiveness. After graduation, he plans to take a few gap years between undergraduate and law school to advance his professional and academic career.

**Maya McGrew** is a senior Interdisciplinary Educational Studies major with a focus in Education, Identity, and Public Policy at Illinois Wesleyan University. From early childhood classrooms to state and federal policy offices, Maya has explored the full spectrum of the education system with a commitment to improving learning outcomes at every level. She has served as the Student Senate Civic Engagement Commissioner, Career Center Special Events Coordinator, and VP & Public Relations Chair of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Her key field experience includes a Policy & Government Affairs internship with Emerson Collective in Washington, D.C. Following graduation, Maya intends to work in a state-level policy setting.

**Valeria Suarez** is a senior double-majoring in Political Science and International Studies, with a minor in Creative Writing. Originally from Venezuela, she is known for her active involvement on campus, serving as a Spanish tutor, a Residential Community Advisor, and contributing to the founding of four student organizations. She also studied abroad in Switzerland, where she conducted research. Valeria is passionate about global issues and aspires to a career in human rights and policymaking. Valeria plans to attend graduate school after IWU.

**Emmeline Schubert** is a senior Political Science major with research interests in anatomy-politics, anthropology, and public interest. During her time at Illinois Wesleyan University, she has enjoyed leading through positions as the President of Women in Politics, Vice President of the Pride Alliance, Treasurer of Amnesty International, on the executive board of Kappa Delta Sorority, and as a student-athlete. On campus, Emmeline works for the Office of Alumni Engagement and as a STEP Peer Mentor. In 2025, she was elected as a Delegate to the DSA National Convention. On track to graduate two years early, Emmeline is excited to attend law school in the fall.

**Khel Gordhan** is a senior Political Science and Biology double major dedicated to understanding and advocating for local government. He worked as a policy analyst for the Solutions for Change Foundation in D.C. and interned for State Representative Sharon Chung. Khel was also involved with Raja Krishnamoorthi’s Campaign, being the Master of Ceremonies for two campaign events. Currently, he serves as the assistant volunteer coordinator for the McLean County Democrats and the research intern for the Bloomington Normal Community Land Trust.

**Emma Kudelka** is a junior Political Science major with minors in Psychology and Advocacy with a Pre-Law concentration and research interests in political psychology, identity, voting behavior, and social policy. As a second-year author, she is excited to continue sharing her work in Volume 31. On campus, she currently serves as the Panhellenic President, Student Senate Chief of Staff, Kappa Delta National DEI Collegiate Council Member, and a member of Psi Chi, Pi Sigma Alpha, and Women in Politics. After interning with the McLean County State's Attorney's Office and Meyer Capel LLC, Emma plans to attend law school after graduation. This summer, she will be traveling to the Dominican Republic for a May class about public health.

**Vân Lê** is a senior majoring in Political Science and International and Global Studies. She is a Posse Scholar and one of the Peace Fellows at IWU. She is interested in human rights and food security struggles around the world, which drives her research in food culture, class struggles, and the weaponization of famines in colonial Vietnam. Her study abroad experience in South Africa inspired her to do honors research on social safety net policy in Ethiopia. After graduation, Vân plans to pursue a higher degree in international development and ultimately, a career with an NGO.

**The 2025 Michigan Supreme Court Ruling on LWOP Protections: Morally Justifiable?**

Asa Smith

Department of Philosophy, Illinois Wesleyan University

PHIL 104: Ethics Bowl

Professor Engen

14th November 2025

**Abstract**

This paper examines the moral permissibility of the 2025 Michigan Supreme Court ruling that found life-without-parole (LWOP) sentences for 19- and 20-year-olds to be unconstitutional under Michigan state law. The paper supports its argument on whether the ruling was morally permissible by drawing on neuroscientific data as well as moral frameworks such as a rehabilitative theory of punishment and John Rawls's 'veil of ignorance' thought experiment for the application of justified principles in society. The paper considers and replies to potential objections to its argument and to alternative interpretations of the moral frameworks it deploys. It concludes by contending that the mindful and rational decision would be to enact LWOP protections and that the Michigan Supreme Court ruling was, in fact, a morally justified decision.

## The 2025 Michigan Supreme Court Ruling on LWOP Protections: Morally Justifiable?

Was the Michigan Supreme Court's decision to declare life sentences without parole unconstitutional for 19- and 20-year-olds morally justified? To address the aforementioned question, it will be helpful to set forth a roadmap for guidance. First, my position on the case; next, the case's pertinent details, including both sides of the argument; finally, an elucidation of my position by adhering to neurobiological studies and relevant moral frameworks, while considering possible objections or alternative viewpoints. To start, the Michigan Supreme Court's decision to declare life sentences without parole unconstitutional for those aged 19- and 20-years-old is morally justifiable.

The Michigan Supreme Court ruling is morally justifiable, as it is consistent with neurobiological studies and relevant moral frameworks, such as a rehabilitative theory of punishment and John Rawls's veil of ignorance thought experiment for the application of justified principles in society. In April of 2025, in *People v. Taylor* and *People v. Czarnecki*, the Michigan Court determined life-without-parole (LWOP) protections for those aged 18 and under to be extended to those aged 19 and 20, granting the latter similar individualized consideration under the criminal justice system ("*People v. Taylor/People v. Czarnecki*," 2025). The ruling expanded upon the precedential decision in *People v. Parks*, in which the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that mandatory life-without-parole sentences were "cruel and unusual" punishment under the Michigan State Constitution ("*Michigan v. Parks*," 2022). The Michigan judiciary reasoned that 19- and 20-year-old defendants in such cases are "emerging adults" or "late adolescents" and more closely resemble juveniles than adults in terms of brain development. Their capacity to make rational, sensible decisions is impaired by their impulsive propensity. To try these individuals as adults would be harsh and disproportionate punishment, as well as neglectful of brain science. Michigan Supreme Court Justice Elizabeth Welch cited neurobiological studies in her assent, stating the human brain is not fully developed until 25. Individuals aged 19- and 20-years-old have a more immature brain than their adult counterparts, increasing their likelihood for irrational behavior.

Opponents raise a salient legal objection to Michigan's ruling: Is legal responsibility therefore contingent on brain development and age, and does this new understanding undermine justice and equal accountability under the law? Opponents also worry the change could reopen

old wounds for those involved in the case. An earlier Michigan Supreme Court case, *People v. Poole*, granted retroactive accommodation for those currently serving LWOP sentences, i.e., individuals who are currently serving life sentences without the chance of parole for crimes they committed at 19 or 20 years old have the opportunity for their cases to be reheard (“*People of Michigan v. Poole*,” 2025). Therefore, concerned parties may have to “testify again, revisit graphic case details, and face the prospect that individuals convicted of serious crimes could be released earlier than expected” (Day, 2025).

If an individual’s brain, the basis for human behavior and emotional regulation, is primeval in its nature, it seems unlikely that we would have the moral standing to appraise their actions similarly to those who have further-developed brains. At 19 and 20 years old, the human brain is somewhat ineffectual in its rational discernment of action, due to various factors. Most importantly, the underdevelopment of the prefrontal cortex in the brain is a crucial component for the brain’s ability to regulate behavior and emotion. As Justice Elizabeth Welch correctly added, the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for planning, impulse control, and decision-making—does not fully mature until around the age of 25 (“The Teen Brain: 7 Things to Know,” 2023). It does not help that this individual is under great stress stemming from heightened hormone levels, career decisions, financial burdens, and a society that has increasingly become more isolated post-pandemic (Tonan et al., 2024). Once we add in the brain science, we must understand that their brains are unfit to address such challenges, and irrational behavior seems to be an inevitable outcome. If the law hopes to be just for all, it must accommodate the adolescent brain’s inadequate decision-making abilities; otherwise, by not doing so, the inaction could reasonably be deemed a form of ‘cruel or unusual’ punishment, violating Michigan state law. This sentiment aligns with the very argument the Michigan Supreme Court uses to defend its decision. This position does not undermine justice and equal accountability under the law; rather, it promotes acute scrutiny for the contextual nuances of each case, perhaps strengthening the integrity of the law itself. Furthermore, accounting for brain development and age in the law is not a novel concept. Criminal offenders who are minors generally are granted greater leniency when it comes to prison or jail sentences because of age- and development-related considerations. For instance, the 2012 landmark United States Supreme Court case *Miller v. Alabama* ruled mandatory life sentences without the chance of parole for juvenile offenders unconstitutional under the Eighth Amendment, with similar reasoning to the

Michigan Supreme Court, i.e., adolescents have underdeveloped brains and have a greater capacity to change (“*Miller v. Alabama*,” 2012).

An ‘emerging adult’ should be given the opportunity of rehabilitation, as they still have the time to metamorphose into a contributing member of society. A rehabilitative theory of punishment states that punishment is justified so long as it acts as a potential benefit to the punished. At its best, punishment morally educates the punished and thereby causes them to live better lives. In a Northwestern Juvenile Project longitudinal study, *Incarceration and Subsequent Psychosocial Outcomes*, researchers conducted a study on 1,829 inmates from Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center from 1995 to 1998 to measure psychosocial outcomes (i.e., positive mental health, no problematic substance use, educational attainment, gainful activity, residential independence, interpersonal functioning, parenting responsibility, and desistance from criminal activity) after incarceration. The participants were separated into three distinct groups: juvenile-only, adult jail, and prison. The study found that male participants in the prison group had fewer psychosocial outcomes than the adult jail and juvenile-only groups. Results showed that juvenile-only participants were more likely to achieve every socioeconomic outcome than the prison group participants (Thomas et al., 2025). The study underscores the idea that juveniles are more likely to become contributing members of society and achieve greater psychosocial outcomes. Recent research also found that juveniles subjected to the adult court system had higher rates of recidivism and reoffended more quickly than youth in the juvenile system (Miller-Johnson & Rosch, 2007). Not only does juvenile detention seem to influence positive social outcomes in those incarcerated at a young age, but it also seems to play a role in lowering the rate at which young offenders re-offend—a strong indication of the juvenile system’s efficacy to rehabilitate young offenders. Opponents might reasonably object to the relevance of such a study, pointing out that the maximum age limit of those housed in juvenile detention centers is 18 years old. At first glance, the objection seems infallible. Yet, as previously mentioned, brain science matters. According to a Simply Psychology report, “The adolescent brain [13-19 years old] remains under development, with brain growth continuing into the early 20s... [and] reaches its full development around 25 years old” (Guy-Evans, 2025). The earlier study’s findings seem to gain relevance once we integrate our understanding of the adolescent brain into the equation; the juvenile brain and ‘emerging adult’ brain are quite alike in development. To associate juveniles and emerging adults similar in one setting, i.e., brain

development, but dissimilar in another, i.e., sentencing considerations, seems to be antithetical to the primary function of a fair judicial system. A fair judicial system makes a qualified decision based on all of the available evidence, including the science on juveniles' and emerging adults' brains. Disregarding objective evidence on the adolescent brain's anatomical insufficiencies is unjustifiable. If juvenile detention is a supposed stimulant for recidivism, a cause for positive social outcomes, then we may need to revisit the juvenile detention age limit to fit the biological definition of adolescence to promote rehabilitation and fairness in the criminal justice system.

The Michigan Supreme Court ruling seems to pass John Rawls's 'veil of ignorance' moral examination. According to John Rawls, to establish just principles embedded in the structure of society, we must put ourselves behind a veil of ignorance that blinds us to our essential characteristics and circumstances in life, i.e., behind this veil, we are unaware of our age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, geographical location, socioeconomic status, and so on. It's as if you were blindfolded to your very identity, including all of the characteristics you typically associate yourself with. In this society, you could be anyone, e.g., you could be eccentric billionaire Elon Musk, sharp-witted lyricist Kendrick Lamar, a single mom of four on welfare in the Deep South, or a starving child in war-torn Gaza. In other words, you would be entirely unknowing of who you are until unveiled. Therefore, Rawls says the rational person determining just principles of society would account for every possible scenario they might end up in. Ultimately, though it seems contradictory to the thought experiment, societal members would obtain an expansive awareness of others' circumstances, as they would need to show acute diligence in their consideration of societal reconstruction. When applying the thought experiment to the Michigan ruling, it seems that behind the veil of ignorance, one would rationally decide for LWOP protections for those with an adolescent-like maturity. It is unreasonable to assume that someone biologically consistent with an adolescent would receive incongruous treatment when it comes to criminal sentencing behind such a veil. The opponent's alternative interpretation of Rawls's thought experiment would force one to reconcile the fact that they might not end up as just the perpetrator, but as the victim or the victim's family of a crime. In that case, a victim and their family would not choose for LWOP protections to be embedded in the criminal justice system. This understanding is short-sighted and dismisses a couple of key elements of the ruling, particularly on parole and life sentences. The ability to obtain parole does not entail clemency, but it does require a parole hearing. That means, though someone could be given the chance at

parole, they will not necessarily be released. In almost all cases regarding life sentences, parole is not given to the criminal, and they end up serving their entire life sentence. Also, lifers are mandated to serve a specific amount of time until they are eligible for parole. For example, a person convicted of a serious crime and given a life sentence might have to serve 20 years before they become eligible. If one truly made the rational decision on LWOP protections behind the veil, the decision would be to enact LWOP protections, as parole hearings do not entail clemency, and lifers still serve time. The objection to LWOP protections is overstated and underwhelming; a rational person would take into full consideration the science on the adolescent brain and the basic functioning of parole and life sentences. At its best, LWOP protections serve as a safeguard for minors and do not necessitate early release, but permit the opportunity for rehabilitation.

The 2025 Michigan Supreme Court ruling that declares life-without-parole sentences for 19- and 20-year-olds unconstitutional is morally justifiable and is a momentous step in the right direction for rehabilitation and reintegration into society. To disregard the available evidence in terms of brain science and the fundamental function of parole and life sentences would be unmindful and irrational. Going forward, it will be interesting to see what other state judiciaries decide, as it seems to be a growing, contentious matter. If done right, with full consideration, other states should follow suit to Michigan's Supreme Court ruling.

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**Ideological Narratives in Literacy Reform**

Maya McGrew

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PSCI 285: Political Tales We Tell Ourselves

Professor Greg Shaw

8th December 2025

### Abstract

This paper assumes a discourse analysis approach to examining if partisan control has influenced why red states have demonstrated faster gains in early literacy than blue states. This is done by investigating whether ideological presence in political framing, and particularly crisis-oriented rhetoric, drives reform adoption as much as policy design. Recognizing the ongoing discourse surrounding the continual improvement of pedagogy and programming, especially in areas of foundational skills such as reading, writing, comprehension, and oral communication. The research employs a systematic coding methodology, and the analysis combines a qualitative review of media narratives and state reform histories with a small-sample regression including variables for partisan control, investment into literacy efforts (e.g., Science of Reading [SoR]), Gini index, post-secondary attainment, education expenditure funding, and 3rd/4th grade literacy rates, etc. My research delves into the nuances of educational policy formulation and shaping in its relation to sound literacy instruction and programming; but also acknowledges other reasons behind these gains, like a state's capacity and need within the realm of resource usage. Overall, my findings indicate that both ideological framing and policy design are noteworthy in the swift uptake of literacy reforms. Furthermore, media coverage between 1998 and 2025 that adopted crisis-framing appeared to nudge policymakers toward action, shaping whether states adopt strict accountability measures or more support-centered, teacher-focused approaches to improving early reading outcomes. State education expenditures in areas such as teacher instruction and salary demonstrated the strongest statistical correlation to early literacy gains.

## Ideological Narratives in Literacy Reform

### Background and Introduction

Early literacy acquisition remains a well-known indicator of long-term educational and professional success. Proficient reading by the end of the third grade is especially predictive of future academic achievement, even lowering secondary dropout rates. This is mainly because third grade can be seen as a transitional period, as students stop learning to read and begin reading to learn, making early literacy interventions a priority for educators and policymakers alike. Yet, across the country, states exhibit different outcomes in literacy gains despite relatively comparable investments. This divergence is not purely a function of resources or policy design; rather, it's that ideological underpinnings within media narratives potentially have a place in the implementation of reading reforms.

Political framing plays a crucial role in shaping the public perception of any social policy or collective cause. Drawing on Barer and Evans' (1998) work on "zombie narratives"<sup>1</sup> aids in our understanding of the possible influence of media and narration on various social movements (Barer et al., 1998). Since the early 1980s, literacy reform has been framed repeatedly as a "crisis," despite the fact that many—though not all—students circumvent their reading difficulties (Loveless, 2016). This does not translate into a lack of system-wide issues in our country's approach to reading instruction, if this was the case, adult and functional illiteracy would not be as pressing as it is. Confirmation bias<sup>2</sup> amplifies this perception, with policymakers and media often highlighting correlations that reinforce preexisting beliefs about failing schools and the constant need for urgent action.

Across the political spectrum, narratives diverge in distinct ways. Conservatives have emphasized structured literacy and phonics-based instruction in the past, portraying reforms as accountability-driven and necessary for student success. Liberals, in contrast, tend to favor whole-language or hybrid approaches and teacher support, framing literacy success as dependent

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to well-known narratives that have been debunked by data, yet remain in mainstream media and day-to-day dialogue

<sup>2</sup> The tendency to search for and interpret new information as aligning with pre-existing beliefs

on faculty investment and equitable access to resources (Frameworks Institute, 2012). These contrasting narratives set the stage for different policy choices and state-level outcomes.

### **The Unionization Factor**

My previous research demonstrates that the politics of unionization are deeply embedded in the trajectory of early literacy reform, particularly in heavily unionized blue states such as California and Michigan. At the national level, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) collectively represent nearly five million educators and exert a weighty influence over state and local education policy. While the AFT has historically occupied a somewhat more right-leaning to moderate political posture, the NEA has been more consistently aligned with left-leaning policy agendas.

Both organizations, however, have expressed skepticism toward state-mandated Science of Reading (SoR) reforms when those reforms are framed as top-down accountability measures. In states like California, the political influence of the California Teachers Association and the California Federation of Teachers—which together represent over 430,000 educators—has contributed to a reform environment characterized by significant financial investment but limited enforceable mandates. Similarly, in Michigan, the Michigan Education Association played a central role in opposing the high-stakes retention components of the state’s 2016 Read by Grade Three law, culminating in the repeal of the mandatory third-grade retention clause in 2023. These cases illustrate how union strength shapes not only the substance of literacy policy, but also its durability and implementation fidelity.

This dynamic is important to grasp because heavily unionized states often resist externally imposed mandates in favor of collaborative policymaking that centers teacher voice and professional discretion. Unions frequently frame their opposition as a defense of classroom autonomy and protection against unrealistic timelines or insufficient funding; which are concerns that are not inherently anti-reform but can slow or dilute policy implementation. By contrast, many red states have advanced SoR reforms through centralized mandates, strict reporting measures, and retention policies, leveraging a political narrative that emphasizes standards, discipline, and measurable outcomes.

The broader political discourse has thus framed SoR as a conservative victory for rigor over permissiveness, obscuring the more nuanced reality that unionization levels, policy design, and governance structures are equally determinative. The historical “reading wars” between structured literacy and balanced literacy approaches laid the groundwork for this polarization. Conservative rhetoric has traditionally invoked themes of personal responsibility, measurable results, and accountability to prevent failure, this framing worked in part because it drew on widely shared American values. These discursive choices are not merely rhetorical; they shape what the public perceives as necessary reform and what lawmakers believe they have an obligation to enact. When movements like the SoR gained national attention beginning in the late 2010s, red states often adopted them with sweeping urgency, framing reading failure as an emergency requiring rapid and sometimes stringent state intervention.

Moreover, this construction persuaded voters that states must “get tough” on schools to ensure children do not fall behind. And this is what many unions opposed, shifting the blame onto teachers, then enacting mandates. The liberal narrative drew instead on values of fairness or the professional expertise of teachers, emphasizing support rather than enforcement. Both worldviews claim to promote student success, but they draw different conclusions about how literacy instruction should be structured and who should control it. As my past research conveys, the interaction between union strength, political ideology, and governance design substantially influences the pace and consistency with which states adopt and implement SoR-aligned literacy reforms.

### **Advocates and Narrative Construction**

Advocates for SoR and related reforms have deployed media and storytelling to promote their vision of literacy improvement. Conservative outlets often frame teachers’ continued use of whole-language or balanced literacy as a failure to adopt evidence-based methods. Though not conservative-aligned, we can see similar dialogue in Emily Hanford’s “Sold a Story” podcast<sup>3</sup> where anecdotes are utilized to characterize stakeholders in the social movement, portraying teachers and administrators as obstacles to reform while highlighting success stories like the

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<sup>3</sup>Emily Hanford, “Sold A Story: How Teaching Kids to Read Went so Wrong,” Special Projects from APM Reports, August 27, 2025, <https://features.apmreports.org/sold-a-story/>.

“Mississippi Miracle” to justify policy adoption (Plthomasedd, 2024). Hanford included comments from distressed teachers who shared feelings of failure in teaching their students the “correct way to read.” Democratic-aligned media and officials, meanwhile, emphasize teacher credibility and the importance of funding and professional development, arguing that student outcomes improve when faculty are adequately supported (Peterson, 2020; Vaites, 2025).

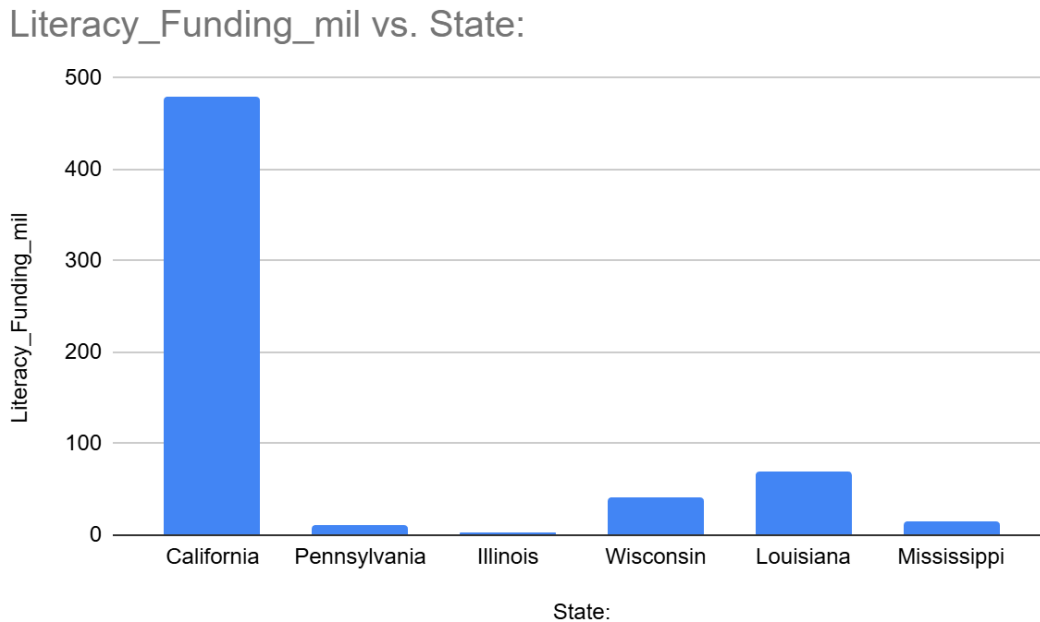
These narratives rely on widely shared political values. Conservatives draw on Lakoff’s “paternalistic” model, emphasizing discipline, personal duty, and societal order, while liberals appeal to the “nurturing parent” model, prioritizing care, support, and equity (Lakoff, 1996). The success of these narratives can be partially observed in state-level literacy outcomes; red states with less union influence and more top-down mandates often report faster gains, while blue states invest heavily in teacher support with mixed immediate results.

### **Methodology and Analysis**

To explore how these narratives interact with measurable outcomes, I analyzed six states: California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Mississippi, and Louisiana. These states were chosen for their ideological and unionization distinction as well as their relevance in national literacy conversations. I incorporate research from think tanks like the Hoover Institution for right-leaning reporting in addition to PBS and NPR reporting on phonics politics, peer-reviewed education policy journals, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO) for expenditure data, and state-level documentation (i.e., roadmaps) of literacy reform components. These sources were selected because they offer a mix of scholarly discourse, historical political analysis, and current policy data not captured in much of the sources in the following research platform.

I also reviewed media coverage through Nexus Uni and searched for ideological terminology across multiple time windows from 1998 to 2025. The purpose was to create a proxy for political framing intensity, showing how often literacy was narrated using distinctly conservative or liberal language within each state. Articles were coded using keyword searches representing two distinct policy frames: liberal and conservative. Liberal-coded texts included terms associated with educator support, equity, and resource investment (e.g., “teacher support,” “professional development,” “opportunity gap,” and “whole-language literacy”). Conservative-

coded texts included terms emphasizing standards, accountability, and structured literacy approaches (e.g., “accountability,” “high standards,” “third-grade retention,” “literacy crisis,” and “science of reading”). These keyword sets were combined with literacy-related terms (“reading,” “literacy acquisition,” “early literacy,” or “early reading”) and state identifiers to ensure relevance to state-level literacy policy discussions.



**Figure 1: Literacy Funding vs State**

To account for shifts in federal education policy and national literacy debates, articles were grouped into specific timeframes corresponding with major policy developments. These periods include the late 1990s whole language backlash (1998–2000), the passage and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001–2003), the standards initiatives associated with Race to the Top (2009–2012), early state-led literacy reforms such as Mississippi Early Literacy Law and the influence of public discourse such as Hanford’s Sold a Story podcast (2013–2016), the national resurgence of the Science of Reading (2018–2020), and the most recent wave of state Science of Reading legislation (2022–2025). Organizing articles within these policy windows allowed for analysis of how ideological narratives around early literacy evolved alongside federal initiatives and national reform movements.

In order to comprehend the collection of data, it is necessary to first define the parameters of each variable and present the systematic codes applied in searches. For partisan control, I donned a two-point system—providing the six states with a point for each legislative chamber controlled by the republican party. As far as unionization levels are concerned, I assigned each state a label of “high unionization,” “moderate unionization,” or “low unionization” through probing reputable sources on Google and investigating historical union relations. The NAEP and NCES were utilized for acquiring third and fourth-grade public school literacy proficiency levels in addition to general benchmarks. Post-secondary education attainment levels were selected to inspect long-term outcomes and observe the variable’s potential influence on early literacy gains; information regarding attainment levels was found on Statistical Atlas.

The gini index sheds light on the amount of inequality in any given population, whether that be income or wealth. Moreover, the World Bank considers economies with an index greater than .4 to be significant in terms of inequality. Literacy investments into reading reforms (e.g., screening tools, programming, etc.) aids in our ability to decipher which states display a vested interest in improved early literacy outcomes. Lastly, according to the NCES, the majority of education expenditures include—but are not limited to—instructional staff support services, staff salaries, and more (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). I adopt this approach to decrease the criteria of what falls into the expenditure category.

**Table 1: Data Collection**

State:	Partisan Control*:	Unionization Levels:	3rd/4th Grade Literacy Rate (% , 2024):	Postsecondary Attainment (%):	Gini Index:	SoR/ Literacy Funding (FY24-25, \$M)*:	Education Expenditures (% FY23-24)*:
CA	Democratic (0)	High	29	40	0.49	~480	~18
IL	Democratic (0)	High	30	41	0.48	~3	12
PA	Democratic (0)	High	33	37	.47	~10	~17
WI	Typically purple, but Republican lead (2)	Moderate	31	39	.44	~41	16
MS	Republican (2)	Low	32	30	.48	~15	~19
LA	Republican (2)	Low	32	29	.49	~70	17

**Table 2: Findings**

Proxy:	Coefficient:	P-Value:	Interpretation:
Red State (Binary)	0.193	0.323	Positive, but not statistically significant
Literacy Funding (Per \$1M)	0.000595	0.305	Relatively small positive association
Teacher Preparation/PD (Expenditures)	0.404	0.057	Strongest positive predictor
R <sup>2</sup>	0.417	N/A	The model explains 41.7% variance

<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.028	N/A	Drops due to small sample size
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Results indicate that while the variable indicating conservative partisan control was positive, it was not statistically significant. More striking was the strong, near-significant association between literacy rates and teacher investments, highlighting that states providing substantial training and implementation support within their education expenditures—and not merely mandates—saw the greatest improvements. This result aligns with existing research showing that educators require ongoing coaching and capacity-building to shift reading instruction effectively (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Investments, measured in millions, showed only a small positive relationship with literacy outcomes, illustrating that there was no causal proof that suggests its sole effectiveness in reform success.

These findings tentatively support the claim that both political framing and policy design matter. Conservative narratives framing literacy as a crisis with urgent, standards-driven solutions may accelerate policy adoption and quick gains in student achievement, while evidence-based interventions such as teacher professional development ensure sustainability in literacy programs.

### **Limitations and Future Use**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the quantitative analysis relied on a small sample of six states, which restricts the statistical power of the regression model and limits the ability to generalize the results. While the model explains approximately 41.7% of the variation in literacy outcomes, the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> drops substantially due to the limited sample size and the inclusion of multiple predictors. In addition, California functions as an outlier in the dataset because of its significantly larger population, education system capacity, and scale of financial investment in literacy initiatives. These differences may influence outcomes in ways that are not easily comparable to smaller states. Future research should expand the dataset to include all fifty states in order to produce more reliable statistical estimates and to better capture variation across political contexts, particularly in “purple” states where partisan control shifts or remains competitive.

A second limitation concerns the measurement of political and media discourse. The qualitative component of the study relied on identifying key ideological terms within media coverage of literacy reform; however, this approach made it difficult to exclude articles that contained relevant terminology but were not substantively related to literacy policy debates. Additionally, media coverage may be shaped by intra-state political conflicts, general research, or local policy disputes that influence how literacy reforms are portrayed to the public. These dynamics may introduce variation in the data that is not directly tied to policy design or implementation.

Future research could improve upon this approach by conducting more refined content analyses, including weighting specific ideological terms or phrases to determine which types of political framing most strongly influence public perception or policy adoption. Expanding the dataset and incorporating variables—such as union strength, media framing intensity, or measures of implementation capacity—would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how political narratives and institutional investments interact to shape early literacy reform outcomes.

### **The Good, the Bad, the Ugly**

Understanding the reasoning behind the pushback on both sides requires recognizing the philosophical depth of these disagreements. Critics often frame their arguments around concerns about the dangers of over-reliance on standardized testing for accountability purposes and the risks of high-stakes retention policies that disproportionately affect marginalized students. Furthermore, opponents dissent that literacy crises cannot be separated from broader issues of poverty, structural racism, and uneven school funding, pointing out that red states often rely heavily on private investments to sustain educational operations. Lastly, left-leaning policy advocates and media outlets often criticize the SoR movement as ideologically driven with limited evidence of long-term efficacy.

It is asserted by contenders that third-grade retention policies, a hallmark of red-state reform, may improve reported literacy outcomes through cohort selection rather than genuine learning gains (Thomas, 2024). Republicans, conversely, sometimes downplay the importance of teacher unions—unions have the ability to advocate for increased teacher salaries, improved working conditions, and more—arguing that unionized states resist necessary reforms (Targeted

News Service, 2025). Moreover, proponents of the literacy movement also object to the simplistic portrayal of whole language and balanced literacy as ideologically “left,” noting that many classrooms use hybrid approaches of balanced and phonics instruction when provided adequate training and materials.

A balanced assessment reveals that both sides have strengths and blind spots. Conservative policies benefit from clear mandates and accountability, but may underemphasize teacher buy-in and economically contextual adaptation. Liberal approaches support faculty and do not force mandates, but risk slower implementation. Collaborative approaches, as seen in Tennessee’s statewide curriculum reforms, suggest that combining standards with support and expanding to other research-backed solutions like family engagement can optimize literacy outcomes (Vaites, 2025).

### **Conclusion**

Red states’ quicker improvement in early literacy illustrates the interplay between political framing, policy design, and state-level characteristics; but the increasingly common claim that “red states are simply better at implementing statewide reading reforms” risks becoming a zombie narrative in its own right. As Barer and Evans (1998) explain, zombie narratives persist because they feel intuitively true and tend to align with existing ideological expectations, even when the underlying evidence is more complex. The idea that conservative states are inherently more effective at literacy reform gains traction because it fits a broader political storyline of standards, mandates, and accountability driving results, with blue states’ emphasis on autonomy and equity slowing progress. Nonetheless, this framing oversimplifies the institutional and structural dynamics at work. Ultimately, effective literacy policy requires balancing standards with educator expertise, leveraging political narratives to foster buy-in, and addressing systemic inequities that affect student learning.

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**Between Motherhood and the Motherland: Navigating Challenges to Rank Advancement  
of Women in the U.S. Army**

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**Abstract**

Female officers remain a minority in the U.S. Army. Motherhood, dependent care, and sexual assault are some of the reasons why they decide to give up on their Army careers. The following study intends to examine how the impact of policy changes to accommodate female Army officers' increased retention and consequently promoted the rank advancement of women to the rank of major, or O4 and above. Through conversations with 14 armed forces officers, both men and women, it is evident that the gender neutral culture of the Army proves to be detrimental to women's rank advancement. For them to be able to have both a successful career and start a family, the Army needs to implement accommodations that counteract the culture of gender neutrality, of an inherently male institution.

## **Between Motherhood and the Motherland: Navigating Challenges to Rank Advancement of Women in the U.S Army**

### **Introduction**

Stating that the Army is inherently male is not a bold assumption to make; the structure of rank advancement leaves little to no space for a woman to have a family. Thus, motherhood can significantly impact female officers who intend to grow their military careers. The following research examines factors affecting retention of female officers in the military, among which motherhood plays a major role. It is salient for this project to focus on the advancement of officers in the rank of O4 (major) and above. Due to the Army Time in Grade<sup>4</sup> requirements, by the time female officers reach O4, it is safe to assume that they are at least 30 years of age. At this age, women face decreased fertility and difficulties trying to conceive children.

Out of 6 women interviewed for this project who are in ranks O4 and above in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, only two have children. However, their cases are rare. This study places a focus on some of the policy changes the Army has made in the last 10 years to accommodate female officers: The P3 2022 Army Directive (2022), the changes to the Uniform Code of Military Justice<sup>5</sup> in 2015, and the removal of the ban on joining infantry teams in 2016<sup>6</sup>. Analyzing the impact of these policies serves the purpose of demonstrating how one could attribute the increase in female officers in the Army to a variety of policy changes. Accommodations serve as the only tool to make sure women have the same opportunities for advancement and professional development as their male counterparts. In addition, examining a gender neutral Army culture and standards allows us to demonstrate how these principles fail to account for equality of opportunities for women who do not want to decide between motherhood and serving their motherland.

### **Literature Review**

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<sup>4</sup> Time in their current rank.

<sup>5</sup> Enhances sexual assault victims rights, like not being required to testify in court. The decision to remove commanders from prosecution was taken later in 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Implemented in 2016

People seldom tend to question the danger of a homogeneous institution. Having an organization composed mainly of individuals who have a particular background can often bring a unilateral perspective. These homogeneous institutions often underestimate the power of being representative of a country's population. Especially if they serve the public interest, as is the case with the Army. The Army has to be able to engage with the population they are serving. With an overwhelming 80% majority of male officers, every meeting serves as a reminder that women are often unequally represented in decision-making. Not only to promote gender diversity, but because from an identity standpoint, there is very little personnel to speak for women in higher ranks in the military.

Joining the Army as a career provides women with a plethora of opportunities for professional development. While authors consider that there is a possibility for women having successful military careers, in her book on women's issues while joining the armed forces, Iskra (2010) acknowledges that there are a variety of setbacks. One of them is the concept of Combat Masculine Warrior Paradigm,<sup>7</sup> according to Iskra, "...women are automatically outside the norm, and are required to accommodate to the standards and culture" (Iskra 123). Women inevitably face the shock of different biological differences that don't allow women to have the equality of access to opportunities as their male counterparts have.

Womanhood is characterized by a series of events that male officers often remain unaware of. Being one of those, menstrual cycles. Bozzini (2023) did a study on the impact of the Army Basic Combat Training on menstruation. According to Bozzini's research, "A variety of stressors, including low energy availability/energy deficit, psychological stress, disrupted sleep, and increased physical training, can initiate or contribute to the onset of MD<sup>8</sup> (Bozzini 1533). While training can provide women with the physical conditions to withstand deployment, it cannot prepare them to withstand their periods during deployment. Women's menstrual cycles cannot be modified in accordance with service, or much less the consequences on overall wellness impacted by menstruation. Bozzini explores how menstrual cycles are significantly altered by basic combat training in her study on menstrual cycle dysfunction.

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<sup>7</sup> Also referred to as CMW.

<sup>8</sup> Menstrual Dysfunction.

To fit into the Army standards, women have to resort to birth control pills to have control over their menstruation. According to RAND Reproductive Health Reports on Female ADSW,<sup>9</sup> birth control alternatives are provided to help female soldiers mitigate the effects of an unexpected period. However, one in five ADSW reported being unable to access their preferred form of birth control through the Military Health System (MHS).<sup>10</sup> The experiences of female officers within the sample match the statistics. According to female interviewees, being in a male-dominated base during deployment, women are likely to experience difficulties finding the sanitary products of their preference, other than those provided by the Army, if they can access these products at all.

Not only could one attribute women leaving the Army to biological reasons, but the Government Accountability Office considers that sexual assault, dependent care, and family planning are the main causes why women leave the Army.<sup>11</sup> One could argue that women could take alternative pathways to continue their military careers, but their advancement is subject to being at the government's disposal to serve. Iskra also argues that possibilities for deployment place an additional stress on the development of interpersonal relationships, since women would potentially have to leave their partners for long periods of time (Iskra 2010). In order to mitigate the impacts of time away from their loved ones, the possibility of going from an active duty service member to a reserve officer is an alternative. There is a difference in pay and in flexibility to provide women time to take care of their families. However, this places a hold on their career as an officer and their advancement to higher ranks. The time as a reserve officer counts differently towards Time In Grade (TIG) to fulfill requirements for promotions. Additionally, officers transitioning to the reserves often have to go through training for their new positions, and this is often a period where they would be receiving no income (Officer Hotel),<sup>12</sup> which places a significant burden on their decision to start a family and advance their career. It is clear that more often than not, women officers have to decide between their military career and starting a family, if pay and benefits are at stake.

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<sup>9</sup> Active Duty Service Women.

<sup>10</sup> RAND Report on the Reproductive Health of ADSW (Pg. xiv)

<sup>11</sup> (GAO, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Personal Communication, October 8th, 2025.

As of now, the implementation of the P3 Army Directive (Parenthood, Pregnancy, and Postpartum) has eased the way for women to have children during their time as active duty members, providing the mother with a year of maternity leave. This Army directive was also updated in February of 2025. As of now, “Soldiers are also exempt from other regular unit physical readiness training requirements<sup>13</sup>... for 180 days after the conclusion of pregnancy. After 180 days, Soldiers will return to regular unit fitness training. (U.S Army Holistic Health and Fitness Website). However, there is a concern about how pregnancy could directly affect their career and rank advancement.

Time also represents a structural barrier to women’s rank advancement. Depending on the branch, performance, and education, it might take a female officer over 10 years to reach the rank of O-4, or major. A requirement to pursue an officer commission is to have a bachelor's degree, which most students obtain after the age of 21, following a traditional pathway, with exceptions that could pursue officer commission starting at 17 years of age (U.S Army Website). A female officer who decides not to have children until after reaching the rank of O-4 might experience fertility issues that are common in their mid-30s. RAND reports that “Twelve percent of all DoD<sup>14</sup> ADSW... reported an unmet need for fertility services since joining the military (RAND xiv)”. If a female officer decided to stay in order to have the opportunity to be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, she would have to serve at least 3 to 4 years more to be eligible,<sup>15</sup> significantly affecting her possibilities of having children at a shorter term.

The Army also has a gender neutral approach to physical strength. While the Army Fitness Tests (AFTs) have presented a difficulty for women because of weight-lifting requirements, other factors, such as height and weight, significantly impact the possibility of women maximizing their fitness test results. Fitness tests are a condition for acceptance, but they do not determine the success of female soldiers in the Army (Officer India).<sup>16</sup> As of now, they have proved to be acceptable for women to at least meet minimum standards. The argument for optimal physical fitness is that the life of another soldier depends on the ability to achieve certain physical goals. There is a higher fitness expectation for the MCOs or Army Mission Critical

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<sup>13</sup> Such as ... diagnostic physical fitness tests, timed distance runs, timed distance ruck marches.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Defense

<sup>15</sup> U.S Army Time in Grade requirements for advancement.

<sup>16</sup> Personal Communication, October 6th, 2025.

Occupation (Officer Bravo). These are missions in which the ultimate goal would be put at risk by soldiers who do not have the right training or physical preparation. There is a continuum between fitness requirements and gender neutrality, which provides a defensible argument for gender neutrality for fitness tests; however, physical strength is not the only factor that could be attributed to gender differences.

Being the minority, women are subjected to scrutiny that affects their overall performance. Placing a psychological burden that Kim (2024) explores in her study on gender microaggressions on women in the military. Higher rates of depression are associated with lower rank soldiers who experience gender microaggressions, while higher ranks serve as a buffer for women to deal with gendered expectations on their roles. Yet, this is where the problem lies: there are not enough women in higher ranks in the military. Women remain outside the normative and expectations set by their male counterparts. Gender neutrality serves as a reason not to address the issue faced by female officers, that of having to prove themselves in a male-dominating field.

While keeping their gender neutral stance, the Army has been able to strategize gender differences. Throughout her study on sexual violence, Mesok (2019) mentions how women would create relationships with civilian women in villages in the Middle East. Having female officers creates a sense of safety at a cultural level (Mesok). While Mesok argues for strategizing gender differences, she believes that combating sexual assault of women in the Army does not represent an advancement for feminism as a whole. Since men are also sexually assaulted in the Army. Mesok believes that, in comparison to the footprint that transnational sexual violence perpetrated by Army men has left, sexual violence against women in the Army is not a major advancement for feminism overall. However, there is a sense of solidarity that stems from sharing an identity such as gender. Women in the Army are paving the way for any other woman aspiring to be in a leadership position in a male-dominated field. Their efforts should be celebrated, and any dehumanizing action that deters them from advancement must be harshly condemned.

The will and dedication required to stay in the Army and achieve higher ranks as a woman are rare. Women have to deal with discrimination, microaggressions, objectification, and ultimately sexual assault. Women have different struggles that should be targeted with different

accommodations. While Army culture strives for a gender neutral approach to combat, gender differences prevail, and so do the male soldiers' perceptions of those differences. If mostly men are in higher ranks, women face more difficulties pursuing a long-term career in the military. Due to fewer common accommodations, there will be fewer female officers achieving higher ranks. Issues like sexual assault and discrimination can only be prevented if addressed, and gender neutrality provides the institution with a reason not to talk about the differences that come with gender. The homogeneous nature of this public institution continues to foster the marginalization of female officers. Only because it refuses to let other women go in and address it. As long as women are not offered more holistic accommodations encompassing their biological needs and their needs for professional fulfillment that comes with rank advancement, they will continue to face the dichotomy of having to choose between their family and their military career.

### Methods

This research relies on mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Yet, the quantitative component serves as complementary to the main qualitative component. 14 conversations were conducted via Google Meet and phone calls, which have lasted around 30 minutes to an hour. The individuals interviewed were contacted via email to coordinate times. For this research, a couple of different sampling methods were used: Convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Regarding convenience sampling, most of the interviewees were in an online group. As a student researcher, I connected with them through that group for a matter of accessibility. Mutual connections were essential in the process of snowball sampling, as they encouraged me to connect with other officers with expertise in the field. Therefore, this sample of officers might not be fully representative of the Army population. The questions asked of the interviewees were the following.

1. What is or was your role in the Army?

*Served as a platform for follow-up questions such as:*

- a. Why did you choose to retire?
- b. Were there any women in your unit? How were your interactions?

- c. What could have made you stay in the Army?
- d. How is rank advancement determined?
2. What are the differences between reservists and active duty members?
3. What policy changes have been implemented during your service to accommodate women?
4. Do you have any children?
5. What alternatives does the Army provide you in case you want to start a family?

*They would often provide me with a timeline of when they had them, as well as the accommodations they were offered, if any.*

6. Is there anything you consider I should know about, any other variables that could be beneficial to my research?
7. Is there anybody you could connect me to, in order for them to provide me with information for my research?

The responses of the officers remained anonymous. In the findings section, I will be using pseudonyms to cite the interviewees. Please refer to the appendix for more information on their rank and role in the armed forces, as well as the pseudonym assigned to each one.

For the quantitative component, the paper relies heavily on government data, surveys, and yearly reports provided by the Department of Defense and the Pentagon. The surveys and data throughout the years are presented in column and pie charts to facilitate the process of conveying the findings. These research instruments also attempt to demonstrate that a majority of the female officers who leave the Army in the ranks of 04-06, do so mainly because of the complications that arise from motherhood and starting a family.

### **Findings Section**

In order to examine the impact of notable<sup>17</sup> accommodations in the past 10 years, one also needs to examine the number of female officers in the past 10 years and the circumstances for rank advancement. Through the analysis of the existing data provided by the Department of Defense, as well as the quantification of the topics that proved to be the most common in the interviews, the following research intends to support the need for gender-oriented accommodations. By also examining the impact of the already established measures.

### **1. Gender Neutrality in the U.S. Army**

The U.S Army might be the only institution that refuses to acknowledge intersectionality and the richness of one's identity. "In combat, you're not a woman, or a man, you're just a soldier" (Officer Bravo). Yet, there is some uncertainty about what the concept of soldier entails. One could say it refers to any individual able to adhere to the physical standards of those who are deployed in the same unit. Physical fitness serves as a guarantor that soldiers have a level of preparation that would allow them to save their peers in combat. However, physical standards and fitness standards were set by men, and so were the guidelines for recruitment, the policies regarding uniforms, the ergonomics of the vehicles, the policies regarding body fat measurements, and even policies regarding sexual assault.

There is an unspoken assumption about what is expected from "soldiers" from which women are just excluded because there is not a holistic approach to gender; while the Army is, or was, moving towards a more inclusive institution, it is too early to assume there is an ongoing cultural shift. Iskra defines this as the CMW paradigm. As long as the Army does not acknowledge gender differences and it shields its demanding standards on gender neutrality, it will require women to acquire a fierce and aggressive disposition rooted in following the standards of masculinity. More of a chameleonic identity that tries to both adhere to their female empowering aspirations and their reverent Army self. As one would expect, those women are very few.

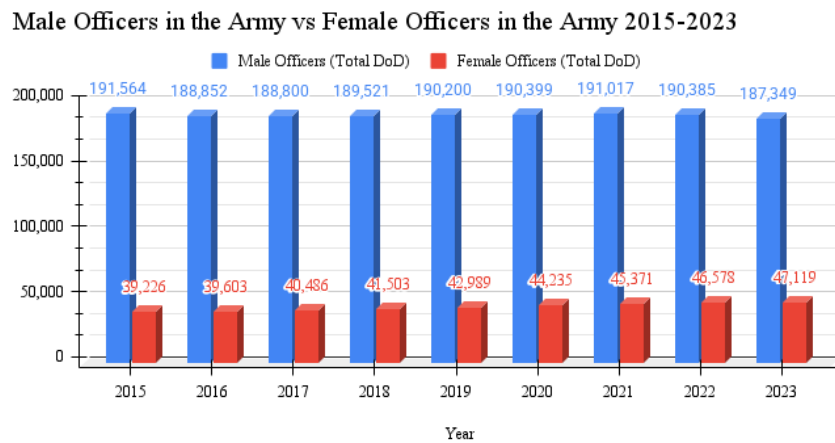
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<sup>17</sup> Considered as *notable* for being policy shifts that gave female officers freedom and flexibility in the Army (in comparison to already existing measures). Targeting the issues mentioned by the GAO in 2020: Family Planning (Motherhood), Seal Assault and Dependent Care (Associated to family).

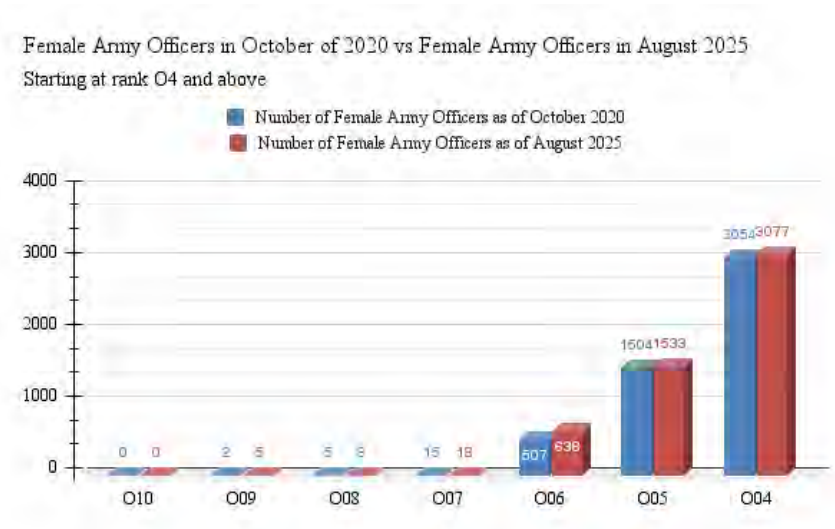
### 1.1 Gender Disparities Across Active Duty Officers

There are significant gaps across the armed forces when it comes to officers by sex and rank. Over the last 10 years, the number of officers joining the Army has increased. Surprisingly, the number of male officers has decreased. The following graph reflects the number of officers by sex based on the yearly demographic reports of the U.S. Army. The information available is until 2023.

**Figure 1 Source, DOD Yearly Demographics Report, from 2015 to 2023**



**Figure 2 Source: DoD DMDC (Defense Manpower Data Center).**



Female Army Officers in October of 2020 vs Female Army Officers in August 2025

One could attribute these increasing numbers to policy changes. Women feel more drawn to the U.S Army because the increasing number of female officers has forced the Army to implement different policies in order to keep the women in the forces. Officer Echo<sup>18</sup> mentions how, as a retired officer, she had 2 children during her service. There were different policies regarding maternity. She states that when she had her first child, she only had 6 weeks off, and then she was able to be deployed 6 months after her second child was born. As of now, thanks to the implementation of the P3, Parenthood, Pregnancy, and Postpartum Policy, women can now have a year of maternity leave.

Women were not able to be a part of infantry teams until very recently. Coming into effect in 2016, the removal of the ban for women to join infantry teams allowed them to be able to combat alongside other male officers. However, during deployment, women were able to work in other departments during deployment. Officer Echo describes how, based on her experience during deployment, she was able to travel with the infantry while working in the office of the Adjutant General, or what would be closer to human resources. “There were 400 men and 18 women in our battalion,” she stated. The role of women when deployed was mostly strategic regarding gender; identity-based bonding allowed female officers to connect with civilian women through something their male counterparts could never understand: womanhood.

Army culture attempts to portray a culture of gender neutrality. However, the agreement with gender neutral expectations on literature might easily come across as undermining the experiences of female officers in the Army. Not only did Echo, but also Officer India, comment on their experience as women in deployment. Echo and India, while being deployed at different times, mention how they had engaged with civilian populations, especially with women and children. For Officer Echo, this experience was outside of her field of work, and one could argue it was more of a strategic measure because of her gender. However, India worked in Civil Affairs; her role was based on how to make the Army have the least impact on the surrounding villages and vice versa. Her day-to-day tasks involved interacting with civilians, and she argued that “...sometimes because of cultural dynamics, you had to gain trust or get a man to intervene”. However, some struggles are not only because of the men and their cultural differences. While both India and Echo were deployed at very different times, both of them mentioned how being

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<sup>18</sup> Personal Communication, October 11th. 2025

fewer women caused the Army to group them. India mentions how she had to blend with lower rank officers, and share their sleeping spaces, when in regular circumstances, men in higher ranks would be separated from lower rank officials. Gender neutrality becomes unattainable when there are no infrastructural capabilities to give equal treatment.

## **1.2 Women as a Minority**

Women being a minority in the Army are subjected to the scrutiny of their male counterparts, which is logically tied to societal expectations. Women are often victims of harassment, intimidation, and abuse, especially by their superiors. The lack of female role models that could advocate for them makes it more difficult for them to feel like they can go up to their supervisors and have a leader that they could trust<sup>19</sup>. This significantly impacts their performance and even their mental health. Kim examines the impact of biases and microaggressions perpetrated by men. Discrimination, sexual assault, and objectification based on traditional gender roles also make women more self-conscious about their performance. When examining the criticism towards women in higher political positions, Carlson mentions how hate speech can create a feeling of inferiority. Yeeun's research on the verbal abuse towards lower-rank officers supports this. Microaggressions can result in difficulties achieving higher ranks in the military and negatively impact mental health, provoking depression, especially among lower-rank officials. Having few resources to approach the mental health of women in the Army can not only decrease retention rates, but also escalate this bullying to sexual harassment. Microaggressions and discrimination reminders that women are outside the norm, outside the typical, and remain outcasts in the Army.

## **1.3 O-4 and The Biological Clock**

When asked to mention one of the areas where there was room for improvement in the Army, most women mentioned that access to on-base childcare represented an issue. The shortages in childcare imply having to get on the waitlist as soon as they find out they are

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<sup>19</sup> Mentioned by officer Mike, when addressing difficulties that come with leadership. Personal Communication, October 22nd, 2025.

pregnant. For this paper, 6 women in the ranks of O4 and above were interviewed. Except for one in the Navy and one in the Air Force, all of them were in the Army. Out of those 6 women, only two had children. Both cases were extremely rare. Officer Echo is married to Officer Foxtrot<sup>20</sup>. Officer Echo stated that being a dual military couple places them in a privileged position in comparison to the couples where one of the spouses is a civilian. They had #2 priority on the waitlist for childcare, after senior officers. It is surprising that when asked about a major factor affecting female officers, around 80% of the female interviewees mentioned the shortages in on-base childcare. The literature proves that this has been an ongoing, unresolved issue over the past 20 years. According to DiSilverio and her study on the retention of women in the air force, the respondents also mention that the “DoD has excellent (superior) child care—it’s the waiting lists and uncertainty of getting a slot that causes stress” (DiSilverio, 2003). One of the interviewees, who is a senior officer in the Air Force, also mentioned that this is currently an ongoing problem, so one could extrapolate this struggle across the services.

Women have to deal with gendered expectations from the institution, society, and their male counterparts. Officer Kilo<sup>21</sup> stated that “...women tend to be more...maternal”. Iskra adds to the discussion by asserting that traditional roles tend to prevail in household management (Iskra 2010). However, focusing on fulfilling household responsibilities and having a successful career is extremely difficult. While serving in active duty, women have to be able to be deployed at any time. Both children and interpersonal relationships place stress on their possibilities for advancement. In fact, Officer Foxtrot asserts that most Army men tend to be married to civilian women, while most Army women tend to marry Army men. Not only does balancing personal life with a professional career represent a burden for women, but so does the “biological clock”<sup>22</sup>. For a woman pursuing a commission at the age of 21, it might take around 11 years to achieve the rank of major, or O4. By the time she passes the age of 30, she is less likely to be fertile. RAND’s reports on the reproductive health of women serving across the armed forces show that “15.2 percent of DoD [...] reported having tried unsuccessfully to conceive for 12 or more months” (RAND xiv). They also reported having irregular menstruation patterns (RAND 60). Women experience biological burdens associated with fertility that male officers do not

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<sup>20</sup> Personal Communication, October 1st, 202

<sup>21</sup> Personal Communication, October 20th, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Concern for age and fertility amongst womenand.

have to face. Women do not have the chance to delay pregnancy based on their career; they are forced to choose between one or another.

## **2. Accommodation vs. Facilitation**

There are expectations women have when it comes to joining the Army. One of them is defying misconceptions about femininity. They see themselves compelled to prove their worth to an institution that does not take affirmative action measures to guarantee their success. Proving that women can do the same things men can is one of those expectations. When mentioning accommodations, a majority of the respondents, both men and women, were very careful when establishing a difference between accommodating women and making rank advancements easier for women; two of the interviewees requested to restate the question. It was not difficult to gather that gender neutral standards are something on which both men and women agree. India believes that while Army Fitness Tests or AFTs are gender neutral, "...they are not hard to pass but to max". She places a special focus on having tests based on height and weight instead. Officer November<sup>23</sup> believes that gender shall not be the only factor to take into account, since the role of the officer should also have weight on physical standards; she is in favor of gender neutrality. On the other hand, Officer Kilo believes that word choice is important, since the word accommodation, to him, implies some sort of disability or impairment.

There are different reasons why officers in the Army believe that gender is not as relevant when evaluating the performance of officers in different areas. However, biological differences are clear and scientifically backed up. If the institution is not able to provide accommodations to give women equal opportunities in relation to men, gender cannot be a factor to discard when assessing officers of multiple genders. In order to have gender neutral standards, it is paramount to have gender-neutral treatment. Not without first providing women with equal opportunities to thrive.

### **2.1 Issues with Retention: Is the Playing Field Levelled?**

Promotions in the Army are subject to the assessment of several evaluations performed by superiors. Ideally, these committees that decide advancement would have an unbiased

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<sup>23</sup> Personal Communication, November 10th, 2025.

opinion. However, Officer Delta<sup>24</sup> explained her history with sexual assault in both the Navy and the Coast Guard. Power dynamics played a role, since she was assaulted by her superior. She openly states as a fact that “...the sexual assault reporting process is terrible, I was retaliated against in my evaluation... and threatened by the regional commander.” While she described her experiences in both the Navy and the Coast Guard, her case can be extrapolated to the power dynamics in the Army. It was not until very recently, in 2015, that there were some changes made to the Army Uniform Code on Military Justice, where women could take their sexual assault cases to the civilian court, and that way avoid having to go through their superiors in the reporting process. An additional burden for sexual assault victims is definitely having to deal with a lack of representation. Most of the higher-ranking officers are men, which in certain cases might make it difficult for women to build a relationship with their superiors. Officer Mike establishes that as a leader, he understood how “...young women struggle to reach out to strong male leaders... men felt more comfortable talking to them.” Noticeably, not having the ability to bond over a shared identity is another factor that gender neutrality fails to account for.

## 2.2 The Force Behind Policy Changes

While historically most standards are and have been set by men, until October of 2025, women counted on DACOWITS (Defense Advisory Committee for Women in the Forces) to push for policy changes on their behalf. One of the most salient aspects of DACOWITS is that its intention was to specifically target retention for female officers. DACOWITS would provide recommendations to the Department of Defense to retain women and increase representation in the forces. While representation in the forces is often underestimated, Officer November mentioned how she remains indecisive about her decision to stay in the Army. She states, “If I could see one person, who had a successful Army career and also had a family... just give me one, I would stay.” The impact of not having enough female leaders has a greater impact on retention. Officer Foxtrot, based on his experience with the ROTC, believes that there is nearly a 50/50 gender breakdown among students pursuing officer commissions through the ROTC.<sup>25</sup> According to these numbers, the Army should be moving toward a more inclusive institution

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<sup>24</sup>Personal Communication. October 13th, 2020October5

<sup>25</sup> Based on the class he has information on.

whose purpose is to increase retention rates for these women who could potentially be higher-ranking officers, if given the necessary resources to do so.

### **3. What Needs to be Targeted**

The greatest selling point of the U.S. Army is its early retirement plan. Officer Hotel believes that, despite having excellent benefits in comparison to the civilian workforce, most soldiers, both men and women, leave because of burnout. He also mentions how serving on active duty means being at the government's disposal and being willing to go whenever they call. One could also argue that there is a difference in responsibilities for both reserve and active duty officers, and life as a reservist could give officers more space for family planning. However, there is no way of not sacrificing either their families or their careers, since choosing to be a reservist involves having to serve for a longer period of time, in order to be promoted. While being a reservist does provide greater flexibility in regard to time management, the difficulties of going back into active duty service imply that it somewhat slows down the rank advancement process. It is important to note that upon reaching 28 years of service, the Army subjects officers to a mandatory removal from the forces, unless selected for higher rank positions. Women need to have an alternative to be able to remain in active duty services in order to be able to focus on their career advancement, while being provided with accommodations for childbearing purposes. No matter the gender neutral standpoint of the Army on many aspects, pregnancy comes with significant financial and physiological consequences, which the Army should be able to address to provide women with the same opportunities for advancement as men have.

#### **3.1 DACES: Officers Care for Their Families**

The issues with the retention of female soldiers are clearly identified. The Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey provides yearly anonymous surveys in order to identify the main causes why officers exit the Army, family has proven to be one of them. Both officer Golf<sup>26</sup> and officer Hotel agreed that the Army's strength relies on the families. According to this belief, there should be more of a focus on the institution accommodating women as birthgivers, for them to be able to advance their military career. Rank advancement and family planning should not be mutually exclusive. Neither for military nor civilian women. Officer Mike

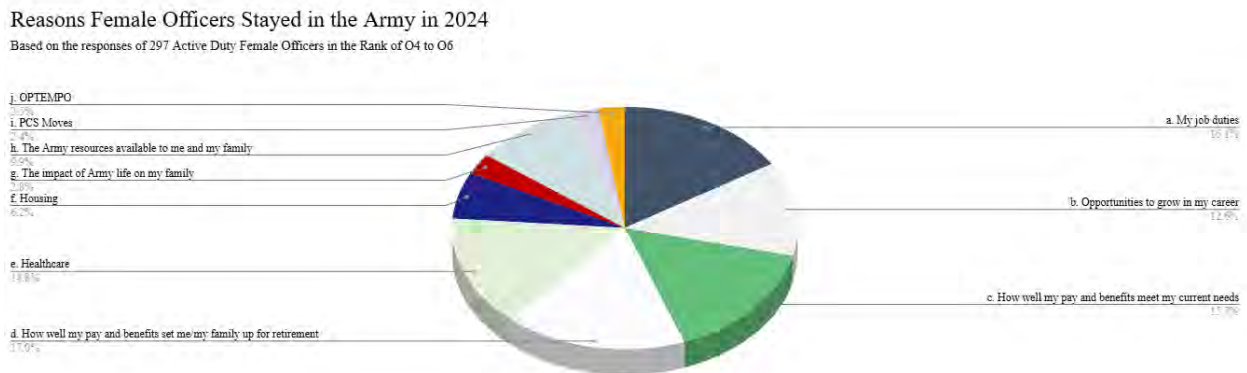
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<sup>26</sup> Personal Communication, October 7th, 2025.

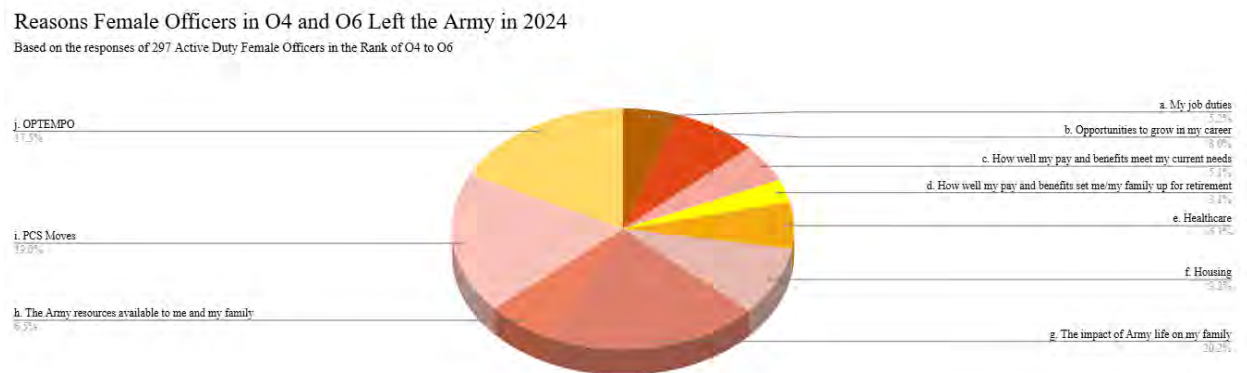
mentioned how his civilian wife dedicated her whole life to taking care of their family, so he could have a successful military career. Ideally, if the strength of the Army is the family, there should be a focus on affirmative actions to guarantee the well-being of the officers and their families, by avoiding the feeling of burnout that comes with being at the government’s disposal.

The 2024 DACES survey provided by the Pentagon revealed the determining factors for women in ranks O4 to O6 to stay in the Army or decide to leave. Figures 3 and 4 show the options women had to choose from. 297 Female field grade<sup>27</sup> active duty officers were surveyed in 2024. Their responses were both positive and negative, and ranked by pay grade.

**Fig. 3 Positive Responses - Reasons Female Officers Stayed in the Army in 2024**



**Fig. 4 Negative Responses Reasons Female Officers Left the Army in 2024**



<sup>27</sup> Field grade officers refers to majors, colonels or lieutenant colonels (O4 to O6).

The most determining factor that makes women stay in the Army is the benefit of pay after retirement; however, the reason why they leave is the impact of the Army on their families.<sup>28</sup> Family planning proves to be the greater reason behind lower retention rates. Even based on the other responses to the survey, involving OPTEMPO<sup>29</sup> and PCS Moves,<sup>30</sup> female officers reject all mobility that impacts the stability of their family. In order to guarantee the retention of women in the following years, the DoD<sup>31</sup> needs to have a greater focus on facilitating motherhood. This could involve reducing the 20 year mark of service to access the early retirement plan, or making sure that pregnancy does not interfere with active duty roles. An alternative could involve allocating more funding towards the development of infrastructure for the CDCs<sup>32</sup> or providing active training to relocate women in different areas with lower physical standards. This could not only allow women to keep working on their military careers, but also allow them to start a family. Women have an opportunity to succeed in the Army only if the institution is intentional in taking affirmative measures that allow them to do so. Officer November, a junior Army officer, when asked if she considered staying in the Army, stated: “If I could see one person who had a successful Army career and also had a family... I would stay.” She brought up how there are not many female role models for junior female officers to follow. Women do not have the same advantage male officers have, that of being a majority. Policy changes to accommodate women would be the only way to provide them with equality of opportunity in rank advancement. Representation matters, and having women in higher ranks could clearly allow the Army to transition to a more inclusive career path for all the women who want to serve their country. Gender neutral standards require a treatment where women are given resources in order for them to have the same chances of success.

### Conclusion

Army women have a very particular set of traits. Their identity is built around resilience, strength, and the ability to pave the way for their peers. They have a sense of commitment that

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<sup>28</sup> G. in the pie chart.

<sup>29</sup> J. in the pie chart. Operational Tempo: "the rate of military actions or missions.". Also, frequency of deployments, training exercises, and garrison duties. (Castro and Adler, 1999)

<sup>30</sup> I. in the pie chart. Permanent Change of Station.

<sup>31</sup> Department of Defense 20-year 20-year.

<sup>32</sup> Child Development Centers. On-base childcare.

pushes them to achieve standards of an institution that was not made for them. Officer Mike mentioned how “Army people are alpha people, for their own detriment.”<sup>33</sup> Women are in favor of policies that allow them to strive against gendered societal expectations. They want to be able to fulfill the same standards as men, under different conditions. Biological differences inevitably cause women in the Army to go through experiences the Army is not used to dealing with, because of their position as pioneers in a male-dominated field. While the cases of women who have been able to overcome structural barriers imposed by their peers and superiors are admirable, their cases are rare. Family represents a burden to career advancement and vice versa. The research proves they are both nearly mutually exclusive. The institution continues to be structured by men, for men.

Gender neutral standards perpetuate the idea of an inherently male Army culture. Women could take advantage of having more policy changes that guarantee their retention and advancement, promoting a more welcoming institution. However, the success of these accommodations depends heavily on the political climate and the leadership figures. As of October 2025, the Department of Defense has made policy changes such as the elimination of DACOWITS, as well as the restructuring of information handling for reporters of sexual assault, which could significantly impact their possibilities for promotion. The number of female officers has been increasing over the past few years because of a focus on policies to increase their length of service. Without any forces to drive change, the scenario is now more discouraging than ever. Making one question if there was ever an interest in women serving their motherland.

### **Limitations**

While this study proved the thesis to be correct, there were significant limitations in the research. The data is really scattered regarding recruitment. There is no specific breakdown of female officers who decided to pursue a commission at a specific period of time. Because of this constraint, the study could not follow the consequential impact of policy changes on the decision of female civilians trying to make a career in the Army.

Additionally, time was a constraint regarding having a larger sample of interviewees. These conversations started being merely informational; however, the repeated patterns in their

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<sup>33</sup> Perception as a Navy senior officer, part of a different branch of the Armed Forces.

testimonies and the care they put into giving a thorough account of their stories strengthened the thesis. This might affect generalizability to a larger sample size of active duty officers who are currently in the forces. However, the sample was extremely diverse in terms of sex, ranks, roles, and status (there were both active duty and reserve officers).

At the beginning of the research, this project was intended to be more quantitative; however, because of changes in data collection techniques, the transitory nature of having a qualitative study complicated the data coding process. Making it difficult to classify interview results by themes. Most of the data on reasons why women leave the Army was also not readily available to the public.

### **Potential Criticisms**

Limitations of this research might raise different concerns. One of them is that of generalizability. Although this was a sample of 14 officers, their arguments were supported by data provided by the Department of Defense. Their testimonies, alongside demographic reports and surveys, point out that family<sup>34</sup> is a major factor affecting the retention of female Army officers. This sample, although not fully randomized, provided a foundational part of the project, and there was always an ethical concern for the anonymity of the officers' identities and an unbiased compilation of the data.

At a theoretical level, one could argue that gender neutral policies are implemented for the sake of fairness. However, scientifically proven data demonstrate that women have clear biological differences that can place a major disadvantage in their performance in comparison to their male counterparts. This project argues that gender neutrality serves as a tool not to address these differences or their condition as a minority in the Army.

At a methodological level, quantifying the impact of the accommodations and policies might be difficult. However, the timing of these measures and the ongoing needs of the women

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<sup>34</sup> In addition to gendered societal expectations, microaggressions, and sexual assault, and factors mentioned in the research.

in the Army align with a steady increase in female officers over the past 10 years, as the reasons they leave were targeted through these policy changes.

Recruitment and numbers on advancement would have been a key factor in quantifying the impacts of policy and representation. However, there was no data available on the recruitment of officers by sex, or on the number of female officers promoted to a higher rank in a specific year. However, having a larger sample of respondents in lower ranks in potential research could serve as a tool to examine the impact of female role models in higher ranks and gender targeted recruitment.

## Appendix

For the purpose of this research, the respondents were provided with pseudonyms based on the Army Phonetic Alphabet. They narrated their personal experiences and provided me with details of their time in the Army. In order to protect their identities and privacy, I have opted to use the following pseudonyms.

Alpha. U.S. Air Force Senior Officer.

Bravo. U.S. Army Reserve Officer, Former Infantry Officer.

Charlie. Retired Army Judge Advocate.

Delta. Navy Senior Officer.

Echo. U.S. Army Retired Senior Officer.

Foxtrot. U.S. Army Senior Officer (with ROTC involvement).

Golf. Retired U.S. Army Senior Officer.

Hotel. U.S. Army Major.

India. U.S. Army Senior Officer.

Julieta. U.S. Army Senior Officer.

Kilo. Retired U.S. Army Colonel.

Lima. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel.

Mike. U.S. Navy Senior Officer.

November. U.S. Army Junior Officer.

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Echo. U.S. Army Retired Senior Officer. Personal communication, October 11, 2025.

Foxtrot. U.S. Army Senior Officer involved with ROTC. Personal communication, October 1, 2025.

Golf. Retired U.S. Army Senior Officer. Personal communication, October 7, 2025.

Hotel. U.S. Army Major. Personal communication, October 8, 2025.

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**One Nation, Bound By Drag: Tokyo's Drag Culture as a Modern Subentity of National Identity**

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### Abstract

Throughout Japan's history, performance has played a significant role in the construction and expression of gender and identity; drag culture in 21st-century Tokyo represents a contemporary subcultural form of this tradition. As drag publics become increasingly visible in urban Japan, it raises the question of how subcultures, competing identities, and social rebellions relate to dominant understandings of national identity. This paper explores the idea that Tokyo's drag culture functions as a counterpublic of imagined communities that negotiate belonging through performance. While Japanese national identity is frequently defined as homogeneous and ethnocentric, an examination of gender expression in kabuki, onnagata, and the Takarazuka Revue suggests that Japanese drag communities function as elective publics that redefine belonging. This paper examines national contributions of Tokyo's drag culture through shared aesthetic practices, which integrate transnational queer influences while still articulating local forms of "Japaneseness." This paper argues that the twenty-first-century drag scene in Tokyo unravels essentialist narratives of national homogeneity, a destabilization of ethno-nationalism that constitutes the formation of subcultural national identities in post-Shōwa Japan.

## National Identity, Subcultures, and Belonging in Japan

Nationalism in Japan has historically emphasized ethnic roots, national purity, legacies of imperialism, and general homogeneity, whether cultural or social. Hidden beneath dominant narratives is a myriad of vibrant subcultures that have reimagined *nihonjinron* (“Japaneseness”)—a widely recognized ethnocentric nationalist concept that Japan is a racially and culturally homogeneous country, as a concept more complex than ethnic roots (Yamamoto, 2015, p. 1). The prominence of Japan’s subcultures proposes a relationship between nationalism and shared identities, cultural experiences, and challenges. Noted amongst these communities is Tokyo’s drag scene, which emerged as a significant social hub in the mid-2010s, inspiring a set of central questions: How might Tokyo’s drag culture in the post-Showa period resist, reimagine, and reflect national identity? And how can these expressions be analyzed under diasporic and subcultural forms of Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities?

Tokyo’s drag culture has functioned as an aesthetic public and site of subcultural nationalism. In Tokyo, diasporic communities, united by drag, imagine forms of national identity that challenge Japan’s ethno-nationalist identity and transcend borders. By integrating transnational aesthetics, linguistic hybridity, and performance-based networks, Tokyo’s drag community has imagined an alternative national solidarity that questions, subverts, and abandons dominant traditional narratives of Japanese national belonging. Through expressions of gender as in performance art, notions of Japan’s national identity are redefined.

Drag, defined by sociologist Sarah Murray as a “tradition of enacting the essential characteristics of the opposite gender through cross-dressing and the use of other symbols and gestures” (Murray, 1994, p. 345), has become a worldwide phenomenon. In Japan, the influence of gender-performative traditions is prominent both historically and in urban culture. On a national level, drag-adjacent performances are traced through parallel histories in the Takarazuka Revue, kabuki performance, and the dramaturgy of *onnagata*, an expression of kabuki in which “female impersonators...played the role of the ‘paragons’ of womanhood in seventeenth-through nineteenth-century Japan” (Moringara, 2002, p. 3). Similar to modern drag, *onnagata* “almost automatically refers to male actors playing women’s roles... [it] entails connotations regarding the one who performs: male identity, maleness [and] masculinity” (Isaka, 2016, p. 112). Legacies of gendered parody as exaggerated performance enabled the rise of the Tokyo

drag scene in Japan's post-Showa era (1989 through the present day). This includes Western influences and traditional forms of performance.

As displayed by the account of “Yamanote... named after the main train loop in central Tokyo” (*The New York Times*, 2022), drag communities in Tokyo inculcate Japanese nationalism through nationalist subcultures in which “even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). When understood as an imagined community, drag redefines belonging through aesthetic and elective notions of performance over national definitions, which are marked by ethnicity or civic behavior. Through a dualistic approach, which incorporates both global and traditional Japanese forms of gender-based parody performance, linguistic play, and theatrical solidarity, Tokyo's drag artists articulate alternative visions of “Japaneseness” that destabilize traditional pillars of identity.

Tokyo's drag scene warrants analysis with specific concern for its transnational aesthetics. When contextualized with traditional Japanese theatrical performance, drag as an aesthetic counterpublic reveals narratives of subjugation, isolation, and performativity among subgroups within Japanese national identity. The success of Tokyo drag is an illustration of “Japaneseness” and national belonging, exhibiting that performance arts and gender expression provide insight into how national subcultures are reimagined.

### **Imagined Communities and the Gendered Nation**

Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities conceptualizes the nation as an “imagined political community...both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). By this definition, nations are not naturally occurring entities; instead, they are state-endorsed structures built through shared history and unified through cultural experiences, language, and community rituals that signify rapport.

Tokyo's drag scene, which emerged in the 1980s and 90s through Western media representations like Priscilla, Queen of the Desert and *La Cage aux Folles*, is characterized as an extravagant presentation in which Japanese drag queens “establish [a] genre of drag within Japan's underground burlesque and cabaret scene...focusing on niche humor, camp, and gags” (*AJET Connect Magazine*, 2020). Exclusive to Japan, this style of drag offers a modernized take on the traditional forms of gendered performance found in *onnagata* and *kabuki*. Through an

underground genre of gender expression, national belonging connects to genderfluid representations—negating understandings of nationalism as ethnicity or legal residence. Cultural belonging and “Japaneseness” are exhibited by mutual participation in artistically intricate exaggerations of gender. Through drag performances, Japanese nationals and their audiences form an imagined community, which is bound by common symbols, performances, and linguistics reflective of shared history.

A reflection of the recent evolution undergone by gender expressions in Japan, Sarah Murray's research emphasizes that Japanese drag artists frequently negotiate between upholding tradition and integrating Western queer influences, such as the “theatrical convention” of drag being exclusively performed by “gay males” (Murray, 1994, p. 347) to create resonant performances. Centered in expressions of drag, this hybrid definition of “Japaneseness” serves as a direct contestation to conservative interpretations of Japanese identity, instead proposing a nationalism that is flexible, aesthetically driven, and communal. By entering these spaces, drag performers reclaim and reshape their national identity in ways that subvert traditional norms and gender roles associated with nationalism. This behavior reclaims Japanese nationalism from being solely civic or ethnic.

The relationship between national identity and gender-based parody in Japan is established beyond contemporary renditions of onnagata. Characterized by deliberate, state-led constructions of masculinity and wartime gender roles, Japan's Meiji period aligned its national progress with a militarized, disciplined male citizenry. Research published by historian Jason Karlin, a scholar of Asian media studies, demonstrates that modern Japanese nationalism was a result of internal gendering; a phenomenon which explains projections of femininity within otherwise masculine representations of Meiji leadership, provoking a reconsideration of “what has been repressed in the discourses of gender...the ‘difference within’ that had to be disavowed in Japanese discourses” (Karlin, 2002, p. 42). Karlin notes that in internal gendering practices, what is feminine exists inside what is masculine.

### **Performing Gender: Onnagata, Kabuki, and the Takarazuka Revue**

Japan holds a tradition of alternative gender performances within the male gender. In Kabuki, the practice of onnagata (male actors specializing in female roles) exemplifies how

gender was stylized rather than exclusively parodied. Maki Isaka's description of onnagata as an idealized, codified, and exaggerated femininity characterizes this performance as remaining distinct from "real" womanhood. The codification of Kabuki is compliant with its own set of aesthetic codes and functions to inform its modern counterparts. Tokyo drag does not simply imitate gender or drag's Western forms. Instead, like onnagata, it combines elements of these existing structures to outline its own aesthetic code. This includes, but is not limited to, "theatrical spoofs and parodies revolving around men in drag" and "quintessential gay male sensibility" (Murray, 1994, p. 354). Tokyo drag is a cultural composite that is not merely aesthetic. It carries political weight by demonstrating that "Japaneseness" is not homogeneous.

Understanding the theory of counterpublics is critical to understanding the Tokyo drag culture. Counterpublics, which are affinity spaces formed to oppose dominant cultural norms (Ikegami, 2005), are best seen in the gay bars and clubs of Shinjuku Ni-chōme. In 2 Chome, drag performers establish counterpublics where dominant narratives of Japanese identity are both critiqued and reimagined (*The New York Times*, 2022). These performances often include "the humor and jokes, as well as the campiness, found in Japanese-style drag" (*AJET Connect Magazine*, 2020) alongside western inspiration taken from popular performers such as the RuPaul dynasty. In 2 Chome, Tokyo's drag artists synthesize cultural and historical unity based on the foundation of aesthetic principles (*The Tokyo Weekender*, 2023).

A signal of the diaspora that comes with this territory, queens in Japan find themselves identifying with the national associations that house their community. Due to the background and shared history of gender-based performances in Japan, the elective nature of belonging in the drag counterpublic proposes a participatory model of Japanese nationalism. Furthermore, the bars, clubs, and stages where the performances take place function as physical embodiments of this nation. Though it can be classified under the "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7) of an imagined community, there are geographic meeting grounds associated with the subnational group. These spaces aid in the redefinition of national and gender identities and resist state-driven narratives of uniformity.

### **Transnational Aesthetics and Diasporic Performance**

The Tokyo drag scene is rooted transnationally, taking on elements of queer culture that are not exclusively Japanese. Performers often experiment with the RuPaul lineage, vogue to international scores, and implement queer vernacular of Western origin. What makes this art Japanese is that it is not a replication; it is an energetic and participatory hub that embodies the “constructed femininity by imitation and citation” (Isaka, 2016, p. 64) of onnagata while engaging captive audiences through novel concepts. A contrast to Western drag, which frequently leans toward satire and political commentary, Tokyo drag has concerned itself with “sexual power...emotional power and vulnerability” (Murray, 1994, p. 357). From this convergence of influences emerges an authenticity essential to the expansion of a “drag nation.”

As clarified by Anderson, print capitalism catalyzed imagined communities through “the potential stretch” (Anderson, 1983, p. 46) of the modern nation. In the case of Tokyo, widespread digital media platforms, including TikTok and Instagram, enable transnational ties to the drag community operating within Japanese borders. By participating in global dialogues, drag artists identify themselves within an online community that is diasporic and imagined. This co-occurs with efforts to uphold a community that is distinctly local.

### **Drag as Subcultural Nationalism**

This negotiation between national ritual and social rebellion is part of what makes Tokyo’s drag scene compelling. Through a critique of existing norms and the continuation of ritualistic elements from the past, it becomes an abject site of national renegotiation (*Betsuni’s Blog Part III*, 2016). Through these performances, drag artists model a vision of a Japanese future that rejects the sole recognition of ethno-nationalism. This suggests that nationality is not only about obeying laws and revering flags, but about Anderson’s pillars.

### **Performing “Japaneseness”**

By emphasizing elective identification, solidarity through aesthetic counterpublics, and belonging found in performative action, Tokyo drag artists challenge and expand notions of “Japaneseness”. Performers reveal that their national identity is not fixed, but dynamic and fluid.

The Tokyo drag scene resists modern and commonly encountered Japanese nationalisms, which are comprehensively characterized by ethno-nationalist homogeneity, imperial memory, and tensions of cultural purity (Yamamoto, 2015, p. 1).

Consideration of aesthetic counterpublics and performative action proposes a conflicting narrative: that drag has the properties to function as a subcultural entity where alternative forms of “Japaneseness” and national belonging are imagined on a global scale. Challenging dominant conceptions of nationalism, drag culture in Tokyo catalyzes and negotiates contracts of transnational belonging within Japan's historically homogenous national narrative. This belonging reflects subcultural nationalisms. Through subcultural nationalisms, marginalized communities construct solidarities independent of ethno-nationalist thought processes and maintain diasporic connections, revealing a manifestation of aesthetic, performative, and linguistic practices.

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**Ranked Choice Voting at the State and Local Level**

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### Abstract

Many people across the political spectrum are frustrated with many of the problems that come with simple plurality voting, also known as first-past-the-post, which is implemented in the lion's share of elections across the United States. To solve many of these problems, some activists and other political organizations advocate for cities and states to adopt Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) as a viable alternative. However, many people, both Republicans and Democrats, claim that implementing this system would be too complicated for people to understand. Due to this, there would be high rates of ballot exhaustion, which would disenfranchise vulnerable minorities who already face significant barriers to voting as is. While there is plenty of research attempting to demonstrate how much people understand how RCV impacts elections, not enough attention has been placed on whether an RCV election taking place at the state or local level will have any impact on voter turnout. This report aims to address this gap in the literature by going through polling data of RCV elections in statewide and local elections and comparing them. This paper also contains a discussion of the different spheres of thought regarding RCV and its unique history in North America and across the world.

## Ranked Choice Voting at the State and Local Level

### Introduction and Overview

In 2022, Democrats braced for a red wave that was expected to flip the House of Representatives. However, while some seats were lost, the damage was minimal compared to expectations. This was most evident when Democrat Mary Polta defeated Trump-backed Republican Sarah Palin in Alaska, a historically Republican state. This was the first election in Alaska using Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), a new alternative voting system to plurality voting that promises to more accurately determine the candidate with the strongest support. After her loss, Palin decried the new voting system, claiming it was fraudulent. She described it as “weird” and claimed RCV had disenfranchised a large percentage of Alaskan voters because it is difficult to understand (Lancaster, 2023). Interestingly, this talking point of Palin, a far-right conservative, would be repeated by the Democratic Party in Washington, D.C., after the passing of Initiative 83 on November 5, 2024, which will bring RCV to D.C. in 2026. Muriel Bowser, the current mayor of D.C. and a staunch Democrat, opposed Initiative 83. When questioned by WTOP News, Bowser described RCV as “a very complicated election system” (Iannelli, 2024).

It would appear that both sides of the political aisle, when in the majority, claim that RCV disenfranchises citizens. Taking that message to heart, some states have even taken measures to ban RCV altogether. This includes West Virginia, which moved to ban RCV in February 2024. During several committee meetings, many members of Congress expressed their intent to ban the alternative voting system. According to ACLU West Virginia, Delegate Rick Hillenbrand reportedly tried to learn about how RCV works through several AI chatbots; however, he was ultimately unsuccessful in understanding the process (ACLU West Virginia, 2025).

This would make West Virginia among the 10 states that have already banned RCV. Delegates argued that RCV would be too complex for voters at the state level. Supporters of RCV, on the other hand, believe that it is the ticket to creating a more diverse pool of candidates and encouraging a wider breadth of people to vote. While there is existing research on the impact RCV has on voter turnout, more research is needed to determine if RCV’s effect on voter turnout

is constant. In other words, does RCV have the same impact on voter turnout in city and state elections?

To answer this question, this paper will explore polling data from several RCV elections across the United States. This will include city cases such as the June 2021, 2017, and 2013 New York Democratic Primaries, the California Bay Area, the 2022 Oakland Mayoral Race, and Santa Fe. Additionally, polling data from statewide RCV elections from Alaska and Maine will also be utilized and compared with city polling data.

The purpose of this paper is to determine if RCV's impact on voter turnout changes depending on whether it is implemented in city or state elections. This Chapter introduced RCV and presented the main research question: Does RCV have the same impact on voter turnout in city and state elections?

The next chapter will contain an explanation of how RCV works as well as a brief history of its implementation in the United States. Following that, Chapter 3 will contain an in-depth discussion of the different spheres of thought on RCV's impact on voter demographics and the gap in the available research that this paper will address. Afterward, Chapter 4 will detail the research methodology, including reaching out to organizations like Fair Vote and the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center for polling data and interviews. Next, Chapter 5 will analyze the available data comparing cities and state RCV elections. Chapter 6 will discuss the results of the compiled data. Finally, Chapter 7 will conclude the paper's main takeaways and discuss new avenues for future research.

### **Ranked Choice Voting Explanation and Brief History**

In order to assess whether the impact RCV has on voter turnout changes depending on whether the election is local or statewide, it is first necessary to provide important context about the alternative voting system. This will involve explaining how exactly the alternative voting system works, as well as why advocates want to replace plurality voting with it. Then, for further background, the history of the development and implementation of RCV will be elaborated on. All of these discussions provide crucial information that will inform the following chapters.

#### **How Ranked Choice Voting Works**

The voting system for RCV involves a slightly different process from plurality voting. On a ballot for each candidate, under the new system, voters must rank each candidate from 1 to 5 in order of preference. Then, all of the votes are counted. Assuming a candidate is ranked first on more than half of the ballots, then that person wins the election, like under plurality voting. However, if no candidate gets an outright majority, then the candidate with the lowest number of votes will have their votes transferred to the ballots' second choice. After that, the candidate has been eliminated from the race, and the votes are recounted. This process of elimination is continually repeated until a candidate receives a simple majority. This instant process of elimination is why some refer to RCV as Instant Runoff Voting.

This process can be illustrated with an example. Suppose at a local high school, Billy, Sally, Andy, and Ted run for class president under RCV. After the ballots were counted, Billy received 10% of the vote, Sally received 25% of the vote, Andy received 24% of the vote, and Ted received 41% of the vote. Since nobody won more than 50% of the vote, because Billy is the most unpopular candidate, the ballots that listed him as their number one are now recounted to their number two. All of the votes for Billy listed Ted as their second choice. Therefore, in the second round, the 10% of the vote that Billy received goes to Ted. Ted now has 51% of the votes, which crosses the threshold needed to win the election. For multi-winner elections, like a city council or school board, three candidates would have to cross a 25% vote threshold to get the position. In this circumstance, the percentage is lower to ensure no more than three candidates can reach the threshold to fill a seat. This version of RCV is called Single Transferable Vote (STV).

### **Why do Advocates Push for Ranked Choice Voting?**

There are a variety of reasons why advocates push for plurality voting to be replaced with RCV. Firstly, they argue that under plurality voting, people do not end up voting for the candidate they like but instead are encouraged to strategically vote against the candidate they hate. This system encourages voters to ignore third parties more aligned with their interests and view the major left-wing and right-wing parties as the only feasible options, which results in voters settling for the less damaging choice. To solve this issue, advocates believe that adopting RCV will provide room for smaller third parties to be taken more seriously. This is because, since votes transfer, voters are more honestly able to select their preferred candidate. Parties with

a more specific platform would then have an easier time securing the 1st spot on a voter's ballot. However, since RCV is quite uncommon, there is not enough literature to definitively suggest this would be the case. Advocates also believe that RCV will provide better turnout due to the wider plethora of options. Regarding RCV, Republican Mitt Romney said, "[Ranked choice voting] sounds good at this stage. It looks good on paper. I like the results that came out of Alaska and Maine. And so if it continues to perform well... I think it makes a lot of sense" (Wilburn, 2023).

However, critics of the system argue that this system of ranking will be too complicated for the average American, who will only be familiar with plurality voting. This has the danger of impacting the minority vote the most, as the educational opportunities that would spread awareness of RCV would be less available in those communities. Another consequence of the complicated system is the increased number of ballot errors, including "ballot exhaustion," which will be discussed in detail in the Literature Review. As explained by Jason Sneed, Executive Director of the Honest Elections Project, "Americans want elections with clear rules that deliver clear winners. RCV offers neither. Ranked-choice voting makes voting harder and turns elections into a complicated black box" (Sneed, 2024).

### **History of Ranked Choice Voting**

From the earliest democracies, like the Athenian and Roman Republics, plurality voting was the dominant form of voting. One of the earliest works on an alternative voting system dates back to the work of Ramon Llull, a Spanish theologian of the late 13th century (Colomer, 2011). RCV would later pick up steam in the 1850s in Europe, to be used primarily for multi-winner elections. From there, Denmark would adopt an earlier version of RCV in 1855 for the upper house of their legislature. According to the Ranked Choice Voting Research Center, one of the first thinkers to consider implementing RCV in North America was a man named William Ware in 1870. He would be the first to adapt the multi-winner version of RCV into a single-winner system. The first place to adopt this system was Ashtabula, Ohio, in the 1915 election for its city council. RCV would then later expand into different cities across Ohio, including Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo, and Hamilton. From there, RCV would expand to cities in other states, including Kalamazoo, Michigan; Boulder, Colorado; West Hartford, Connecticut; and Sacramento, California.

Famously, the multi-winner form of RCV would be adopted by New York City in 1936 for its city council and school board elections, where it is still used today (Ranked Choice Voting Resources, n.d.). In 2018, Maine would make history by becoming the first state to completely embrace RCV. They are currently used in all general elections as well as state and federal primaries (Paterson, 2020). Following their lead two years later, Alaska would be the next state to fully adopt RCV after the 2020 General Election.

### **Where Ranked Choice Voting Is Currently Practiced**

As of March 2025, RCV has been adopted in 62 jurisdictions across 24 states, according to FairVote (Otis, 2024). All of the locations are depicted in Figure 1. Alaska and Maine remain to this day the only two states to have RCV on a statewide level. While Utah doesn't share this status, it contains the most cities that use RCV within states that only use RCV in local elections and some jurisdictions. The alternative voting system has even taken hold in the Deep South, being used in Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana for military and overseas voters. They are the only states that use RCV for this purpose. Currently, the only state that uses RCV for special elections at the county and federal levels is Hawaii (Figure 1). More cities and states will likely begin experimenting with the system (Otis & Lavery, 2024). On April 1st, Skokie, Illinois, became the first city of 2025 to implement RCV (Nolde, 2025). The system will also expand to Washington, DC, thanks to Initiative 83, passed last year with implementation in 2026 (The Washington Post, 2024).

While RCV has achieved a lot of legislative victories, the alternative voting system remains a contentious issue among some states, which have legislation to ban it for all federal and state elections. These states include Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Montana, Idaho, Mississippi, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Missouri, South Dakota, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Wyoming has the strictest ban on RCV, preventing it from being used in any election held within the state, including school boards (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2024). However, some of these bans are starting to face opposition, with two bills in 2025 proposing RCV as a remedy in Alabama.

In the rest of the world, RCV is used on a bigger scale than in the United States. For instance, presidential elections in the Republic of Ireland utilize the single-winner system.

Across the pond, local Scottish elections use STV. The Northern Ireland assembly uses the system as well. Additionally, their lower house of parliament uses RCV to elect candidates in multi-member districts. Likewise, Australia uses single-winner RCV to elect members of their House of Representatives. They also use the multi-winner version for the Australian Senate. Malta uses a multi-winner RCV system for electing their parliament (Ranked Choice Voting Resources, 2022). RCV is also popular in India at the federal level. They use it for presidential and vice-presidential elections as well as for the Rajya Sabha, India's upper house of legislature (Boyd, 2017).

Within the United States, like most reforms, implementing RCV has become a deeply partisan issue. While some Democrats in certain states and the nation's capital have implemented some measures to slow the spread of the alternative voting system, the Republicans have taken a more staunch opposition. In 2023, the National Republican Party Committee committed itself to opposing the implementation of RCV. This is because they believe that it violates the principle of "one person, one vote" that is enshrined in many state constitutions. There is also the concern that because the new system is too complicated, RCV would disenfranchise people who had a lower quality of education, which disproportionately impacts certain minority and ethnic groups within the United States (Republican National Committee, 2023). The evidence for and against this position will be further examined in the literature review.

### **Literature Review**

While Ranked Choice Voting is still a relatively new topic for research, many schools of thought have developed on the impact RCV has on voter turnout. Polling data from states and cities provides the closest to a first-hand account of how citizens feel about ranked-choice voting. From there, that data is collected and analyzed in various studies conducted by universities. Many of these are compiled into books either arguing for or against adopting RCV. This chapter will comb through all these types of data and highlight different clusters of thought regarding how the alternative voting system either positively or negatively impacts voter turnout.

#### **Ranked Choice Voting Impact on Voter Turnout in General**

Broadly speaking, some studies suggest RCV broadly increases voter turnout in the jurisdictions that practice it. A 2024 study from Electoral Studies found that for citizens residing

in RCV jurisdictions across the United States, for the 2021 off-year elections, voter turnout was 17% higher than in non-RCV jurisdictions. This trend seems to remain true zooming into the local level (Dowling et al., 2024). A report by the Center for Urban Research as a part of the Graduate Center from the University of New York City found that in the June 2021 Democratic Primary, which utilized RCV, Democrats had a 28% turnout with 942,031 mayoral votes. This turnout is 16.3% greater than the Republican Primary, which used plurality voting, with a 11.7% turnout resulting in 60,051 votes (Mollenkopf et al., 2022). This increase is also corroborated by data from a study undertaken by the UTS Business School located in Sydney, Australia. They found that voter turnout increased by 9.6% when RCV was introduced in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metro area for the election for mayor (McGinn, 2020).

Despite this, some researchers found that introducing RCV had minimal to no effect. A study from the University of Missouri in St. Louis found that while RCV reduced the substantial drop in voter participation usually seen between runoff and primary elections, apart from that, the new voting system did not have a substantial impact on increasing ballot completion and voter turnout (Kimball & Anthony, 2016).

Additionally, a significant number of studies have found that RCV had a negative impact on voter turnout. This was the opinion reached by a study of San Francisco elections from 1995 to 2011. The study also found that during odd or off-cycle election years, RCV jurisdictions as a whole have an average 8% lower voter turnout rate than non-RCV jurisdictions (McDaniel, 2016). Critics of ranked-choice voting will also point out how frustration with RCV can manifest in “Ballot Exhaustion”. This is when someone fills out a circle for filling out a circle for only one of the candidates. As a result of the rules of RCV, if the single candidate that was voted for loses the first round of elections, their ballot does not transfer to the other candidates and is lost. A study from the University of North Carolina Wilmington highlights the risk of Ballot Exhaustion with RCV. After analyzing ballots in 4 local elections, they found that the rate of ballot exhaustion was high in each election, ranging from 9.6% to 27.1% (Burnett & Kogan, 2015). Additionally, they found that a portion of ballot exhaustion comes from people who didn’t understand how to rank multiple candidates. That percentage range might seem small, but as a result of how the RCV process works, election outcomes can shift wildly depending on how

much ballot exhaustion took place. This was the opinion expressed by a Canadian research paper (Marc et al., 2020).

### **Impact of Ranked Choice Voting on Voter Turnout for Minorities**

There is also an academic split regarding whether Ranked Choice Voting leads to more political representation for women and marginalized groups. A 2015 FairVote study found that the use of an alternative voting system to plurality voting in the Bay Area was associated with a 9% increase in the percentage of minority candidates, a 0.16 increase in the predicted probability a female candidate will win office, and a 0.14 increase in the probability a female minority candidate will win office (John et al., 2018). A later 2020 report on the California Bay Area from Represent Women arrived at similar positive outcomes for women and minorities. They found that 42% of women, 22% of women of color, and 60% of people of color as a whole had a higher likelihood of winning in a ranked-choice election than using a plurality system. They highlight how of the 53 Bay Area officials elected by RCV in 2016, 59% were held by women. Additionally, 60% of those offices were held by people of color (Represent Women, 2024). Another FairVote report found that Hispanic, Latino, and Black voters ranked more candidates than White Voters on average (Otis & Laverty, 2024).

Those on the opposite side of the academic fence argue that since minorities don't always have access to education about RCV, they are more likely to be frustrated with the new system, resulting in more ballot exhaustion and lower minority turnout. This was the opinion of a 2024 study published in *Social Science Quarterly*, which took exit poll data from Santa Fe, New Mexico's RCV election in 2018. This was the first city in New Mexico to adopt RCV. Santa Fe Researchers found that 6% of voters felt very confused by the process, while 10% were only somewhat confused, for a total of 16% of voters who were confused by the system. Their data also indicated a higher rate of confusion in Hispanic voters compared to white voters (Lonna Rae Atkeson et al., 2024). Research from Nolan McCarty, Professor of Politics and Public Affairs from Princeton, took a closer look at the 2022 elections in Alaska and the 2021 New York City Democratic primary. Data taken from both elections demonstrated there was a racial and ethnic component to ballot exhaustion. Specifically, districts with a high population of Hispanic, Asian, or other minorities consistently had higher ballot exhaustion rates (Guterman, 2025). However, there is some debate about the exact mechanisms of RCV that result in this disparity. The

Institute for Responsive Government found that the structural benefits for minority candidates present in multi-winner contests, like city council elections, do not fully translate into single-member contests in which the election is only for a single seat (Institute for Responsive Government, 2024).

### **Discussion on Ballot Exhaustion**

Another aspect that impacts voter turnout is education. This is especially relevant for RCV, as since the new voting system is not commonly used as first-past-the-post voting in the United States, it is reasonable to expect most Americans are not familiar with it without relevant education. A 2024 paper from the American Politics Research Journal shares this sentiment. This study examined ballot data from the 2021 and 2017 New York City mayoral Democratic primaries as well as the 2013 general election. In 2021, lower rates of ballot exhaustion were found in communities with a higher concentration of residents with a college degree. While the pattern did not hold for 2017 and 2013, in the 2021 RCV election, the areas that had the greater share of voidable ballots were from neighborhoods with lower incomes (Cormack, 2023). Another paper, from the University of Pennsylvania, looked at New York City's 2021 ballot for the 4 citywide offices: the Republican and Democratic primaries for Mayor, as well as the Democratic primaries for Public Advocate and Comptroller. According to this study, neighborhoods with precincts containing a high population of low-income voters had greater rates of ballot exhaustion. This pattern appeared to hold in data from both Republican and Democratic contests. The paper also found that precincts with a high population of people 60 years of age or older tended to incorrectly fill out their ballots at a higher rate. Though this connection between age and mismarked ballots was only seen in the Democratic races, and not in the Republican ones. The paper did not explain the reason for this split (Pettigrew & Radley, 2023).

Challenging the results of both the American Politics Research Journal and the University of Pennsylvania study is a report from the Institute for Mathematics and Democracy at Utah Valley University. They first question the University of Pennsylvania paper's claim that the skipping of candidates that occurs under ballot exhaustion usually occurs only if a voter does not understand the specific rules the jurisdiction has in place regarding skips or RCV's instant-runoff mechanism. The Utah Valley University report argues there is a double standard in how the

paper claims ballot exhaustion is a result of not understanding the process of how RCV works, yet acknowledging over-ranked ballots can also be a legitimate means of civic engagement. They point out that only circling one name on the RCV ballot is a valid form of political expression. This makes sense as several candidates within the New York ranked-choice voting primary encouraged their supporters to only vote for them. The Utah Valley University report then turns to the American Politics Research Journal paper. They mention that their study uses two control elections from New York City, a strongly Democratic-leaning metropolitan area. However, Utah Valley claims that the other paper does not appropriately consider how the competitiveness of the race and size of the candidate field would impact ballot error rates. Therefore, comparing those faulty controls to a competitive RCV election may lead to unreliable results. The use of a linear regression for analysis is also called into question, as the Utah Valley University report mentions that for communities with fewer holders of Bachelor's degrees, the error rates are higher. However, what the American Politics Research Journal paper did not consider was that the rate of errors plateaus as the number of college-educated residents goes up. This results in the data not being linear enough for a linear regression (Parry & Kidd, 2024).

### **Impact of Ranked Choice Voting on Youth Turnout**

One more component to understanding how RCV impacts voter turnout has to do with how youth turnout is impacted. A 2021 study from the Politics and Governance journal utilized a matched study incorporating voter turnout data from fourteen non-RCV and seven RCV local elections from 2013 to 2014. They found that among the general public, there wasn't a significant difference in voting rates between first-past-the-post and RCV cities. However, the paper did find that ballot rates were higher for younger voters living in cities using RCV. They hypothesize that the campaign civility offered by RCV and mobilization may mitigate against the pessimism most young people feel toward the political system and encourage them to participate (Juelich & Coll, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Overall, when it comes to RCV, there are a variety of debates on how the alternative voting system impacts voter turnout depending on age or ethnicity. After combing through the research, the primary concern with implementing the new system is ballot exhaustion, which is

reported by some papers to disproportionately occur more with minority groups. If accurate, this undermines the claims by RCV advocates that it produces more diverse outcomes in elections. However, there is not enough research regarding whether an RCV election will impact voter turnout, depending on whether the election is conducted at the state or local level. There may be complications that arise from either a local or state level that make RCV a better or worse candidate for a voting system that encourages voting turnout in all demographics. Therefore, this paper will attempt to address this gap in the literature by comparing studies and polling data from states and cities using RCV to determine if there is an increase or decrease in voter turnout among certain groups.

### **Research Methodology**

To conduct this report on RCV, data was gathered from several organizations advocating for and or documenting data relating to the alternative voting system. Among them was FairVote, which has a map showing where RCV has been adopted throughout the United States (Figure 1). Many of the sources regarding polling data used throughout this report come from Fair Vote or partnerships with the organization. Polling was also taken from a report from The Oregonian. It was important to get polling from different sources because Fair Vote seeks to promote RCV, so diversity in sources provided a more balanced view of the outcomes of state and local elections. Deb Otis, the current director of Fair Vote, was contacted by email for additional information. Data was also collected from the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, which aims to provide a comprehensive library of data regarding the new system. In addition to the information available on their website, the organization was also contacted for additional questions. To obtain data about current ranked-choice policies being considered across the United States and polling data, information from Ballotpedia was utilized.

In addition to obtaining data and consultation from organizations well-versed in the subject matter, books with a more comprehensive overview of the subject were also an invaluable resource. Among them, the book “Ranked Choice Voting,” published this year by James W. Endersby and Michael J. Towle was utilized to give a general overview of the subject of RCV and provide a neutral perspective on the arguments for and against the alternative voting system. To gain a better understanding of the arguments against RCV, the book *The Case*

Against Ranked Choice Voting by Trent England and Jason Snead was also a crucial component of the research process.

When searching for more sources, resources were utilized by several libraries. Utilizing the Ames Library from Illinois Wesleyan University yielded many crucial sources. Additionally, consulting librarians from the Bender Library at American University was also incredibly useful. Resources were also searched from the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. Searching for papers using Google Scholar additionally proved to be helpful. Additionally, R Street was a useful resource as well. FM3 Research also provided crucial polling data and locations to determine if there was a racial component in ballot exhaustion. Another search engine that was useful for finding sources was the Political Science Complete Database from Illinois Wesleyan University. A combination of all of these scholarly search engines would prove incredibly vital to the research that makes up the backbone of this report.

When using these search engines, a combination of different keywords was searched to provide the necessary studies to fill the gaps in knowledge of certain critical areas. These include searching “Ranked Choice Voting,” “Instant Run-Off Voting,” “Exit Polling Data for Ranked Choice Voting Election Results in California,” “Exit Polling Data for Ranked Choice Voting Results in Alaska,” “Exit Polling Data for Ranked Choice Voting in Maine,” “Local Ranked Choice Voting Elections in Maine,” and “Local Ranked Choice Voting Elections in Alaska.”

In addition to academic sources, a variety of secondary sources, like newspaper articles, were also used to gather information regarding the perspectives people had on the alternative voting system. A report from The Oregonian proved especially useful as it offered a different perspective than a poll conducted by an organization sympathetic to causes to implement RCV. However, it was not conducted in a standard academic format, which could be a source of error for this report.

Also, several of the researchers of the papers and books mentioned in this report were contacted for an interview. Of those people, Lindsey Cormack, associate professor of Political Science and Director of the Diplomacy Lab at Stevens Institute of Technology, responded. From there, a 30-minute interview was conducted over Zoom, where questions were asked regarding her specific work in RCV and her thoughts on the system as a whole. Through the composition

of all these resources, an in-depth exploration of state and city RCV elections could be properly conducted.

### **Comparing State and City Ranked Choice Voting Elections**

In order to assess the primary research question, “Does RCV have the same impact on voter turnout in city and state elections?” polling data and research papers will need to be analyzed from states and cities that implement RCV. The data presented in the Literature Review will be expanded upon and compared with additional polling data and reports. Special emphasis will be placed on Maine and Alaska, as they are the only two states in the United States that have RCV elections at the state level. However, out of the two, Maine has RCV at a statewide and local level, making it the ideal state to compare local and state statistics because there are fewer confounding variables of two elections in the same state compared to two in a different state.

To gain a better understanding of the local level, several prominent cities within the United States will have their own section to discuss their polling data. Among them is the city of New York, as its large population is comparable to that of many states. The same can also be said for San Francisco, California, and Portland, Oregon. While there are problems with using those numbers to directly make inferences on how well RCV would work in another state, due to the limited application of RCV within the United States, that data would still have enormous implications for other cities with a large population. This is especially true for Washington, D.C., which is in the beginning stages of phasing out plurality voting with the alternative voting system. To gain a better understanding of the bigger picture, ballot exhaustion will be discussed in conjunction with polling data. This is because ballot exhaustion is a problem unique to RCV, and so a discussion of only the percentage of voter participation would not be enough to assess people’s understanding of the alternative voting system.

### **Discussion of Statewide and Local Ranked Choice Voting Polling from Maine**

When discussing Maine, the best place to start would be the first election that used RCV, the 2018 statewide election. A study from R Street found that 46.24% of citizens in Maine’s 2018 general election ranked at least two candidates. This means that less than half of the voters utilized the ranking component of RCV (Germer, 2021). Though those who only voted for one candidate could have also done so strategically or because they only believed in one candidate.

There is good reasoning to support that idea. Polling data taken from SurveyUSA for FairVote reveals an interesting trend. Mainers from across the state were interviewed from 10/28/22 to 11/02/22, resulting in a total sample of 1,475 adults. Some were interviewed on the telephone, while others filled out a survey utilizing a smartphone, laptop, or tablet. Out of those people, when asked about the difficulty of the process of voting under the alternative system, 54% said RCV was “Very Easy,” with 28% calling it “Easy.” To address ballot exhaustion, people who had only filled out one choice on their ballot were given an additional question asking why they had done so. The population of voters who answered saying they did so because they did not understand the system only made up 1% of the total number of people who answered the question. The highest percentage, 44%, cited only liking one candidate as their main reason for not ranking other candidates, with 12% citing they did not want to harm the chances of their favorite. There was also an 8% of people who believed their first choice would make it to the final round, and so they would not need a backup (SurveyUSA, 2025). This suggests some evidence that the majority of people who don’t decide to rank other candidates do so for strategic reasons rather than not understanding RCV.

On the local level in Maine, in the City of Portland, understanding the system of RCV also appears to be strong. This is the conclusion arrived at by exit polling data from the 2022 Portland School Board Election conducted by Fair Vote. Polling data revealed that 93% of voters listed multiple candidates on their ballots, meaning that the vast majority understand and utilize the ranking component of RCV. The same was also true of the smaller 78% of voters who listed multiple candidates on their ballots for the District 5 election. Both elections, according to Fair Vote, cross the national average “median of 71% of voters who rank multiple candidates” (Merkle, 2022).

When examined with data from state elections, certain comparisons can be made. The 82% of voters who decided to rank more than one candidate in the statewide election have a higher percentage than the 78% of voters in the District 5 election. However, both percentages are eclipsed by the 93% of voters from the Portland School Board as a whole.

## **Discussion of Statewide Polling Data from Alaska**

Examining RCV elections in Alaska additionally provides crucial information and insights into how the alternative voting system impacts voter turnout. To that effort, exit polling was conducted by a collaboration between Alaskans for Better Elections and Fair Vote. This was done for the Alaskan general election taking place in November 2024. A sample size of 600 participants was surveyed between November 3rd and November 6th. These people were contacted through a mix of landline and mobile phones. Participants were also able to participate via text on the internet. Overall, the study found that 84% of Alaskans find RCV to be a “simple” process to participate in. This is in stark contrast to the low 6% of participants who said it was “very difficult”. Within that sample, 56% of voters in the November general election expressed approval to choose between multiple candidates affiliated with the same party. Zooming into the ethnicities of the percentage that found RCV to be a simple process, at least 75% of respondents across all major ethnicities within the state, including but not limited to Black, Latino, Asian, and Alaskan Native, agreed that the alternative voting system was simple (Alaskans for Better Elections, 2014).

## **Discussion of Polling Data from Portland, Oregon**

On the local level in Oregon, specifically in the City of Portland, the number of people who are capable of understanding the system of RCV also appears to be in the majority. To determine Portlanders' opinion on the alternative voting system, FM3 conducted a survey to determine how people viewed it after the November 2024 election, the very first time the city voted to use RCV to fill its mayor and city council member seats. From November 6th through 10th, FM3 interviewed randomly selected voters in Portland who voted for mayor and city council through live telephone calls by cell or landline. Additionally, text-to-web interviews were also utilized by researchers in the survey. When determining how many people are engaging with the ranking component of voting, researchers found that for the mayoral election, 10% only ranked one candidate, while 87% ranked two or more. As for the city council election, only 4% ranked one candidate. This would suggest that the number of ballots that are exhausted makes up a negligible amount of the ballots in this election (FM3 Research et al., 2024).

However, an analysis of all ballots by The Oregonian revealed a different story. After the election was over and all of the ballots were analyzed, the analysis found that an average of 20% of citywide voters did not rank a single candidate to represent them for the city council election, which amounts to 1 in 5 citizens not properly filling out their ballot. This was a significantly higher percentage of ballot exhaustion exhibited in this election compared to the previous two election cycles, which did not use RCV. Due to lower voter turnout and low rates of ranking, only 39% of registered voters had any say regarding which of the three candidates would be best to represent the district. Though this could be due to the unique quirks of the way Portland set up its RCV system. In this election, 16 to 30 candidates sought elections within each of Portland's respective districts (Dixon & Friesen, 2024). The incredibly large selection of choices makes it more difficult for the average person to be well-informed enough about each candidate to rank them. This source of frustration likely prompted voters to skip that section of the ballot altogether to save themselves the trouble.

### **Discussion of Polling Data from New York City**

As for the case of New York City, there is also a wide plethora of RCV data regarding the city as one of the most populous cities within the United States. Exit polling from New York's 2021 election study was conducted by a collaborative study between Edison Research for Common Cause NY and Rank the Vote NYC. A survey was administered over a period of 10 days, beginning on June 12 and ending on June 22, 2021. The representative sample taken for the study included 1,662 Democratic voters. Interviews were conducted through several methods of communication, including landline or smartphone, as well as in-person exit polling. This exit polling was carried out at approximately 30 election day voting locations. To mitigate against the language barrier being a potential reason for people not to vote, interviews were offered in both English and Spanish. Out of this sample, 70% were polled on election day, while 30% were polled before the election during the aforementioned early voting period. After gathering everyone's surveys, researchers found that 77% of New York City residents want RCV to be used in future local elections, which was a throughline between different categories of people across ethnic, gender, and age lines. Regarding voter participation with the ranking aspect of RCV, in the mayoral primary, 83% of voters ranked more than one candidate. Additionally, the survey also found that 95% of New York City residents found their ballots easy to finish (Huang,

2021). This was across racial and age groups. Though this success could be attributed to more aggressive educational campaigns about Ranked Choice Voting and more accessibility options present for those who don't speak English.

### **Discussion of Polling Data from San Francisco, California**

Another prominent example of RCV in a local setting can be seen in San Francisco, California. A report from San Francisco University's Public Research Institute took an in-depth look at the 2004 general election. For a bit of background context, this was the first time that the alternative voting system was implemented for an election in the city. A total of 2,847 surveys were utilized to form the sample for this paper. In order to help mitigate against the language barrier being a potential roadblock to understanding RCV, the survey San Francisco University conducted also had versions of the survey in Spanish and Chinese, along with English.

Researchers found that 86% of voters understood the new system either "fairly well" or "perfectly well". Regarding whether people were utilizing the ranking element of RCV, the study found that 59% of in-person and 60% of absentee voters ranked at least three candidates. Only 23% of in-person and 24% of absentee voters reported that they did not have a good understanding of how RCV works. The lowest rates of understanding were found in those who had lower levels of education. However, this is true regardless of what voting system is implemented.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, this chapter covered several studies examining polling data from within the United States where elections implementing the RCV system, either single or multi-winner, took place. To get a sense of local elections, cities included Portland, Oregon, New York City, and San Francisco, California. Additionally, this chapter also discusses the only two states that have implemented RCV on the statewide level, Maine and Alaska. As a whole, all of the polls for each of the cases went over FairVote's reported average threshold for participation in the ranking component of RCV. However, due to these polls containing a limited sample size, it may not be enough to gain a proper assessment of the overall trends of how RCV impacts voter turnout. In Portland, Oregon, for instance, while the exit poll found favorable outcomes, a deeper analysis of the ballots from The Oregonian found that approximately an average of 1 in 5 voters

decided to skip the ranking process altogether. However, this could have been the result of Portland's unique experiment with ranked choice voting, having a high number of people on the ballot for people needing to sort through and rank. By stark contrast, New York City's RCV election had a much more favorable outcome. In fact, out of all the cases presented in this paper, New York City had one of the highest percentages of people who found RCV easy to use. This is likely due to the presence of more educational material and making surveys more accessible to people who don't speak English. This would indicate that the accessibility of RCV seems to play a critical role in determining whether the implementation of the alternative voting system is successful or not. Overall, these findings suggest that an election being on a state or local level has less bearing on voter turnout and ballot exhaustion than what educational campaigns were done beforehand to ensure people understood the alternative voting system before it was implemented in an election.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to develop a comprehensive analysis of how voter turnout changes in elections that have implemented RCV, depending on whether the election was conducted at the state or local level. After having considered cases taking place at the local and state level, there are a variety of ways to interpret the results of the data that was collected from various polls and organizations. This chapter will discuss them and compare and contrast them to better answer the research question.

Out of all of the examples analyzed in the previous chapters, the one with the least participation in the ranking portion of an RCV ballot was the first RCV election in Maine. On first glance, this might seem to indicate that statewide elections in Maine are especially vulnerable to ballot exhaustion. However, the majority of people who filled out the survey who voted for one candidate did so because they were voting strategically for a single candidate. This would suggest that examples of ballot exhaustion, where they occur, could also be the result of conscious strategic voting. Therefore, the converse is also true, that people ranking their votes is not necessarily a perfect indicator of how well a sample understands the details behind how RCV works on their ballot.

The highest rates of participation were found in the local elections in New York. This is potentially due to many factors. One of the most important ones was that there was a stronger emphasis on educational campaigns. Polling data looking at that election also used surveys that were available in Spanish and Chinese, in addition to English. This was also a strength of the polling data in San Francisco, California.

That being said, it's clear that RCV is not always easily understood by the citizens of districts that use the alternative voting system. While the polling data from the Portland, Oregon, election would seem to suggest that it was well understood, a report from *The Oregonian* came out with more comprehensive findings. The conflicting answers could have been a result of a bottleneck effect of people who understood RCV, which comes with a lower sample size. While it is true that only filling in for one candidate could be considered strategic, leaving a section of the ballot blank could not be considered so in the slightest. So, alternative explanations in the Portland, Oregon case can be ruled out. Therefore, while Maine technically has the lowest numbers, Portland's election makes a better fit for the lowest number of people who understood how RCV worked in the cases discussed in this paper.

Since the lowest participation in the system came from the local level, it might be easy to conclude that local-level elections are simply more susceptible to ballot exhaustion. However, there are unique circumstances regarding the Portland, Oregon, election that make it likely an outlier in local RCV elections. Specifically, the incredibly high number of candidates on the ballot. With a large number of candidates, it becomes harder for the average person to conduct research on which candidate is best, let alone which one is third or fourth best for the job at hand.

### **Conclusion and Points for Future Research**

The primary goal of this paper was to use cases of RCV conducted in the United States to determine if RCV had an impact on voter turnout at the state and local level. After looking through the research, it would appear that an election taking place at either level is still susceptible to ballot exhaustion due to a variety of factors, including a limited amount of education on the subject. It would appear that in elections that occur after a substantial period of aggressive campaigning for understanding RCV, more people are likely to vote with the new system and understand how it operates. However, minorities and individuals with lower

education are still vulnerable under this system. That being said, this fact is true of all currently existing voting systems, including first-past-the-post. This is because lower-income voters face barriers like poor access to ballot stations, the inability to take time off to vote, and strict ID requirements. These will still be a problem regardless of what voting system is in place.

Additionally, RCV also has a fascinating history, originating from Europe and later arriving in the United States. While traction for the new system has shot up in recent years, several states, especially Republican controlled southern states, have passed legislation to ban implementation of the new alternative voting system. Due to concerns of how complex RCV is compared to first-past-the-post, it is unlikely that other states will rush to adopt the system on a statewide, let alone federal level.

However, while an RCV election taking place at the state or local level may not have as much bearing as it would initially seem, other factors could be researched. For instance, figuring out how many educational efforts were made to facilitate the transition to RCV before the election took place. As seen between the differences between the local elections in New York City and Portland, Oregon, the strength of the efforts to educate the populace has a significantly greater bearing on the success of an RCV election and mitigating against ballot exhaustion. Another factor for future research could be how the partisan makeup of an area impacts voter turnout. Voting reforms like RCV tend to be more popular with Democrats, though this does not explain why the connection between age and mismarked ballots were only seen in the Democratic races, and not in Republican ones.

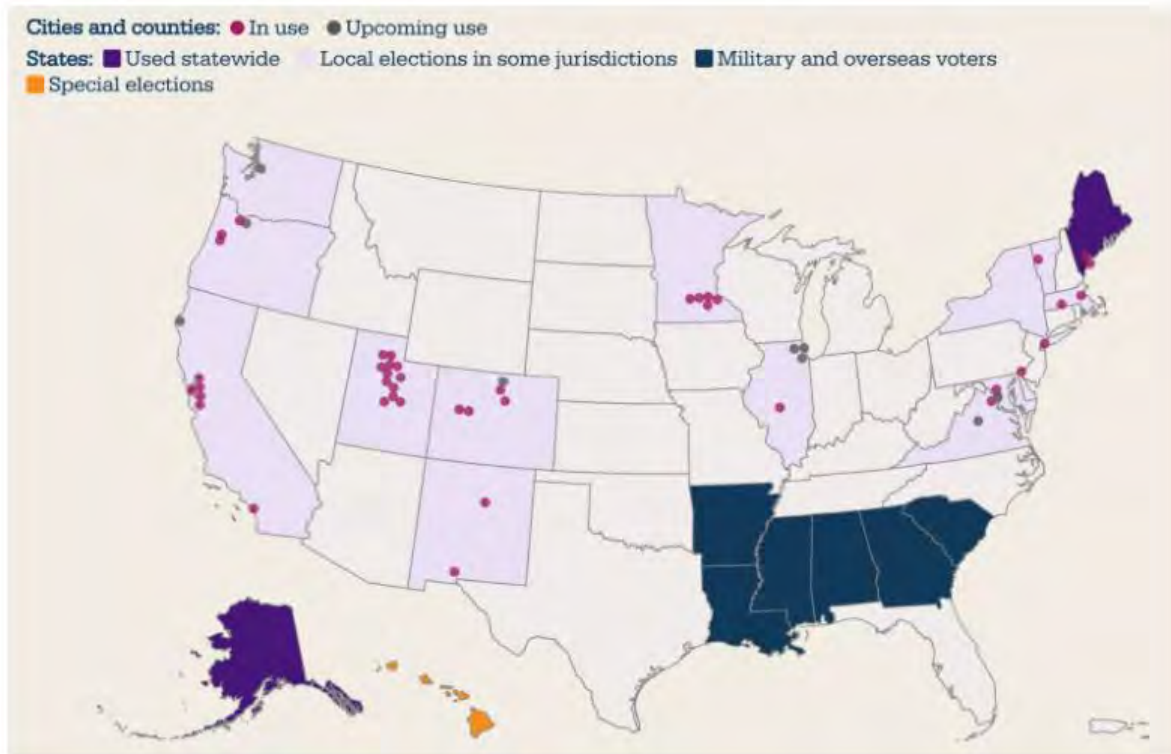
It is also worth noting that the instant runoff component of RCV is not always used. As explained by Professor Lindsey Cormack, 95% of RCV elections have the person who had the highest number in round one win. Regarding the 2021 New York Democratic Primary election, according to her, the other candidates did not really engage with the system of encouraging voters to put them as their second or third choice. Cormack states that the only candidate who attempted to play into this system during that election was Andrew Yang, current head of the Forward party (L. Cormack, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

Therefore, in order to determine if RCV is truly a worthwhile alternative to plurality voting, more research must be conducted regarding the efficacy of RCV educational programs.

Ultimately, when deciding on whether or not a state or local government should adopt RCV, policymakers and researchers must ask whether the benefits of RCV will be enough to offset the costs of uprooting plurality voting in the United States.

## Appendix

Figure 1:



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**Exploring the Gender Gap in Trump Supporters: Why “Real Women Vote for Trump”**

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### Abstract

This paper examines the types of women who support Donald Trump and explores the reasons behind their alignment with him, despite his seemingly contradictory policies toward women. It begins by analyzing the persistent and modest gender gap across the last three election cycles in which Trump was a candidate. The paper then outlines the demographic and attitudinal profile of female Trump supporters—predominantly white, non-college-educated women who often hold traditional views, including sexist or racist attitudes. These views are frequently rooted in their demographic backgrounds and upbringing, particularly the effects of gendered political socialization, which may shape their attitudes toward political engagement. The paper argues that traditionalist women are drawn to Trump because his messaging reflects the familial and cultural values they are familiar with (whether growing up or in the home). Trump’s rhetoric—framing outgroups (such as immigrants, racial minorities, and pro-choice advocates) as threats to family and motherhood—effectively mobilizes this base. His use of nationalist themes and securitarian language helps sustain women’s support across election cycles, despite his history of misogynistic remarks. This rhetoric becomes deeply damaging in American politics, as it promotes authoritarianism, othering, and a normalization of gender discrimination.

## Exploring the Gender Gap in Trump Supporters: Why “Real Women Vote for Trump”

### Literature Review

The political behavior of women voters, particularly those supporting Donald Trump, has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Although political scientists assumed that the gender gap of the 2024 presidential election would significantly widen with a female presidential nominee on the Democratic ticket, exit polling data show the 2024 gender gap to be similar to previous election cycles (De Simeone, 2024).

A gender gap in voting choice is “a difference between the percentage of women and the percentage of men voting for a given candidate, generally the winning candidate” (De Simeone, 2024). Such a gap has existed in every presidential election since 1980, with a greater proportion of women preferring the Democratic candidate in each election (De Simeone, 2024). 2016 marked the first election in which a female presidential nominee (Hillary Clinton) was on the ballot for one of the two major political parties. This voter gender gap was the largest in history, where 52% of males voted for Trump, and 54% of women voted for Clinton. For elections involving Trump, the gender gap is summarized here: in 2016, the gender gap in support of Trump was 11 points (52% men and 41% women); in 2020, the gender gap in support of Trump was -12 points (55% men and 43% women); in 2024, the gender gap in support of Trump was 10 points (55% men and 45% women) (De Simeone, 2024). Many political science experts expected the gender gap to increase in 2024 due to Trump’s performance in 2016. However, it remained modestly steady, leading us to believe that other factors may provide an explanation.

The values individuals hold are expressed in their voter preferences. Currently, 72% of voters in a typical presidential election vote “correctly,” meaning that 72% of voters vote “in accordance with what their fully informed preferences would be” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001, p. 951). These interests are defined as “whatever that person would choose with the fullest attainable understanding of the experiences resulting from that choice and its most relevant alternatives” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006, p. 75). If only 72% of people vote “correctly,” what other premises are citizens considering when casting their vote?

Cognitive heuristics consist of various information shortcuts used to help people make reasonable decisions while minimizing cognitive efforts. One explanation of voter policy

preferences is that people over-utilize cognitive heuristics when making voting decisions. For example, party and ideological schemata lead to assumptions about political candidates (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001, p. 952). If a politically uneducated citizen decides to vote without having adequate information on the candidates, they might vote solely based on their party or ideological identification. These patterns have increased over time, as straight-ticket voting has increased from 54% in the 1970s to 94% in 2010 (Finkel et al., 2020, p. 535). Furthermore, citizens may feel biased or compelled to vote for specific candidates based on their appearance alone. In studies conducted by Lau and Redlawsk, it is found that a photo of a candidate “provides a tremendous amount of information about that candidate, including gender, race, and age, and often general ‘likeableness,’ which immediately brings many social stereotypes into play” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001, p. 954). For example, a citizen voting for Donald Trump simply because Kamala Harris is a Black woman rather than because of their differing platforms or levels of credibility is an example of utilizing social stereotyping.

Cognitive heuristics play a large role in voter decision-making, shaping how individuals process political information. Political parties further reinforce these heuristics by constructing a conceptual framework through which voters interpret the political world. As Achen and Bartels explain in *It Feels Like We’re Thinking: The Rationalizing Voter*, parties use the media to “tell people how to think and what to believe,” helping voters identify allies and opponents (2006, p. 277). Even among well-educated, politically informed individuals, voting behavior often stems more from party group loyalties than from independent, rational deliberation. This also occurs with voter ideology; despite many Americans claiming they hold an ideology, many Americans fail to understand what they mean. Research by Phillip Converse found that 17% of the public could correctly identify “liberal” and “conservative” and 1 in 6 Americans were capable of following discussions about ideologies (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017, p. 17). In this sense, ingroup biases may cause individuals to vote solely based on the groups they identify themselves with (party, ideology, race, etc.), which dampens voter rationality (Brennan, 2016, p. 39). This lack of political and ideological awareness, coupled with the American tendency to rely heavily on political parties, may contribute to misguided voting decisions.

When individuals do not agree with every political stance or policy that a candidate proposes, they pick and choose which issues are the most important. These voter preferences

help individuals make critical voting decisions, as they must weigh different factors of importance to determine who to vote for. When voters rationalize their pre-existing preferences to minimize cognitive dissonance, they often attempt to fully align with their party's position to reduce discomfort over policy disagreements (Achen and Bartels, 2006, p. 269). This process, known as cognitive balancing, helps lower psychological stress but can contribute to partisan interference in voting decisions (Achen and Bartels, 2006, p. 274). Cognitive balancing is fueled by motivated reasoning, which tempts individuals to maximize their positive feelings ("I am smart," "I made the right decision," "I align with this candidate") (Brennan, 2016, p. 38).

While voter preference and heuristic theories help explain the psychological mechanisms behind individual voting behavior, examining the specific demographics of Trump supporters reveals how these theories manifest in real-world electoral trends. It is imperative to understand what demographic/moral patterns exist amongst Trump supporters. Holistically, Trump supporters favor the protection of family, culture, and tradition. In alignment with conservative Republican values, they often frame most policy issues where *they* (Trump supporters) are the ingroup while everyone else is the outgroup.<sup>35</sup> Insiders consist of the dominant demographic (race, religion, culture), the "historical and numerical core of the country," while outsiders are "those who do not belong to the aforementioned core" (Hibbing, 2020, p. 12). Therefore, those who live/used to live outside the country and those who share a different culture from the majority pose threats to the established unity. Securitarianism, which leads people to "expect outsider threats to their person and culture," is one of the primary driving forces behind support for Trump and his policies (Hibbing, 2020, p. 90). The securitarian concept of ingroup vs. outgroup can be applied to most of the Trump Administration's policy stances, including foreign affairs, immigration, abortion, and the economy. Such sociocultural cleavages, such as normative debates over citizenship, equality, and civil rights, have repolarized with the recent Trump

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<sup>35</sup> Hibbing defines an ingroup as those who are *insiders*—people perceived to share the same values, norms, lifestyle, and cultural identity. This typically includes citizens who conform to traditional norms and are rooted in the nation's customs (Hibbing, 2020, p. 12). An outgroup consists of those who are determined as *outsiders*—not necessarily foreign, but anyone viewed as deviating from traditional or normative behavior, including immigrants, nonconformists, activists, elites, or intellectuals who dismiss traditional values, etc (Hibbing, 2020, p. 12). Crucially, Hibbing emphasizes that securitarianism isn't mainly motivated by authoritarianism or social dominance but by a deep fear of threats posed by the outgroup to the safety and integrity of the ingroup. Rather, securitarianism focuses on protecting the ingroup from perceived corruption/danger.

administration. Trump's rhetoric exemplifies ethnocentrism by promoting favorable views of the ingroup—often defined by nationalist or cultural lines—while stereotyping and vilifying the outgroup, reinforcing divisions through an “us versus them” narrative, feeding into pernicious polarization. Pernicious polarization “focuses less on triumphs of ideas than on dominating the abhorrent supporters of the opposing party,” which emphasizes party take-over/ingroup vs. outgroup ideals rather than party collaboration (McCoy and Somer, 2019, p. 244). Due to these narratives, racial resentment in the United States has helped to predict Trump's support in the 2016 election; he often uses polarizing nationalist rhetoric that mobilizes white citizens to fear minority outgroups (McCoy and Somer, 2019, p. 240). While it logically follows to assume that Trump supporters are in favor of most of Trump's policies, it is naive to assume that all people who voted for Trump are pro-life, homophobic, and anti-immigrant. For Trump supporters, issues such as homosexuality and abortion are known as secondary issues. While Trump supporters may still have opinions on these topics, they often support policies on them not because they view them as core ideological issues, but rather for coalition-building reasons or as part of broader political strategies<sup>36</sup> (Hibbing, 2020, p. 15).

First, we need to illustrate the typical characteristics of individuals who generally support Trump. Demographically speaking, Trump supporters tend to be affluent, employed, non-college-educated white people. 2016 exit poll data found that Trump lost every income bracket under \$50k per year and won every income bracket above \$50k per year, with his largest margin being \$70 - \$120k per year (Hibbing, 2020, p. 27). Among those 45 years and older, he won with a majority of 52%. Republican voters 60 years and older comprise a large majority of Trump's support, with the Republican alignment being about 10% higher than the Democratic alignment (53% Republican vs. 43% Democratic) (Nadeem, 2024). Regarding education, Trump won (51%) among those without a college education (Nadeem, 2024). Pew's alternative to exit polls showed an even larger educational split (Hibbing, 2020, p. 29). While many people associate Christianity with Donald Trump, a 2018 survey by the Public Religion Research Initiative found that the only religious group with consistently high support for Donald Trump throughout his term is Evangelicals (Hibbing, 2020, p. 28). Rather, Christianity correlates with the Republican

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<sup>36</sup> This is a generalized statement about traditional conservatism and policy preferences, it does not account for different types of conservatives or individual cases. For example, social conservatives typically prioritize social issues more strongly and view them as fundamental to their belief (moral, religious, etc.) (Hibbing, 2020, p. 15).

Party and conservatism, and less with Trump specifically. These demographic trends have remained consistent over the past several election cycles. As of 2024, 54% of Trump supporters identified as white (CIRCLE, 2024). Notably, young white men showed particularly strong support, with 63% of white males aged 18–29 casting their votes for Trump (CIRCLE, 2024). Additionally, while white voters of all ages favored Trump, white youth favored Trump by a 10-point margin (CIRCLE, 2024). 54% of the youth who voted for Trump had a high-school education or less, and a correlation was drawn between less educated voters and higher support for Trump.<sup>37</sup> Youth in rural areas had a particular favoring towards Trump, with 60% of all youth voters supporting Trump in the 2024 election (CIRCLE, 2024).

Not all Americans who support and vote for Trump are conservative Republicans. Polling data finds that 88% of Republicans and 81% of conservatives voted for Trump in 2016. The Pew Research Center found 95% of conservative support for Trump<sup>38</sup> (Hibbing, 2020, p. 31). Trump, who has run as the Republican candidate for the past three presidential elections, has been characterized by many political scientists and governmental officials as socially conservative, protective, and nationalist. Because of this, the correlation between the high proportion of conservative Republican voters is rather straightforward. People who self-identify as Republicans often vote for the Republican Party candidates in elections. Conservatism, which is a political ideology, extends beyond politics as a cognitive framework and often affects an individual's stance on lifestyle choices (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017, p. 12). Both Republicans and conservatives tend to support low government interference, preservation of tradition, moral paternalism, and nationalism.<sup>39</sup> Several traits have been empirically associated with conservatives, which relate to close-mindedness, tradition, and protectionism (Hibbing, 2020, p. 32). While general Trump supporter demographics provide insight into broader voting trends, they offer a limited understanding of how specific groups, such as women, develop political

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<sup>37</sup> In 2024, Trump received support from 54% of youth with a high school education or less, 43% with some college or an associate's degree, 42% with a bachelor's degree, and 39% with a postgraduate degree, demonstrating a direct correlation between less education and Trump support (CIRCLE, 2024).

<sup>38</sup> The Pew Research Center used a different method when measuring conservatism, accounting for the higher percentage (95%). However, both polling data and Pew ask similar questions when identifying conservative voters, allowing us to draw broader conclusions about support for Trump and party/ideological affiliations.

<sup>39</sup> There are variations to Republican and conservative voting preferences and values; the statements made here are simply introductory-level, generalized information and do not account for individual cases.

preferences. To address this gap, it is essential to explore theories of political socialization as they relate to women specifically.

Various political scientists and sociologists have attempted to explain why there is such a significant and consistent gender cleavage in U.S. presidential elections. When examining the political gender gap further, research has found that women are significantly less politically engaged than men and are less likely to belong to a political party (Coffe, 2010). Furthermore, out of the women who are voting, a majority of them consistently vote for the Democratic Party (Manza and Brook, 1998). A widely accepted explanation for the increasing number of Democratic identifications among women is the appeal for women's rights and pro-choice policies—issues that have been part of the Democratic Party's focus since the 1970s (Trevor, 1999, p. 86). Research has also suggested that “women's propensity towards higher levels of anxiety, risk aversion, and perceived threat” could drive desires for specific policy preferences (such as stricter gun control laws) and opposition to war (Gothreau, 2021). Political socialization explains how the political habits of people are formed from a sociocultural and environmental perspective (Orum et al., 1974, p. 198). This framework aligns with gender identity politics, which explains that politics is inherently gendered and that gender shapes individuals' perceptions and beliefs. As a result, women's political preferences and values are influenced by the ways they are socialized and exposed to gendered modeling. I predominantly rely on Manza and Brook's *The Gender Gap in the U.S. Presidential Elections: When? Why? Implications?* To describe various theories about women's socialization and voter patterns/preferences.

Two primary schools of thought exist around women's political socialization. The first is that women are less likely to be interested in politics or vote because women have been historically excluded from the political environment and are taught this at a young age. This school of thought, known as “childhood socialization,” emphasizes how interpretations and views of gender differences stem from the sex role conditioning that occurs in girls as they are raised (Manza and Brooks, 1998). An application to the childhood socialization school of thought attributes women's tendency to grow up believing in empathy and nurturance for others, which leads them to hold more liberal and Democratic social policy preferences (Manza and Brooks, 1998). According to a recent study, both boys and girls perceive politics as male-dominated, with girls seeing the most dramatic effects of this change throughout their childhood

(Bos et al., 2021). Because of this, girls tend to turn away from politics as they age. Current research has suggested that increased political knowledge about politics leads to a lower likelihood of girls associating members of their own sex as political leaders (Bos et al., 2021). The first school of thought is supported by the fact that girls are more interested in politics at age six, while this interest decreases with age (Bos et al., 2021). This research concluded that, “as girls learn more about politics and internalize society’s expectations of them, they are less likely to see traditional politics as a place for them to lead” (Bos et al., 2021). The first school of thought relies on the upbringing of women, meaning that parental and familial role modeling and social learning may contribute to women’s perceptions and engagement with politics. For example, recent studies on English-speaking American and Canadian families have found that politically active mothers have a role-model effect that may affect a woman’s level of political engagement<sup>40</sup> (Gidengil, O’Neill, and Young, 2010).

The second argument suggests that men and women perceive politics differently due to their situational perspectives. This school of thought is known as “adult socialization,” which theorizes that the effects of childhood socialization are mediated by adult roles, especially women’s experiences as wives and mothers (Manza and Brooks, 1998). Although it acknowledges that gender roles and stereotypes contribute to differences in political expression, it primarily attributes them to variations in adult life experiences (Orum et al., 1974, p. 198). Traditional family structures are considered especially influential, as they often reinforce women’s identification with motherhood, contributing to the formation of “separate spheres” in which men and women engage in distinct moral and political roles (Manza and Brooks, 1998). For example, this theory argues that married women in particular do not have time or concerns with politics because they are too busy taking care of children and performing domestic duties. Accordingly, married men are more involved in political life because of their frequent contact with the outside world through their occupation (Orum et al., 1974, p. 199). This school of thought is attributed to the fact that married women vote less than married men in nearly every country (Orum et al., 1974, p. 199). The critique of this theory is that logically, women who secure meaningful long-term employment will be more likely to vote; critics claim that the

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<sup>40</sup> These studies align with previous studies conducted in the U.S., which find that party identification transmission occurs the most strongly between mothers and daughters.

situational school of thought is outdated, as many women enter the workforce and not all women are responsible for caring for their children.

Although they emphasize different areas of life, both major socialization approaches argue that political differences between men and women stem more from long-standing patterns of sex-role differentiation than from economic or material interests (Manza and Brooks, 1998). When controlling for attitudinal characteristics, women are more likely to vote than men *if* they are interested in politics and feel as though their political efficacy is equal to that of men (Coffe, 2010). Therefore, if more women were conditioned to believe in political equality and embrace the political atmosphere, they would become more involved in political participation, perhaps even more politically involved than men. This relates to the rising autonomy of women theory, which explains that the gender gap persists across time and has continued to grow due to women's changing roles in society. As marriage becomes less socially important, fewer women are getting married. Additionally, as women have been granted more prominent roles in the workforce, they tend to get married and enter motherhood later in life, decreasing women's overall interdependence on men (Manza and Brooks, 1998). Divorce rates have also increased since the 1960s, contributing to the "growing number of women who are independent of husbands and the institutional constraints" (Manza and Brooks, 1998). This also relates to the theory regarding women's rising labor force participation. Labor force participation rates among women have increased steadily throughout the 20th century since the 1950s (Manza and Brooks, 1998). Sociologists hypothesize that women who enter the workforce are exposed to more discussions about politics, resulting in the diminishing voter *turnout gap* between men and women. Researchers also suggest that "employment increases women's support for feminist political goals and political activism by providing women with life experiences that call into question traditional gender roles" (Manza and Brooks, 1998). Another theory behind women's socialization and voter preferences is the feminist identity theory, which claims that feminist values (strength of women's identification as a woman/with other women, the strength of women's attitudes towards the women's liberation movement, etc.) tend to affect partisanship, political ideology, and voting patterns (Manza and Brooks, 1998). This theory argues that the growing gender gap is attributed to women's growing identification with the feminist goals of the women's movement/contemporary feminist political agendas (Manza and Brooks, 1998). The

rising autonomy of women theory, women's rising labor force participation theory, and rising feminist identity theory all relate to the adulthood socialization school of thought.

A linked theory to the adulthood socialization framework specifically correlates the political socialization of white children with political preferences. Research finds much more significant differences in the sexes from white families than other races, which is explained by both childhood modeling and adulthood environments (Orum et al., 1974, p. 208). Because a majority of women who support Trump are white, narrowing the focus to white women's political socialization is worthy of note. When specifically examining white women, racist tendencies seem to contribute to their views on minorities. In *Mean Girl Feminism: How White Feminists Gaslight, Gatekeep, and Girlboss*, Kim Hong Nguyen ties together microaggression and motherhood, referencing globalized motherhood as a key contributor to white women and their views on outgroups (people of color, immigrants, migrants, people of other cultures, etc.) (Nguyen, 2024, p. 9). Nguyen's unique perspective on white nationalism and motherhood explains how white women feed their ingroup biases by pressing their sociocultural agenda onto outgroups, contributing to Trump's protectionist narratives of saving the country from minority groups. Nguyen quotes Wendy Anderson, the Chief of Staff of the Department of Commerce, who explains how white women play an important role in perpetuating white supremacist structures. Anderson states, "white women can be framed as the victim... the vessel as a means to advocate for their support of white supremacy" (Nguyen, 2024, p. 9). In Anderson's study on white women's values of family and nationalism, she concluded that "white women [have] shaped and sustained white supremacist politics... White women can oscillate between their gender and their race, between being the oppressed and the oppressor" (Nguyen, 2024, p. 9). Countless examples exist in modern media, where white women have called the police on innocent people of color, falsely accused them of rape, and advocated for direct segregation to protect their children (Nguyen, 2024, p. 15).

The attitudes white women hold can manifest in ways beyond being openly racist towards minorities. As it turns out, globalized motherhood can lead to microaggressive tendencies amongst both conservative and liberal feminists. When white women advocate for changes in minority cultures, they are directly pushing their own white feminist culture/agenda onto women of other backgrounds. Rather than defending America from the outgroup, these

white women are invading the outgroups in an attempt to preserve and spread white culture. By “fighting sexism with racism,” white women who label themselves as feminists attempt to combat the gender divide by further dividing white women from women of minority races, ethnicities, and cultures (Nguyen, 2024, p. 84). Leveraging racism and prejudice to align themselves with the dominant ingroup, many white women have supported figures like Donald Trump, reinforcing systems of white supremacy in exchange for status or protection.

Building on the political socialization of women and globalized white motherhood, existing research highlights the ideological divide between socially liberal women and those who supported Trump—particularly surrounding issues like reproductive healthcare. Yvonne Lindgren’s *Trump’s Angry White Women: Motherhood, Nationalism, and Abortion* explores how Trump’s campaign strategically leveraged traditionalist, family-value narratives to appeal to conservative women voters. Her study situates this rhetoric within a historical framework, tracing its roots to the 1970s pro-family movement and identifying parallels with nationalist appeals in earlier fascist regimes (Lindgren, 2019, pp. 17–21). In the wake of *Roe v. Wade*, Evangelical and conservative leaders seized abortion as an issue to mobilize conservative Protestants as voters, creating new alliances between Evangelicals and conservative Catholics. This led to abortion becoming a major social cleavage, “dividing conservative religious Republican voters from secular feminists and liberal Democrats” (Lindgren, 2019, p. 17). This realignment of the Republican Party framed opposition to abortion as a crucial component of the traditional family, meaning that abortion became a threat to family, religion, and motherhood itself. Their argument rested on a narrative that “fundamental guiding principles of gender roles, family, and the homemaker-breadwinner organization of family life were under assault,” casting feminists and Democrats as “unpatriotic” and “anti-family” (Lindgren, 2019, p. 21).

This perspective helps explain why some women adopt pro-life, traditionalist views that align with Trump’s social policy agenda. Trump’s pro-life messages, in relation to his pro-family narrative, link the protection of the nation with the protection and glorification of traditional motherhood (Lindgren, 2019, p. 4). Under this narrative, “women are called upon to protect and build nationhood through their childbearing role and to inculcate national identity by imparting the culture and values of the nation to its citizens. Thus, women’s role in nationalism requires both child-bearing and child-rearing, and restriction on abortion is directly linked to preservation

of the nation” (Lindgren, 2019, pp. 10-11). To further contextualize Trump’s gendered rhetoric, I draw on McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton’s *Language in the Trump Era: Scandals and Emergencies*, which analyzes how Trump constructs identity through speech—portraying women as needing protection, immigrants as enemies, Americans as victims, and himself as a savior (McIntosh & Mendoza-Denton, 2020, pp. 240–241). Their findings complement Hibbing’s theory of securitarianism, framing Trump’s appeal as rooted in themes of protectionism and nationalism that resonate with a specific subset of women voters.

**Introduction: 73 things Donald Trump has said about women**

In 2005, Trump famously stated, “you know I’m automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything ... Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything” (Rafi Schwartz, 2025). In 2013, when referring to sexual assaults in the military, Trump stated, “what did these geniuses expect when they put men & women together?” (Rafi Schwartz, 2025). Throughout his celebrity and political career, Trump has made numerous comments on female celebrities, influencers, politicians, and family members. Upon analyzing 73 quotes from Donald Trump between 2024-1991, Trump most often referred to women he was in favor of as beautiful and sexy, referring to their body/certain body parts that he finds particularly appealing. When Trump dislikes women, he calls them stupid, unattractive, and body shames them (Table 1).

**Table 1: Categorizing 73 of Donald Trump’s Comments about Women (1991-2024)**

Women as Weak/In need of protection/ Bum/ Useless/ Pathetic	Stupid/ Unintelligent/ Slow/Crazy/ Out of her mind	Filthy/Dirty/ Unattractive/ Ugly/Chubby/ Bad face or body/Nasty	Incapable specifically due to being a Woman/ Women only being useful for their outward appearance	Claiming he would not sexually assault/rape certain women because they are unattractive/ (“she wouldn’t be the one”)	Beautiful/ Sexy/ Referring to their body or face in suggestive manner/ Alluding that he would have sex with them	Other (i.e., referring to women as other derogatory names, responding to specific women, referring to women as manipulative/
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						seductive)
7	15	17	6	3	10	15

*Note.* Rafi Schwartz, T. W. U. (2025, February 4). *73 things Donald Trump has said about women.* theweek. <https://theweek.com/politics/things-donald-trump-has-said-about-women>

Despite Trump's derogatory remarks about women and the policies of his administration appearing to oppose women's social interests during his previous terms, many women still supported Donald Trump in the 2024 election. With 39% of women supporting Trump in 2016, 42% in 2020, and 45% in 2024 (Igielnik et al., 2021), important questions are raised about political identity and voting behavior among women. This paper works to uncover what types of women tend to favor Donald Trump, why they support him, and how Trump’s rhetoric of protectionism and nationalism (ingroup vs. outgroup) actively mobilizes these women to continue supporting him. It argues that Trump strategically appeals to women—particularly white women and mothers—through nationalist rhetoric that frames them as guardians of traditional values and national security. This appeal taps into cognitive frameworks and gendered socialization theories that shape voter issue preferences, leading traditionalist women to favor Trump’s securitarian policy agenda on various issues. By reinforcing traditional gender roles and casting minority groups as outgroups and threats, Trump maintains the political mobilization/support of women throughout his previous election cycles to the present day.

**The Statistics Behind the “Real Women” Who Vote for Trump**

In a viral TikTok clip posted in the fall of 2020, three women wearing MAGA merch sing a song in support of female voters supporting Trump in the 2020 presidential election. Although the song seems irrelevant at first, it provides key insights as to what female Trump supporters believe and value. The first verse goes as follows–

We don’t care if you’re white; We don’t care if you’re black; We don’t care if you’re gay; We’re all under attack; We don’t care if you’re rich; We don’t care if you’re poor; We just know; What we’re fighting for; Real women vote for Trump; We don’t need no liberal chump (I Wake Up With Today).

With three verses and three chorus repetitions, this country tune highlights various aspects of female Trump supporter characteristics. This section will cover specific demographic and attitudinal characteristics of women who voted for Trump.

Although a majority of Trump's supporters are white, non-college-educated males, the number of suburban females who voted for Trump should not be ignored, especially considering the significant number of women who voted for Trump throughout the last three elections. When analyzing female Trump supporters specifically, exit polls indicate that more than half of white women (52%) voted for Trump in 2016 (Setzler and Yanus, 2018, p. 523). Women who vote for Trump tend to be over age 45 (Nadeem, 2024). A recent poll by the Institute of Politics (IOP) concluded that Biden's lead over Trump in the 2020 election was 33+ points among 18 to 29-year-old women<sup>41</sup> (Kamarack et al., 2025). In the 2024 election, only 41% of young women voted for Trump, and in 2020, only 33% of young women voted for Trump (CIRCLE, 2024). Because support for Trump is consistently higher among older women than younger women, this generational divide may reflect differing values—such as a stronger alignment with socially traditionalist policies among older women, as well as a potentially higher likelihood of holding racially or gender-biased attitudes. Based on recent studies of the 2016 presidential election, women who supported Trump were powerfully influenced by racial and sexist attitudes, similar to their male Trump-supporting counterparts (Setzler and Yanus, 2018, p. 523-525). Studies have also found that “white women prefer to identify with and vote with their racial privilege rather than their gender oppression” (Lindgren, 2019, p. 3).

Benevolent sexism is also found to be very common amongst all Trump supporters, including women. According to a survey conducted in April 2019, 74% of Trump supporters agree that women should be protected and cherished by men, and only 40% agree that men have it easier than women (Hibbing, 2020, p. 120). This aligns with theories surrounding women's political socialization, which suggests that gender norms are perpetuated through traditional family structures and division of labor, where women are socialized and reinforced into traditional female caretaking roles. According to the Pew Research Center, seven in ten Trump

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<sup>41</sup> Although the gender gap between Democrats and Republicans has narrowed *historically* throughout the years, it continues to widen when considering *age group*. According to a poll by Harvard, 42% of young women (ages 18-29) identified as Democrats in 2020 while 44% identified as Democrats in 2024 (Kamarack et al., 2025).

supporters say the obstacles that once made it harder for women than men are now largely gone, with 55% of Trump-supporting women agreeing (Nadeem, 2024). This belief reflects a post-feminist mentality common among many white conservative women, who may view their privileges as normative and ignore broader systems of inequality. These views may have derived from childhood conditioning/upbringing (childhood socialization) or through traditional households that stem from marriage and motherhood (adulthood socialization) (Manza and Brooks, 1998). The sexist and racist attitudes that white conservative women tend to hold reflect elements of the global motherhood ideology, where white women are often positioned as the moral and familial center of the nation—responsible not just for their own households, but for preserving cultural and national ideals through motherhood (Nguyen, 2024, p. 9).

Trump supporters, unsurprisingly, also tend to believe in traditional family structures. In 2024, 59% of Trump supporters said people should prioritize marriage and children, with higher agreement among men (63%) than women (54%) (Nadeem, 2024). These views echo functionalist perspectives that reinforce gendered divisions as necessary for societal stability—perspectives often internalized through early gender socialization. In 2016, 63% of single women voted for Clinton, while only 49% of married women did so, suggesting that marriage, especially for white women, may reinforce alignment with patriarchal norms more commonly associated with conservative values (Hibbing, 2020, p. 29). This supports the adulthood socialization model, attributing marriage to traditionalist men as a primary factor that influences women's view of politics and feminism (Manza, 1998). Additionally, Trump supporters are more likely to express discomfort when married women do not take their husband's last names, and nearly half (47%) believe it is bad for society to have fewer children (Nadeem, 2024). According to Pew, never-married women are far more likely to identify as Democrats (72%) than Republicans (42%) (Nadeem, 2024), illustrating how marital status may influence one's socialization and political identity. Therefore, this theory claims divorced, widowed, or single women may have very different material interests than married women, as their lived experiences often challenge the idealized nuclear family model (Manza and Brooks, 1998). Many more women are pursuing higher education/higher employment than they were in the past; according to the Pew Research Center, three-quarters of women ages 25-54 were employed in 2023 nationally, which is the highest rate on record. That figure has almost doubled since 1955, when only about 38% of women in that age group were employed (Biernacka-Lievstro et al., 2024). According to the

rising women's autonomy theory and rising labor force theory, the more women who are pursuing careers and not prioritizing traditional marriage, contribute to the gender gap and rise of Democratic women across time (Manza and Brooks, 1998). Conversely, women who adopt traditional caretaker roles within the household are more likely to internalize and reinforce gendered attitudes, often influenced by and aligned with their husbands' beliefs. This adherence to traditional gender roles is shaped by gendered socialization, which discourages women from engaging in political spaces or viewing themselves as political actors (Bos et al., 2021). As a result, traditionalist women tend to be less politically active and less informed about political processes. Research shows that women remain severely underrepresented in American politics, particularly within the Republican Party (Poutvaara & Graefe, 2024). Republican conservatism often emphasizes traditional family values and hierarchical gender norms, which can resonate with women who were socialized to uphold these ideals. This alignment helps explain the support some women give to figures like Trump, whose rhetoric reinforces conservative, patriarchal values. It may also explain why women may have shied away from voting for Kamala Harris, as studies have proven that social stereotyping can play a significant factor in voting preferences (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001, p. 954). Traditionalist women who do not believe that women belong in politics, or who hold sexist and racist beliefs, will judge Harris as less competent than Trump due to their gendered socialization. These dynamics reveal how variations in gender socialization and differing relationships to patriarchal structures influence women's political ideologies and partisan affiliations.

### **Female Trump Supporter Issue Preferences**

Interestingly enough, Trump voters will continue to support him when his policies are harmful to their own livelihood or personal health (Hibbing, 2020, p. 16). This idea often puzzles liberal women, who detest female Trump supporters, claiming they "voted wrong" or "voted against their own gender." Critics of Trump may hypothesize that female Trump supporters are *not* voting "correctly," meaning they are not voting in accordance with what their preferences would be should they be fully informed on Trump and his policies (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001, p. 951). Because of the high correlation between low education and support for Trump (Nadeem, 2024), critics may believe that women who support Trump are uneducated about politics and tend to over-utilize voting heuristics to help them make decisions about whom to vote for. For

example, perhaps they are voting based on their self-identified partisan or ideological preferences (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001, p. 952), or perhaps they are voting for Trump because their traditionalist husbands tell them to (Setzler and Yanus, 2018, p. 523).

While these factors most likely contribute to a proportion of female Trump supporters, it would be dismissive to simply list reasons why women who vote for Trump are misguided. In John R. Hibbing's words, "it would be foolish to suggest a single explanation for an individual's political preferences, and I will not" (Hibbing, 2020, p. 12). Instead, it is important to break down various ideals and preferences of Trump-supporting women and explain how Trump caters to this particular female subgroup. To better explain this phenomenon, consider an example of a hypothetical Trump supporter farmer. Despite Trump's trade war initiatives (which will adversely affect commodity prices for farmers), the farmers will continue to support a policy that is directly damaging to their lives. Although produce prices will fall because of tariff proposals, the Trump-supporting farmer will tolerate, or even endorse, Trump's trade policies so long as Trump continues to "protect the U.S. from China" (Hibbing, 2020, p. 16). This hypothetical situation provides an example of Trump voters' willingness to preserve protectionist and securitarian ideals over other values.

When specifically analyzing women's issue preferences in the previous election, a KKF Survey found that most women voters who planned to vote for Trump in the 2024 election stated that "their support isn't necessarily based on his leadership ability, character, values, or experience. Rather, half of women who plan to vote for Trump say the candidates' stances on specific issues will make the biggest difference in how they vote" (Kearney et al., 2024). According to the Pew Research Center, these important issues include the economy and jobs (40%), abortion (13%), and immigration (11%) (CIRCLE, 2024). White youth voters held similar rankings of priorities.<sup>42</sup> Among Trump voters specifically, the economy (93%), immigration (82%), and violent crime (76%) were leading policy issues, while only 18% of Trump supporters say racial and ethnic inequality is an important issue (Nadeem, 2025). Young women are more likely than men to cite abortion (17%) and health care (10%) as their priority voting issue, but 39% of young women voters still cited the economy and jobs as their top

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<sup>42</sup> White youth ranked their top priority voting issues as: economy and jobs (41%), abortion (14%), and immigration (13%) (CIRCLE, 2024,, in)

priority voting issue (CIRCLE, 2024). Both male and female voters who cited the economy as their #1 priority voting issue were more likely to vote for Trump while voters who cited abortion as their #1 voting issue were more likely to vote for Harris in 2024 (CIRCLE, 2024). These statistics reinforce the idea that voters have specific issue preferences in mind when they are weighing their decision to support Trump. Some female Trump supporters, for example, assert that they back his economic policies while rejecting his social stances. Among Republican women voters (many of whom support Trump), inflation was the top concern (KKF, 2024). The economic anxiety theory suggests that economic crises offer political challengers an opportunity to gain support by appealing to those left behind, like the middle and working class. Trump taps into this by blaming outgroups for their struggles, despite catering to wealthy political elites to maintain power (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 241). Trump caters to voters' economic and immigration fears by relying on securitarian framing. During a campaign rally in Colorado of October 2024, Trump claimed false narratives that immigrants are stealing jobs from United States citizens, particularly Hispanic and African American jobs, in an attempt to appeal to minority demographics (Hussein, 2024). Trump claimed migrants are “going to be attacking — and they already are — Black population jobs, the Hispanic population jobs, and they're attacking union jobs too...so when you see the border, it's not just the crime. Your jobs are being taken away too,” (Hussein, 2024). Despite U.S. Census Bureau statistics proving Trump's claims are blatantly untrue (Hussein, 2024), he continues to take advantage of citizen fears regarding the economy and immigration, often claiming that he will “fix” these policy areas to mobilize support. Republican women often fall for his claims in particular— the KKF states more than one in three (36%) Republican women cited the economy as a top voting issue (KKF, 2024), and a large majority of them continued to support Trump in the 2024 election.<sup>43</sup>

Despite many women claiming they do not trust either major political party to handle rising inflation, a large majority of Republican women cite that inflation was a top priority issue when voting in the 2024 election (KKF, 2024). Republican women also stated they approved of

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<sup>43</sup> While exact percentages for Republican women specifically are not available, previous surveys suggest strong support for Trump within this group; for example, 92% of women who voted for Trump in 2020 planned to vote for him again in 2024 (De Simeone, 2024). While exact percentages for Republican women specifically are not available, previous surveys suggest strong support for Trump within this group; for example, Trump won the women's vote by a margin of over 30 points in communities like Aging Farmlands and Evangelical Hubs, where Republican women made up a significant portion of the electorate (American Communities Project, 2024).

Trump's "handling of various issues" during his previous term, including the economy and inflation rates (KFF, 2024). However, such distinctions may seem ironic, as research indicates that voters generally struggle to detect meaningful differences in the economic competence of specific administrations. The Clinton Budget Deficit Study found that Republicans have especially inaccurate interpretations of the economy, with only one-third of respondents answering correctly (Achen and Bartels, 2006, p. 281). This voter myopia makes retrospective judgments of the economy highly idiosyncratic and arbitrary, as many voters base their assessments on economic conditions in the final weeks of a campaign rather than long-term performance (Achen and Bartels, 2006, p. 176). As a result, retrospective voters frequently fail to recognize and reward competent economic management.<sup>44</sup> However, Trump's false promises and inaccurate narratives of the economy and its major players often result in his supporters blindly backing his economic policies, as they relate to both immigration fears and traditional family norms. Trump's rhetoric is largely impactful, as studies show that Republicans exhibit more liberal attitudes after being exposed to Trump discussing liberal policy positions (Finkel et al., 2020, p. 533).

Trump's socio-political agenda is enhanced by various news platforms, such as Fox News, where Fox News Host Jesse Watters recently claimed that Trump's tariffs will "make it easier for people to start families," and that tariffs are "for the children" (Mahdawi, 2025). Various Trump-supporting journalists claim that Trump's economic policies/tariffs will "fix the crisis of masculinity" (Mahdawi, 2025). One particular columnist spoke on Fox News, stating,

The U.S. shipped jobs that gave men who work with their hands...and rely on...physicality...to other countries...[and] imported millions of illegals to work in construction, manufacturing, landscaping...services-jobs that used to give men...the American dream (Mahdawi, 2025).

Trump and his supporters utilize the economic anxiety theory by directly relating citizens' fears about the economy's performance to tradition, securitarianism, and nationalism (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 241). Framing immigrants as threats to jobs that embody the "American Dream" and linking economic setbacks to traditional, masculine gender roles helps alleviate Republican fears about the economy. At the same time, it directly blames an outgroup for the economic

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<sup>44</sup> While this data provides strong conclusions, it is based on aggregate findings and does not account for individual-level variations.

problems Trump has caused while simultaneously soothing Republican women, who find comfort in traditional gender roles due to gendered socialization. By emphasizing economic protectionism, he appeals to traditionalist women, reinforcing their belief in the importance of these roles in maintaining stability and their role in society. A connection between Trump's economic and reproductive rights/abortion policies stems from his broader narrative, framing both issues as essential to safeguarding traditional values.

### **Trump's Rhetoric and Abortion Policies**

A high point of tension between women who vote for Trump and women who do not is understanding how female Trump supporters support (or choose to ignore) Trump's extremist views on abortion policies. Trump, who had previously declared he was pro-choice, now claims he has “evolved on many issues over the years,” one of them being his stance on abortion (Lindgren, 2019, p. 37). While abortion is not the top voting issue for any group of women voters, one in ten women voters say abortion is the most important issue determining their vote (Kearney, 2024). For Trump-supporting women in particular, abortion has not been cited as a top voting issue (Kamisar and Murray, 2024). Yet, for the Trump-supporting women who *do* care about abortion, 31% of women who voted for Trump in the 2020 election claimed they were disappointed by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (Kamisar and Murray, 2024). According to a focus group conducted by NBC, only three out of fifteen women interviewed considered Trump at least partially responsible for the Supreme Court's decision. A majority also did not believe that Trump would seek a federal abortion ban (Kamisar and Murray, 2024). Sarah E., a 35-year-old female Trump supporter interviewed by NBC, states that while the abortion bans were disappointing, they “mean nothing in the grand scheme of everything... I'm going to vote for who I think is going to do the best for my family” (Kamisar and Murray, 2024). This demonstrates not only voter preferences but also motivated partisan cognition, in which people actively ignore or resist information that contradicts their beliefs (Hibbing, 2020, p. 32). Trump-supporting females who believe in abortion rights may avoid blaming Trump for restrictive abortion bans to deter feelings of vote choice regret, or shame (Brennan, 2016, p. 38).

Trump links patriotism, nationalism, and anti-abortion rhetoric to motherhood and family to build his support amongst women. For example, Trump has addressed women's anxieties

regarding immigrants, crime, and economic downturn by claiming that the safety of American children and neighborhoods is threatened if the Democrats gain power.<sup>45</sup> At one campaign rally, Trump stated that “women want safe neighborhoods for their families, they want great schools, and healthcare for their children. They want to keep drug dealers and predators and traffickers ... They want them out of our country, and we do that. The Democrats don't do that, they want to open the borders.” (Lindgren, 2019, p. 39). Another example includes Trump’s inaugural speech, which blamed previous Democratic administrations for “American carnage.” These statements caused declining perceptions of American democracy and further pernicious polarization (McCoy and Somer, 2019, p. 258). This ingroup vs. outgroup framing of policy preferences and partisan differences causes women to form extremist views on “the enemy,” consisting of whichever outgroup Trump is claiming will cause harm to America’s children and families (immigrants, pro-choice women, etc.). “The enemy” has been described by Trump in various ways—Trump has referred to immigrants as animals, Mexico as an enemy, other nations as a border, immigration as a flood, white America as a victim, and Trump himself as a hero (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton, 2020, pp. 240-241). Trump argues that immigrants and foreign trade are “stealing jobs” from American workers, polarizing globalist vs. nationalist messages and pitting American citizens against the rest of the world with the excuse of protecting the economy (McCoy and Somer, p. 241). During NBC’s focus group study, many Trump-supporting women expressed frustration and fear with the idea of America’s resources being allocated to foreign countries (Kamisar and Murray). Some of the women had harsh words for immigrants that resembled Trump’s own words closely, complaining that they are “bringing in drugs” and “viruses” into the U.S., questioning whether terrorists were taking advantage of the situation at the border to “set up cells in our country” (Kamisar and Murray, 2024).

Furthermore, polling has concluded that the fear of cultural displacement in America is a driving factor in white, working-class support for Trump. This heightened resurfacing of racial resentment among white U.S. citizens has been mobilized through the last few elections due to the Trump administration specifically (McCoy and Somer, p. 240). For example, a 2016 poll found that 55% of white Americans believe there is discrimination against white people in the

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<sup>45</sup> As stated previously, immigration, crime, and the economy are the leading policy-issues amongst Trump supporters (Nadeem, 2024). This most likely attributes to why Trump continuously forms strategic protectionist narratives and rhetoric around these issues—they alleviate his fanbase.

United States today (Lindgren, 2019, p. 43). Within the mainstream of white nationalist media, Trump supporters chant, “you will not replace us,” exposing the white nationalist movement that has been uplifted through Trump’s propaganda and rhetoric (Lindgren, 2019, pp. 41-42). As one white female Trump supporter at a campaign rally claimed, Trump “understands why we’re angry and he wants to fix it,’ she said, ‘he wants to protect this country, and he wants to keep it safe, and he wants to keep it free of invaders and the caravan and everything else that’s going on” (Lindgren, 2019, p. 40). These white, Trump-supporting women believe that Trump is fighting to preserve life and protect the country from outsiders. His propaganda demonizes minorities both in and out of the country, reinforcing white women’s fears of people of color and foreigners by framing them as dangerous (Nguyen, 2024, p. 15). Even white women who are not blatantly afraid of minorities often hold internal microaggressive tendencies relating to global motherhood. If white women do not want to remove minorities from the country, they, at the very least, want to assimilate them into American culture (Nguyen, 2024, p. 9).

With the context of traditional, bread-winning conservatism in mind, Trump’s infamously misogynistic rhetoric seems to be “tailored dog-whistle politics designed to reach those who embraced the patriarchal family and stay-at-home motherhood” (Lindgren, 2019, p. 40). When Trump makes degrading comments about women and is confronted, he often downplays his comments as “locker-room talk” and “banter,” underscoring the idea that commenting on women’s bodies is normal male behavior (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton, 2020, p. 159). While Trump’s vulgar statements about women and their bodies seem unpresidential, they have not significantly damaged his political reputation. The justification of “typical male behavior” may be seen as valid to traditionalist women, who are conditioned from childhood to adulthood to believe in gender norms and women’s roles in society. Some authors even claim that such distasteful statements worked to his advantage, “by reinforcing the message that a vote for him would be a vote against conventional politics” (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton, 2020, p. 166). Trump’s comments reflect a cultural environment where men feel entitled to discuss and objectify women’s bodies, reinforcing patriarchal norms and moral traditionalism. Such language not only normalizes the devaluation of women but also perpetuates a system where male bonding occurs at the expense of women’s autonomy and respect.

## **Conclusion**

Donald Trump is widely known for his derogatory comments about women, demonization of immigrants, and mass mobilization of traditionalist American citizens. Despite Trump often vocalizing his misogynistic viewpoints on women's roles, credibility, and bodies, he was still supported by 39% of women in 2016, the 42% in 2020 (Igielnik et al., 2021), and the 45% in 2024 (Nadeem, 2024). Rather than assuming these women voted incorrectly due to a lack of political knowledge, it is important to draw connections between who these Trump-supporting women are and what attitudes they tend to hold. Throughout all three election cycles, more than half of white women and a large majority of Republican and conservative women consistently vote for Trump (Setzler and Yanus, 2018, p. 523). Trump's largest subpopulation of female support is older women (CIRCLE, 2024), which may explain why they tend to hold racist and sexist attitudes (Setzler and Yanus, 2018, p. 523-525). The number of women holding sexist views is surprisingly high, with over half of Trump-supporting women agreeing with statements aligning with traditional female gender roles (Nadeem, 2024). This can be attributed to the political gender socialization of women, where women are conditioned in childhood and further reinforced in adulthood to remove themselves from the political world (Manza and Brooks, 1998). Since traditionalist homes often perpetuate women's role as a caretaker, married women and mothers are more likely to agree with sexist statements than divorced, single/unmarried women (Nadeem, 2024). This may be why traditionalist women feel comfortable with Trump's derogatory statements about women and tend to agree with his patriarchal views. Therefore, when Trump plays off his comments as "banter" (McCoy and Somer, p. 240), or when Fox News promotes Trump by claiming that he will "fix masculinity in America" (Hussein, 2024), his supporters are not drawn away from him—in fact, they may encourage this behavior.

Trump-supporting women hold similar issue preferences to Trump-supporting men, as both demographics cite the economy and immigration as priority voting issues (CIRCLE, 2024). Although women are four times more likely to cite abortion as a top voting priority than men, voters of both sexes who claimed the economy was their top priority voting issue in 2024 were very likely to vote for Trump (CIRCLE, 2024). Many women who voted for Trump in 2020 cited inflation as their top priority voting issue for the 2024 election, and many of these women approved of Trump's performance with the economy and inflation during his previous term (KKF, 2024). Trump takes advantage of traditionalist women's fears regarding the economy, immigration, and abortion by using securitarian and protectionist rhetoric. These messages are

found in his false narratives about both economic and abortion policies, where he frames various outgroups (immigrants, people of color, Democrats, pro-choice actors, etc.) as the enemy and as a danger to America. For example, Trump falsely naming immigrants as “job stealers” creates an out-group surrounding immigrant workers, promoting otherism and securitarianism (Hussein, 2024). He also claims that he will protect American children from dangers, referencing illegal immigrants as drug-dealers, predators, and criminals that will harm women’s families and communities (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton, 2020, pp. 240-241). By comparing motherhood and child-rearing to traditional American values and nationalist pride, Trump mobilizes pro-life individuals into villainizing pro-choice and Democratic actors (Lindgren, 2019, p. 39). These negative perceptions of outgroups perpetuate pernicious polarization, microaggression, and globalized motherhood tendencies, particularly in white women (Nguyen, 2024, pp. 15-16). This hateful rhetoric also furthers white Americans’ fears of being replaced by minority groups, contributing to the increasing white nationalist and ethnocentric views in America (Lindgren, 2019, pp. 41-43). This type of rhetoric has been proven to be extremely powerful when influencing voter decisions (Finkel et al., 2020, p. 533). Many women have echoed Trump’s campaign claims, alleging immigrants bring drugs, disease, and threats to American children (Kamisar & Murray, 2024).

Although some liberal women believe that women who vote for Trump are simply uneducated or made a mistake, it is crucial to consider demographic and historical factors that contribute to Trump’s powerful female mobilization. While some of these voting decisions may be attributed to voting heuristics and a lack of voter competence, other factors, such as the gendered political socialization of women, help to explain Trump’s voter demographic (Setzler and Yanus, 2018, p. 523). Traditionalist women, shaped by patriarchal norms often reinforced in their home environments, may be more inclined to trust male authority figures over women (Manza and Brooks, 1998). This vulnerability can lead them to find comfort in Trump’s racist, sexist, and securitarian rhetoric rather than feel appalled by it. Simultaneously, he frames himself as a protector and white savior to justify his hateful rhetoric. Trump uses the importance of motherhood and family to mobilize support around various policies, including the economy, immigration, and abortion, which were cited as top voting issues by all voters as well as Trump supporters specifically (CIRCLE, 2024).

Referring to the “Real Women Vote For Trump” song, the lyrics reflect the securitarian and protectionist values often favored by female Trump supporters, prioritizing perceived threats to national identity and traditional social order over issues like social justice. By asserting that “we’re all under attack,” the lyrics tap into a shared sense of existential threat—the key belief of securitarian thinking—that fuels support for strong, heroic leadership embodied in the figure of Donald Trump. The phrase “real women vote for Trump” reinforces in-group identity while simultaneously vilifying the out-group—liberals, immigrants, etc.—as weak or unpatriotic, intensifying pernicious polarization. In the second verse, the song lyrics state “we’re America...just livin’ the dream,” relating American traditionalism and nationalism to Trump’s presidency (I Wake Up with Today). By framing his socio-political agenda to fit common themes of securitarianism, protectionism, and nationalism/ethnocentrism, Trump consistently receives support from traditionalist women throughout the last three elections. The normalization of outgroup hostility, degradation of women, and growing embrace of traditionalist values demonstrates a shift in socio-political culture; one in which exclusionary nationalism and patriarchal norms are increasingly reframed as forms of protection and moral stability rather than as threats to equality and universalism.

With Donald Trump in his second term, his female support has broader implications for American democracy and for women’s status in the United States. The persistence of Trump-supporting women suggests that gender-related issues may not be a dominant political force shaping these women’s political behavior. Instead, ideological and partisan identity, racialized and misogynistic nationalism, and ingroup-outgroup fears may outweigh gender-based policy concerns such as reproductive rights or women’s workplace equity. Rather than viewing their vote choice as harmful or regressive towards women, this voting pool may perceive their support for Trump as reflective of the norms they are socialized with. Furthermore, they might not prioritize women’s issues when voting, or they might not perceive them as under threat. This dynamic could normalize the political legitimacy of policies and practices that reinforce traditional gender roles. These changes are reflected not only in policy, but also in culture, as “Tradwifery”<sup>46</sup> and other trends encouraging and romanticizing women’s roles as mothers and

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<sup>46</sup> Tradwifery can be defined as romanticism of “feminine characteristics, chastity and submissiveness, a patriarchal vision of gender norms, and fundamentalist Christianity” (Cooksey, 2021).

homemakers remain prevalent in the media since Trump's last time in office. The durability of this phenomenon signals that future debates over women's rights in America may increasingly occur within a fragmented landscape, where appeals to protection and tradition resonate for some women just as strongly as appeals to liberation and equality for others. This dynamic may further divide women politically, intensifying affective polarization and contributing to growing resentment and distrust among American women themselves. For liberal women to truly understand Trump-supporting women, they must recognize why and how these thought patterns occur rather than being dismissive or overly general of female Trump-supporter beliefs.

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**Little Saigon Vote: The Mobilization of Vietnamese Voters through Ethnic News Media**

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### Abstract

Informed inspectors suspect Vietnamese Americans associate with the Republican Party because of the model minority mindset and their bond over the anti-Communist attitude. These two components created a sense of Vietnamese American nationalism in the refugee community. A way this Vietnamese American nationalism sustains is through ethnic media, which comes in many forms. The most prominent one is YouTube, where many Vietnamese voters (specifically the older generation) gain their political information from. This research seeks to explore how Vietnamese voters make their voting decisions based on the information that they consume by analyzing the content of the four most popular ethnic news media YouTube channels. Findings suggest that Vietnamese elites mobilize voters by using anti-communism rhetoric to justify their support for a particular presidential candidate or political party.

## Little Saigon Vote: The Mobilization of Vietnamese Voters through Ethnic News Media

Vietnamese Americans are the largest right-leaning Asian minority group in the United States, with over 50% of registered voters identified as Republicans in 2020 (Schaeffer, 2023). Informed inspectors suspect Vietnamese Americans tend to identify with the Republican Party because of the model minority mindset, as a result of the refugee assimilation process, whether they are aware of it or not. The early interaction between the GOP members and the first-generation Vietnamese refugee community in California played a part in influencing and shaping the Vietnamese American political ideology and identity. This initial support from the GOP in the early 1980s and their bond over anti-Communism further validated the Vietnamese American/ refugee nationalism and influenced their political ideology. A way this Vietnamese American nationalism sustains is through ethnic media. One of the first forms of political communication in Vietnamese ethnic media comes from refugee artists whose art reflected their experience and commentaries on the communist regime. Gradually, Vietnamese political expression branched out from art to local newspapers. With the rise of the online digital media landscape, access to information and ethnic media via social media platforms is preferred, as people can interact with one another and build their own algorithm based on which political activists they are following.

Based on the process-oriented approach theory [of voters' decision making] introduced by Richard Lau and David Redlawsk (2009), a way to understand how voters decide is through studying their information processing during election campaigns. The implementation of this theory on understanding how Vietnamese voters decide will be discussed later in this paper. Historically, Republicans had major political influence on the Vietnamese refugee community in the early 1990s in Orange County, California. This influence set the tone for the first generation of Vietnamese voters and their identity as refugee Americans through the creation of popular ethnic media like *Paris by Nights*, *Vân Sơn*, *Asia*, and local newspapers written in Vietnamese. This paper seeks to answer the question: How does political information sharing by Vietnamese elites mobilize Vietnamese American voters?

This paper offers a brief history of the relationship between the GOP and the first-generation Vietnamese Americans in California to demonstrate how the model minority narrative is believed to stem from the “good refugees” image. Then, the research uses Lau and Redlawsk’s

(2006) conceptual model of individual decision making as the theoretical framework to explain how voters' decisions are influenced by their information sources (such as Vietnamese Americans obtaining political information through ethnic media consumption). Studies show that Vietnamese Americans rely heavily on ethnic media as a way to express and maintain their culture, but also to share information. To examine the influence of Vietnamese political activists and elites in mobilizing Vietnamese voters through their ethnic media platforms, the research analyzes the content of the ethnic media consumed by Vietnamese voters and compares the results to the Vietnamese voting pattern in the 2020 election. The findings suggest that anti-communism is widely used by political elites across the ideological spectrum as a way to justify their support for a specific candidate and their call for support for their preferred party and candidate.

### **The Model Minority Narrative**

The discourse of the “model minority” is not new in Asian American scholarship, as many authors have contested that the model minority is a harmful perception of Asian Americans. Generally, it is believed that Asian Americans are academically successful, have occupational upward mobility and are not “problematic” in terms of mental health and crime (Wong et al., 2018, p.99). In the case of Vietnamese Americans, this model minority stems specifically from the “good refugees” image post-Vietnam War (Yến Lê Espiritu, 2006, p.422). Assimilation into the model minority became the way Vietnamese sought to rewrite the past as refugees and to remove their status as “social burdens” in order to be seen as American citizens. The connection between the former South Vietnamese and the Republicans is their mutual interest in a positive image of the former South Vietnamese thriving in America (Nguyen, 2013, p.100). The positive image indicates America has “won” the war and successfully liberated the Vietnamese from communism.

The first official Republican Party interaction with Vietnamese local political involvement was at the first Vietnamese community meeting in 1984. In the midst of an insurance fraud scandal among Southeast Asians, there were negative public backlashes against the Vietnamese community in Orange County, California. It was the first time the Vietnamese community received support from the Republican Party when California Senator Ed Royce sent his assistants to monitor the situation (Nguyen, 2017, p.103). Following the senator’s support,

Vietnamese Americans slowly received more recognition and friendly gestures from Republicans, like Kathy Buchoz. The support validated the Vietnamese Americans' resident status and allowed them to insert their voices in the American political discourse. In 2008, almost three decades after resettlement, Representative Joseph Anh Cao (R-LA) became the first Vietnamese to be elected to Congress. Nguyen stated, “refugee nationalism and the politics of rescue had created an unusual political climate in which Republicans, at least in their dealings with Vietnamese Americans, could claim to be the party of racial tolerance,” suggesting that the Republicans in California were willing to look over the racial conflicts to gain support from this model minority group (Nguyen, 2017, p.103). To demonstrate how the model minority mindset can influence political attitudes, Frank Samson researched Asian American attitudes towards immigration reform based on their racialised politics (2014, p.118). The research found that as Asian Americans’ perceptions of political commonality with White Americans decrease, the likelihood of supporting immigration reform increases.<sup>47</sup> This raises the question of whether the result captures the “honorary white” designation attributed to Asian Americans under the model minority myth. And if this is true, do Vietnamese voters have these racialized ideologies when they consider who to vote for, and if they formed their political attitudes based on the “model minority” perception?

### **The Importance of Ethnic Media**

Based on Lau and Redlawsk’s model of individual decision making, Vietnamese voters are most likely to be categorized as Model 2: Early Socialization and Cognitive Consistency (2006, p.9). This voter group’s typical information gathering is passive, which means they don’t actively seek information and put minimal effort into fact-checking. Most of their exposure to relevant information comes from the media and is largely inadvertent (social media posts). According to the 2016 AAPI Voter Survey, Vietnamese voters had the highest ethnic media consumption rate among Asian American groups (AAPI 2016, p.32-34). This proved their reliance on ethnic media for news and political information.

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<sup>47</sup> Attitude towards immigration policy is relevant here because immigration issues are among the top polarized topics in today’s American politics. By stating the connection between racialised politics and commonality with other race groups and attitude towards immigration policy, it shows the political ideology being formed as a response to the voters’ interaction with other racial groups.

The model also describes that the Model 2 voters' perception of media messages is often biased in favor of early-learned predispositions. This implies their search for information is done purposefully to confirm their biases. The predispositions, as this paper suggests, are influenced by the local political leaders and racialized attitudes learned during their assimilation process. This Model group's method of decision making is memory-based evaluations of what is known (long-term) and has recently been learned (short-term) about the different alternatives. Which means older generation voters would make their voting decisions based on what they remember to be true. These assumptions directly relate to Nguyen's (2017) literature on Vietnamese refugees' assimilation process into "model minorities." Voters may make their voting decision based on (a) the relationship between the Vietnamese community and right-wing political leaders and (b) the information that they consume via media.

Sarah Nguyễn's (2024) research findings showed that political information seeking among the Vietnamese diaspora is impacted by intergenerational divides, lasting historical and political traumas of immigration, and language barriers. Ethnic media is a powerful source for many Vietnamese and Asian Americans in general, because its value "lies in the provision of information that acknowledges the intersectional identities of refugees and immigrants" (Nguyễn, 2024, p.418). Based on the historical context of the GOP and Vietnamese Americans' relationship and the theoretical framework of how this model 2 voter group makes vote decisions, the research examines the role of Vietnamese elites and political activists in mobilizing voters through their information-sharing platform.

**Hypothesis:** Given the historical right-leaning disposition of Vietnamese voters, the research expects to find ethnic news media to be more right-leaning than left-leaning.

In this paper, political elites are defined as those who have a strong representation in the Vietnamese community, regardless of their occupation. Many political elites create content on social media (mainly YouTube and Facebook) to communicate with the community, locally and nationwide. The research focuses on YouTube video content as the studied ethnic media for its purpose to inform the targeted audience and for its popularity among Vietnamese Americans.

## Methodology

### I. Selecting Sources

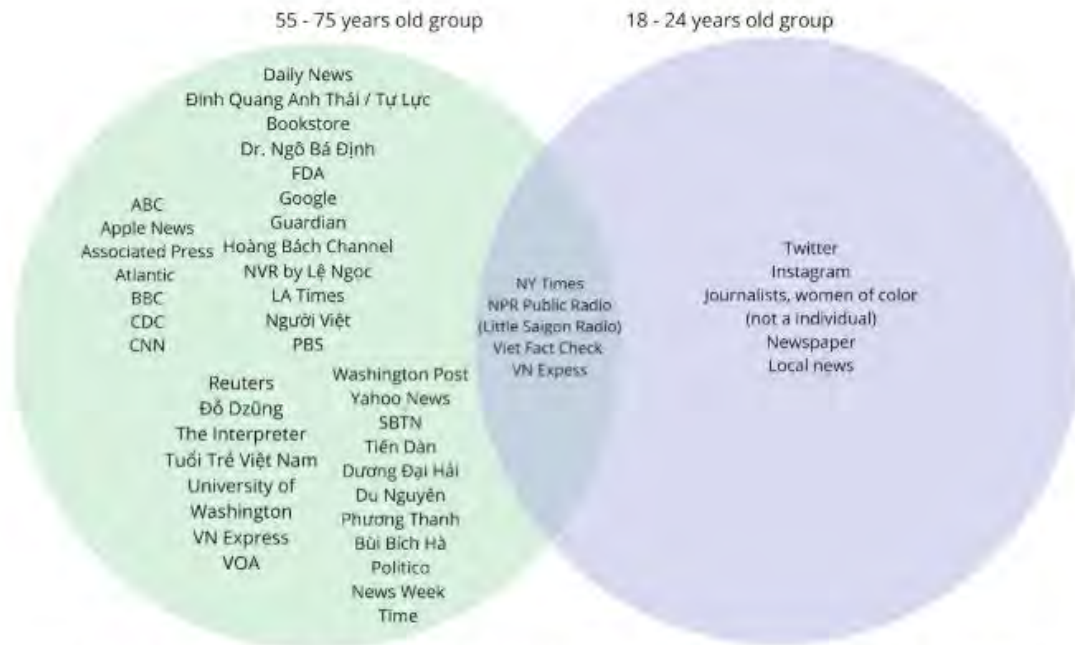
The influence of Vietnamese political activists in mobilizing Vietnamese voters is examined through the content of the media consumed by Vietnamese voters. The content analysis includes a scoring system to determine how right- or left-leaning a source is. It also seeks to answer the questions of how the model minority mindset might shape a collective's political attitudes through anti-communism content. Given the lack of information on the Vietnamese voting pattern in the most recent presidential election in 2024, evidence was collected in the year of 2020.

Based on feedback from the community in Sarah Nguyễn's research (2024), the Vietnamese community reflected that YouTube, along with newspapers written in Vietnamese, is the most popular news media among Vietnamese voters. YouTube is an interesting medium because it is a platform that allows the channel hosts to broadcast daily news, political commentary, and interact with their viewers live. Since there are many Vietnamese channels available for content analysis, the source selection is based on a general list generated from Nguyen's survey (2024), which the research participants have provided, and the recommendation list of news sources by Viet Fact Check (2021). This list gives a general idea of the most popular and well-known channels;<sup>48</sup> their popularity is relevant to the study of influence because it indicates the number of the Vietnamese audience they have reached. Nguyễn's study participants listed the sources based on their judgment of trustworthiness, which does *not* become a determining factor for the selection process. Since all of the research participants identified as Democrats or left-leaning voters, this might create a biased problem in choosing sources. The recommendation lists were only used for the mere purpose of generating a general list of popular channels among Vietnamese Americans. The four most popular channels across the ideological

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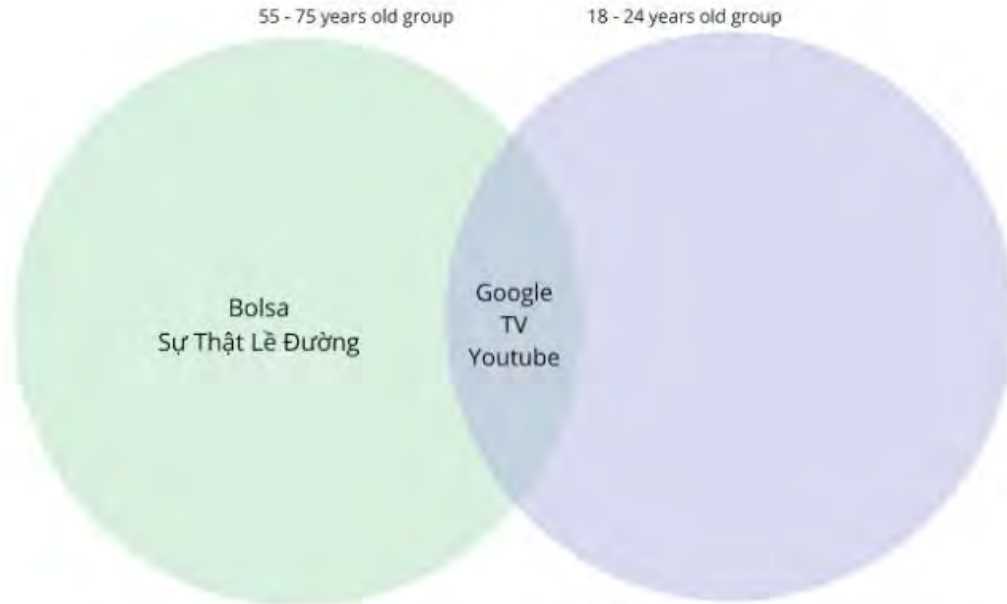
<sup>48</sup> The language in the methodology section refers to Vietnamese influencers as "channel" and ethnic media as "media." Because most channels are hosted by 1-2 individuals. These media are not formal news channels; therefore, we can categorize them as influencers and elites.

spectrum were chosen based on these three characteristics: their view count, post frequency, and subscriber range to determine popularity.<sup>49</sup>

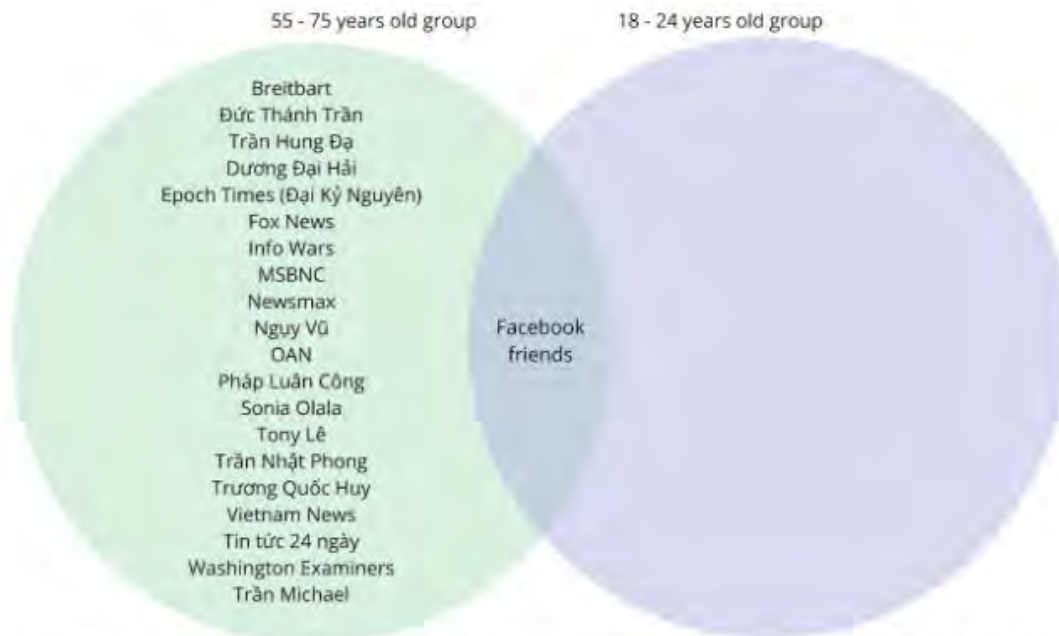


Trustworthy sources listed by the participants mentioned in the focus group interviews (Nguyễn, 2024, p.425)

<sup>49</sup> Some sources were eliminated from the lists because they are not available on YouTube or they were inactive in 2020.



Undecided sources listed by the participants mentioned in the focus group interviews (Nguyễn,2024, p.425)



Untrustworthy sources listed by the participants mentioned in the focus group interviews (Nguyễn,2024, p.425)

**II. General list of well-known channels among Vietnamese media consumers**

Channel Name/ Host Name	Subscriber counts	Average Weekly	Posting
		View Count/video	

			Frequency
Hoàng Bách Channel	17.5K	3.5K	Week days
NVR by Lê Ngọc	28.2K	3.8K	Week days
Người Việt Daily News/Đỗ Dzũng	810K	22.7K	Week days
Dương Đại Hải	9.42K	4K	Week days
Nguy Vũ	137K	28K	Twice a week
Sonia Ohlala	218K	10K	Week days
Trần Nhật Phong	171K	25K	Week days
Trương Quốc Huy	1.63M	127K	Daily
Trần Michael (Tran MaicoUSA)	191K	7.5K	Week days

### III. Random Sampling Pool:

To create a random sampling pool, the material playlist is composed of every video posted in the third week of each month, except for November. Within the first 20 minutes, the videos are scored following the coding protocol (see Appendix I) in three categories: GOP favorability, refugee/memory, and anti-communism. This prohibits the coder from selecting a specific time of the year when all four channels post the same content with the same purpose of mobilizing Vietnamese voters to vote for a certain party. Some channels separated a one-day livestream and reuploaded it into different videos, in addition to creating extra content for the day.

### IV. Coding:

For GOP favorability, each video is scored -1 if it is anti-GOP, 0 if it is neutral, and 1 if it is in favor of the GOP (see Appendix I). Within the first 20 minutes, if the host mentions their personal story as a refugee or the collective identity of Vietnamese as refugees, that counts as 1 score for the refugee/memory category. For the anti-communism category, the video is scored 1 when the hosts negatively criticize any Communist country (whether it’s a general comment or a specific news piece). Note that each category can only be scored once per individual video. The titles of each video are provocative and might state a clear claim about the channel’s political attitude, but only the actual content of the video is scored.

Since there is only one coder in this project, coding liability and scoring evaluation are checked through an intracoder procedure, where the coder revisits the data after a short break and recodes the material using the same coding protocol. After the first round of coding was finished, the coder took a four-day break and restarted coding in the same order. The results from both rounds are compared for scoring consistency (see Appendix for the first round of content analysis result table).

The total score from the columns helps determine the channels’ score for each category. If the GOP's favorability score is significantly negative, then it is not in favor of the GOP, which is not right-leaning. And if the GOP Favorability score is significantly positive, then it is in favor of the GOP, which is right-leaning.

When comparing the first and second time results, the scoring for the GOP favorability is overwhelmingly consistent. It is most likely because the hosts of the channels are very clear whenever they express their attitude toward a candidate if they choose to do so. There are some 2-4 differences in the Refugee and Memory Account category. For the anti-communism category, there is only 1 off score. Therefore, the second result is chosen for the content analysis.

	GOP Favorability Score	NR / R*	Average view count	Refuge/Memory Account	Anti-Communism	N**
N10tv Trương Quốc Huy	20	R	387,898	6	63	77
Tran MaicoUSA	45	R	86,971	0	2	45
Người Việt Daily News	-6	NR	13,377	0	0	60

NVR Channel	-34	NR	7,095	0	6	80
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\*NR = not right-leaning / R= right-leaning

\*This is the actual number of content posted/day for each channel. Some channels posted more or less than others during the third week of each month. N10tv posted his livestream into two videos. Tran MaicoUSA posted once a day. Người Việt Daily News is posted twice on most days. And NVR posted twice a day.

Figure 1. Content analysis results

## Results and Discussion

Based on the content analysis result, the two most popular channels are right-leaning, while the other two channels with significantly lower average view count are more progressive. This indicates that in the 2020 election, Vietnamese Americans consume more right-leaning content than progressive content. Yet, this does not support the hypothesis of finding ethnic news media to be more right-leaning. Since only two out of the four most popular channels are right-leaning, only one has a high “not in favor of the GOP” score (NVR Channel), while Người Việt Daily News is relatively neutral.

The analysis results also give some insights into Lau and Redlawsk’s Model 2 voters’ decision-making process based on their information diet characteristics: passive information gathering and early-learned predispositions. It is likely true that this group of voters’ exposure to political information comes from the media and is largely inadvertent due to the social media algorithm. Once they interact with one of these four channels, they are most likely to be exposed to similar channels with similar ideology. The format of these four channels is similar; they would start a video with a news piece and then follow up with commentary. However, in the cases of NVR Channel and Người Việt Daily News (two progressive channels), their commentary section always includes an interview with a lawyer, a news reporter, or a writer. The other two channels only have one host who does the news broadcast and commentary. All four channels consistently cite their sources in the videos, but Tran MaicoUSA (the most right-leaning) has the tendency to discredit his sources. For example, when it comes to COVID-19 news and updates, Tran would start the video by reporting the death tolls from the CDC and later claimed that the numbers are made up by Democratic lawmakers and liberals. He uses it as an example of how Democrats are trying to keep people out of jobs and encourages his audience to support Trump for his re-opening business policies. If the passive information gathering characteristic is true, Tran MaicoUSA’s audience would follow what he says and believe that he is a trustworthy source because he “cited” the CDC. On the other hand, Trương Quốc Huy

(N10tv) also uses the same tactic of citing a source and discrediting it during his commentary. However, his content frequently covers news in Vietnam. By discrediting the Vietnamese government-run press, it serves the purpose of promoting anti-communism and also justifying his support for the American government.

Although Vietnamese Americans rely on ethnic media for information (AAPI, 2016), this is not a case of pursuing the public through ethnic media but rather the other way around. If the Model 2 early-learned predispositions characteristic is true, it is most likely that Vietnamese voters chose who and what kind of content to watch to affirm their learned predisposition. Thus, these ethnic media creators would make content that caters to their typical audience to secure viewership. Based on the memory-based evaluations theory (Lau and Redlawsk, 2009), Vietnamese evaluate information from what they remember to be true.

The use of anti-communism by the four channels served as a way for people to justify why they like the American government and mobilize voters to participate in the 2020 election.

Anti-communism has always been a part of the Vietnamese American identity - one of the main subjects that the GOP and the Vietnamese American community bonded over. When broadcasting news on Trump's Chinese student visa ban, Tran MaicoUSA and N10tv expressed their support for Trump because they believe that "Communist Chinese" shouldn't be allowed in the United States. This is an example of the model minority mindset in terms of one's perception of political commonality with conservative White Americans (Samson, 2014). This perception influenced their view and attitudes toward other immigrant groups in the United States. In the case of Vietnamese Americans, the greatest political commonality with the GOP is extreme anti-communism.

The scoring of the Refugee and Memory category is only significant for N10tv because Trương Quốc Huy had stated in many videos that he was a political prisoner under the Communist regime in Vietnam. While most channels refer to Vietnamese as Americans, Vietnamese Americans, or Asian Americans. Here, it demonstrates a trend of losing the "refugee" identity within this minority group. This relates to the assimilation process from "good refugee" to model minority Americans.

Vietnamese voters consistently have the highest rates in Republican presidential candidates' favorability from 2008 to 2020 (see Figure 2), but it is not a case of blind partisanship. Their preference for the Republican presidential candidate dropped dramatically in 2012 when Obama ran for a second term, and it heightened during the 2020 election. The significant drop from May to September 2024 can be explained by the change of candidates during the election or dissatisfaction with the GOP's performance. However, Vietnamese's preference for Republican House and Senate candidates remains the highest among Asian Americans (see Figures 3 and 4), supporting the claim that the Vietnamese voters are right-leaning.

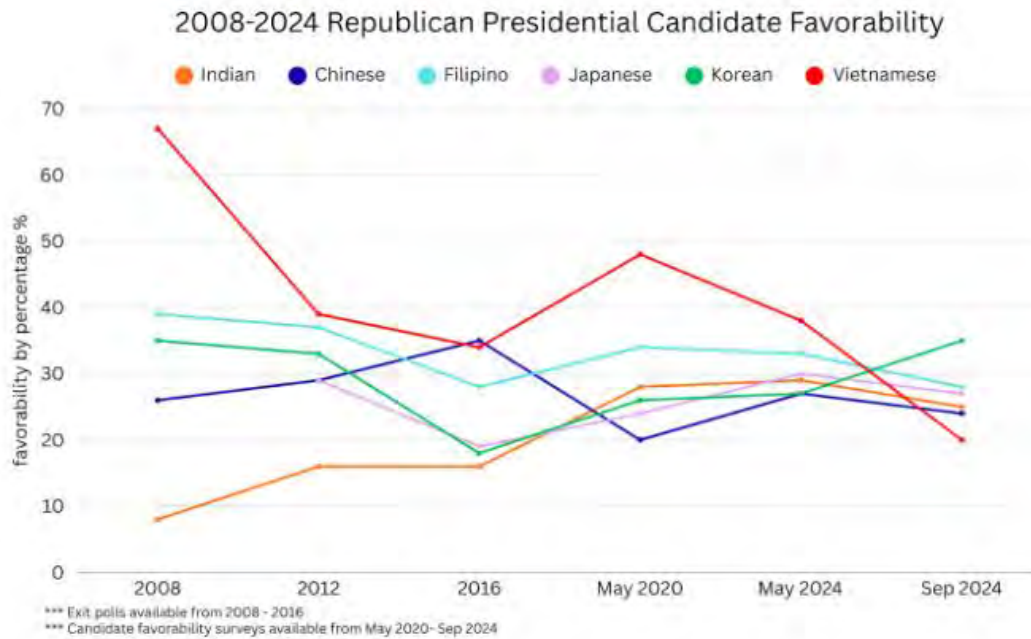


Figure 2. Vietnamese Republican Presidential Candidate Favorability (2008-2024)<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup>AALDEF. “The Asian American Vote in the 2008 Presidential Election ,” 2009. <https://apen4ej.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/AALDEF-Asian-American-Vote-in-the-2008-Presidential-Election-.pdf>.

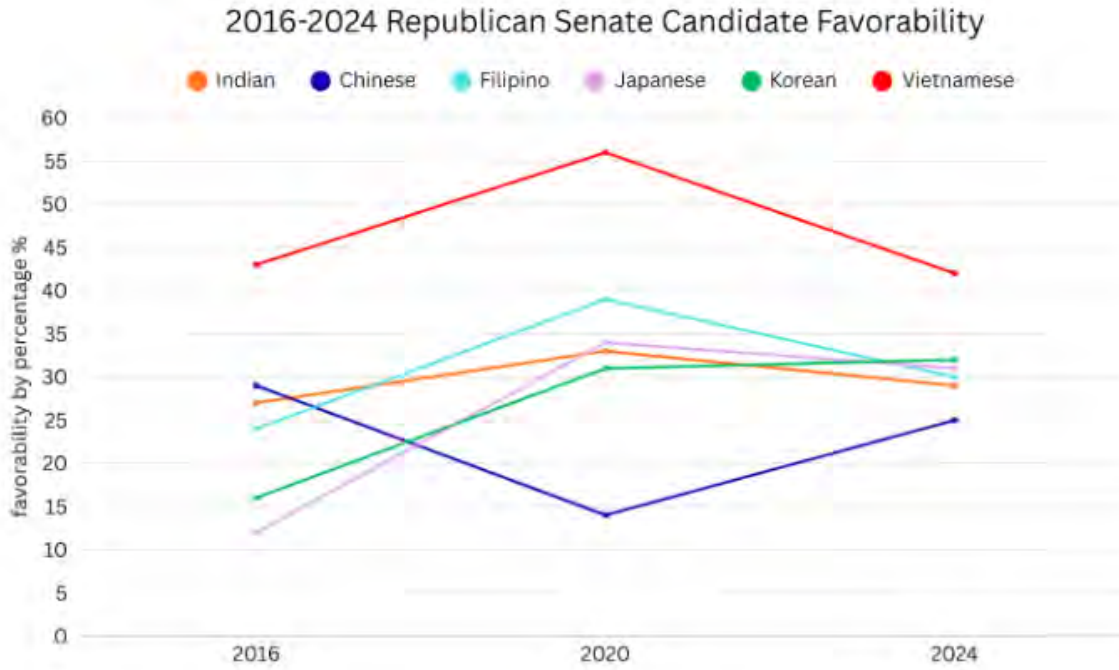


Figure 3. Vietnamese Republican Senate Candidate Favorability (2008-2024)<sup>51</sup>

AAPI Data. “2016 Asian American Voter Survey (AAVS) .” AAPI Data, May 2016.

<https://aapidata.com/surveys/2016-asian-american-voter-survey-aavs?tagl=166>.

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<sup>51</sup> (ibid)

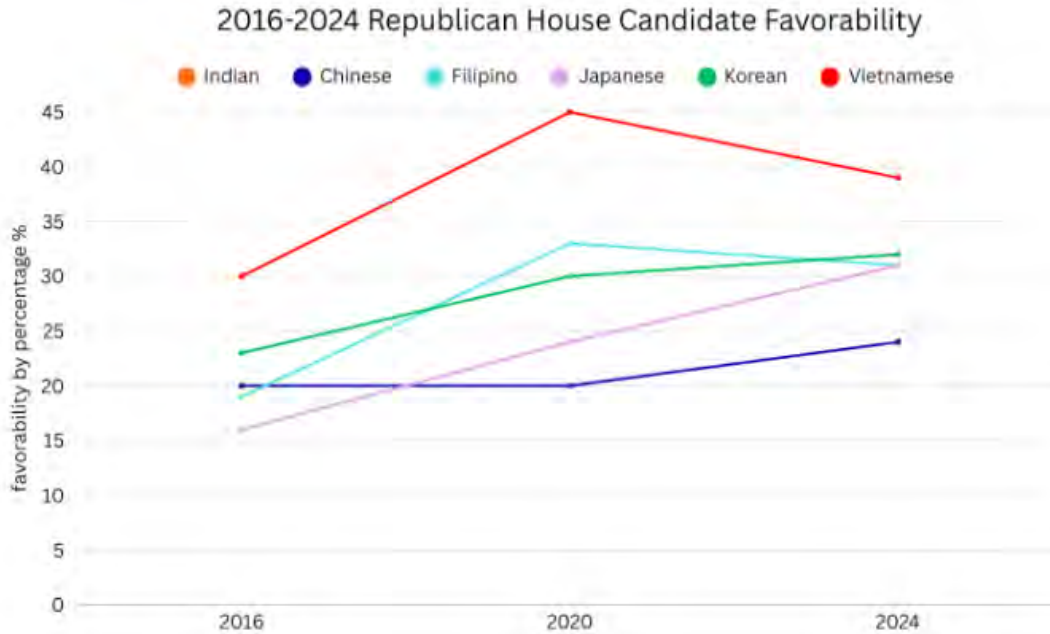


Figure 4. Vietnamese Republican House Candidate Favorability (2008-2024)<sup>52</sup>

### **Limitations**

Ideally, the paper sought to directly connect the findings of Vietnamese media to a solid percentage of how many Vietnamese voters actually voted from exit poll results. This will help answer the question of how much influence the major Vietnamese media has on the Vietnamese's voting decisions. However, given that studies on Vietnamese American politics are scarce, the research lacks detailed data on Vietnamese voting patterns. We know that 51% of Vietnamese registered voters identified themselves as Republicans during the survey in 2023 (Schaeffer, 2023), but there have been no exit polls of Vietnamese voters since 2016 onward. And to truly understand the ethnic media trends, an analysis of these channels' content from other election years is needed to determine if they consistently make right-leaning content or if they have changed their attitude in 2020.

The creators of the channels are based in California, Washington D.C, and Florida - it is most likely that their main audience is from their states. However, their contents are accessible

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<sup>52</sup> (ibid)

across America, which raises the question of how much influence they have in the local community compared to the national Vietnamese community.

Since the paper argues that anti-communism rhetoric is used to justify the creator's support for a specific candidate, the anti-communism attitude might have changed over time for different Vietnamese American generations. Given the lack of data, the research doesn't include the age range of these ethnic media audiences. However, it is more common for the older generation to use YouTube as a news source than the younger generations, as they tend to rely on Instagram or X (formerly Twitter).

The short coding time period gap is also not ideal because it may affect the intracoding procedure (the coder already had a sense of which channel is right-leaning by the second time coding).

### Conclusion

The content analysis of the four most popular channels in the 2020 election does not support the hypothesis of finding ethnic news media to be more right-leaning than left-leaning. Only two out of four channels are right-leaning; the other two are more progressive, with one being relatively neutral. However, the content of the right-leaning channel suggests that Vietnamese elites mobilize voters by using anti-communism rhetoric to justify their support for a particular presidential candidate or political party. Understanding that Vietnamese voters' political attitudes are shaped by various factors beyond their media diet, there is a risk of encountering misinformation that may have strong implications for affirming their predispositions.

Given the strong implications of how political predispositions influence voters' media diet and how they process it, a key question in studying Vietnamese Americans' voting patterns is: how strongly does the young generation associate with the *Vietnamese American nationalism*? As the diaspora population grows over time, generational gaps in political and cultural norm attitudes also expand. It is also important to understand these differences between the original refugee group and the second to third generation of Vietnamese Americans to fully understand ethnic media's mobilization. The issue of language barrier is almost nonexistent among younger second-third generation Vietnamese Americans, allowing them to process and obtain information

from reliable and non-biased sources. And with the increased use of social media among the younger population, left-leaning Vietnamese American content creators might influence the younger generation through their platforms.

## Appendix

To create my sampling pool, I went to each channel on YouTube and created a playlist for each channel. Then I went to the channel's livestream or video posted sections to find the videos posted on the dates below and add them to the playlists on YouTube. The way to find the 5-year-old content is by using YouTube's filtering tool, which allows users to sort videos posted from the oldest to the newest date. I then scroll down to the May 2020 period and add every video that was posted during that third week of each month.

May:18-24

Jun:15-21

Jul:13-19

Aug:17-23

Sep:14-20

Oct:12-18

Nov:1-5

## Coding Protocol

All official government titles should be correctly referred to. Based on the Vietnamese translated guide by the USCIS issued document: Welcome to the United States: A Guide for New Immigrants 2015 (p.90 -94)

*Đảng Dân Chủ* : Democratic Party

*Đảng Cộng Hòa*: Republican Party

Only score trustworthy when they cite the sources they get the news from, or are translated from.

### Refugee/Memory:

Score 1 when the speaker refers to themselves, Vietnamese Americans, or their audience as refugees or the next generation of refugees. Also, when they refer to a story of a refugee.

### Anti-communism:

Score 1 when stating clearly how a communist government failed to resolve an issue, problems with the communist regime, or communist ideology. Also, score 1 when the speaker claims that communism in general is harmful, even if they have no evidence to support it.

### Neutral

#### Score 0 when:

- The speaker asserts that they are *not* on any side.
- The speaker asserts that they have sought out all the information and considered it carefully before expressing their opinion.
- When discussing a specific policy or vote decision, they do not express a negative attitude toward or blame the parties.
- Treat the sources as news sources, so when the speakers describe a policy or an event as a politically motivated action, it cannot be scored as neutral, as it involves their personal opinion.
- Scores neutral even if the source is heavily criticizing a Communist country's politics because this research is focusing on American politics.

**Score -1 when:****Not in favor of the Republican Party**

Not quite neutral and oppose the GOP. I categorize any party (including Independent) to be in one group opposing the GOP, since we do not always know what party they have voted for.

- The speaker asserts that they are on the side of, or will and have voted for, the **Democratic Party or any party that is not the GOP.**
- Claims that the policies or leadership direction of the **Democratic Party** are more beneficial to the citizens.
- Calls on viewers *not* to listen to leaders in the **Republican Party.**
- When discussing a specific policy or vote decision, they explicitly express a negative view towards the **Republican Party.**
- When discussing the government, they use the adjective “authoritarian” or compare the U.S. under the Trump presidency to other authoritarian states. Note that even if the speaker does not compliment the **DP**, but in this case, strong language like so is influential and is propaganda against the **GOP.**
- When the host participates in a rally for a Democratic presidential candidate.
- The host uses derogatory names for the GOP candidates.

**Score 1 when:****In favor of the Republican Party**

- The speaker asserts that they are on the side of, or will and have voted for, the **Republican Party.**
- Claims that the policies or leadership direction of the **Republican Party** are more beneficial to the citizens.
- Calls on viewers *not* to listen to leaders in the **Democratic Party.**
- When discussing a specific policy or vote decision, they explicitly express a negative view towards the **Democratic Party.**
- When the host participates in a rally for a Republican presidential candidate.
- The host uses derogatory names for the DP candidate.

<b>First Round</b>	GOP Favorability Score	NR / R*	Average view count	Refuge/Memory Account	Anti-Communism	N**
N10tv Trương Quốc Huy	20	R	387,898	8	63	77
Tran MaicoUSA	45	R	86,971	4	2	45
Người Việt Daily News	-6	NR	13,377	0	0	60
NVR Channel	-34	NR	7,095	0	7	80

\*NR = not right-leaning / R= right-leaning

\*This is the actual number of content posted/day for each channel. Some channels posted more or less than others during the third week of each month. N10tv posted his livestream into two videos. Tran MaicoUSA posted once a day. Người Việt Daily News is posted twice on most days. And NVR posted twice a day.

Figure 5. Content analysis results from the first round of coding

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