

Mainstream Media Ecosystem Analysis

May 2026



PROTAGONIST



Lumina™
FOUNDATION

Why Explore Mainstream Media

Mainstream outlets are powerful narrative actors.

They amassed this power through mass audience reach, institutional ties, and a reputation for journalistic integrity.

Mainstream outlets are critical to narrative change.

While they are not often the originators of new narratives, they are essential to how information flows through media ecosystems and reaches new audiences.

Mainstream outlets have huge normative influence.

They are arbiters of what is known and what is sayable, and the assertions and assumptions embedded in their articles play an outsized role in shaping public, and especially elite, conversations.

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Overview and Context



Executive Summary

Mainstream outlets reflect all eight Left-Wing Strategic Narratives and all four Right-Wing Strategic Narratives.

Compared to the partisan Ecosystems, mainstream outlets tend to favor context setting over advocacy. Their articulations of Strategic Narratives are less likely to issue clear calls to action or promote explicit political visions.

The Left-Wing Strategic Narrative appear more often than those of the Right-Wing and are driven by a focus on hardship.

Coverage frequently centers *Paddling Upstream* through articles about harm, barriers, and challenges. This reflects the mainstream tendency to describe without explaining, and to privilege accounts of struggle over stories about solutions, resilience, or progress. In 2025, *Americans Under Siege* surpassed *Paddling Upstream* as the top Strategic Narrative.

“Ambient coverage” dominates and subtly shapes the information environment.

Roughly two-thirds of mainstream output consists of ambient reporting: articles that avoid overt partisan framing but reinforce assumptions about what matters most—including business success, political competition, and institutional stability.

Outlets engage in a set of practices that privilege institutions, prioritize the optics of neutrality, and shape the boundaries of public discourse.

These conventions shape how most articles are written and influence what and who is understood to be legitimate. Together, these practices reinforce the power of mainstream outlets to shape the range of ideas the public is willing to consider and accept.

The Mainstream Media Ecosystem

- The “Mainstream Media Ecosystem” refers to the outlets below. The dataset encompasses every article published by these outlets.

23
Mainstream Outlets

7.2m
Articles

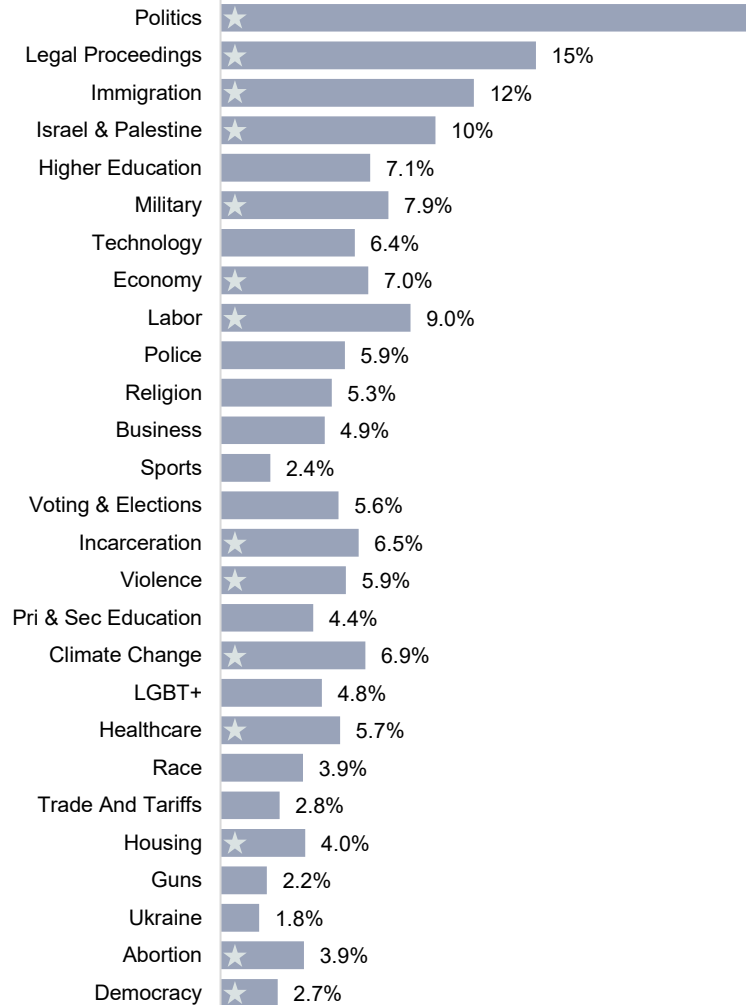
6 Years
January 2020 – December 2025



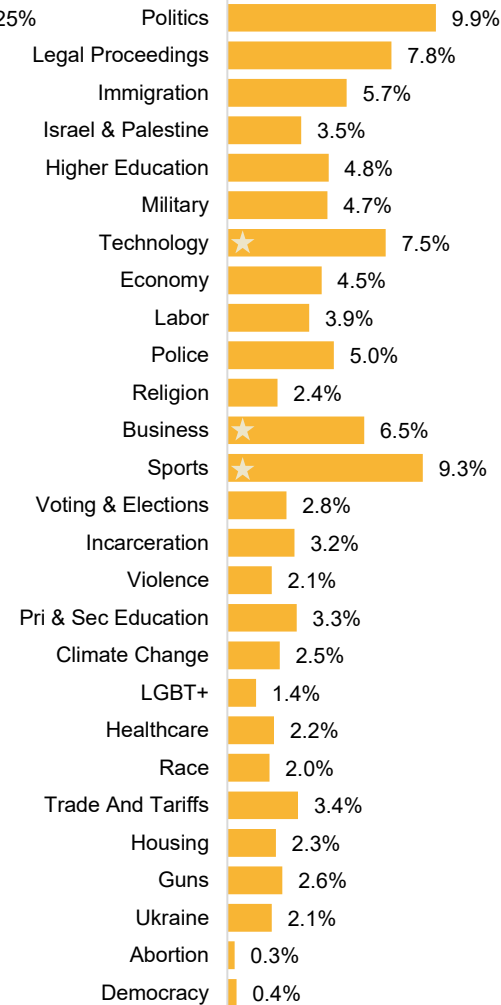
All analyses were conducted on a sample of the total dataset. Aggregate statistics are calculated weighting each outlet equally.

The Portion of Articles that Focused on High-Level Topics in 2025

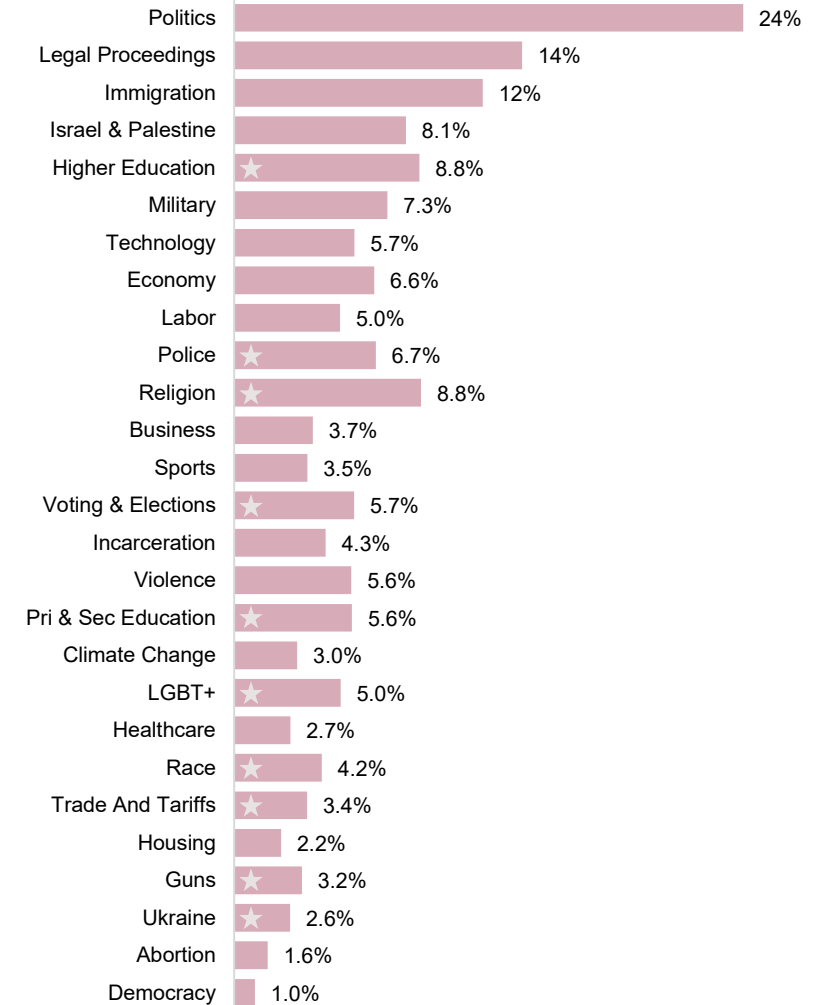
The Left-Wing Media Ecosystem



The Mainstream Media Ecosystem



The Right-Wing Media Ecosystem



★ The most vocal ecosystem on this topic

Strategic Narratives and Ambient Coverage

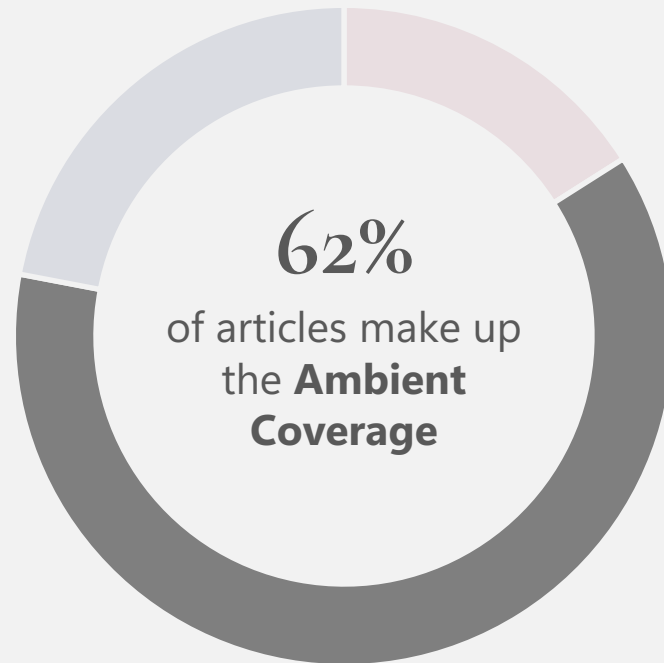


Mainstream Media
Ecosystem

**Mainstream Media Outlets
Reinforce Strategic Narratives from
Both the Left and the Right**

Over 1/3 of Mainstream Articles Reflect a Left- or Right-Wing Strategic Narrative

- In 2025, Mainstream outlets reflect Left-Wing Strategic Narratives at a slightly higher rate than Right-Wing Strategic Narratives. Outside of these, 62% of articles constitute “ambient coverage” that does not explicitly align with either set of partisan frames—though it often reinforces embedded assumptions from both Ecosystems.



The Strategic Narratives of the Left- and Right-Wing Media Ecosystems

<i>Existential Threat to America</i>	The Republican Party threatens democracy and is barreling us towards authoritarianism—we must push back or else watch our rights disappear.	<i>Reject The Woke Agenda</i>	The radical and all-powerful Left is waging a mass indoctrination campaign that is silencing Conservatives and threatening the sacred values of our nation.
<i>Welcome to the Clown Zone</i>	We are governed by dishonest, unqualified people who treat their jobs like a game, and we must demand some decency and competency.	<i>Americans Under Siege</i>	Chaos, crime, and violence have descended on this country, and Americans live amid constant threat of physical harm.
<i>End the Oligarchy</i>	A handful of corporations and billionaires control our economy and politics. We need collective action to break their grip.	<i>Preserve Capitalism</i>	In order to keep our country strong and prosperous, we must not lose track of our commitment to hard work, self-determination, and a free market.
<i>Paddling Upstream</i>	People are worn down by nonstop crises, and basic stability keeps getting further out of reach.	<i>Expose the Deception</i>	We must open our eyes and resist efforts by Democrats, elites, and corporations to pull the wool over our eyes and amass power.
<i>People First Policy</i>	Real solutions exist, but leaders keep reaching for band-aids instead of addressing root causes.		
<i>Institutions of Oppression</i>	The legacies of genocide and slavery live on today in our institutions; we must replace them with something just, inclusive, and new.		
<i>Diversity is Our Strength</i>	We must celebrate diversity and keep building a society where everyone is valued and belongs, even in the face of backlash and resistance.		
<i>These People are Deplorable</i>	Some people are committed to cruelty and neglect—we need to protect what matters and stop wasting energy on them.		

Mainstream Outlets Reflect Less Forceful Versions of the Strategic Narratives

- While echoes of the four Right-Wing Strategic Narratives and eight Left-Wing Strategic Narratives appear in mainstream media, their quality and framing differ from the versions that appear in each partisan Ecosystem. Articles from mainstream outlets tend to place heavier emphasis on the context and conflict elements of a Narrative, and in turn are less apt to articulate clear calls to action and resolutions. Articles from mainstream outlets are also far more likely to describe opposing points of view than are articles from the two partisan Ecosystems.

End the Oligarchy articles from mainstream outlets make fewer assertions about power structures and name “oligarchy” less often. Republicans and Democrats are less likely to be named as participants and enablers.

Most stories are focused on corporate malpractice and labor activity. Fewer stories speak broadly about the exploitation of working people or advocate for collective action.

Example: End the Oligarchy *(writeup from the Left-Wing Media Ecosystem)*

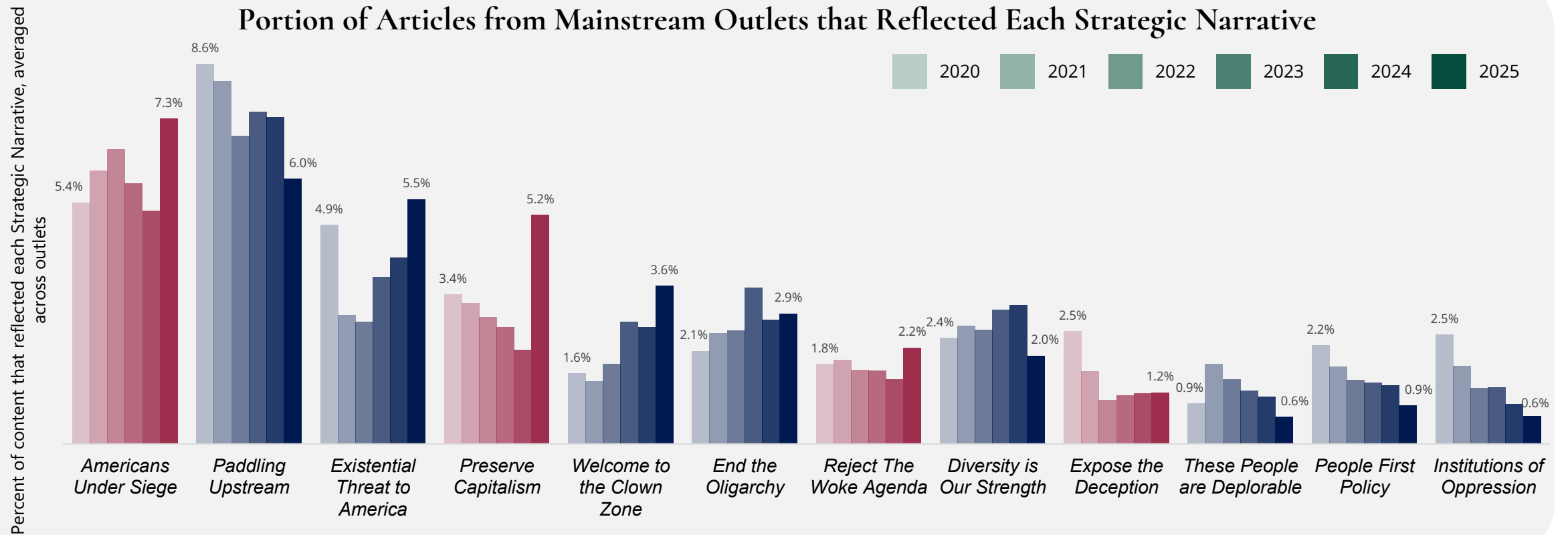
Working people are exploited in this country. You can see it everywhere you turn: corporations’ stocks soar, and CEOs pay themselves handsomely while workers risk their lives just to be denied a living wage. From tech moguls to health insurance executives, **centrist Democrats to extremist Republicans**, those in power will do whatever they can to consolidate their power and wealth at the **expense of working people**—including wreaking **havoc on the rest of the world** and destroying the planet along the way. But the tides must turn. We must mobilize the masses and get organized. **Only collective power will allow us to dismantle this oligarchy** and build the democracy we deserve.

Few articles draw connections between domestic exploitation and U.S. imperialism, which sometimes came to the surface in Left-Wing Media.

This call to action is less explicit in mainstream outlets. Mainstream articulations of the Narrative are more about describing wrongdoing and less about advocating for change.

Mainstream Outlets Prioritize *Americans Under Siege* and *Paddling Upstream*

- The two most common Strategic Narratives—one from the Right (*Americans Under Siege*) and one from the Left (*Paddling Upstream*)—both center on depictions of struggle and harm. In 2025, mainstream reflections of *Americans Under Siege* surged into the lead, with depictions of crime and immigration enforcement.
- Starting in 2023, and then supercharged after Trump’s second election, mainstream outlets have prioritized *Existential Threat to America* in articles about politics. This has been paired with an increase in mainstream reflection of *Welcome to the Clown Zone*.

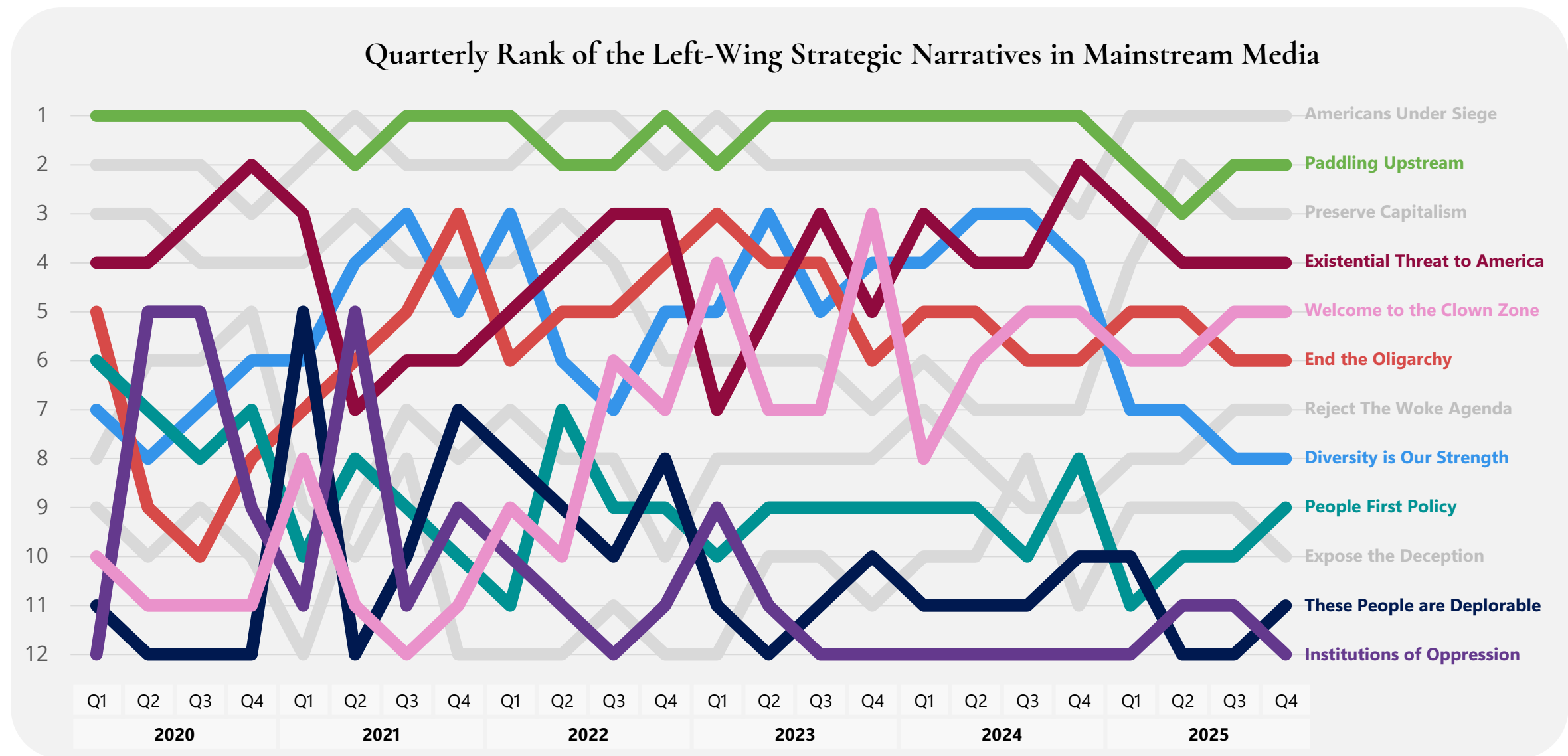


*Data through April 2025

Mainstream Media
Ecosystem

Mainstream Outlets Build a Feeling
of Crisis with a Drumbeat of Stories
about Struggle and Harm

Mainstream Outlets Led with *Paddling Upstream* for Most Quarters



*Data through April 2025

In *Paddling Upstream*, Content Narrates Crises without Describing Causes or Solutions

Example Headlines from *Paddling Upstream* Articles

2.2 million Americans over age 55 still
have student loan debt: Report [NEWSNATION]

Firefighters battle hundreds of wildfires in California
abc NEWS

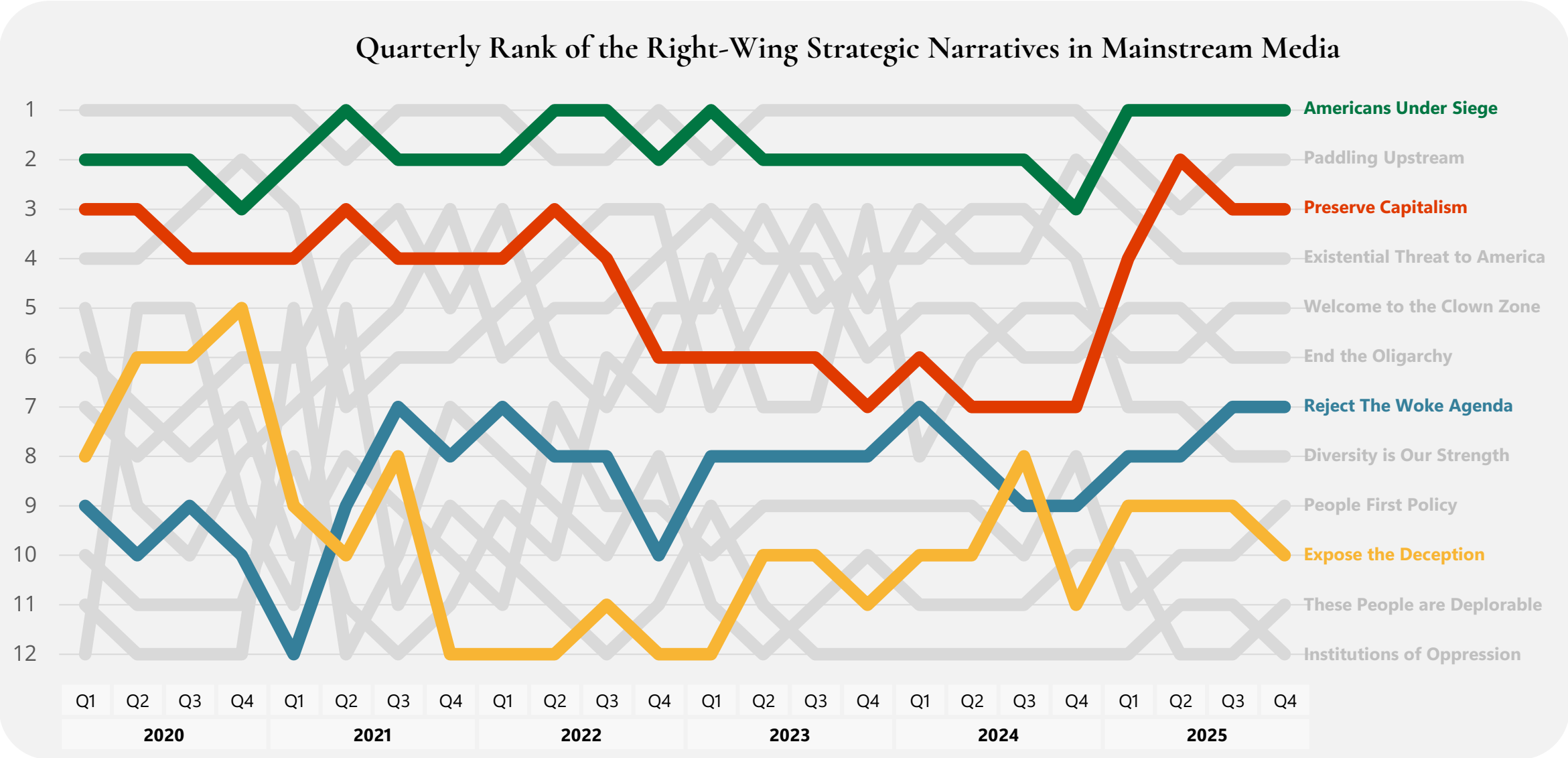
Higher health costs set the stage for
ACA premium hikes for 2024
AXIOS

Health disparity crisis: Insulin prices and
COVID-19
THE HILL

Black Children With Cancer Less Likely To Receive
Radiation Treatments Than White Children
Forbes

- As in the Left-Wing Media Ecosystem, *Paddling Upstream* articles from mainstream outlets detail a litany of challenges facing everyday Americans, including soaring debt, lack of access to affordable housing and healthcare, and natural disasters resulting from climate change.
- Within the Mainstream Media Ecosystem, these challenges are widely cited but poorly explained, as articles often neglect to interrogate the root causes of the issues they lament, or to hold those in power accountable.
- Articles devote much more space to problems than to pathways for change. In addition to normalizing struggle and potentially contributing to a sense of demotivation, this tendency also leaves open the opportunity for the Left or the Right to co-opt the crises elevated by mainstream outlets to serve their political projects.

For all of 2025, *Americans Under Siege* was the Top Narrative for Mainstream Outlets



*Data through April 2025

Mainstream *Americans Under Siege* Articles Reinforce a Sense of Threat and Unsafety

Example Headlines from *Americans Under Siege* Articles

With gun violence surging and public trust on the line, New York's officers go back on the beat

The Washington Post

Two pipe bombs found in Pennsylvania township this week

CNN

There Have Been, On Average, 10 Mass Shootings In The U.S. Each Week This Year

n p r

Woman and Child Found Dead in Car in Alabama Lake

Newsweek

Thieves break in to Honolulu home while family sleeps

[NEWSNATION]

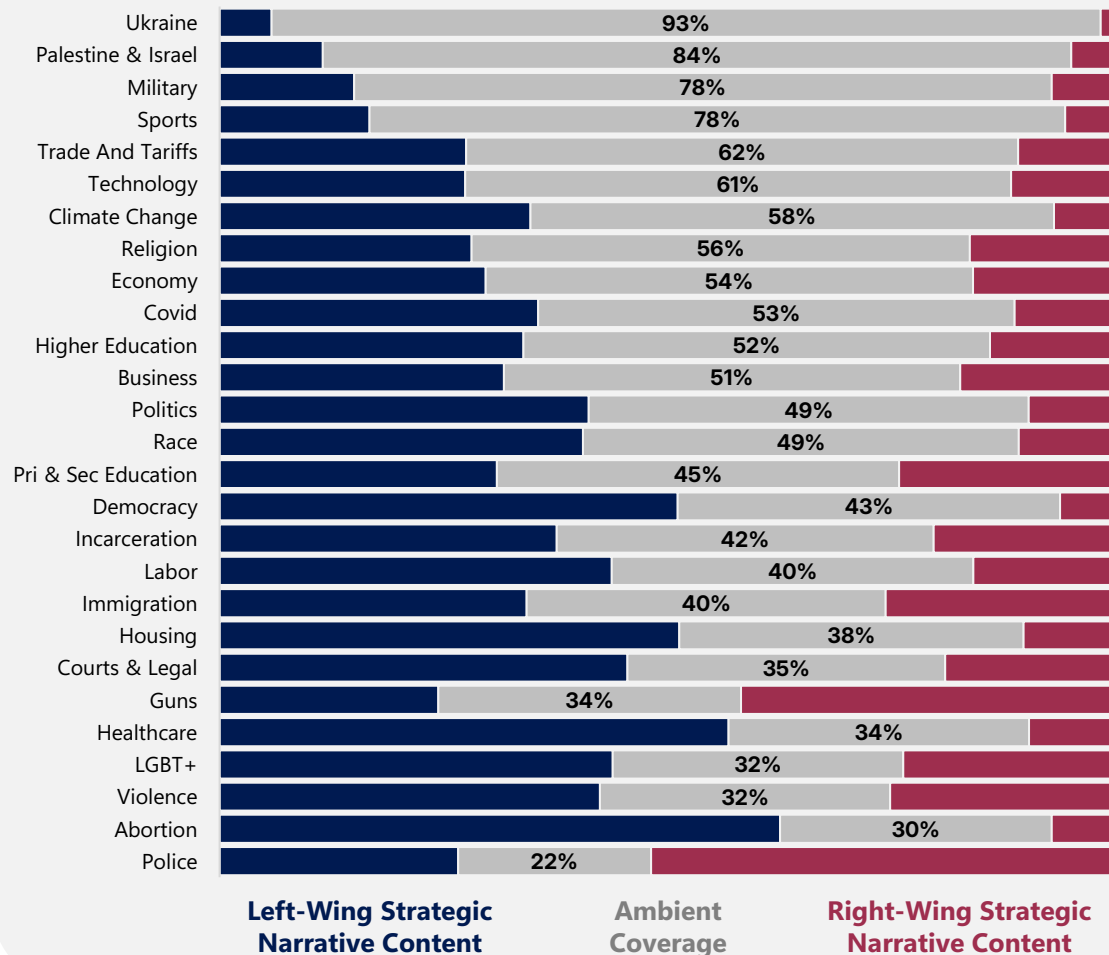
- In mainstream media, *Americans Under Siege* articles typically document specific incidents of violence and crime, adopting a tone of gravity and tragedy that at times dovetails with the sense of crisis inherent in Paddling Upstream.
- Within this content, outlets position police as the primary authorities and narrators of events. While articles avoid the glorification common in the Right-Wing Media Ecosystem, they practice a similar deference to law enforcement and a reluctance to elevate alternative perspectives.
- Mainstream outlets stop short of using *Americans Under Siege* to actively persuade audiences that physical threats should surpass all other concerns. Content avoids the explicit blaming of Democrats, immigrants, and minority groups for violence.
- However, the regularity with which mainstream outlets employ *Americans Under Siege*—despite its more reportorial style within this Ecosystem—reinforces the salience of this Strategic Narrative in the broader public conversation, furthering the sense of fear and crisis.

Mainstream Media
Ecosystem

Ambient Coverage Reflects and
Reinforces Embedded Assumptions

Ambient Coverage Shapes a Collective Sense of Which Issues are Newsworthy

Portion of Articles about Each Topic that are Ambient Converage



- Some topics, such as sports, trade, and technology, are primarily elevated in ambient coverage, suggesting they warrant media attention, but do not require as much scrutiny through the lenses of the Strategic Narratives. This dynamic positions these issues as simultaneously important and uncontroversial.
- Other topics such as police, abortion, healthcare, housing, and immigration appear much more in articles that reflect the Strategic Narratives than in the ambient coverage. This elevates the idea that these issues are controversial and require scrutiny through the Strategic Narratives.
- Ukraine and Palestine are discussed far more frequently in ambient coverage than in Strategic Narrative coverage. While this is partly due to the methodological choice to exclude internationally focused articles lacking domestic content from the scope of the Strategic Narratives, it also reflects a broader editorial tendency in mainstream outlets to present U.S. foreign actions as ideologically neutral and distinct from domestic concerns.

Ambient Coverage Subtly Reinforces Embedded Assumptions

Example Assumption: Business and corporate interests are aligned with the interests of American citizens.

Former U.S. Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson
Wants to Make Climate Action Profitable

**US added 206,000 jobs in June in a
sign of continued economic strength**

TIME

POLITICO

Example Assumption: US hegemony is essential for global stability and American success.

Biden says US outreach to Vietnam is about
providing global stability, not containing China

AP

**We may all regret dismantling USAID: A few billion dollars wielded
effectively around the world can do far more for American interests
than some want to believe**

Los Angeles Times

Example Assumption: Politics—understood as a competition for power with winners and losers—is the primary frame for interpreting public life.

**Sunday shows preview: Biden amps up
involvement in talks amid tug-of-war
over infrastructure**

THE HILL

**Kamala Harris Gets Favorability Boost, Closes Gap for First
Time in 3 Years**

Newsweek

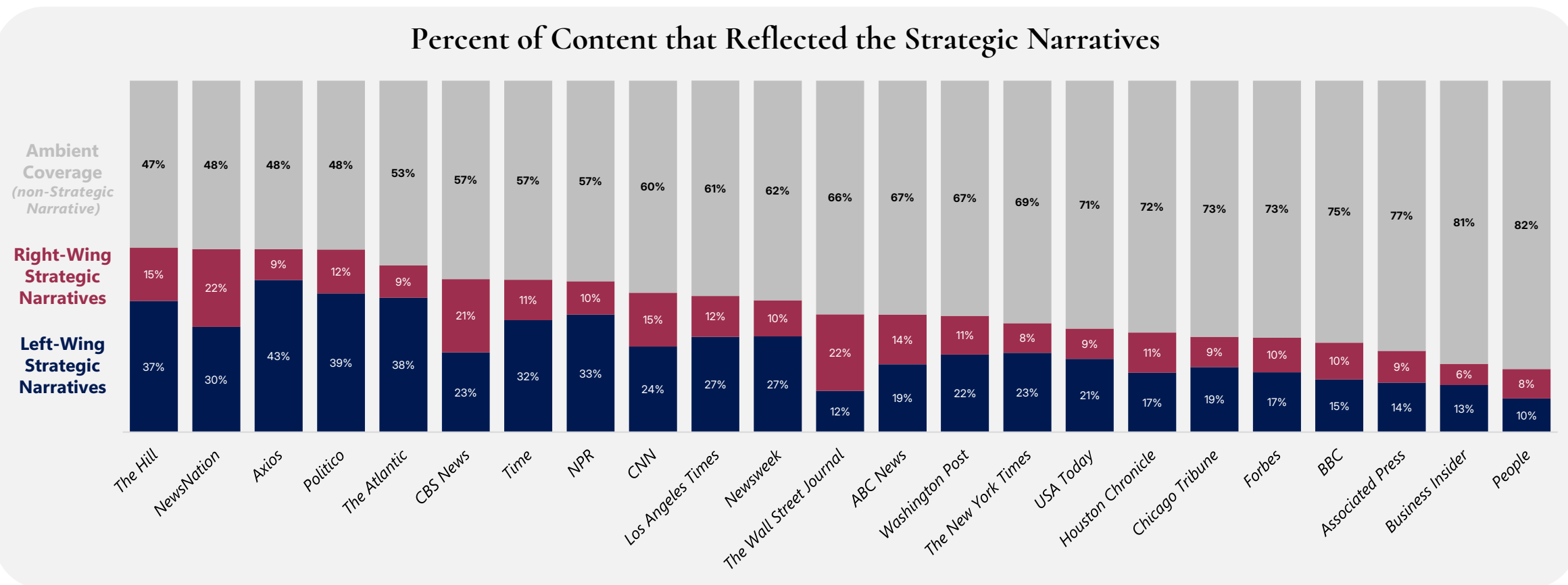
**The following research was
completed in July 2025 and relies on
data from January 2020 – April 2025.**

Outlet Alignment Across the Strategic Narratives



Most Content from Mainstream Outlets is Ambient Coverage

- Only four of the mainstream outlets reflected a Strategic Narrative in more than half of their articles. The other 19 outlets produced ambient coverage more often than they reflected the Strategic Narratives.
- Except for *The Wall Street Journal*, all mainstream outlets reflected the Left-Wing Strategic Narratives more often than those of the Right-Wing. While the strength of this lean varied, several exhibited a clear and consistent preference for Left-Wing Narrative frames.



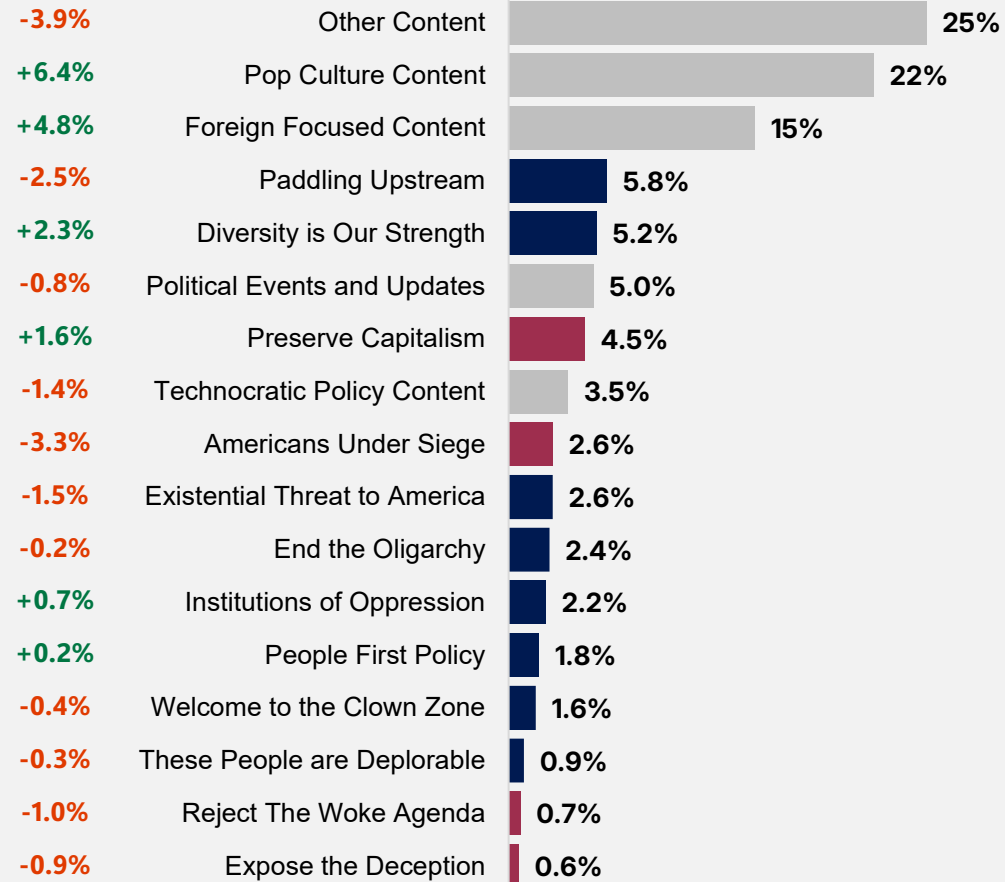
The Only Clear Alignment Across the Ecosystem is Around *Paddling Upstream*

Ordinal Rank of Narratives by Outlet	Paddling Upstream	Americans Under Siege	Existential Threat to America	Diversity is Our Strength	Preserve Capitalism	End the Oligarchy	Welcome to the Clown Zone	Reject The Woke Agenda	People First Policy	Institutions of Oppression	Expose the Deception	These People are Deplorable
Washington Post	1	2	3	4	6	5	8	7	12	10	11	9
CNN	1	2	3	8	6	9	7	4	12	10	5	11
Los Angeles Times	1	2	3	4	8	5	6	7	12	11	9	10
Chicago Tribune	1	2	3	5	9	4	11	8	7	6	12	10
USA Today	1	2	4	3	11	5	8	7	12	6	10	9
Time	1	3	2	4	9	5	10	8	6	7	11	12
Newsweek	1	3	2	6	11	8	4	9	12	10	7	5
NPR	1	3	2	4	12	6	11	9	5	7	8	10
The New York Times	1	5	4	2	3	6	9	11	8	7	12	10
Axios	1	8	3	2	4	5	7	6	10	11	9	12
Forbes	1	8	7	4	2	3	9	5	6	11	10	12
Business Insider	1	9	5	7	2	3	8	6	4	12	10	11
The Atlantic	1	11	2	10	9	4	5	7	6	3	8	12
CBS News	2	1	3	8	10	7	11	6	12	9	4	5
NewsNation	2	1	3	10	11	5	4	7	6	12	8	9
Houston Chronicle	2	1	4	3	9	7	12	5	6	8	11	10
ABC News	2	1	4	3	10	6	11	9	12	5	7	8
BBC	2	1	8	3	11	6	10	7	9	5	12	4
The Wall Street Journal	2	3	9	5	1	4	11	6	10	7	8	12
Associated Press	2	4	8	3	1	6	12	7	5	10	11	9
The Hill	2	5	1	11	7	4	3	8	9	12	6	10
People	3	1	6	2	12	11	4	5	10	9	8	7
Politico	4	8	1	12	7	2	3	9	6	11	5	10

The New York Times Centers Culture and Favors the Left-Wing Strategic Narratives

Distribution of Articles Published by *The New York Times*

Difference from
Ecosystem Cascade



- *The New York Times* stands out for its sustained emphasis on cultural coverage, prioritizing *Diversity is Our Strength* more than most other outlets and devoting significant space to issues of identity, inclusion, race, and LGBT+ rights.
- *NYT* frames much of its economic coverage through the lens of Preserve Capitalism, linking business and policy stories to themes of market competition and institutional stability. *NYT* rarely reflects other Right-Wing Strategic Narratives—it echoes *Americans Under Siege* less often than most outlets do, and both *Reject the Woke Agenda* and *Expose the Deception* are firmly at the bottom of this Narrative cascade.
- Higher education is a signature beat, and *NYT* ranks among the most active outlets on the topic. It most often frames this coverage through *Paddling Upstream*, focusing on student debt, financial hardship, learning loss, and educational inequality.

Even a Single Article in *The New York Times* Can Have Legitimizing Impact

- Coverage from *The New York Times* is influential not only in aggregate but also at the level of individual articles. Despite the paper's overall alignment with Left-Wing Strategic Narratives—or perhaps because of it—its rightward exposés, guest essays, and opinion pieces can lend significant legitimacy to right-wing critiques or attacks on public figures.
- While this dynamic exists across mainstream outlets, *NYT*'s singular reach and status as an agenda-setting institution make this coverage especially legitimizing of right-wing perspectives.

Selected Prominent Headlines from *The New York Times*

Tom Cotton: Send In the Troops

The nation must restore order. The military stands ready.

Mamdani Identified as Asian and African American on College Application

Zohran Mamdani, the Democrat running for mayor of New York City, was born in Uganda. He doesn't consider himself Black but said the application didn't allow for the complexity of his background.

Harvard Finds More Instances of 'Duplicative Language' in President's Work

Claudine Gay has faced growing criticism of not only her response to antisemitism on campus but also her scholarship.

As Kids, They Thought They Were Trans. They No Longer Do.

The Battle Over Gender Therapy

More teenagers than ever are seeking transitions, but the medical community that treats them is deeply divided about why — and what to do to help them.

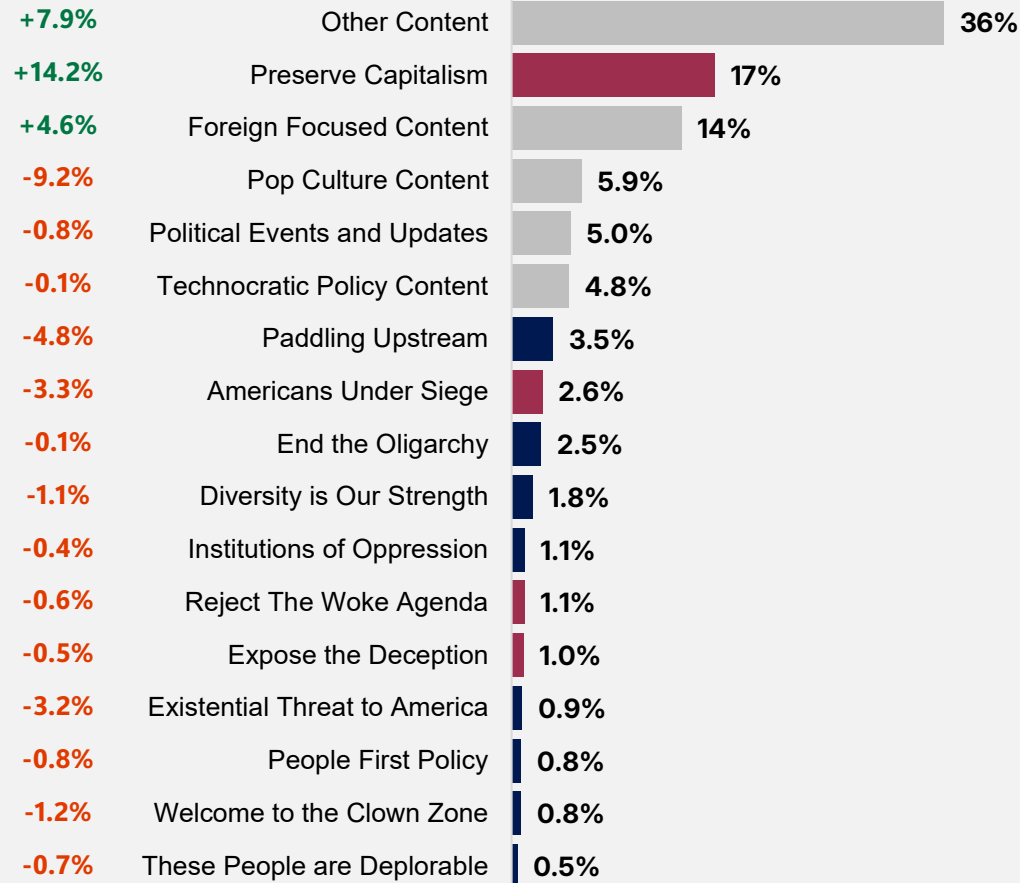
'Screams Without Words': How Hamas Weaponized Sexual Violence on Oct. 7

A Times investigation uncovered new details showing a pattern of rape, mutilation and extreme brutality against women in the attacks on Israel.

The Wall Street Journal Stands Out for a Heavy Focus on *Preserve Capitalism*

Distribution of Articles Published by *The Wall Street Journal*

Difference from
Ecosystem Cascade

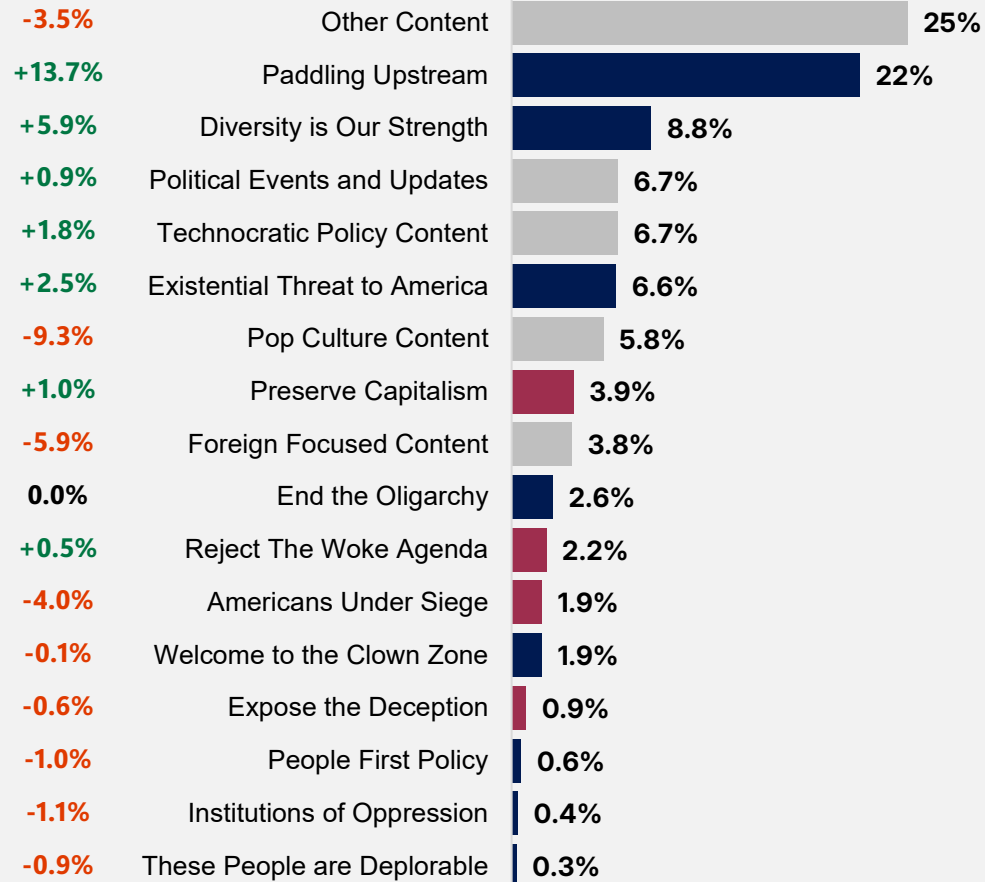


- *The Wall Street Journal* diverges significantly from the norm in the Mainstream Media Ecosystem due to its strong emphasis on *Preserve Capitalism*. This heavy focus is the driving force of *WSJ*'s position as the outlet most aligned with the Right-Wing Strategic Narratives.
- Capital markets and executive decision-making are central to *WSJ*'s storytelling, pulling *Preserve Capitalism* to the forefront. This framing includes robust coverage of the macroeconomy, labor issues, and corporate restructuring—often told through a financial, managerial, or investor-focused lens.
- While *WSJ* reflects all other Strategic Narratives less often compared to the broader Ecosystem, the deficit in *End the Oligarchy* is smallest, when compared to other outlets. This reflects an editorial interest in power struggles within businesses, from governance breakdowns to labor unrest and antitrust scrutiny.
- *WSJ* dedicates the least attention to higher education among all outlets in the ecosystem.

Axios Stands Out for a Heavy Focus on *Paddling Upstream*

Distribution of Articles Published by Axios

Difference from
Ecosystem Cascade



- Axios demonstrates the strongest alignment with *Paddling Upstream* across the entire Mainstream Media Ecosystem, placing struggle, interlocking crises, and uneven burden at the center of its editorial focus. This dominant Narrative framing highlights the barriers and inadequacies that both individuals and communities face in relation to housing, healthcare, labor, local governance, and other issues.
- Axios also favors *Diversity is Our Strength*, which solidifies its place as the outlet most aligned with the Left-Wing Strategic Narratives. Articles frequently cover local festivals, art exhibits, sports milestones, and historic firsts among marginalized communities. Axios uses these stories to frame inclusion, pride, and representation as core dimensions of public life.
- Axios is one of the few outlets that strongly deprioritizes writing stories aligned with *Americans Under Siege*, setting it apart from the overall thrust of the Ecosystem.

Practices of Mainstream Media Outlets



Practices of Mainstream Media Outlets

Outlets engage in a set of practices that cumulatively have the effect of privileging institutions and norms, prioritizing the optics of neutrality, and shaping the boundaries of what is considered politically and socially acceptable. Six such practices are outlined in this section.

Associate Institutional Perspectives with Credibility	Impose Binary Political Framing on Contentious Issues	Elevate and Normalize Selected Concepts from the Margins
Deplatform Voices that Challenge Systems and Institutions	Default to the Stated Intentions Behind Political Actions	Explore the Stories Behind Flashpoint Events

Practice: Associate Institutional
Perspectives with Credibility

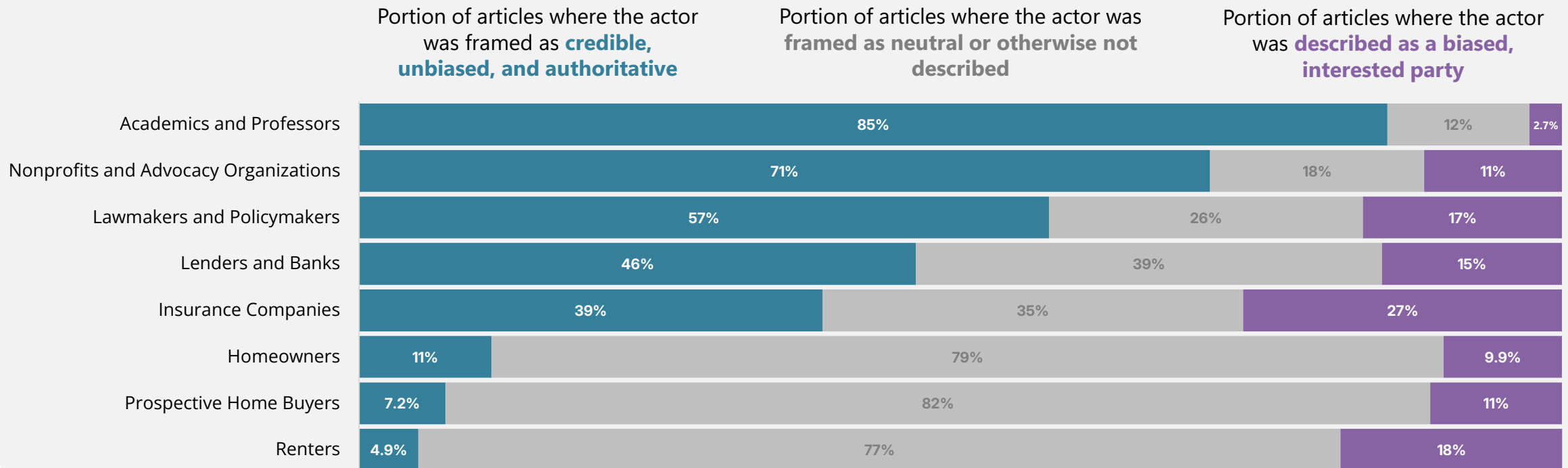
Mainstream media outlets consistently rely on individuals with strong ties to elite institutions—such as prestigious universities, federal agencies, and large corporations—as sources of objective, authoritative expertise.

This practice privileges institutional perspectives, often presenting elite voices as unbiased and factual. In doing so, articles obscure the underlying motivations of institutional actors, whose claims and behaviors frequently serve the preservation and interests of the institutions they represent.

To Gain Insight about Homeownership, Outlets Relied on Actors with Institutional Ties

- Academics and nonprofit leaders were the clearest examples of actors that mainstream media treats as authoritative experts. Banks and insurers—though seen as profit-driven—were also regularly treated as credible guides, particularly relating to mortgages, interest rates, and market trends.
- Homeowners and renters were rarely positioned as go-to sources for credible information. Their perspectives, rooted in lived experience, were often presented as anecdotal or emotional rather than as legitimate expertise.

How Actor Groups were Contextualized in Articles about Homeownership



Outlets Repeatedly Centered the Perspective of JP Morgan CEO Jamie Dimon

- Jamie Dimon was repeatedly elevated by mainstream outlets and treated as a critical voice to consider when interpreting economic news. This status was likely built from his position leading the largest bank in the US.
- These articles portray Dimon as both authoritative and credible, not as someone with a vested interest in advancing his own wealth and success. This is an example of mainstream outlets privileging institutional perspectives and not qualifying them as they qualify many perspectives that are not backed by major institutions.

Example Headlines from Articles about Jamie Dimon

Jamie Dimon on Booming Economy and Finally Getting Off Zoom
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Jamie Dimon Warns 'A Bad Recession' Is Coming



JPMorgan's Dimon warns inflation, political polarization and wars are creating risks not seen since WWII



JPMorgan boss Jamie Dimon says the US is addicted to debt, and it's created a dangerous sugar high in the economy



Sen. Warren, Jamie Dimon spar over overdraft fees at Senate hearing



Jamie Dimon Should Run for President, Bill Ackman Says

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Billionaires Jamie Dimon and Ray Dalio sound the alarm on soaring US government debt



Practice: Depatform Voices that
Challenge Systems and Institutions

Mainstream media sidelines views that are rooted in lived experience with forces like incarceration, racism, or poverty.

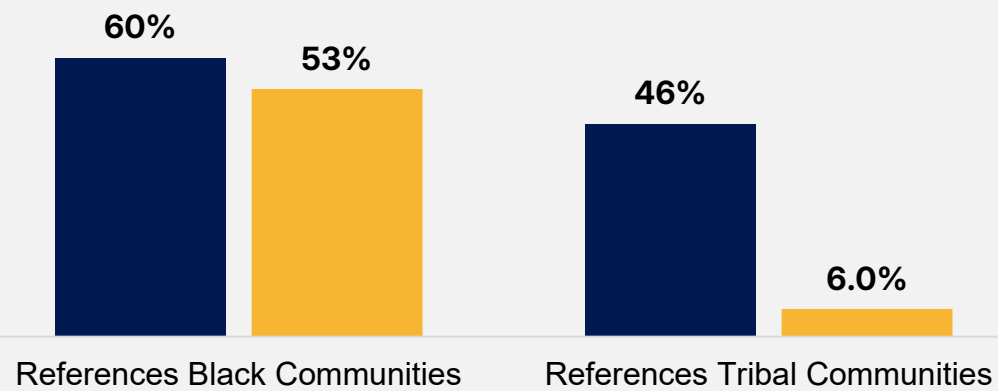
This practice reveals a bias toward institutional perspectives and away from those that have experienced institutional harm. Voices that challenge foundational systems—especially voices from historically marginalized communities—are deprioritized, as truly platforming them would shift attention and influence in ways that threaten elite institutions.

Outlets Deprioritized Covering the Cop City Protests in Atlanta

Overall, **Mainstream Media Outlets** wrote articles about Cop City in Atlanta **16x less** often than **Left-Wing Media Outlets**

Portion of Articles about Cop City that Reference Black and Tribal Communities

■ Left-Wing Outlets ■ Mainstream Outlets



- Readers of mainstream outlets encountered far less coverage of opposition to the Atlanta police training facility—known by opponents as “Cop City”—than readers of Left-Wing outlets. For those following Left-Wing coverage, the project likely came across as a major issue; for those relying on mainstream coverage, it may have barely registered.
- When mainstream outlets did cover the protests, they referenced Black communities at a rate similar to that of the Left-Wing outlets. However, these mentions less often elevated Black voices and more often referenced that the facility is in a “poor, majority-Black area” or linked the protests to broader movements like Black Lives Matter.
- The starkest gap was in coverage of Indigenous groups: mainstream outlets rarely acknowledged tribal leadership in the protests, a consistent feature of Left-Wing reporting. Overall, mainstream outlets did little to uplift the voices of activists and community members most affected by the decision to construct the facility.

Many Articles Covered Efforts to Delegitimize the Protesters

- Groups including the Atlanta Police Foundation, the Atlanta City Council, and several prominent corporate funders have actively sought to discredit activists opposing Cop City, portraying protesters as violent and dangerous.
- While not all mainstream coverage echoed this criticism, a significant share adopted similar logic, reinforcing storylines that delegitimized the protest movement and undermined voices challenging the construction of the training center.

Selected Headlines from Articles about Cop City in Atlanta

Georgia Is Using a Domestic Terrorism Law
Expanded After Dylann Roof Against 'Cop City'
Protesters

TIME

3 Atlanta activists are arrested after their
fund bailed out protesters of 'Cop City'

n p r

Protests opposing 'Cop City' in
Atlanta again turn violent

The Washington Post

'This isn't Oregon,' Georgia AG says on
prosecuting vandals

[NEWSNATION]

Lawyers for Atlanta ask federal
appeals court to kill 'Stop Cop City'
petition seeking referendum

AP

Dozens face domestic terrorism charges
after Atlanta attack

[NEWSNATION]

23 people face domestic terrorism
charges in Atlanta

CBS
NEWS

Three "Stop Cop City" activists
arrested for financial crimes

AXIOS

Practice: Impose Binary Political
Framing on Contentious Issues

Mainstream outlets often cover issues as political debates between two opposing sides, and endeavor to equally platform each side in their coverage. This is a core component of their pursuit of objectivity.

This practice reveals a bias toward neutrality and reinforces a political binary in American politics. It also sets the “unbiased” point somewhere between the opposing sides of the debate, which can equate the merits of each argument and build a normative bias toward centrism.

How Mainstream Outlets Impose Binary Political Framing on Contentious Issues

1. Frame the issue as a political debate

This elevates political framing as the dominant lens for understanding public life.

2. Reduce the dispute to a binary

This sets the boundaries of the debate by casting it as a disagreement between only two opposing sides.

3. Give equal weight to each side

This legitimizes both positions by treating them as having equivalent merit. This is commonly referred to as "bothsidesism."

4. Avoid taking a position

This signals neutrality on the part of the author, while obscuring the fact that every editorial decision shapes how readers perceive the issue.

The New York Times Frames Vaccination Policy as a Partisan Political Debate

The New York Times

Some U.S. colleges say students must be vaccinated for the fall. Others want to wait and see. 

But [the issue of requiring vaccinations](#) is also shaping into an ideological debate falling along political lines. [Some Republicans, including Gov. Ron DeSantis in Florida](#), are calling vaccine requirements overreach pushed by Democrats.

A day after Nova Southeastern University, based in Fort Lauderdale, announced its policy for returning students to be vaccinated, [Mr. DeSantis issued an executive order banning state and local government agencies and businesses from requiring so-called vaccine passports](#), or documentation proving that someone has been vaccinated against Covid-19.

Some colleges have offered incentives to be vaccinated. [Dickinson State](#) University in North Dakota exempts vaccinated students from the campus mask mandate. [Davidson College in North Carolina gives employees who are fully vaccinated a \\$100 bonus](#). Several colleges say vaccinated students will be able to skip the coronavirus testing that they require of others.

In December, a [Times analysis](#) of the 203 U.S. counties where college students compose at least 10 percent of the population found that deaths in those communities had risen faster than in the rest of the nation. Few of the victims were students; they were mainly older people living and working in those communities.

Eileen Sullivan contributed reporting.

— [Mitch Smith](#) and [Danielle Ivory](#)

Frame the issue as a political debate. This elevates political framing as the dominant lens for understanding public life.

Reduce the dispute to a binary. This sets the boundaries of the debate by casting it as a disagreement between only two opposing sides.

Give equal weight to each side. This legitimizes both positions by treating them as having equivalent merit.

Avoid taking a position. This signals neutrality on the part of the author, while obscuring the fact that every editorial decision shapes how readers perceive the issue.

WSJ Debates the Data on Corporate Power, Omits Discussion of Impacts

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Biden Stakes Out Position in Debate Over Power of Big Companies

Body of academic research shows U.S. economy has become less competitive as power swells in large firms, but not everyone agrees

Democrats have responded by making boosting competition a key part of their agenda. Mr. Biden's executive order encourages U.S. agencies to push back against corporate consolidation and business practices that might stifle competition across a range of industries, from Big Tech to airline baggage fees. Republicans and some conservative economists, meanwhile, point to studies casting skepticism on the degree of consolidation and showing benefits to consumers from big businesses, and they say government intervention risks making the U.S. economy less productive.

Behind President Biden's executive order seeking to curb the power of companies that dominate their markets is a body of academic research that finds the U.S. economy has become less competitive in the past two decades as power swells in large firms.

Some research has found less cause for concern around business consolidation. "There are reasons to be cautious about concluding that market concentration has risen or is a meaningful problem for market competition and consumer welfare," Nancy Rose, a professor in the economics department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, concluded in a 2019 examination of research on the issue, citing measurement challenges among reasons for skepticism.

Mr. Eeckhout, a professor at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona and a former University of Pennsylvania professor, says that one factor is that regulators have allowed some industries to become concentrated with a few dominant powers. He said one example is beer: Three big companies—Anheuser-Busch InBev, Constellation Brands and Molson Coors Beverage Co.—control more than 70% of all U.S. sales, according to the National Beer Wholesalers Association.

Jim McGreevy, president of the Beer Institute, a trade organization that represents the industry, pushed back on that claim, noting that more than 10,000 new breweries have been permitted in the U.S. since 2010.

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USA Today Entertains Whether Criticism of Josh Shapiro is Antisemitic

● USA TODAY

Josh Shapiro's vice presidential prospects spark debate over Israel policy, antisemitism

As Harris nears a decision, some Democratic voters and organizers are urging her not to choose Shapiro because of concerns about his Israel stance and how he has handled the fallout from the Israel-Hamas war in the United States.

That scrutiny has been met with frustration from Jewish lawmakers and advocacy groups who argue Shapiro is being unfairly singled out because he is Jewish, as all the leading Democratic candidates for vice president have expressed support for Israel.

Former Rep. Adam Schiff, running for U.S Senate in California, called it "antisemitic and wrong." Rep. Daniel Goldman, D-N.Y., wrote that those "on the extreme left only attack the Jewish candidate." Rep. Ritchie Torres, D-N.Y., said "every potential nominee for Vice President is pro-Israel. Yet only one, Josh Shapiro, has been singled out by a far-left smear campaign calling him 'Genocide Josh.' The reason he is treated differently from the rest? Antisemitism." Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt praised Torres' message.

Hatem Abudayyeh – chair of the U.S. Palestinian Community Network, which is not advocating for or against any particular vice presidential candidate – said he thinks the focus on Shapiro is because he increasingly appears to be Harris' choice, not because he is Jewish. He argued it's inaccurate to imply that pushing for Palestinian rights is antisemitic.

"There's real antisemitism in this world, and our organization and the vast majority of Palestinian Arab organizations in the United States and around the world condemn that. What we won't allow is for the weaponization of antisemitism accusations," he said.

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Practice: Default to the Stated
Intentions Behind Political Actions

Mainstream outlets tend to focus on the stated intentions behind the actions of politicians and institutional actors rather than consistently probing deeper into the systemic or material drivers behind—or the implications of—their actions.

This approach once again reflects a bias toward neutrality, wherein outlets avoid elevating critiques when doing so might be perceived as being partisan. As a result, coverage can obscure the real stakes of political and social conflict by failing to name actions as authoritarian, corrupt, racist, or anti-democratic, even when such characterizations are warranted.

By a 2:1 Margin, Outlets Focus on Trump's Stated Intentions for Defunding Higher Ed

┌
66%
└

of articles about the Trump administration's defunding of higher education institutions **focus primarily on Trump's stated intentions.**

These articles accept his actions are intended as either:

1. An effort to crack down on DEI, antisemitism, transgender athletes, and liberal cultural values.
2. An attempt to prioritize fairness and merit in higher education.

┐
28%
└

of articles about the Trump administration's defunding of higher education institutions **question whether Trump's stated intentions are genuine.**

These articles suggest, instead, that Trump's stated intentions may serve as a smokescreen for an effort to weaken dissent and dismantle checks on his power.

By a 2:1 Margin, Outlets Focus on Trump's Stated Intentions for Defunding Higher Ed

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of articles about the Trump administration's defunding of higher education institutions **focus primarily on Trump's stated intentions.**

Trump suspends \$175 million in funding to University of Pennsylvania over trans athletes



Justice Department probes major California universities over 'illegal DEI' in admissions

Los Angeles Times

28%

of articles about the Trump administration's defunding of higher education institutions **question whether Trump's stated intentions are genuine.**

This professor studies dictatorships. He helped convince Harvard to stand up to Trump

Los Angeles Times

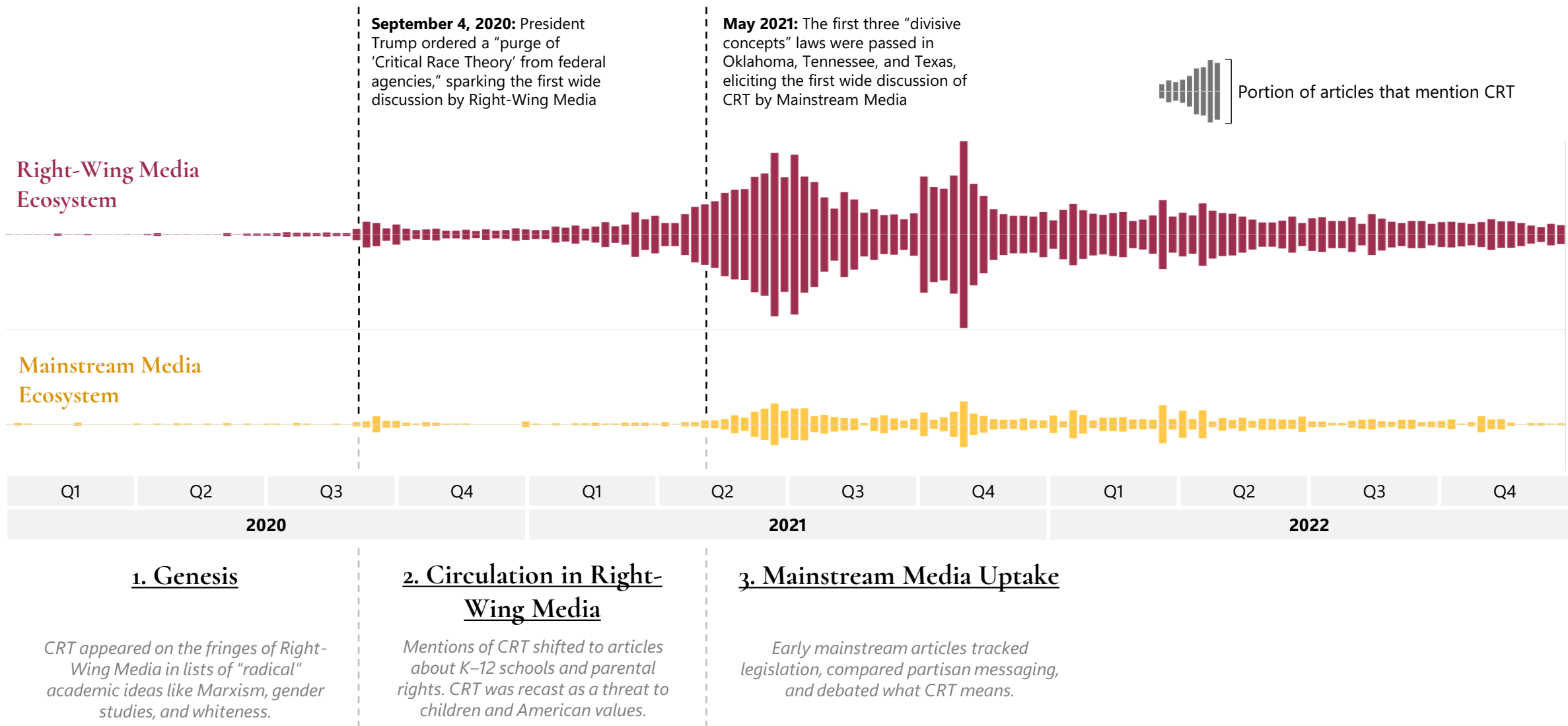
Note: Some articles on this topic do not reference Trump's intentions at all.

Practice: Elevate and Normalize
Selected Concepts from the Margins

Mainstream outlets pick up on concepts circulating in other media ecosystems and play a key role in introducing these “marginal” concepts to wider audiences.

Mainstream coverage functions as a legitimizing force, building broad awareness and, at times, acceptance through sustained attention. This dynamic allows narrative actors—on both the left and the right—to test and expand the boundaries of what mainstream outlets will cover, ultimately shaping the contours of what is treated as politically and socially acceptable.

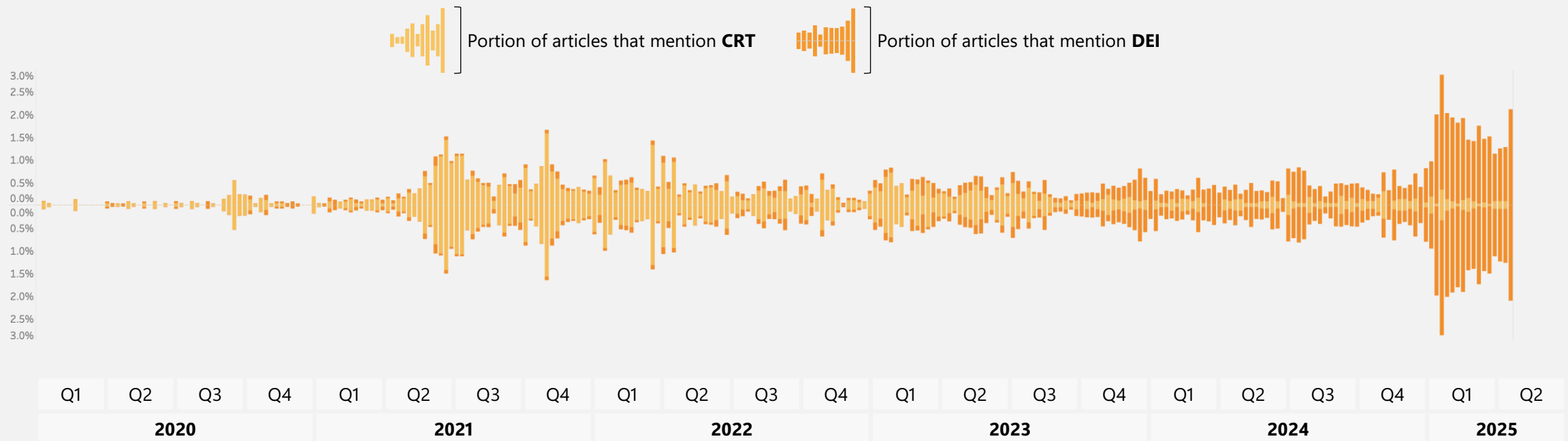
How Discourse about CRT Moved from the Margins to the Mainstream



Sustained Coverage of CRT, then DEI, Eventually Led to Normalization

- CRT—and later DEI—moved from residing at the fringes to having a sustained presence in mainstream coverage and thus became a standing issue in public discourse. While not necessarily endorsed, criticism of these ideas became a routine reference point in stories on education, race, and the broader “culture wars.”
- By Trump’s second term, DEI had become a familiar subject—widely recognized and often cited as the motivation behind many of his administration’s actions.

Portion of Mainstream Media Articles that Mention CRT and/or DEI



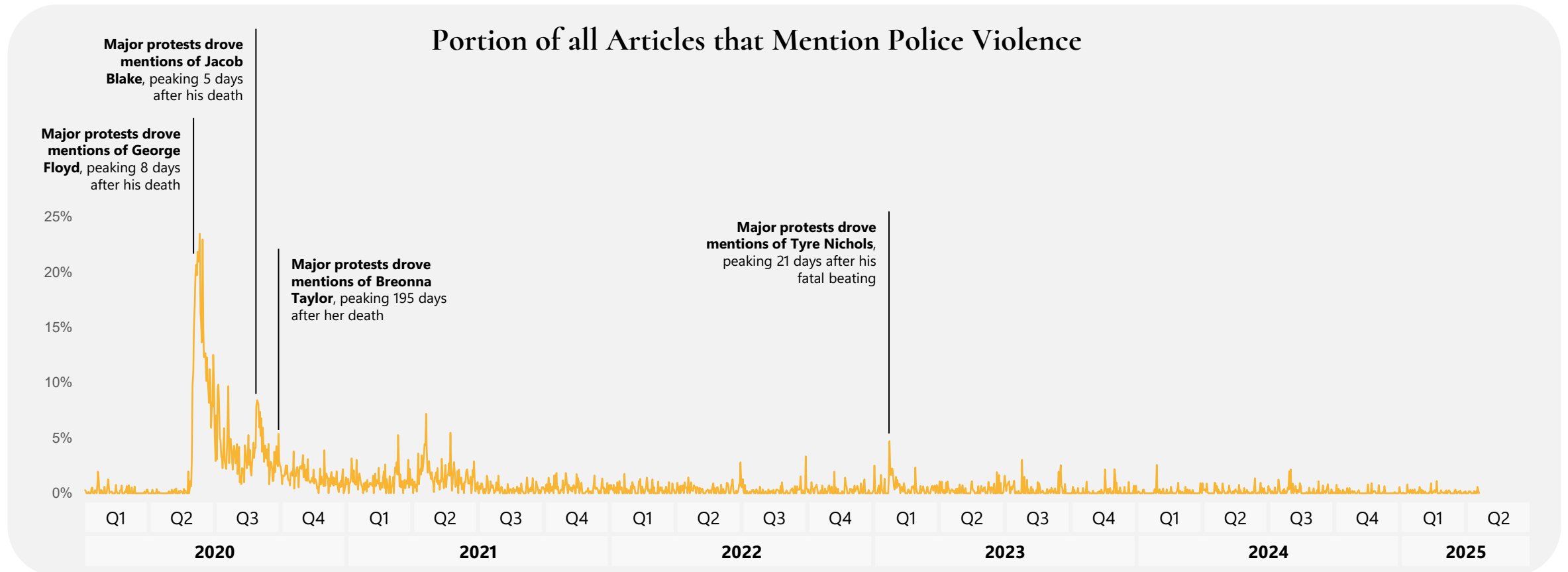
Practice: Explore the Stories
Behind Flashpoint Events

Mainstream coverage gravitates toward stories with proximity to power, national stakes, clear conflict, and visual drama. This produces both stories about spectacle and stories about the underlying issues at play.

Flashpoint events, whether produced or naturally occurring, can bring attention to chronic issues that mainstream outlets otherwise deem unnewsworthy. This pattern can also produce an episodic news cycle in which issues flare up dramatically and then fade, often without resolution.

Mass Protests Drove Mainstream Outlets to Cover Police Violence

- Spikes in attention to police violence and brutality occurred almost entirely during periods of mass protest. These protests drew sustained mainstream media focus to an issue that otherwise received little attention.
- Following the first George Floyd protests, media attention to police violence remained elevated for more than a year. This is clear evidence of organizers compelling mainstream outlets to quantifiably shift their coverage. In the longer term, however, attention waned—not because issues were resolved, but as protest novelty faded and backlash grew.



The Spectacle of Protest Drew Media Attention to Police Violence

- Protests against institutionalized police violence sparked a remarkably wide range of media coverage. Some stories echoed *Americans Under Siege*, framing protests as lawless threats. Others reflected *People First Policy*, centering on organizing efforts. Still others drew on *Institutions of Oppression*, exposing structural injustice.
- This coverage both reinforced prevailing norms of newsworthiness—spectacle, conflict, and celebrity commentary—and created space for often submerged stories, including about grassroots organizing and abolitionist critiques.

Example Headlines from Articles about Police

**Chicago Mayor Asks for Calm as
Police Shooting Video Is Released**
The New York Times

**George Floyd Marches Bring New
Organizers to Protests in Philadelphia**
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**'Lynchings in
Mississippi never
stopped'**
The Washington Post

**Police Declare Riots At Portland And
Seattle Protests; 1 Killed In Austin**
n p r

**'It's the Work of Generations.' How Years of
Organizing and Demonstrations Laid the
Groundwork for Recent Protests**
TIME

**Dallas Fed president says
economy hurt by systemic racism**
THE HILL

**One Dead, Another Critically Injured in
Shooting at Seattle's CHOP Area Formed Out of
Police Protests**
TIME

**Why There's A Push To Get Police Out Of
Schools**
n p r

**Ben Crump Says He Wants to End 'Legalized Genocide':
'They're Killing African Americans'**
Newsweek

Conclusions



The Power of the Mainstream Media Ecosystem

Mainstream outlets present their coverage as a *reflection* of reality rather than a *construction* of reality—but really, it's both.

Audience acceptance of this signaling allows editorial choices to become obscured.

Mainstream outlets define what—and who—is treated as legitimate.

As gatekeepers of public legitimacy, mainstream outlets shape our collective understanding of which issues matter, which actors are credible, and which perspectives are reasonable.

The choices and practices of mainstream outlets have a profound effect on public discourse, politics, and the possibility of meaningful social change.

Many of the ways that mainstream outlets currently deploy their narrative power have the cumulative impact of reinforcing the status quo, crediting institutional actors while discrediting their critics, and minimizing optimistic visions for the future.

Thank you.

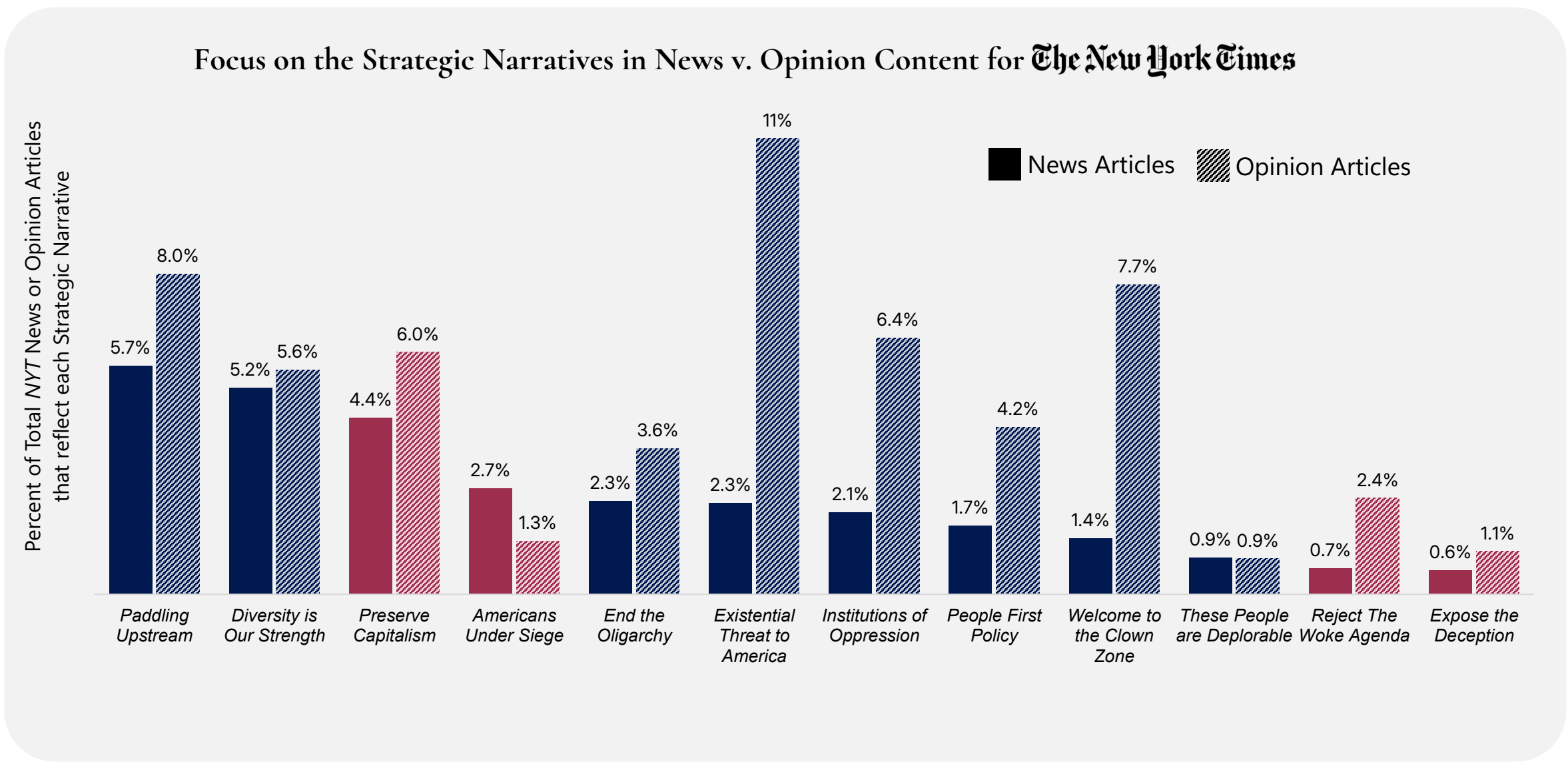


PROTAGONIST

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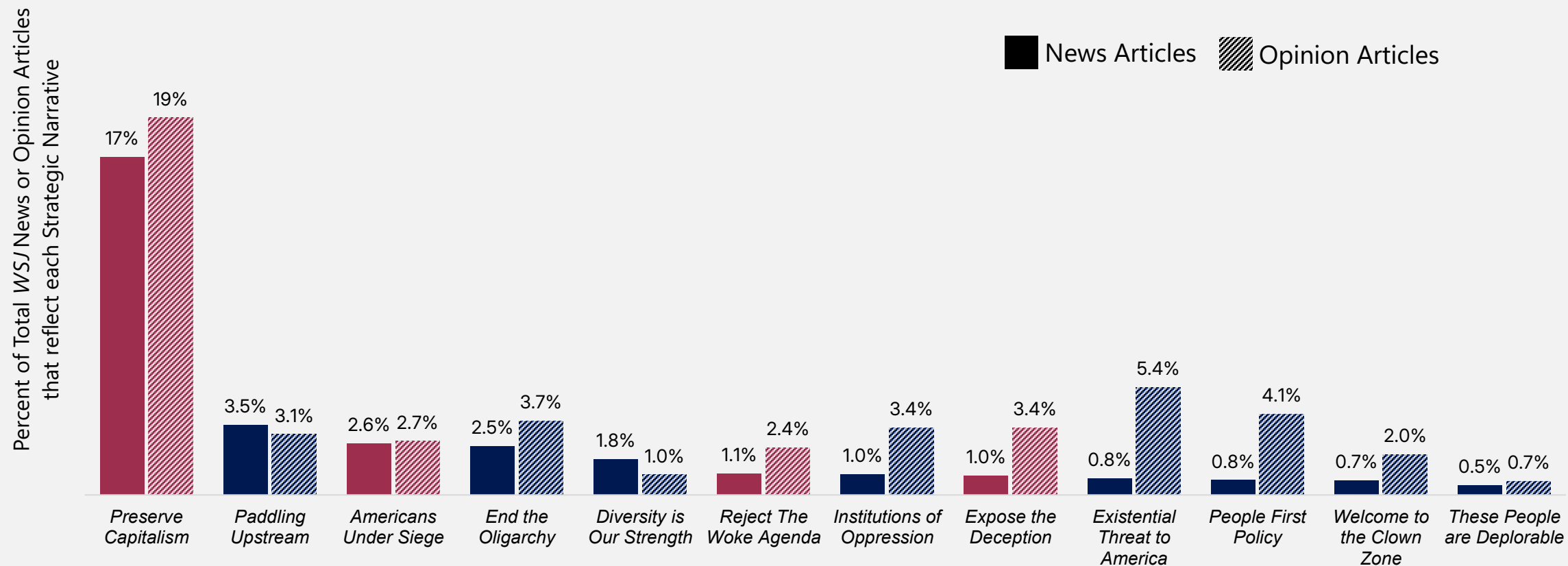
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News v. Opinion: *The New York Times*



News v. Opinion: *The Wall Street Journal*

Focus on the Strategic Narratives in News v. Opinion Content for THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



News v. Opinion: *The Washington Post*

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