

The “Weird” Effect: Shaping U.S. Election Rhetoric

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Abstract

In 2024, as the U.S. election draws close, the media partition bias is increasingly obtrusive in its media framing. This essay explores the broader implications of this rhetorical shift by first analyzing the introduction of “weird” in the 2024 U.S. election discourse with Tim Walz’s viral comment and then comparing the term’s usage by MSNBC and Fox News to explore the partisan usage of the term and how they influence public perception, weaponize humor, and construct biased narratives. The comparisons will center around how semantic framing of words like “weird” creates effective negative priming for the audience and strengthens emotional tendencies such as cue-taking or confirmation bias. Finally, the essay discusses the broader implications of this rhetorical shift, embedding political battles into everyday life and complicating American political discourse. While not new in strategy, the essay underscores how this linguistic tactic uniquely infiltrates common language, reshaping political engagement in contemporary America and further polarizing American society.

Keywords: Semantic Framing, Political Discourse, Rhetorical Strategy, Partisan Bias, Media Polarization

1. Introduction: A New Element in the Election “Soup”

The U.S. election has always been a soup mixed with misinformation and partisan bias, with each new election cycle introducing new elements that deepen these trends. In 2024, the U.S. election heightened the soup again, but with a novel addition: the term “weird.” This new rhetorical tool has been strategically deployed across the political spectrum, contributing to an even more polarized media environment. This essay will examine how introducing “weird” into political discourse has amplified echo chambers and confirmation biases in America while deteriorating the fundamental partisanship dissonance that has historically characterized U.S. elections.

2. “Weird” Became Viral

The term “weird” first gained popularity when Tim Walz, Kamala Harris’ s running mate, humorously described Republicans as “just weird” during a television interview in July 2024 (Amiri, 2024). Walz’ s remark quickly gained attention, becoming a viral meme that various media outlets picked up. What began as a seemingly unintentional jab soon became a cornerstone of the Democratic narrative. Walz’ s framing of Republicans as “weird” was a calculated move designed to frame the Republican ideology as out of touch with mainstream American values. This tactic is an example of media framing, particularly, semantic framing, where the choice of words can significantly influence how the public perceives information.

3. Semantic Framing, Shaping Perception with a Single Word

Semantic framing originated in the early 20th century with Ferdinand de Saussure's work on how language shapes meaning (Saussure, 1916/2011). Cognitive Scientist George Lakoff built upon this idea by illustrating how specific word choice could influence thoughts (Lakoff, 2004). This connects to Erving Goffman's framing theory in the 1970s (Goffman, 1974). Goffman's framing theory emphasizes that how an issue or event is presented, or "framed," significantly impacts how individuals perceive and respond to it. Specifically, semantic framing highlights negative priming, where the audience is subconsciously prompted to view these political actors through a lens of absurdity before any rational discourse can occur. This type of framing is particularly potent because of its brevity. A short word like "weird" can plant a seed in the readers' minds before they even realize it.

4. Weird Across the Spectrum

The deployment of the term "weird" is embraced across the political spectrum. On the left, weird is mainly used to depopularize Trump and Vance's campaign through "Laughtivism," as explored in MSNBC columnist Ruth Ben-Ghiat's editorial (Ben-Ghiat, 2024). Ben-Ghiat describes this approach as "Laughtivism," where "laughter and joy" are used to undermine "authoritarian rule," turning political discourse into a tool for both "mobilization and civic education." By emphasizing the "weird," media outlets are engaging in negative priming and framing the Republican campaign as deviating from normality, creating a narrative that

primes the audience to view them as absurd. This creates a subconscious barrier to rejecting the belief on the other side. By juxtaposing the Republicans' "weird" and the Democrats' joy, Ben-Ghiat's article delegitimizes opponents and creates in-group solidarity. To the Democrats, the juxtaposition further entrenches partisan identities. Because of the term's brevity, it naturally becomes a cheap solution to future cognitive dissonance. Such semantic framing influences how political realities are constructed and weaponizes humor as both a narrative barrier and a mobilizing force in the ongoing battle over political legitimacy.

The Republican response was swift and predictable. Akin to the left, the Republicans respond to the Democrats' use of "weird" with the same semantic framing and negative priming strategies, employing similar rhetorical tactics to discredit their opponents. Adam Shaw's Fox News article, labeling Tim Walz as "weird," exemplified a counter-framing strategy to cast Walz and his statement as unhinged to reality (Shaw, 2024). Particularly, in illustrating how Walz is "weird" relating his view of China, Shaw uses a priming strategy to strengthen Walz's fanatic socialist caricature, where Shaw juxtaposes Walz's praise of China in the 1990s with the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, promoting readers to subconsciously associate Walz with violence. By framing Walz's statement that "one person's socialism is another person's neighborliness" as absurd, Shaw aims to portray Walz as deviant from reality. Citing Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares, Shaw frames Walz's stance as "disregard[ing] the harsh realities countless families have faced under socialist regimes." The word "disregard" adds to the semantic framing behind "weird." It is a semantic cue that reinforces the narrative of Walz's disconnection from historical truth, further entrenching confirmation bias among conservative audiences.

By using semantic framing, both MSNBC and Fox News demonstrate their partisan function, leveraging language to appeal to the emotional cue-taking tendencies of their respective audiences. This framing simplifies complex political realities into digestible, biased narratives that resonate as “common sense” within their ideological bubbles. MSNBC’s portrayal of Trump as “authoritarian,” paralleling Fox News’s depiction of Walz as a pro-China socialist, both show the media’s tendency to generalize from contentious premises, appealing to the audience’s predispositions, enhancing confirmation bias. The bi-partisan competition further deteriorates the issue. As the reactor, Fox News show clearly more hostile vision toward Walz by aggressively invoking McCarthy-era anti-communist sentiment back, effectively framing Walz’s view as not just “weird” but dangerously aligned with oppressive regimes. By comparing Walz’s comment to China and the Tiananmen Square Massacre, Shaw insinuates that Walz’s alleged “weirdness” extends to supporting policies that could lead to the suppression of freedom and massive violence, echoing the fear-mongering tactic of McCarthyism. This framing acts as a form of ideological “tariff,” each siding escalating their rhetoric into a zero-sum competition akin to the trade war, where narratives become more extreme and hostile.

5. Conclusion

Semantic framing is not a new strategy in American elections, as history has shown with terms like “death tax” replacing “estate tax” in 2000 to emphasize its unfairness or Bush’s framing of John Kerry as a “flip-flopper” in 2004. However, “weird” terminology stands apart by infiltrating everyday language and shifting the battleground closer to our daily lives. It would

be difficult to have either party's opinion, which represents nearly half of the American population, as actually “weird” and incomprehensible. The media’s continuing usage of the word will ultimately pull the political battle further from their traditional arenas and embed it deeper into the culture of ordinary lives in American society. The election will soon change from solving the bread-and-butter issue to the bread-and-butter issue itself.

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