Climate Partisanship: The Discursive Logic of the Climate Change Divide on Cable News

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Acknowledgements: Drs. Scoville and McCumber contributed equally to this work. Cecilia Bilbe provided excellent research assistance.

Funding information: This research was supported by an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Keywords: climate change, global warming, negative partisanship, disinformation, media analysis

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Abstract: The divide between Democrats' and Republicans' views on climate change policy is well documented, but social scientists have had less to say about how climate change is woven into the broader fabric of American partisanship. Drawing on the qualitative and computational analysis of two decades of climate change discourse on ideologically opposed cable news networks (MSNBC and Fox News), we show that the partisan significance of climate change cannot be reduced to disagreements about climate policy. It is often instead scaffolded onto the meanings of other issues and aspects of partisan identity. Partisan discussions of climate change with no policy content are especially common on Fox News and are strongly associated with the topic of terrorism on that network. The terrorism-climate discourse asserts that Democratic elites' framing of climate change as a major security threat reflects a dangerous misallocation of fear, motivated by being ashamed of America. We argue that Fox News's integration of climate politics into a more generic – and hostile – conception of "us" and "them" cannot be explained with prevailing conceptions of climate disinformation and offer *climate partisanship* as an alternative grounding concept.

> Consider the ideas that the people in power use to justify their power and their rule over you. Here are some of their slogans, not one of which you're allowed to disagree with. Here they go: "America is a racist country." "White supremacy is our biggest threat." "January 6th was a coup." "Ukraine is a vitally important ally." "Gender is a social construct." "Climate change is an existential crisis." "This is a pandemic of the unvaccinated." And so on. (Tucker Carlson, Fox News, April 2022)

As matters of policy, there is little holding together the string of issues invoked in this excerpt from the opening monologue of an episode of *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. Yet, anyone familiar with the contemporary contours of America's political divisions will have no trouble recognizing who the "they" refers to in this quotation and the overarching point that Carlson is making. The evocative power of such statements lies not in the individual positions implied but in the whole that they weave together, which frames the imagined attitude of the partisan opposition.

Scholarship on political division in the United States (and to varying extents elsewhere) has moved beyond equating polarization exclusively with the extent of policy disagreement to encompass two additional and interrelated trends. One is that positions on a wide range of potentially unrelated issues have become increasingly predictive of each other, as well as other ostensibly "non-political" aspects of social identity like aesthetic tastes and lifestyle choices (DellaPosta 2020). Second, this increasing alignment of a wide range of political disagreements and social identities with partisan affiliation has happened alongside (and likely facilitated) the rise of a more generalized form of inter-party animosity (Iyengar et al. 2019).

Research on the partisan divide over climate change has not adequately absorbed these findings. This work has consistently identified and explained significant differences between liberals' and conservatives' *beliefs about climate change* and its anthropogenic causes, as well as *attitudes toward policies* that would mitigate the problem. However, with a few recent exceptions (Veldman 2019; Mayer and Smith 2023; Huddart et al. 2025; Grant et al. 2025),

scholars have largely analyzed climate politics in isolation from other issues with partisan salience and without respect to rising inter-party animosity.

In this article, we complement the foundational research on political polarization surrounding climate change with a systematic exploration of *climate partisanship*, which refers to how climate change is rendered meaningful in relation to the broader makeup of partisan identities. We distinguish climate partisanship from climate disinformation, the dominant analytical object in research on the obstruction of climate action. Climate obstruction research has shown how a coalition of fossil fuel companies, conservative organizations, and their political and economic allies has strategically misled the public about climate change and intervened in the political process to block the transition to renewable energy and otherwise mitigate global warming (Brulle 2020). We argue that, while disinformation accurately characterizes many of the messages circulated by the climate change counter-movement, the concept has significant limitations for guiding the analysis of how and why partisans are divided over climate change.

To advance the research on climate partisanship, we analyze how climate change is integrated into partisan discourse on two cable news networks that cater to opposing partisan factions, MSNBC and Fox News, drawing on approximately two decades of relevant transcripts from each network.[1] Although climate partisanship tends to imply orientations to or against climate action, partisan discussions of climate change often contain no references to climate policy. Our systematic qualitative coding of television transcripts reveals that climate partisanship is ubiquitous on both networks, but partisan discourse about climate change with no references to climate policy whatsoever is especially common on Fox News.

If climate partisanship cannot be reduced to disagreements on climate policy, what is it made of? Our computational text analysis reveals significant thematic variation between and within news networks. We find a strong association between climate partisanship on Fox News and the theme of "terrorism," a topic that is not typically associated with climate change. A targeted interpretive reading of Fox News transcripts associated with this topic reveals a coherent and sustained "terrorism-climate discourse," which builds on the pre-existing partisan salience of the threat of terrorist attacks against the United States to construct the meaning of Democratic elites' public statements about the urgency of action on climate change. We trace the origins and evolution of the terrorism-climate discourse and elaborate its cultural logic.

The terrorism-climate discourse asserts that Democrats' framing of climate change as a major security threat reflects a dangerous misallocation of fear, motivated by being ashamed of America. It thereby integrates climate politics into a more generic pattern of partisan animosity. However, beyond simply expressing conservative antipathy toward liberals (Iyengar et al. 2012), the terrorism-climate discourse operates through a *second-order affective politics*: it attributes emotional states to liberals and implies how they feel about conservatives.

The terrorism-climate discourse illustrates how climate change takes on partisan meaning in relation to seemingly unrelated partisan signifiers and narratives that resonate beyond climate politics. While the discourse is inherently dismissive of climate action, it often operates without explicitly denying the scientific consensus on climate change. Building on theoretical insights from cultural sociology, we argue that the terrorism-climate discourse owes its power to how effectively it scaffolds (Lizardo and Strand 2010) the political significance of climate change onto the meaning of other issues and aspects of partisan identity, often with no references to climate policy. To construct the meaning of climate change for their audience, Fox News

commentators exploited the asymmetric partisan resonance (McDonnell et al. 2017; Scoville 2025) of the terrorist threat in light of Democratic elites' warnings that climate change represented a comparable or more severe danger. Although it emerged in reaction to concrete utterances by the partisan opposition, the terrorism-climate discourse subsequently hardened into a durable talking point that could be invoked in response to virtually any claim that climate change is an existential threat, even in the absence of explicit comparisons to terrorism.

By analyzing how climate change takes on partisan significance in high-profile public discourse, we offer *in situ* insight into the substantive and formal character of climate partisanship as it operates in the United States in the twenty-first century. Instead of asking how false claims about climate change circulate, we focus on how climate change is folded into divisive narratives about a hostile partisan opposition. Although our argument is grounded in a critique of the focus on climate disinformation, and our analysis in this article draws exclusively on media data, the concept of climate partisanship likely has broader implications for the study of partisan cues and climate change communication, and may ultimately prove useful for guiding the future analysis of why and how claims about climate change (whether true or false) resonate with everyday partisans. If antagonistic partisan identities are obstacles to climate action, it is incumbent on social scientists to understand how climate change has become a divisive partisan object that is tightly integrated into a broader politics of "us" versus "them."

The Partisan Divide Over Climate Change

Climate Change and Polarization

American partisans are divided over climate change. Democrats and liberals are much more likely than Republicans and conservatives to accept the scientific consensus that climate change

is happening and is caused by human activities like burning fossil fuels, and to support policies that would reduce global warming (McCright and Dunlap 2011; Dunlap et al. 2016; Hornsey et al. 2016; Egan and Mullin 2023; Kennedy and Tyson 2024). This pattern is particularly pronounced among elites (Dunlap et al. 2016; Leifeld and Fisher 2025). It wasn't always this way. Up through the 1970s, Republican elected officials championed environmental protections, and even into the first decade of the twenty-first century, there was significant, if waning, bipartisan collaboration on climate change (Turner and Isenberg 2018; Hejny 2018). Contemporary divides on environmental and climate politics did not come about in a vacuum. They are at least in part, downstream from broader transformations of partisan coalitions and platforms, and the nationalization of the party system (Levendusky 2009; Morone 2020; Hejny 2018; O'Brian 2024; Pacewicz 2016; Hopkins 2022).

Several factors explain why conservatives are now, in general, more skeptical of climate science and less likely to support action to mitigate climate change. One is simply that environmental regulations and many policies mitigating climate change conflict with the deregulatory free-market ideology that has dominated the Republican Party's platform and partisan identity since the 1980s (McCright and Dunlap 2003; Hejny 2018; Turner and Isenberg 2018; Oreskes and Conway 2023). Another factor is that Republican voters increasingly express lower levels of trust in science, scientists, and educated elites than do Democrats, an attitudinal pattern that is linked to education polarization (Bugden 2022; Grossmann and Hopkins 2024; Wetts 2025). Religion is another important factor, especially as conservative white evangelicals – a group that is particularly resistant to calls for action on climate change – have become an increasingly powerful part of the Republican coalition (Turner and Isenberg 2018; Veldman 2019; Veldman et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2025). And finally, the partisan coalitions have become

highly geographically sorted. Divisions between rural and urban areas have taken on a strong partisan flavor (Hochschild 2018; Cramer 2022; Brown and Mettler 2024). These geographic divides also increasingly map onto "dual economy," with conservative communities reliant on a fossil fuel-intensive economic base and more liberal areas economically organized around the knowledge economy (Oatley 2024).

Climate Obstruction and Climate Disinformation

Purposive actions have also contributed to the partisan divide on climate change. A coalition of fossil fuel companies, businesses heavily reliant on fossil fuels, and conservative groups – often referred to as the climate change counter-movement – have spread doubt about the reality or severity of climate change, its anthropogenic causes (especially burning fossil fuels), and the efficacy or desirability of policies and technologies that could mitigate it (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Dunlap and McCright 2011; Brulle 2014; Brulle 2021; Stoddart, Tindall, and Dunlap 2022; Aronczyk et al. 2025). Empirical research has documented how industry associations, conservative foundations, think tanks, front groups, and "astroturf" organizations seek to bend public opinion and discourse on climate change toward the fossil fuel industry's interests (Dunlap and McCright 2011; Brulle 2014; Brulle 2021; Slevin et al. 2025). These campaigns have boosted skeptical and pro-business views (which often promote incremental "solutions" or shift the responsibility for climate action to individuals) in media coverage of climate change, often by exploiting the journalistic norm of "balanced" reporting to amplify fringe and contrarian positions on the topic, even though the overwhelming majority of experts agree that climate change is happening and is caused by the burning of fossil fuels (Oreskes 2004; Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; Carmichael et al. 2017; Wetts 2020; Wetts 2023; Aronczyk et al. 2025).

Actors in the climate change counter-movement propagate false and misleading information about climate change, which has shaped public discourse and attitudes on the topic, especially on the right side of the political spectrum. It is for good reason, then, that much of the research that explains the political polarization of views on climate change is organized around the concept of disinformation (Brulle and Roberts 2017; Brulle and Aronczyk 2019; Farrell et al. 2019; Dunlap and Brulle 2020; Brulle 2020; Lewandowsky 2021; Marlow et al. 2021; Brulle and Werthman 2021; Roberts et al. 2024; Jacques and Dunlap 2025). The circulation of climate disinformation by politically and economically powerful groups with ties to the fossil fuel industry is a critical aspect of understanding ideological polarization about climate change, meaning differences in issue positions regarding climate science and policy among liberals and conservatives (Farrell 2016).

The concept of disinformation, however, has significant limitations. First, it foregrounds information. While ideological polarization over climate change is partially a function of incorrect views held by dismissive and doubtful individuals, why people become and remain committed to incorrect views cannot be explained in straightforward informational terms (Leiserowitz et al. 2025). As climate change communication scholars have long acknowledged, people tend not to hold on to incorrect views about climate change simply because they are uninformed or misinformed, and conversely, they tend not to update their views after being confronted with factually correct information (Suldovsky 2017; Buck 2024).[2]

A second limitation of the concept of disinformation is that it emphasizes ideological polarization at the expense of other forms of political division that may contribute to our understanding of how and why American partisans are divided over climate change. Major trends in the broader research on political polarization suggest that views on climate change may

be tied to other facets of partisan identity that cannot be reduced to issue disagreement, and are unlikely to be explained in terms of exposure to (dis)information. There has been a sharp rise in affective polarization – defined as in-party amity and out-party animosity – over the same period that Americans became divided over environmental policy (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Wilson et al. 2020; Finkel et al. 2020). Relatedly, research on partisan sorting suggests that an issue's divisiveness is not merely a function of the level of disagreement over the issue in isolation. Instead, this work emphasizes the importance of understanding the depth and breadth of issue alignment (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009; DellaPosta et al. 2015; Park 2018; DellaPosta 2020; Rawlings and Childress 2024; Rawlings 2024).

A third limitation of the concept of disinformation is specific to the topic of climate change. In the 1980s and 1990s, the climate change obstruction counter-movement invested heavily in direct attempts to deny the reality of anthropogenic climate change, which is sometimes referred to in the literature as "primary obstruction" (Ekberg et al. 2022). In recent decades, however, the climate change counter-movement has changed tactics to emphasize "secondary obstruction," which does not directly deny climate change but seeks to delay action through various other means. Secondary obstruction may be a more promising approach now that the majority of the American public understands that climate change is happening and is caused by human actions (Leiserowitz et al. 2025). Secondary obstruction, in turn, derives much of its efficacy from "tertiary obstruction," understood as "cultures, hierarchies, values, as well as, for example, infrastructures that stand in the way of necessary action" (Ekberg et al. 2022:12). The shift from outright denial to other (often more sophisticated) tactics requires a broader analytical lens than one focused on the propagation of disinformation.[3]

From Climate Disinformation to Climate Partisanship

Our analysis is organized, instead, around the concept of climate partisanship. It is grounded in the assumption that the contemporary partisan divisions that surround climate change, like those associated with other contentious political issues, cannot be abstracted from the context of broader partisan identities and their content. In other words, climate partisanship concerns how climate change is rendered meaningful in relation to broader patterns of partisanship. In some contexts, the partisan meaning of climate change can be ideological, in the sense that it aligns with a broader philosophical perspective (for instance, the rightful role of government in relation to economic enterprise, individual autonomy, and/or the public good). In other contexts, it may be grounded in less rationalistic facets of identity, such as general senses of what it means to be a liberal or conservative, or via analogical associations to an array of issue positions, preferences, lifestyle aspects, or preexisting narratives with partisan salience.

Our approach to climate partisanship is indebted to recent research at the intersection of cultural and environmental sociology, which has taken up the idea that rendering climate change socially meaningful requires cultural work. This research shows that partisan identities are one (but by no means the only) important source of cultural resources that individuals and groups use to frame the meanings of climate science, the causes and severity of environmental problems, and appropriate responses to environmental change (Norgaard and Ford 2020; Norgaard 2023). Cultural framings of climate change sometimes provide the basis for ideological rationalizations (Hoffman 2011) or attempts to maintain the status quo (Brulle and Norgaard 2019). They also have the capacity to evoke strong emotional responses that impel people to act, both in response to the anticipated, imagined, or experienced effects of climate change, and in relation to the

divisive nature of climate politics itself (Norgaard 2011; Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici 2022; Davidson 2024; Huddart et al. 2025; Steiert 2025; Sendroiu et al. 2025; Stuhler et al. 2026). Culture also helps explain why some framings of climate change (and other related environmental issues) circulate more widely than others. Framings that resonate with worldviews commonly held by Americans hold greater sway over media portrayals of climate change (Wetts 2023). Similarly, politicians and media personalities strategically draw on available partisan tropes to define the social meaning of environmental problems within a partisan frame of reference that reinforces and extends pre-existing senses of "us" and "them" (Scoville 2025).

The analysis of climate partisanship also builds on orienting concepts and key findings from the literature on climate change and polarization. Recent research has suggested that partisan divisions over climate change are not merely reflections of ideological disagreements over policy but are also shaped by feelings of animosity toward the political opposition. Cross-national research has found that countries with higher levels of affective polarization are associated with higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions (Grant et al. 2025). Within the United States, supporters and opponents of decarbonization express in-group favoritism and out-group dislike (Huddart et al. 2025; see also Kennedy 2022), and antipathy toward Democrats among Republicans has a strong negative effect on their support for climate mitigation policies (Mayer and Smith 2023). Similarly, research on partisan cues has found that terminology coded as Democratic (such as "the Green New Deal") significantly decreases rural support for climate policies (McConnell 2023) and that exposure to Democratic elites' statements about climate change increases climate skepticism among Republicans (Merkley and Stecula 2020).

If views on climate change are embedded in and inseparable from increasingly antagonistic partisan senses of "us" and "them," the analysis of climate partisanship involves

investigating how climate change has become aligned with other facets of partisan identity, including positions on hot-button issues, cultural narratives, and lifestyle aspects, which may have no inherent connection to climate science or climate policy (DellaPosta et al. 2015; DellaPosta 2020; Scoville 2025). In this article, we focus on one mechanism facilitating such alignments: *scaffolding*. We draw on Lizardo and Strand's (2010) interpretation of cultural toolkit theory (Swidler 1986) as a model of ''scaffolded cognition" (see also Sendroiu 2022). Scaffolding renders a phenomenon legible by building its meaning onto pre-existing socio-cultural infrastructure. It requires both knowledge of extant patterns of partisanship and creativity to extend them into new terrain. In this context, the measure of successful scaffolding is how well it *resonates* with a partisan audience. Following McDonnell et al. (2017:2), we understand resonance not as a static property of phenomena in themselves, but "as an emergent process wherein the fit between a cultural message and its audience shifts over time."

Partisan identities, especially in the context of high affective polarization, are relational entities. This does not mean that partisans on one "side" accurately characterize the attitudes of the other. They are often grounded in false beliefs and exaggerations about their political opponents (Wilson et al. 2020; Fernbach and Van Boven 2022). It does mean, however, that messages with high partisan salience are likely to be *asymmetrically resonant* with one partisan faction, especially when they invoke hostility toward its self-understood opposition (Scoville 2025).

A message's resonance with a (hostile) partisan identity hinges in part on its ability to evoke negative emotions directed toward the partisan opposition. This follows from the premises of the research on affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019). The affective polarization literature, however, largely operationalizes "affect" through quantitative survey instruments such

as feeling thermometers (Bakker and Lelkes 2024). These instruments are effective at measuring first-order affect: a respondent's self-reported attitude toward the partisan opposition. Our discursive approach, by contrast, attunes us to *second-order affective politics*: partisans' attribution of emotional states to their partisan opposition, including how the partisan opposition is imagined to feel about them.[4]

The emotional states attributed to a partisan opposition may be grounded in observations of their reactions to specific phenomena. Such attributions may, in turn, interact with the machinations of what Scoville (2025) calls "the partisan self." Echoing Cooley's (1902) classic statement on the "looking glass self," second-order affective politics encompasses how partisans imagine emotional lives of the partisan opposition, how they imagine those partisan others to feel about them, and how those imagined emotions feed back into a more general, and itself emotionally evocative, characterization of the "partisan other" (Scoville 2025).

To illustrate through a stylized example, conservatives may advance the charge that liberals are "climate alarmists," thereby characterizing their opponents as "hysterical." If one's opponents are deemed hysterical, one may understand oneself as (for instance) self-possessed, by comparison. However, a partisan who hurls the charge of climate alarmism and hysteria may not stop there. Beyond reacting to liberals' imagined emotional responses to climate change, they are likely aware of the possibility of being dubbed a "climate denialist" in return, a charge which may invoke broader status-based resentments grounded in partisan-inflected orientations toward scientific experts and institutions of higher learning (Wetts 2025).

Climate partisanship, in sum, concerns how climate change is rendered meaningful in relation to other constitutive components of partisan identities. Political elites or social movement actors seeking to motivate, dissuade, or otherwise shape climate action are forced to

contend with extant patterns of partisanship, which are not organized primarily around climate change. For this reason, they may seek to scaffold the meaning of climate change onto other pre-existing aspects of partisanship that are distant from the particulars of climate policy. Appeals to emotion are among partisan elites' means of scaffolding climate change onto other aspects of partisanship. Whereas the affective polarization literature emphasizes out-party dislike, we suggest that emotion in this first-order sense may only tell part of the story. Sociologists have long argued that second-order beliefs are critical in the maintenance of social hierarchies like race (Du Bois 2008) and gender (Ridgeway 2011). As we illustrate in the analysis of the terrorism-climate discourse below, beliefs in and claims about the emotional lives of others are an important, if underexplored, element of the partisan divide over climate change.

Analyzing Climate Partisanship

A focus on climate partisanship requires a distinct epistemological orientation from the analysis of climate disinformation. Instead of focusing on how and why false and misleading information about climate change spreads, we treat the partisan character of views on climate change as orthogonal to its truth value. Here we are indebted to the insights of scholarship in science and technology studies, and specifically Bloor (1991:175), who forwards the "symmetry postulate, which enjoins us to seek the same kind of causes for both true and false, rational and irrational beliefs" (see also Barnes and Bloor 1982). The implication is that we analyze the partisan significance of all climate change discourse, irrespective of whether or not it is scientifically accurate. We assume that the partisan resonance of both false and true claims about climate change can and should be conducted in the same analysis. And we do not assume that a claim's partisan character precludes its scientific veracity or vice versa.

To be clear, we, like climate disinformation scholars, accept the scientific consensus on climate change and believe that the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is one of the most urgent tasks faced by humanity. We also believe that disinformation is an accurate label for many of the messages circulated by conservative groups and the fossil fuel industry that aim to sow skepticism about climate change. However, we argue that to understand how and why such messages 'work' requires attention to how climate change discourse is woven into the fabric of partisanship, and that such an analysis should not be fixated exclusively on the circulation of false statements. If social scientists are to truly move beyond the widely discredited information deficit model, we should not assume belief in falsehoods is fundamentally more puzzling than belief in truths.

Despite our commitment to epistemological symmetry, we share disinformation scholars' substantive interest in right-wing discourse, stemming from our recognition of the urgency of climate action and the strong contemporary overlap of the conservative movement and the climate change counter-movement (Brulle 2014). However, following Bauer, Miro, and Giraldo's (2024:7) programmatic statement on right-wing studies, our analysis is grounded in the drive for "understanding" rather than "judgment." If judgment implies framing "right-wing politics as a fringe social pathology," understanding "is about making sense of a world in which right-wing beliefs and policies are comprehensible in the first place" (Bauer et al. 2024:7). As such, the presentation of our results below centers on conservative climate partisanship, while always analyzing it in relation to liberal climate partisanship, and the broader socio-historical context in which these exist in relation to one another.

Our analysis of climate partisanship also takes a different methodological tack than much of the polarization and disinformation literature. While the survey and experimental methods

dominant in these fields are well-suited to identify and measure links between climate change and other facets of partisanship, they are weaker when it comes to providing insights into the substantive and formal character of these connections as a means of evaluating the sources of their cultural resonance (McDonnell et al. 2017). Our intervention focuses on mass media as an important site for partisan meaning-making (Iyengar et al. 2012; Merkley and Stecula 2020). Specifically, we analyze the content of nearly two decades of transcripts from Fox News, which targets a strongly conservative audience, and MSNBC, which targets a strongly liberal audience (Greiko 2020), to understand how climate change is embedded in partisan discourse.

Television news channels can be understood as both an "engine" driving polarization and a "camera" capturing the substance of partisan discourse (cf. MacKenzie 2008). They comprise an important feature of a high-choice media environment, in which individuals can choose the sources that fit their interests, including partisan predilections, which have themselves become increasingly segmented markets (Prior 2013; Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Iyengar et al. 2019). Although it is notoriously difficult to measure the relationship between population-level ideological polarization and partisan television news consumption (Prior 2013), the rise of partisan news has likely contributed to the widespread perception of an increasing distance between the major political parties by distorting committed partisans' and political elites' views of the opposing party (Wilson et al. 2020). Analyses that link public opinion data to media coverage of climate change in particular suggest that the latter does indeed shape the former (Carmichael et al. 2017), and that partisan cues from Democrats are associated with increased climate skepticism among Republicans (Merkley and Stecula 2020).

Television transcripts are made publicly available on the networks' websites and were scraped and compiled into network-specific datasets by Sood and Laohaprapanon (2025) for

MSNBC and Sood (2025) for Fox News. We examine all mentions of "climate change" or "global warming" in either network's dataset, spanning the years 2003 to 2022 for both networks. These totaled 4,387 mentions from 2,166 unique transcripts for MSNBC and 3,425 mentions from 1,790 unique transcripts for Fox News.

We divide transcripts into component passages by splitting them where they contain a new line symbol. Typically, a new line symbol indicates a change in speaker, though sometimes they are used to divide longer blocks of speech, such as a monologue by a host or anchor. In either case, new line symbols are useful for separating discrete, bounded segments of a transcript, though these segments range in length from brief asides or interjections to longer speeches. Since our analysis aims to examine the discursive contexts in which climate change is mentioned, we seek to extract windows of text around climate change mentions of roughly equal length. After splitting the transcripts by new line symbols, we treat segments containing the words "climate change" or "global warming" at least once as unique mentions of climate change. We then build a context window for each mention by successively adding segments preceding and succeeding it until the window totals at least 300 words. This procedure guarantees that each window contains sufficient information for investigating the context in which climate change is mentioned while also ensuring it stays under the maximum length for the computational text analysis tools described below.

Our analysis of these data combines a qualitative content analysis, which identifies climate partisanship and climate policy in cable news transcripts, with computational text analysis aimed at identifying topical themes that characterize climate change-related discourse on each news network. These approaches allow us to examine how climate is discussed in partisan and policy terms, and what topics animate climate discourse on each network. We bring

these two analytical approaches together to better understand the substantive character of climate partisanship and to specify transcripts of particular interest for careful reading.

Qualitative Coding

We first employed a systematic qualitative coding procedure on a randomly drawn subset of 500 context windows for each news network to identify cases of climate partisanship, irrespective of their other content or the positions they take on climate change (N = 1,000 in total between both networks). We distinguish climate partisanship analytically from discussions of climate policy. The point here is not to deny that partisan appeals to climate change are often associated with implicit (even if vague) policy orientations (e.g., climate action versus obstruction). Rather, we aim to lay the groundwork for the more open-ended analysis of how climate change is rendered partisan, by which we mean, placed in a "system of symbolic oppositions" of issue positions, identities, narratives, and tastes that may have no inherent connection to climate policy (Scoville 2025:113). What holds them together is that they congeal to define a partisan "us" in opposition to a hostile partisan "them." This approach builds on an insight common to literatures in political polarization and cultural sociology, that meaning is not merely an intrinsic property of a message, but its "fit" with a preexisting network of meaning by way of linkages with other nodes.[5] It facilitates an analysis of the relationship between policy discussions and partisan discussions empirically, without conflating them. It also allows us to understand connections that are made between climate change and other partisan issues, which may have little direct policy relevance to climate change, but are nonetheless politically aligned under the current partisan configuration of the United States.

To mitigate against potential subjective biases, two coders (one of the coauthors and an undergraduate research assistant) independently coded every context window selected for qualitative analysis. All initial coding disagreements between the coders were reconciled deliberatively. The coding and reconciliation procedures are discussed in more detail in Appendix A. Context windows were coded as "partisan" if climate change was discussed in relation to partisan terms. Discussions of political parties, liberalism or conservatism, the political left or the right, common partisan tropes or generalizations, or individuals who were described as representing a partisan bloc, all resulted in a context window being coded as being "partisan." All context windows were similarly coded as "policy" if they contained any climate policy content, understood as references to public policies (whether enacted, proposed, or simply discussed) that are commonly associated with climate change mitigation or adaptation, or framed in such terms, irrespective of whether or not the discussion was in favor of the policy, against it, or neutral. Text that would qualify a context window for this variable could be as general as mentions of the Paris Agreement or the Green New Deal, or as specific as a discussion about the distributional implications of carbon taxes or cap and trade.

Because partisan and policy content were coded independently and in mutually nonexclusive terms, they can be intersected to produce a two-by-two table of climate discourse types. Content in which policy was present, but partisanship was absent, is classified as "Climate Policy." Content coded positively for both is classified as "Partisan Climate Policy." Content coded as partisan with no policy content is coded as "Climate Partisanship." Finally, incidental (and rare) mentions with neither policy nor partisan content are classified as "Null" and excluded from our analysis below.[6] Table 1 presents these four climate discourse types.

[Table 1 About Here]

Computational Text Analysis

We complement our qualitative coding with a computational text analysis that identifies broad discursive patterns in our data. Whereas our qualitative coding is typological, the automated text analysis maps the lexical themes in discussions of climate change in our corpora without specifying the axes of comparison in advance. Specifically, we construct text networks that model the overall structure of climate change-related discourse in each cable news network and the topical themes that characterize it. We then employ logistic regression to combine the results of our qualitative coding and automated text analysis to understand the associations between the climate discourse types and the themes uncovered via unsupervised machine learning for MSNBC and Fox News. This helps us understand how discussions of climate partisanship, climate policy, and their overlap vary thematically within and across cable news networks. It also provides the basis for a targeted manual review of news segments (both via careful reading of transcripts and watching videos of the original broadcasts) to validate, interpret, and contextualize our findings.

Text networks, which model text data as graphs with words or phrases as "nodes" connected by "edges" based on their co-occurrence, are useful for examining the discursive themes in the dataset and the overarching structure that characterizes them. The approach is similar to the method known as "topic modeling," which relies on the Latent Dirichlet Allocation algorithm to identify a predetermined number of "topics" defined as words that tend to occur in the same document. Modeling text data as a network graph allows the researcher to achieve a similar result through community detection or network "clustering" algorithms. Compared with

topic modeling, the text network approach we use has notable advantages, especially for our data. First, community detection algorithms like the Louvain method do not require the researcher to predetermine the expected number of "topics" in the data, a necessary parameter for topic modeling that can often be arbitrary. Second, the Louvain method produces mutually exclusive communities, whereas topic models do not. This is important for our case, as we sample context windows based on the presence of key terms ("climate change" and "global warming"); the ubiquity of these terms makes it difficult to identify distinct topics while allowing for overlap.

Keyword Identification

As an initial step for constructing our text networks, we identified key words or phrases (hereafter "keywords") for the context window around each mention of climate change. For this task, we used the text parser SpaCy to tokenize the text and consolidate noun phrases, and the contextual word embeddings model SBERT (Reimers and Gurevych 2019) to identify keywords by measuring the importance of candidate words or phrases in the content of the entire text window. Collapsing noun phrases helps generate word networks whose community structure offers greater insight into topical themes by retaining more information about the specifics of word usage. For example, an approach that considers only individual words would assign the word "white" to a single cluster based on every context in which it is used. After consolidating noun phrases, though, the resulting text network might contain a cluster of words/phrases relating to racial inequality that includes the phrase "white people" alongside a separate cluster about the American presidency with the phrase "white house."

After consolidating noun phrases with SpaCy, we perform two steps of pre-processing before proceeding. First, we remove "stop words," or analytically uninformative words like articles and conjunctions, from identified noun phrases, so that, for instance, "the white house" and "white house" are considered the same noun phrase. We also use SBERT to group and consolidate extremely similar words and phrases (e.g., "President Biden" and "President Joe Biden") using a procedure further detailed in Appendix C. Both of these steps are designed to ensure our keyword identification is not so fine-grained that a high percentage of identified keywords are misleadingly unique to a single context window. We consider only nouns and noun phrases in identifying keywords, following prior research that has shown nouns to be most revealing of a text's topical focus (Bail 2016; Borrett, Moody, and Edelmann 2014; Rule et al. 2015).

We then identify the top keywords or phrases for each context window using the procedure outlined by Grootendorst (2021), which leverages SBERT's capacity to generate embeddings representations for both single words and longer sequences of text. SBERT is based on the contextual word embeddings model called Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers, or BERT (Devlin et al. 2019), which generates unique representations of each word in a sequence by considering word order and context (BERT will thus generate two different sets of embeddings for the word "bank" when given the sentence "the municipal bank is located along the river bank"). SBERT uses this same sensitivity to context to generate a faithful representation for an entire sentence or sequence of words. We assign SBERT embeddings for each of the context windows corresponding to mentions of climate change. Then, for each of these context windows, we also assign SBERT embeddings for the nouns and noun phrases they

contain. The "document importance" of a word/phrase is modeled as the cosine similarity of its embedding representation to that of the context window itself.

We measure the document importance for all unique nouns and noun phrases in a given context window, retaining the highest scoring for further analysis. The number of resulting keywords we retained for a context window varied according to the number of candidate nouns and noun phrases it contained; we retained words whose document importance was at least one standard deviation greater than the mean for a given context window.

Text Networks

We construct text networks that model keywords as "nodes" connected by "edges" based on their co-occurrence in context windows, using a procedure similar to those employed by Bail (2016) and Rule et al. (2015). Our use of SBERT modifies the approach to constructing text networks elaborated by Bail, which weights connections between nodes by term frequency-inverse document frequency, or TF-IDF, which measures a word's importance to the document that uses it. Our SBERT-based approach described above offers the potential advantages of identifying a document's key words in a more tailored way that does not rely on words' corpus-level document counts and providing a robust method for collapsing functionally identical words/phrases prior to constructing the network.

We produce weighted text network graphs for both Fox News and MSNBC using the 1,000 most frequently occurring nouns/noun phrases in the data for each news network. These graphs are constructed from a weighted adjacency matrix of keywords. Following Bail (2016), we constructed the adjacency matrix by first computing a sparse matrix with keywords as rows and context windows as columns, where values correspond with a keyword's document

importance. The weighted adjacency matrix was thus computed by taking the transposed cross-product of this sparse matrix. The cells of the adjacency matrix represent the degree to which two words/phrases co-occurred within context windows' retained keywords.

We removed low-weighted edges from the resulting graphs to help reveal their community structures. For each graph, we removed as many of the lowest-weighted edges as possible while still retaining a completely connected, single-component graph. Finally, we identify clusters using the Louvain community detection algorithm. Each keyword is given a within-cluster centrality score corresponding to its eigen centrality as computed on a subgraph containing only nodes in the same cluster.

The above procedure identified 10 total clusters for our MSNBC data and seven for our Fox News data. Before analyzing the topical themes represented by these clusters in greater depth, we first measured the overall prominence of each cluster within the entirety of the climate change discourse under consideration. To do so, we assigned each cluster a "magnitude score" that roughly corresponds with the proportion of climate change discourse for which it accounts. For each context window, we computed its association with each cluster. We did so by considering the composition of a context window's keywords in terms of their importance for the context window itself (document importance score), and for the cluster it is assigned to (centrality score). For each combination of context window and cluster, we computed the mean of the relevant keywords' document importance scores, weighted by their cluster centrality. We then normalized these scores to represent the proportion of each context window corresponding to each cluster (hereafter "cluster score").

Finally, we computed a cluster's final magnitude score by summing its context window-specific scores. These scores were also normalized so that they represent the overall proportion

of climate change discourse for which a given cluster accounts. We used these magnitude scores to eliminate clusters that contributed to less than two and a half percent of the overall climate change discourse. This resulted in four final clusters for each network.

Logistic Regression

We use logistic regression to measure the association between the topical clusters identified in our text network analysis and the climate discourse types identified with qualitative coding. Because context windows drawn from the same broadcast cannot be considered independent observations, we use fixed-effects models with observations nested within broadcasts. For both Fox News and MSNBC, we fit a series of models with each climate discourse type as the dependent variable ("Climate Partisanship," "Climate Policy," and "Partisan Climate Policy"). However, instances of "Climate Policy" were rare in both networks (8% of coded context windows for MSNBC and 2.8% for Fox), which made our multilevel model specification unfeasible due to singular fit warnings. We thus omit that climate discourse type from the regression analysis.[7] For each news network, the context windows' cluster scores for each of the four retained clusters were the dependent variables. We also included a control variable indicating the party of the president in power at the time of the broadcast from which a context window is taken, to account for possible systematic differences in either network's climate change content when the political party associated with its target audience is either in or out of power (Johnson and Schwadel 2019).

Before fitting the models, the cluster scores were centered and scaled with the mean set to zero and the standard deviation set to 1. This allows for easier interpretation; model coefficients

for these cluster variables reflect the change in likelihood of the dependent variable associated with a one standard deviation increase.

Targeted Interpretive Reading

Our computational analysis below revealed one topical cluster that has no obvious connection to climate change. The cluster is focused on the topic of terrorism and is strongly associated with Climate Partisanship on Fox News. Given our analytical interest in right-wing partisan climate change discourse and the uniquely puzzling nature of this topical cluster, we undertook a targeted reading to help us understand its meaning.

We identified context windows in our Fox News dataset for which the "Terrorism" cluster was either the most prominent topical cluster or for which its cluster score was at least 0.25. This sampling procedure produced a subset of 199 context windows. One of the coauthors carefully read this subset of context windows in chronological order, noting themes, context, key events, and changes over time, and referring to corresponding video segments available via Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer's search to aid in interpretation when necessary.[8]

Results

We present our results in several stages. The first is our qualitative coding of a random sample of context windows. These results represent the distribution of climate discourse types (partisan and policy content, as well as their coincidence) within and between cable news networks. While climate discourse is highly partisan on both networks, we find that partisan discussions of climate change without policy content are more common on Fox News than on MSNBC. We then introduce the topical clusters revealed by our computational analysis, which reveal lexical

themes associated with climate change discourse on MSNBC and Fox News. We subsequently bring these two intermediate sources of data together via a statistical analysis that reveals associations between climate discourse types and topical clusters for each network. Finally, we present the results of a careful reading of the "Terrorism" topical cluster, which is the cluster most strongly associated with Climate Partisanship on Fox News. Our interpretive analysis reveals the origins, evolution, and cultural logic of what we term the "terrorism-climate discourse."

Climate Discourse Types

The results of our qualitative coding (visualized in Figure 1) reveal meaningful similarities and differences in how climate change is discussed on MSNBC and Fox News. Discussions of climate change are highly partisan on both networks. Climate Policy is the least frequent substantive climate discourse type on both networks, but it is much more common on MSNBC (8%) than on Fox News (2.8%). Partisan Climate Policy is a common climate discourse type on both networks, accounting for a slim majority of context windows on MSNBC (52.6%) and half of context windows on Fox News. Climate Partisanship is common on both networks as well, but it is much more common on Fox News, accounting for nearly half of the context windows on that network (44.6%) and just under a third of context windows on MSNBC (33.2%).

[Figure 1 About Here]

The numeric distribution of climate discourse types provides an important window into some, but not all, of the similarities and differences between MSNBC and Fox News coverage.

One characteristic it does not capture is that the specific character of the climate discourse on each of these networks is consistent with their overall partisan lean (Greiko 2020). In a separate analysis not reported on here that draws on the same underlying data, we found that approximately 80% of Fox News's discussions of climate change during the same period were implicitly or explicitly against action that would mitigate or otherwise address the effects of climate change, whereas approximately 80% of such discussions on MSNBC were pro-climate action. Accordingly, most climate policy discussions on MSNBC (Fox News) were pro- (anti-) climate action, and most partisan discussions on MSNBC (Fox News) were liberal (conservative) in nature. For illustrative purposes, Table 2 provides an exemplary quotation from a coded context window associated with each climate discourse type for each cable news network.

[Table 2 About Here]

Topical Clusters

Figure 2 visualizes the top keywords for the four topical clusters our analysis revealed for both MSNBC and Fox News, by within-cluster centrality. As described above, the number and composition of clusters were determined algorithmically. We decided on cluster labels for purely descriptive purposes.

The MSNBC network revealed one cluster ("Climate Change") composed of terms broadly associated with climate change, including "climate," "policy," and "emissions," in addition to the two phrases we used to define context windows ("climate change" and "global warming"). The other three clusters pertain to various aspects of the American political process. There is a "Congress" cluster with keywords like "senate," "bill," and "climate change

legislation," a "Presidential Campaign" cluster that captures discourse related to presidential elections ("candidates," "election," "voters"), and a cluster related to "The Presidency" ("president," president obama," "trump administration"). These results echo those of the preceding analysis that climate change discourse on MSNBC occurs predominantly at the intersection of policy and partisan politics.

The clusters associated with Fox News similarly include a "Climate Change" cluster with our search terms and other general climate change-related keywords (though with the addition of the partisan-inflected "climate change agenda" and "Al Gore"). The "Economic Policy" cluster centers on terms related to the economic costs associated with proposals to address climate change, including both macroeconomic (e.g., "economy," "recession") and fiscal (e.g., "tax cuts," "subsidies," "tax rates," tax dollars") terms. The "Democrats" cluster is focused on keywords associated with elected officials in the Democratic Party, especially while serving in the White House (e.g., "President Obama," "Joe Biden"), as well as other national political figures, institutions, and policy frameworks. The emphasis on the opposition party in this cluster is similar to what we find on MSNBC (the term "republicans" is the top term in the "Congress" cluster), but this pattern is more pronounced on Fox News. The only Republican official to appear in the top terms of any cluster on Fox News is Donald Trump.

The final cluster found on Fox News, "Terrorism," is the least intuitively relevant to climate change of any of the clusters found on either cable news network. It features keywords like "terrorism," "Paris attacks," and "threat." As we argue below, this cluster is especially important for understanding the logic of right-wing climate partisanship, which we argue cannot be fully captured with the conventional language of disinformation and climate denial.

[Figure 2 About Here]

Regression Results

Odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals for our fixed effects logistic regression models are visualized in Figure 3.[9] The MSNBC models produced three statistically significant effects in total. A one standard deviation increase in a context window's cluster score for "Presidential Campaign" was associated with a 75% increase in its likelihood of being classified as Climate Partisanship ($p < 0.001$) and a 27% decrease in its likelihood of being associated with Partisan Climate Policy ($p < 0.01$). The "Congress" cluster, meanwhile, was associated with a 54% increase in the likelihood of being classified as Partisan Climate Policy.

Unsurprisingly, the Fox News "Economic Policy" cluster is negatively associated with Climate Partisanship, affecting a 23% decrease in likelihood ($p < 0.05$). Also unsurprising was its positive association with Partisan Climate Policy (36% increase in likelihood, $p < 0.01$). The "Terrorism" cluster accounted for the other two significant effects in the Fox News models. A one standard deviation increase in a context window's cluster score for "Terrorism" was associated with a 39% increase in its likelihood of being classified as Climate Partisanship, but a 23% decrease in its likelihood of being classified as Partisan Climate Policy. In other words, the topic of terrorism is typically invoked alongside climate change in the context of partisan discourse that is devoid of the discussion of climate policy.

[Figure 3 About Here]

The Terrorism-Climate Discourse on Fox News

Our computational analysis identified the association between discussions of terrorism and Climate Partisanship on Fox News, but automated text analysis alone cannot reveal the meaning of the underlying discourse. In this section, we present the results of a careful interpretive reading of context windows strongly associated with the "Terrorism" cluster. This interpretive reading reveals a coherent narrative that links preexisting sources of partisan animosity to climate change. Below, we trace the origins and evolution of the terrorism-climate discourse, followed by an analysis of its cultural logic.

We show that the discourse emerged in response to statements by Democratic elites, before becoming an autonomous talking point and eventually evolving into a more generalized response to claims that climate change is an existential threat. We argue that the terrorism-climate discourse's cultural logic involves scaffolding the partisan meaning of climate change onto another issue with established political significance, and that it operates through a second-order affective politics that centers on fear and shame, reinforcing general partisan grievances that resonate beyond disagreements over climate policy.

The Origins and Evolution of the Terrorism-Climate Discourse

There were several coincidences of discussions of climate change and terrorism on Fox News between 2005 and 2013, but the terrorism-climate discourse took form in earnest in February 2014 in response to comments made by then-Secretary of State John Kerry. In a speech in Jakarta, Kerry described climate change as ranking high among other global threats, including terrorism, epidemics, poverty, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Kerry referred to climate change as "perhaps even the world's most fearsome weapon of mass

destruction," and compared climate change deniers to flat-earthers. A chyron on Fox News coverage of this event read, "Environmental Exaggeration. Kerry: Climate as Bad as Terrorism."

Kerry's comments were repeated and discussed on numerous Fox News programs and served, both explicitly and implicitly, as a reference point for months. This included framing discussions of a statement by Hillary Clinton in September 2014 that climate change was "the most consequential, urgent, sweeping collective challenges we face as a nation and a world." Building on Kerry's earlier remarks, a Fox News segment focused on Clinton's statement (which, unlike Kerry's, did not make an explicit comparison between climate change and terrorism) began with the rhetorical question: "what's the most urgent challenge the world is facing right now? According to Hillary Clinton, I'll give you a hint. It's not ISIS."

The terrorism-climate discourse similarly framed Fox News' coverage of: the 2014 United Nations Climate Summit ("President Obama announces plans for another war, but this one isn't against Islamic extremism"); President Barack Obama's 2015 State of the Union Address ("President Obama issues a dire warning about climate change during his State of the Union Address, but doesn't once mention Al-Qaeda"); and Obama's 2015 commencement address to the United States Coast Guard Academy ("as his mideast strategy implodes and terror spreads, President Obama delivers yet another urgent warning statement about – you guessed it, climate change").

On November 13, 2015, attacks coordinated by the Islamic State militant group killed 130 people and injured more than 100 in and around Paris, France (BBC News 2015). This was just one month before the United Nations Climate Change Conference would be held in the same city. With the groundwork laid over the course of the prior year, Fox News reporters and commentators immediately built on a preexisting discursive framework for making sense of

these events. Elected Democrats provided ample material, drawing a link between climate change and the rise of terrorism, and framing the decision to go ahead with the Climate Change Conference undeterred, as Obama did, as "a powerful rebuke to the terrorists." The terrorism-climate discourse framed Fox News's coverage of the Climate Change Conference, discussions of the Paris Agreement, and debates about climate change during the 2016 Democratic Party presidential primaries.[10]

Whereas the discourse had emerged in response to specific utterances by elected Democrats, after President Donald Trump took office for his first term in January 2017, the terrorism-climate discourse took on a more autonomous character. It framed Fox News's coverage of the Trump Administration's decision to pull the United States out of the Paris Agreement, as well as subsequent criticism of his record on climate change, even when those criticisms did not refer to terrorism or national security.

Beginning in the final years of the 2010's, the substantive focus of the discourse began to widen to incorporate threats beyond terrorism while maintaining the same overall structure. For instance, in her pitch for Green New Deal legislation in 2019, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez referred to climate change as an existential threat, likening it to World War II. Similarly, during the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, several candidates referred to climate change as a grave security threat, as did President Joe Biden after taking office. Fox News commentators responded to these remarks using the same discursive approach: mockery of alleged hysterics and a juxtaposition against threats implied to be more serious and immediate. In addition to terrorism, this included foreign adversaries of the United States, illegal immigration and border security, illicit drugs, and urban crime.

The Cultural Logic of the Terrorism-Climate Discourse

The terrorism-climate discourse constructed the partisan meaning of climate change for Fox News viewers by scaffolding it onto another issue with more established political significance. Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, President George W. Bush launched the "War on Terror," a global military campaign led by the United States. Although concerns about terrorism were broadly bipartisan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, they polarized over time. Public opinion data show that Republicans (but not Democrats) became increasingly worried that terrorists were capable of launching a major attack on the United States after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 and over the course of his presidency (Pew Research Center 2016). These general patterns hold as of this writing (Fagan et al. 2025) and are especially pronounced among older Republicans, Fox News's primary audience (Randolph et al. 2025).

Although the terrorism-climate discourse eventually consolidated into a partisan trope that could be invoked in virtually any discussion of climate change, it originated in response to specific utterances by Democratic elites during President Obama's second term. These statements rested on the assumption that terrorism was a major threat and built on that significance to frame the seriousness of climate change. Fox News commentators seized on the opportunity presented by this formulation. The terrorism-climate discourse resonated with conservatives' relatively high level of concern about terrorism compared to climate change and more general sources of antipathy toward Democrats.

The terrorism-climate discourse does not necessarily rest on the claim that climate change is not happening or caused by human activities (although it is implicitly dismissive and is sometimes paired with explicit denialism). As such, it does not intervene primarily at the register

of ideological polarization (policy or issue disagreement). Instead, its power can be better understood in relation to affective polarization (us/them division) and partisan sorting (the linkages or correlations among positions on distinct issues).

The emotional work done by the terrorism-climate discourse, however, is more complex than standard articulations of affective polarization, which tend to be operationalized with quantitative instruments like feeling thermometers (Bakker and Lelkes 2024). The terrorism-climate discourse is grounded, not simply in negative feelings toward the partisan opposition, but in claims about the emotional lives of Democrats, including how they feel about Republicans. In other words, the terrorism-climate discourse operates through a second-order affective politics.

Fear and shame are central in this second-order affective politics. The discourse asserts that Democrats have a misplaced fear of climate change, which is fortified by being ashamed of America. As an illustration, consider the coverage of President Obama's 2015 State of the Union Address. Fox News framed his remarks on climate change as "global warming hysteria." Commentators compared his discussions of climate change and terrorism to communicate the charge of misplaced priorities. "The guys cannot mention the word Islamic terrorism," remarked one commentator, "but he's hyperventilating and needing a brown paper bag over climate change." However, the commentary continues with a deeper criticism. "So Obama exaggerates one threat while avoiding the name of a real threat like Al-Qaeda, why is that? Well, for lefties, only America can be at fault. And the war against climate change provides the right villain – America."

Far from being a simple case of "whataboutism," the power of the terrorism-climate discourse lies in its resonance with what Scoville (2025) calls "the partisan other," the imagined attitude of the partisan opposition, against which one's political subjectivity is defined. By

placing a “true threat” opposite “climate alarmism” or “hysteria,” it simultaneously situates Democrats as out of touch with ordinary (read as conservative) Americans and unworthy of their trust. Because climate change is a problem that the United States has contributed to disproportionately, and fossil fuels are bound up intricately with the “American way of life” (Huber 2013), the discourse paints Democrats' concern with climate change as grounded in expiating America’s sins.

According to the discourse, this emphasis on self-abnegation comes at the cost of rooting out external evils. And the impetus to shame Americans is itself understood as a source of danger, as it was when President Obama’s “absurd obsession” with climate change explained “why our president missed ISIS.” Such criticisms were by no means limited to Obama, and did not end with his presidency. For example, during the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, a Fox News commentator reflected on the attention candidates were giving to climate change: “we finally found an enemy Democrats want to fight. I mean, Democrats are very soft on ISIS, but they want to knock the hell out of global warming.”

The second-order affective politics of fear and shame does more than graft positions on climate change to positions on terrorism. It also links climate change to more general qualities that Republicans may attribute to Democrats. The charge that climate fears are rooted in a desire to shame Americans reinforces resentment against a partisan opposition that is understood to be condescending, moralizing, and privileged. For instance, one Fox News commentator posed the rhetorical question in 2015, “Have you noticed that this is mainly the hobby of white elitists?” In another segment in 2019, a commentator articulated a similar line of argument, while folding in charges of liberal insincerity and hypocrisy. “Honestly, you really think Nancy Pelosi believes climate change is an existential crisis? Of course, she doesn't think that, that's why she flies

private. Barack Obama can say whatever he wants about carbon emissions and stroke his chin and be very, very concerned. But when you're spending $15 million of your own dollars on a beachfront estate in Martha's Vineyard, you're not really too worried about the oceans rising. The problem is the Democratic base doesn't get the joke."

By asserting that concerns about climate change's urgency are insincere, the second-order affective politics of fear and shame allows Fox News commentators to unveil what they assert are the true desires behind Democrats' calls for climate action: statist control. For instance, one Fox News commentator explained in 2018, "the reason why they are doing this, of course, is that they need to whip people up into fear so that we can hand over our sovereignty, hand over our autonomy, to these people who are better than us and smarter than us." Similarly, in 2019, a commentator questioned the intentions behind Democrats' urgent calls for climate action: "I mean, these people that are claiming this is an existential crisis, if it really is, you should declare war on India and China tomorrow to save the planet from all the pollution that they're doing." Instead, the commentator continued, "What they're offering is increased government control over our economy and over our personal lives. Again, it is nothing but socialism. We all know that. And they are hoping that enough Americans are not watching that they'll be able to grab power before they actually wake up and realize, dear God, we've actually given these crazy socialists power over our lives to continue annihilating our future and taking away life's choices from us."

Discussion and Conclusion

Combining qualitative and computational methods, we have systematically analyzed the relationship between partisanship and climate change on Fox News and MSNBC. Discussions of climate change are highly partisan on both networks, but partisan climate discourse with no

policy content is more common on Fox News than on MSNBC. The topical themes associated with climate change discourse vary between networks and within them by climate discourse type. A computational analysis reveals a thematic connection between terrorism and Climate Partisanship on Fox News. Our subsequent interpretive analysis of the terrorism-climate discourse provides insight into how right-wing media constructs the meaning of climate change in partisan terms, often without relying on references to climate policy or explicit climate denialism. These findings suggest that to explain partisan divisions on climate change, researchers should broaden the analytical frame beyond the study of disinformation to the cultural-political sources of the appeal of right-wing climate discourse.

Our focus on partisan animosity and climate change contributes to an emergent body of research that goes beyond the focus on ideological polarization in climate research, to one that seeks to understand the relationship between climate politics and affective polarization (Mayer and Smith 2023; Huddart et al. 2025; Grant et al. 2025). However, it also suggests that the relationship between climate change and partisan animosity may be more complex than feeling thermometers (the standard way of operationalizing affective polarization) can capture. Our interpretive analysis reveals the prominence of a second-order affective politics of fear and shame. This finding is consistent with recent work that finds a link between opposition to decarbonization and the feeling of morally judged (Huddart et al. 2025), and more generally with research that articulates embattlement (Veldman 2019) and resentment (Cramer 2022; Hochschild 2018) as core features of conservative political identity.

In line with research on partisan sorting (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009; DellaPosta et al. 2015; Park 2018; DellaPosta 2020; Rawlings and Childress 2024; Rawlings 2024) and cultural resonance (McDonnell et al. 2017), our findings

also suggest that to account for *how* appeals to out-party animosity in climate politics work, it is important to understand how views about climate change are bound up with other sources of partisan meaning. We suggest that climate partisanship derives its power, not merely from disagreements about climate change, but also by scaffolding those disagreements onto other pre-existing facets of partisan identity, including seemingly unrelated issues, identities, and narratives that shape political senses of "us" and "them." The processes through which climate change becomes built onto or linked to other facets of partisan identity represent an underexplored area of research in climate politics.

Additionally, our findings offer context for interpreting research on elite cues and climate change. Merkley and Stecula (2020) show that elite cues from Democrats (who tend to discuss the urgency of climate action) are associated with greater skepticism among Republicans. Our findings suggest that interpreting this finding as "backlash" against Democratic climate discourse is incomplete. In a highly segmented media environment, everyday partisans are likely to be exposed to cues from out-party elites through partisan media sources that they trust. The analysis of the terrorism-climate discourse illustrates how the meaning of utterances by out-party elites is constructed by the partisan opposition. If ordinary conservatives react to the statements by high-profile Democrats that formed the basis of the terrorism-climate discourse with increased climate skepticism, the concerted framing of those statements by Fox News likely accounts for part of that reaction. Our exclusive reliance on media data limits our ability to formally test this hypothesis. Further specifying the relationships among out-party elite cues, in-party media framing, and climate attitudes is a critical area for future research.

The analysis of how partisan elites and institutions channel climate discourse into culturally resonant narratives that reinforce and extend antagonistic partisan identities also

departs from the primary focus of some of the foundational research on climate skepticism. Classic research in this area framed climate obstruction in terms of constructing the "non-problematicity" of climate change (McCright and Dunlap 2000; see also McCright and Dunlap 2010; McCright 2016). Our findings suggest that, as climate change has risen on the public agenda and partisan animosity has increased, opponents to climate action may be shifting to a strategy of "re-problematizing" climate change instead. As the terrorism-climate discourse exemplifies, Fox News commentators have often *amplified* rather than muted Democratic calls for climate action because they have learned how to turn appeals about the urgency of climate action back onto their political opponents. This does indeed undermine the problematicity of climate change as a *policy* matter. However, it simultaneously recasts "climate change" as a *partisan* problem: something that is wrong with Democrats themselves.

The strategic reframing of a policy problem into a problem with one's political opponents may have implications for climate change communication. Research on combating disinformation has shown the promise of "inoculation," warning people in advance about the strategies that purveyors of false claims use so that they can recognize them in the future (Farrell et al 2019; Lewandowsky 2021). By constructing a new partisan meaning of Democrats' calls for the urgency of climate action, the terrorism-climate discourse may similarly "inoculate" against future framings of the urgency of climate action. Whereas Democratic elites' framing of climate change as a security threat may have been crafted to bolster the case for climate change among security hawks, our analysis illustrates the limitations of that strategy. One question this raises is whether it is possible to inoculate against such partisan remobilizations, especially when they do not contain overt disinformation. Perhaps a more promising line of research is to understand

which framings of climate change and climate action are more or less vulnerable to being hijacked by partisan elites and institutions in the first place.

We conclude with a word of caution. Although we have emphasized the importance of understanding partisan discourse on climate change that is bereft of policy content, we are not suggesting that the elite actors who propagate this content are themselves unconcerned with policy. On the contrary, our analysis suggests that fossil fuel interests and their political allies are likely aware that amplifying partisan animosity can be a more straightforward and efficacious way of obstructing progress toward decarbonization than making direct policy arguments, especially as renewable energy has become more affordable and the effects of climate change more palpable. If appeals to partisan animosity are instruments of obstructing climate action, we need to better understand how and why they work.

Notes

[1] MSNBC was rebranded as "MS NOW" in 2025. This was after our data were collected, so we refer to the now archaic "MSNBC" throughout.

[2] Epidemiological metaphors are common in the disinformation scholarship. At the macro and meso levels, the concern is the "spread" of disinformation. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the associated spread of disinformation was termed an "infodemic" (Zarocostas 2020). Relatedly, "inoculation" (sometimes termed "prebunking") is understood to be one of the most promising approaches to reducing the spread of disinformation, but evidence for its efficacy is largely constrained to the micro-level (Farrell et al 2019; Lewandowsky 2021). Although we distinguish our approach from disinformation studies, the research on inoculation assumes a

more complex psychological model than the information deficit model. Its emphasis on how judgments about the veracity of information are scaffolded on a prior cognitive infrastructure is generally compatible with the cultural approach presented here (for more general treatments of "cultural scaffolding," see Lizardo and Strand [2010] and Sendroiu [2022]). The trouble, we show below, is that opponents of climate action also purposively build cultural/cognitive scaffolding that may "inoculate" against the receptivity of common messages in support of climate action.

[3] In the research on climate change and society, "disinformation" and "denialism" are treated as interchangeable in some contexts, and in others carry different connotations (for instance, denial as an emotional state or cultural repertoire (Norgaard 2011; Brulle and Norgaard 2019)). We do not reproduce or intervene into typological debates about "climate denial," "climate skepticism," or other cognate terms, but instead refer the reader to the helpful review of these typologies by Ekberg et al. (2022:8-13). In line with recent scholarship, we treat "climate obstruction" as an umbrella term that comprises many tactics and operates at various levels of analysis. Below, we sometimes distinguish climate partisanship with outright or explicit denial (which are appropriately associated with disinformation), only to clarify that appeals to partisanship are analytically distinct from denying the scientific consensus about climate change and its causes.

[4] Of course, by exclusively analyzing media data, we do not claim to provide a precise alternative to the feeling thermometer. Although our understanding of second-order affective politics is influenced by our media analysis, survey, interview, and experimental methods could be used to measure it among the general population as well.

[5] Here we are noting a family resemblance between the cultural sociological concept of "resonance," which is employed to explain how "cultural objects help people puzzle through

practical challenges they face or construct" (McDonnell et al. 2017:1), and the research in political science and political sociology on partisan sorting, partisan cues, and more loosely, affective polarization. Similar to the metaphor of resonance, sorting describes a process whereby issue positions become aligned, and thereby take on the character of "fitting" together (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009; DellaPosta et al. 2015; Park 2018; DellaPosta 2020; Rawlings and Childress 2024; Rawlings 2024). Partisan cues refer to signals, typically by elites, that draw on the power of those alignments to signal to partisans how they should think about a topic or vote on an issue (Nicholson 2012; Merkley and Stecula 2020; McConnell 2023), which may be grounded in a more generalized in-party amity and out-party animosity, known as affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; Wilson et al. 2020; Finkel et al. 2020).

[6] The "Null" category accounted for 2.8% and 6.2% of coded context windows on Fox News and MSNBC respectively. As a residual category, it is quite heterogenous internally, but one explanation for the difference across networks is that MSNBC reports more on the findings of climate scientists without references to policy or partisanship than Fox News.

[7] The rarity of policy discussion that was not accompanied by partisanship is an revealing finding in its own right.

[8] The Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer is freely available at: https://tvnews.stanford.edu.

[9] Only variables corresponding with the topical clusters from our text network analysis are included. Full regression results are reported in table format in Appendix B.

[10] The years 2014-2016 were significant for US climate politics beyond the Paris Accords. These years also saw the announcement of the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan, the People's Climate March, and conflicts over the Keystone XL Pipeline. Leifeld and Fisher

(2025) show that these events coincided with heightened polarization over climate change in Congress, and received high levels of media attention in swing states (their period of analysis included both the 2014 midterm elections in which Republicans gained control of the Senate and the 2016 election of President Donald Trump). It is therefore unsurprising the terrorism-climate discourse was inaugurated in this period, as the stakes of the war for public opinion over climate change were particularly high.

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Tables

		Partisan Content	
		Yes	*No*
Policy Content	*Yes*	Partisan Climate Policy	Climate Policy
	No	Climate Partisanship	Null

Table 1: Climate Discourse Types

	MSNBC	Fox News
Climate Policy	"The thing is … we could have reduced energy use, less dependence on foreign oil. We could have a much higher quality of life for our citizens, and we could have a future without catastrophic global climate change, if we got on it right now."	"If we actually had a consensus around climate change and a plan to deal with it, you would naturally have to have a slope to decrease using fossil fuels over 30 or 40 years while you increase other forms of energy, et cetera."
Partisan Climate Policy	"Just last week, [Mike Huckabee] denied supporting cap and trade during the 2007 Republican primaries, perhaps blacking out on the fact that he declared that support on camera. … Then there is Sister Sarah [Palin]. As one-half of the Republican presidential ticket in 2008, she offered this: "climate change just might be man-made," Terry. Now, free from the constraints of facts, the half-governor has changed her tune. That woman is an idiot."	"Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Edward Markey are reportedly planning to introduce legislation for a Green New Deal as early as next week. The goal of the plan is to transform the economy in the name of fighting climate change. This leftward shift is creating a rift within the Democratic Party."
Climate Partisanship	"Over the years, the Texas Republican platform has been sort of a wondrous document, like a diagnostic workup of conservative politics hot beating id. So far in this year's edition, Republicans want you to know that Benghazi was a cover-up, "climate change" - again, scare quotes - is an agenda to control every aspect of your life."	"We, as Republicans, conservatives, and libertarians, have been smeared for decades as being anti-science because we question the statistics of climate change, but I believe that the most anti-science party is always or it's always going to be the left. They don't believe in differences between genders, right? Boy, girl. You can't call your child a boy or girl, not yet anyway, not until they decide."

Table 2: Illustrative Examples of Climate Discourse Types by Cable News Network

Figures

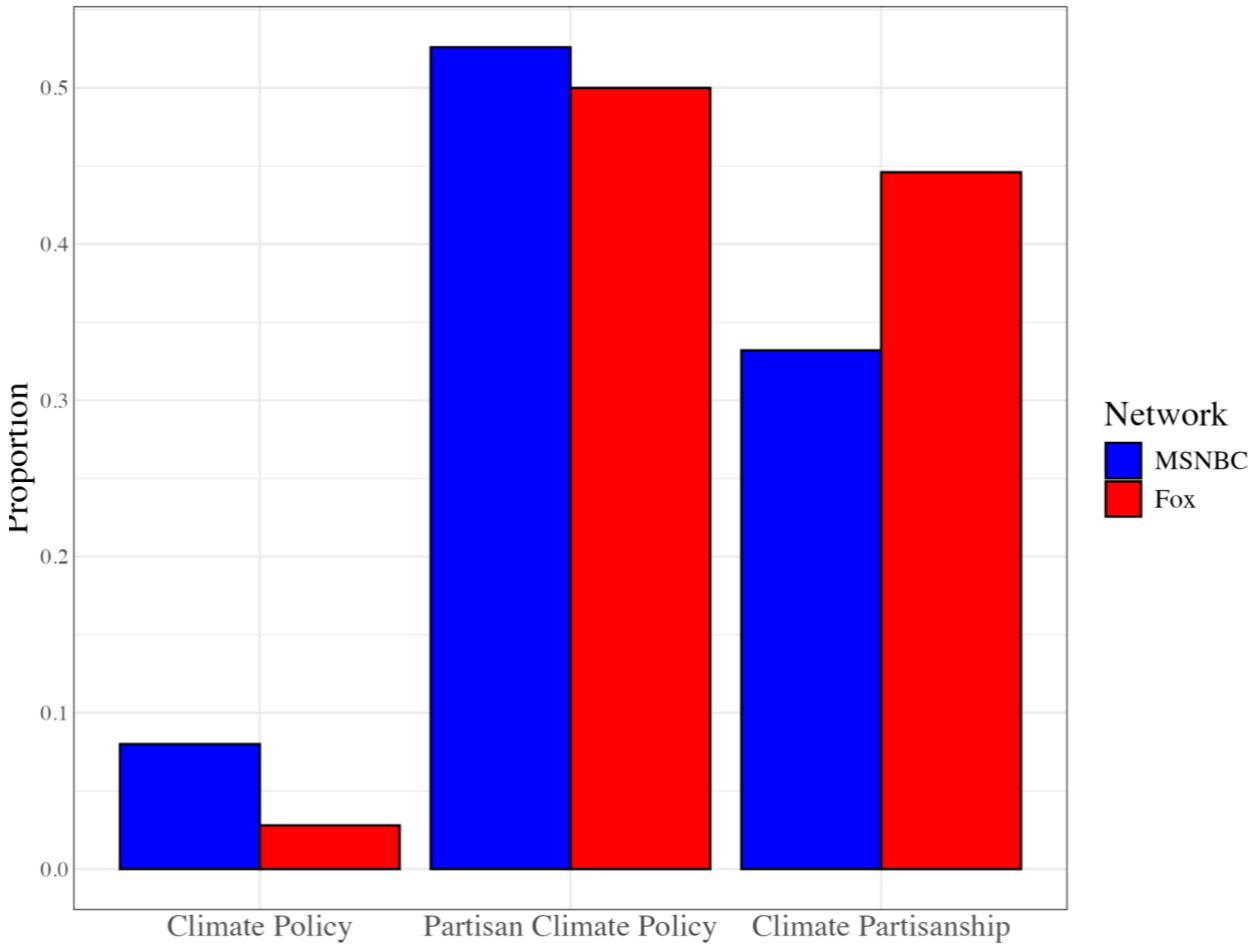

Figure 1: Climate Discourse Types

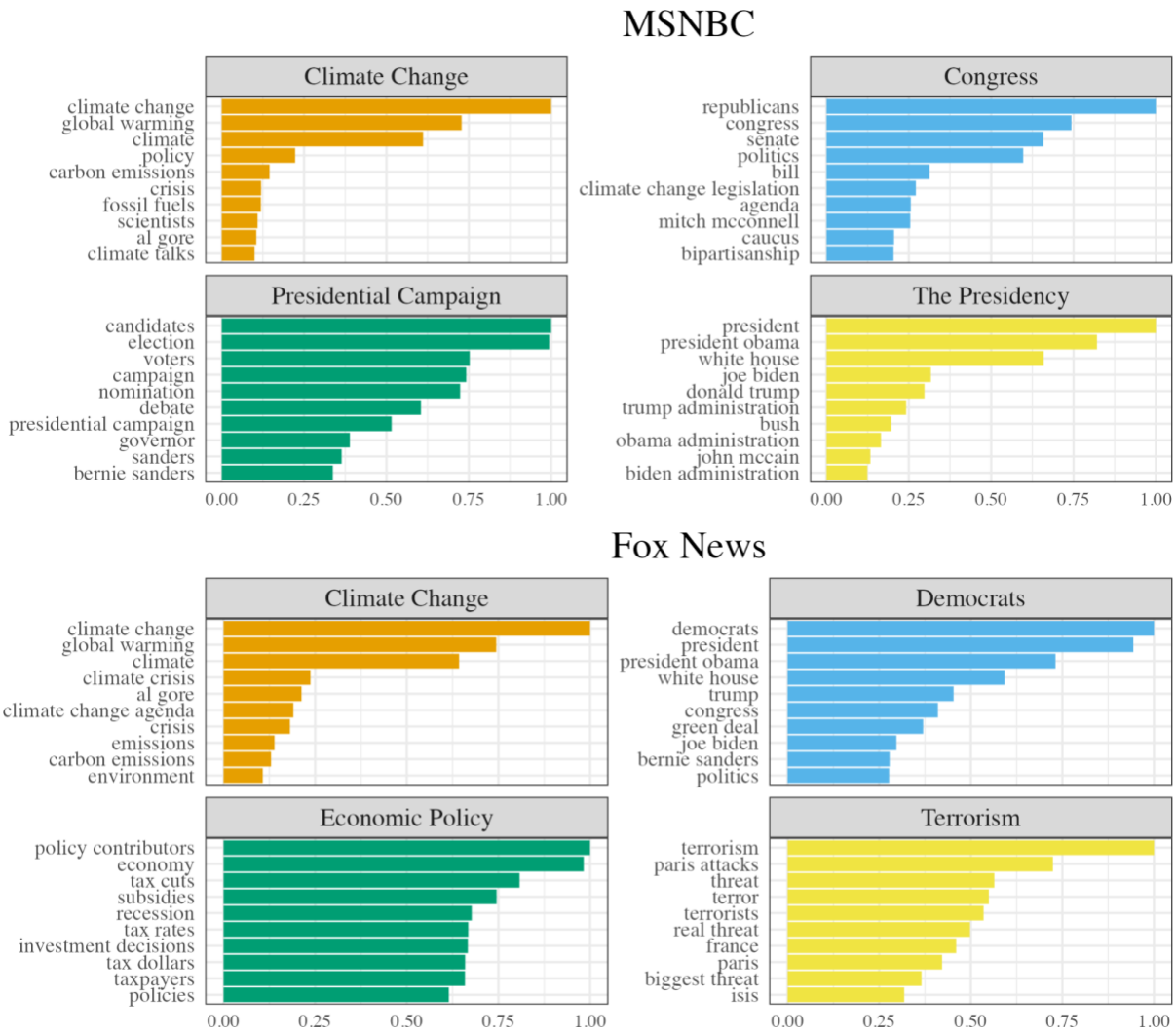

Figure 2: Topical Clusters by Cable News Network

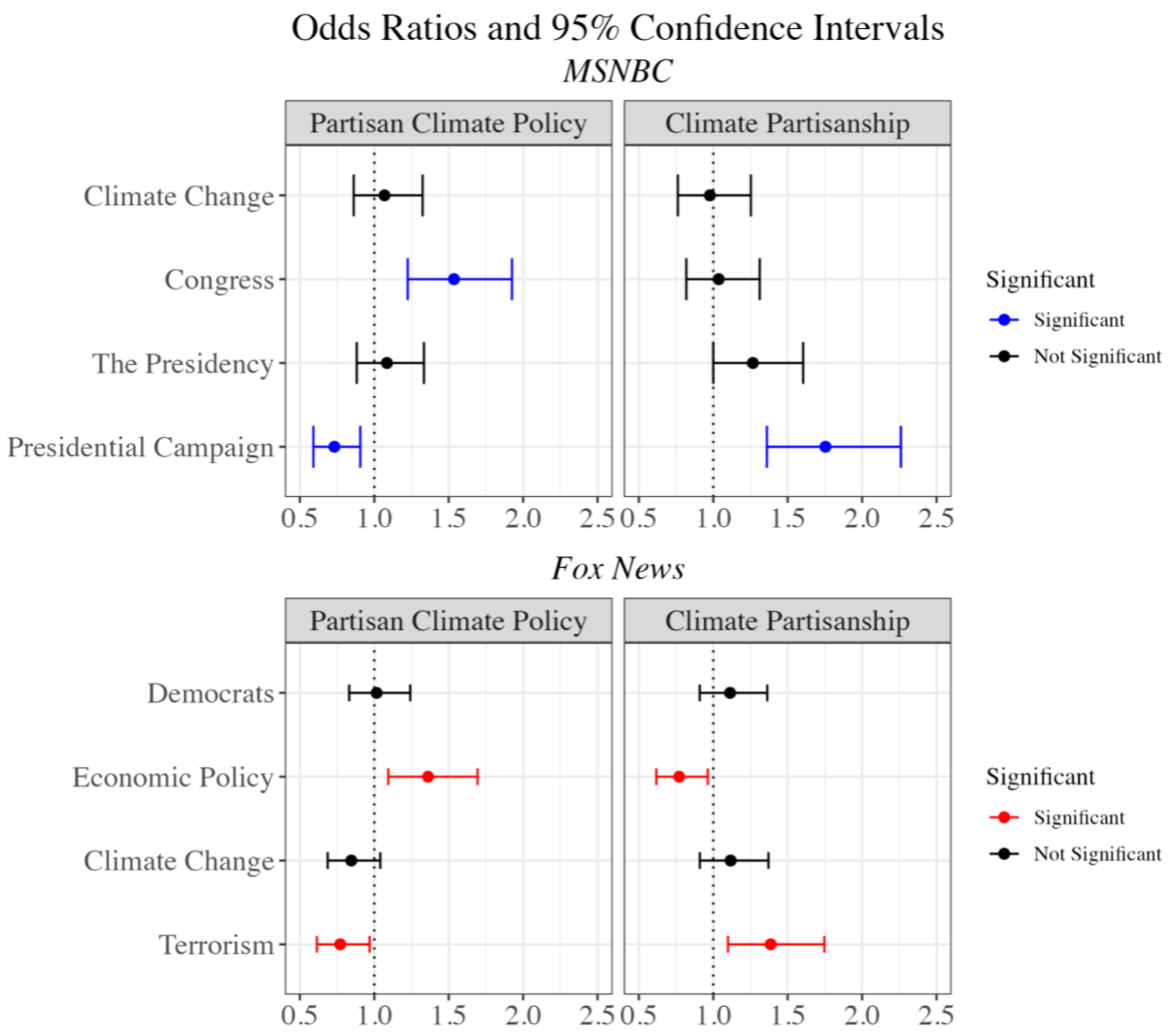

Figure 3: Logistic Regression Results Showing Associations Between Topical Clusters and Climate Discourse Types by Cable News Network

Appendices

Appendix A. Coding Reconciliation Procedure

This appendix describes the procedure for establishing intercoder reliability for the portion of our analysis based on qualitative coding. First, one of the authors of the study read and manually coded a random sample of 500 context windows for each network (N = 1,000 in total). Each

context window was coded independently for whether or not it contained policy content relevant to climate change and for whether it included partisan content. These codes were applied in a binary (1/0) format and were mutually nonexclusive, meaning that any context window could be coded as having both policy and partisan content, either policy or partisan content, or neither.

The same context windows were sent to an undergraduate research assistant without the coding results. They were also reshuffled in a new random order to avoid reproducing systematic biases. Other than answering the undergraduate research assistant's general questions of clarification about the scope of coding, each of the coders operated independently.

After both coders completed all of their context windows, the results were compared via a script that automatically identified discrepancies. When codes matched, they were considered final. When codes did not match, they were flagged for discussion. During the reconciliation process, coders deliberated about every disagreement in-person based on the content of the context window in question and did not refer back to their respective initial coding decisions. They made a final decision on each coding decision for which there was a disagreement in the initial coding, and entered those decisions in the reconciled spreadsheet. To ensure consistency in these decisions, the coders kept a running list of analytical decisions they made during the reconciliation process, which are listed below. These lists only represent coding decisions made during the reconciliation process, and do not reflect coding decisions for which there was no disagreement among independent coders.

Policy

- Government disaster response (if it's framed around climate change) is policy.

- Extremely vague terms like “climate change mandate” or “climate change agenda” are not coded as policy. But any sense of what the mandate or agenda consists of is considered policy.
- “Climate change spending” counts as policy.
- “Climate change regulation” counts as policy
- Executive action counts as policy.
- “Bold action” is policy if the actor is clearly the government.
- “Addressing climate change” without any specificity in what “addressing” means does not count as policy.
- “Action” on climate change can potentially count as policy if we can decipher the action that they’re referring to.
- Claiming that something is taking up political energy without specifying the policy does not count as policy.
- The charge of misplaced priorities is not policy unless policy is explicitly mentioned.
- Scientific or technological ideas that are not framed in terms of regulation or law are not necessarily policy.

Partisanship

- Discussions of electoral strategy that are framed around partisan blocs count as partisanship.
- When a scientist is warning about something, and there is no mention of a figure who is obviously partisan-coded, it is not coded as partisan.
- Denialism (implicit or explicit) is not automatically partisan in itself, but context matters.
- Merely mentioning a politician as a retelling of events isn’t necessarily partisan.

- Policy disagreement is not automatically coded as partisan if the discussion is purely framed in policy terms.
- Mentioning environmentalists without a clear partisan cue is not considered partisan, but context matters.
- Discussions of environmental organizations with a clear partisan lean generally count as partisan, but context matters.
- Discussions of people who are prominent partisan figures, and the speaker is clearly trying to elicit outrage, are coded as partisan.
- References to Hollywood or celebrities who are referred to in a clearly partisan-coded way are coded partisan.
- References to the hypocrisy of elites can be partisan, but context matters.
- Discussions of presidential debates are partisan.
- References to partisan-coded buzzwords like "climategate" are generally considered partisan.
- Foreign cases with no connection to the USA are generally not coded as partisan.
- Vague mentions of "they" that are clearly about the partisan opposition can be coded as partisan.

Appendix B. Full Regression Results.

Here, we present the full results for our fixed effects logistic regression models, as visualized in Figure 3. Tables report odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals in parentheses.

MSNBC

Variable	Partisan Climate Policy	Climate Partisanship
Intercept	1.22 (0.96, 1.54)	0.38 (0.28, 0.54)***
Climate Change	1.07 (0.86, 1.32)	0.98 (0.76, 1.25)
Congress	1.54 (1.22, 1.93)***	1.04 (0.82, 1.31)
The Presidency	1.08 (0.88, 1.33)	1.27 (1, 1.6)
Presidential Campaign	0.73 (0.59, 0.91)**	1.75 (1.36, 2.26)***
Republican President	0.75 (0.47, 1.19)	1.38 (0.82, 2.33)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Fox News

Variable	Partisan Climate Policy	Climate Partisanship
Intercept	1.08 (0.83, 1.39)	0.72 (0.55, 0.94) *
Climate Change	0.85 (0.69, 1.04)	1.12 (0.91, 1.37)
Democrats	1.02 (0.83, 1.24)	1.11 (0.91, 1.36)
Economic Policy	1.36 (1.09, 1.69) **	0.77 (0.62, 0.96) *
Terrorism	0.77 (0.61, 0.97) *	1.39 (1.1, 1.75) **

Republican President	0.83 (0.55, 1.24)	1.26 (0.84, 1.89)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Appendix C. Collapsing Similar Words and Phrases

Consolidating noun phrases prior to constructing a text network has the advantage of retaining some of the specificity of word usage and thus generating more informative clusters. However, a downside to this approach is that it produces many highly similar but not identical noun phrases whose superficial differences belie their shared meaning. For instance, modeling "carbon emissions" and "carbon gas emissions" as distinct phrases would reduce their interpretive value.

We used SBERT to identify similar keywords and collapse them where appropriate. This involved first embedding each unique noun and noun phrase in the data with SBERT and then computing a pairwise cosine similarity matrix from the resulting embeddings. Then, we filtered this similarity matrix to include only similarities greater than 0.85 and modeled it as an undirected graph. The nodes of this graph are thus nouns/noun phrases, and edges indicate that the two nodes share a cosine similarity of at least 0.85. We collapsed all connected components of this resulting graph into single tokens. Before identifying keywords of context windows, we then recoded all tokens in one of these identified components by substituting the variant with the greatest frequency in the data. For example, in our Fox News data, the noun phrases "global warming," "bad global warming," "warming," and "climate warming" were all recoded to "global warming," which was the most frequently occurring among those variants. Finally, for

the purpose of ranking keywords' frequencies for further analysis, the frequencies of all variants were summed.