

AUTHORITARIAN RHETORIC: THE THEORIES OF PRIMING AND FRAMING APPLIED IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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***Abstract.** The article provides insights into the theories of priming and framing as strategic tools of authoritarian rhetoric. It looks fundamentally at how Donald Trump's speeches significantly shifted the "uncritical" American public's political and ideological directions, turning their democratic values upside down towards an explicitly authoritarian approach to social existence. We have analysed how the processes of priming (increasing the importance of certain issues in the recipients' cognitive network) and framing (highlighting these issues under certain angles to impose particular attitudes towards them) facilitated the effects of sadopopulism in the uncritical public promoting Trump's political success.*

***Key words:** authoritarian rhetoric, declassification, framing, priming, sadopopulism*

1. Introduction

Authoritarian leaders dedicate plenty of resources to controlling domestic opinion through rhetoric and propaganda. To illuminate their influence on individuals' cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours, this article investigates the theories of priming and framing, which have profoundly shaped collective understanding of how people perceive their political and social worlds. Comprehending these theories necessitates keeping in mind how they are connected with the notion of "uncritical public". Therefore, we provide a brief review of priming and framing effects in authoritarian rhetoric in political discourse, aimed at the uncritical public, analyzing the former American president Donald Trump's speeches.

Since his election in 2016, Trump managed to make a significant shift in the American citizens' political and ideological directions, turning the democratic values of liberty and equality upside down, towards entirely different axes. Numerous commentators characterized Trump as a strong man, menacing democracy, a xenophobic and racist demagogue skilled at whipping up crowds, and an opportunistic salesperson lacking any core principles. American scholars, in turn, viewed him as a leader who used populist rhetoric to legitimize his style of governance, while promoting authoritarian values that threatened the liberal norms underpinning American democracy (Pippa, Inglehart 2019: 3).

Despite all that, in 2016, Trump managed to win around 63 million votes from the American citizens (Election 2016: Exit Polls 2016), and in 2020 – even more – 74 million votes (US election results 2020: Joe Biden's defeat of Donald Trump 2020). Therefore, Trump's speeches influenced the political attitudes of his voters and urged them to support an explicitly authoritarian approach. A timely,

detailed analysis of this phenomenon is given by Mohan (2019). She uses fantasy-theme analysis and cluster criticisms to analyse Trump's political rally speeches, providing a critical lens which can help his audience to interpret his rhetorical strategy. Kelly (2020) elaborates on the concept of "ressentiment", explaining how Trump can appeal to malice, revenge, and rage by creating the rhetorical dimensions of an underlying emotional and moral framework, in which resentment, revenge, and victimization are inverted civic virtues. Rowland (2021) analyses the populist and nationalist themes that dominate Trump's rhetoric, illustrating how Trump's speeches present a divisive message designed to create intense negative emotions, especially hate and fear.

Therefore, different approaches have been proposed to analyse this issue. Nonetheless, no studies elaborate on the triangle of priming, framing, and uncritical public theories with the aim of rationalizing how and with what effect Trump managed to raise the salience of the incentives that could turn the public into uncritical and made them support an authoritarian leader. To answer this question, we will analyse the concepts mentioned above, from communication, psychology, sociology, and linguistic perspectives, intending to get a multidisciplinary overview of the phenomenon.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Mind setting through priming

Media-priming theory originates from the models of psychological network memory (Schemer 2013). Following these models, human cognition stores information in the form of nodes, where each node represents a specific concept. These nodes are interconnected through associative pathways, and the proximity between nodes reflects the degree of correlation between them. Therefore, the human information processing apparatus is a cognitive network architecture that consists of more or less strongly interconnected nodes (ideas, beliefs, persistent emotions, affective predispositions, etc.). When media messages succeed at activating a particular concept, it automatically leads to the activation of other nodes connected to that concept and, simultaneously, the suppression of the non-connected ones. The latter may still be present in a person's information-processing apparatus, but if not activated, it plays a minor role (or none at all) in the decision-making process (Schemer 2013: 154-155). For example, suppose a media message activates the stereotype of foreigners being a threat to cultural identity. In that case, its recipients are likely to support policies unfriendly to immigration, even if they know the fact that foreigners work for and pay taxes to their country. The reason for it lies in the fact that this awareness is suppressed in their cognitive network.

The process of media-priming involves two key stages. In the initial stage, information received from a media source, referred to as the "media prime", triggers the activation of preexisting associated knowledge in the recipient's mind, represented by "available" cognitive units. This activation enhances the accessibility of these cognitive units, increasing the likelihood that the recipient will employ them in interpreting and evaluating a subsequently encountered target stimulus, such as an attitude object. The occurrence of a media-priming effect is observed in the second stage when the recipient applies the primed and now more accessible concept to a target stimulus, a behaviour they might not have been

engaged in otherwise. Thus, the first stage involves the priming process, while the second stage pertains to the resulting consequences (Moy and Tewksbury 2016: 5).

Drawing on this knowledge, one can define the phenomenon of priming as a media-induced process of increasing the salience of some cognitions, motivations, or emotions in individuals' cognitive networks (Roskos-Ewoldsen and Klinger 2007: 75) to influence their judgments concerning particular topics, issues, politicians, and public figures.

The greater visibility an issue attains in the news, the more significant is its influence on how voters form opinions about the government. Ordinary individuals, who typically have a limited view of political affairs, focus on events and subjects that receive media attention, essentially considering those not covered in the media as if they don't exist. Consequently, what becomes prominent ("primed"), serves as the primary foundation for the public's beliefs regarding the country's current state. Therefore, the level of prominence issues achieve in the news is the key factor determining public perceptions of the challenges confronting the nation and the country (Iyengar 2008)

Following these considerations, the media can define the level of importance of a particular issue for the overall state of the country. Furthermore, they can guarantee the existence or even erase certain phenomena by activating and suppressing related concepts in their recipients' cognitive networks. The recipients, in their turn, will tend to make their own judgments about particular policies and politicians, by drawing on the media-constructed understandings of what is the most important for them and their country at the time being. For instance, if the immigration issue is primed in the media, its recipients will accept it as important and be interested in the policies that have this issue on their agenda. Moreover, the recipients will evaluate the policies based on how the latter promise to deal with this issue.

In general, people with a heightened interest in politics tend to experience less pronounced priming effects. They could be more adept at discerning between different sources, filtering out biased information, and maintaining a more balanced perspective. On the other hand, these effects can become stronger and more complex, depending on the way political involvement interacts with other features: a high level of confidence in the media enhances the potency of priming effects because individuals are more inclined to integrate the primed concept with their preexisting beliefs and attitudes (Miller and Krosnick 2000). Besides, the impact of priming is contingent on the political context and overarching political attitudes within a given situation. Priming theory also assumes that media influence depends on the recipients' personality traits, their ability to reflect, their social and private interests.

2.2. Mind setting through framing

Media aim not only at priming the phenomena they are referring to, but also at framing them within particular contexts and under certain angles. The notion of framing is, though akin, a more complex process than priming. Framing involves choosing specific elements from a perceived reality and emphasizing them in a manner that encourages a particular definition of a problem, interpretation of its causes, moral assessment, and recommended course of action for the subject in question (Entman 1993: 52). For example, if the immigration issue is framed against the backdrop of the costs for the welfare state, immigration will primarily

be understood as a financial problem. On the other hand, if immigration is discussed in the context of internal security and terrorism, it will no longer be a financial but rather a safety issue (Schemer 2013: 157).

There has been a great deal of research devoted to framing theory. The concept of frame was introduced in communication studies by Tuchman (1978), Gans (1979), and Gitlin (1980), who understood it as an interpretative and organizing tool for making news. Gamson (1989) defines frame as an idea of a general organization that governs specific events, indicating what is newsworthy and what is not. Entman (1993) describes framing as follows:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman 1993: 52).

Therefore, framing pertains to the elements in news content that encapsulate a concept – whether it be an image, a phrase, a keyword, a depiction, an analogy, or a metaphor – employed by an author to communicate the core of an event or issue. Frames facilitate the clarity of the storytelling process and assist audiences in comprehending the news. Additionally, consideration is given to the placement of informative elements such as headings, leads, front pages, photographs, etc.

Lakoff (2004) played a significant role in promoting framing theory as a tool for political communication, generating increased professional interest in this practice. Recently, there has been a growing interest in the connection between political power and framing power, examining both how politicians construct frames and the subsequent impact of these frames on the media. Political communication researchers have established two primary stages in the process of framing: frame-building and frame-setting (Scheufele 1999: 103-122). Frame-building specifies frame development and frame inclusion in speeches and news stories. Frame-setting refers to news consumption and people's frame adoption as means of understanding challenges and concerns.

The central source of the framing process is the cultural and social norms within which speakers and audiences live (idem: 104-105). People interested in public opinion (government actors, interested groups, corporations) have a direct stake in journalists' frames, competing for public attention and acceptance. Thus, the framing process can be influenced by interested people and journalists who usually have their beliefs and perceptions about problem causes and consequences.

Researchers claim that the majority of journalists covering political topics typically adopt either a thematic or an episodic frame (Iyengar 1991). Narratives employing the thematic frame delve into the systemic aspects of issues, emphasizing the political and social contexts in which events and matters unfold (Iyengar 2008). With the episodic frame, stories are focused on people with problems connected with the issue. They tend to specify people and events without delving into larger contexts. In the mainstream media, there is a tendency for employing episodic frames.

When individuals perceive a specific public issue, such as poverty, as linked to a certain concept, for example, unemployment, they view unemployment as a cause of poverty. An article can provide this relationship by clearly stating it or suggesting it in its portrayals of poor people. Generally, the framing process happens without the audience's awareness, but it can also occur through

systematically considering information. In other words, embracing the depiction of a problem in the news is not entirely unreasonable. Consequently, the greater the attention individuals give to the information and the more time they dedicate to contemplating a frame, the greater is its impact (Moy and Tewksbury 2016: 9).

On the whole, framing is a dynamic psychological, communicative, and organizational process, which can be considered both a tool and a product of political strategy. It significantly affects how people form an opinion about any issue in their social and political surroundings. This effect is especially evident if people who undergo the framing process belong to the uncritical public.

2.3. The uncritical public

Fraser (1990) and Toepfl (2020) posit that society's public life occurs within a certain number of partial publics that include participants who perform certain discursive practices according to their beliefs and understandings within the framework of particular environments. Based on the scope of political criticism reflected in the discursive practices, Toepfl (2020: 7-10) divides partial publics into three types: leadership-critical (where criticism can target even the country's highest political leadership), policy-critical (where criticism aims at low-level officials, policies, and institutions), and uncritical (where negative statements can only appear if the political leadership of a country supports them).

The overbalance of uncritical public compared to leadership- and policy-critical ones is a common feature characteristic of authoritarian societies and an essential condition for the success of authoritarian rhetoric. We want to turn to Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) to understand some of the psychological prerequisites that can make a particular individual become a part of the uncritical public.

Freud (1921) builds his study on Group psychology around Le Bon's (1895) Group mind theory, with a mere difference that Le Bon's study is focused on investigating features characteristic to psychological groups and their members, and Freud's study – on investigating personal motives of individuals to become a part of such a group. One of the most fundamental characteristics attributed to this kind of group by Le Bon (1895: 29) is that, while being a part of a psychological group, people become incapable of forming precise judgments, and thus, they have to accept the decisions imposed by those in power. In this way, the participants of such a group tend to lose their ability to critical thinking, and this is why we consider the notion of "psychological groups" described and investigated by Le Bon and Freud to be the predecessor of the notion "uncritical public" introduced by Toepfl (2020). We also adhere to the thought that both notions describe the same phenomena but from different perspectives of the authors' scientific interests.

Unlike Le Bon, Freud (1921: 95) goes beyond merely characterizing the group's particular features and investigates the motives holding a group together. Eventually, he concludes that all the participants of a psychological group are bound by libidinal ties to the leader, on the one hand, and to other group members, on the other. To prove this statement, he offers the example of church and army:

In a Church [...] as well as in an army, however different the two may be in other respects, the same illusion holds good of there being a head – in the Catholic Church Christ, in an army its Commander-in-Chief – who loves all the individuals in the group with an equal love [...]. All the demands that are made upon the individual

are derived from this love of Christ's [...]. It is not without a deep reason that the similarity between the Christian community and a family is invoked, and that believers call themselves brothers in Christ, that is, brothers through the love, which Christ has for them [...]. The like holds good of an army. The Commander-in-Chief is a father who loves all soldiers equally, and for that reason, they are comrades among themselves (Freud 1921: 93-94).

Hence, Freud claims that the skeleton of a psychological group that holds it together, makes it incapable of forming precise judgments, and urges its members to support their leaders in any circumstances, is the affectional feelings towards the leader and other members of the group, comparable to those characteristic to family bonds.

Having analysed the phenomenon of Trump becoming the USA president in 2016 and getting around 74 million votes during the elections in 2020 (US election results 2020: Joe Biden's defeat of Donald Trump 2020), we can conclude that the above-highlighted knowledge on group psychology can be applied only partially to this particular case. On the one hand, Trump's supporters indeed resemble the described psychological groups/uncritical publics. On the other hand, Trump and the way he positions himself towards modern society does not meet the requirements that a leader capable of evoking affectional feelings would have to meet. Kenneth Roth (2017) described his behavioural patterns as follows:

Donald Trump's successful campaign for the US presidency was a vivid illustration of this politics of intolerance [...]. He stereotyped migrants, vilified refugees, attacked a judge for his Mexican ancestry, mocked a journalist with disabilities, dismissed multiple allegations of sexual assault, and pledged to roll back women's ability to control their fertility.

In Roth's perspective, Trump is not presenting himself as a "loving father" who will take good care of the United States citizens, but rather as a powerful abuser, with low moral standards. Moreover, he is not trying to conceal his aggressive authoritarian approach, but on the contrary, remains open about it and even sets it out. The experts on the analysis of right-wing authoritarianism argued that the most remarkable thing about Donald Trump as an authoritarian leader was the fact that he was so obvious about it (Fuchs 2018: 197). Consequently, we can conclude that his voters supported his approach consciously and not while being unaware of its nature.

Having investigated the uncritical public supporting right-wing authoritarianism, Fuchs (2018: 84) made the following statement:

[...] groups that are threatened with decline or doom tend to be more likely to support right-wing authoritarianism. Experience and fear of declassification seems to play a role in the support of right-wing authoritarianism. Declassification is understood in this context as the loss of one's class status, where class in a Bourdieusian sense means the combination of economic class, social status, and cultural status as defined by the level of control of economic power, political power and cultural power of a particular individual or group.

Hence, in Fuchs' perspective, one possible stimulus that can hold the uncritical public together and urge them to follow an authoritarian leader is the fear of declassification, which equals the loss of either economic, political, or cultural power or all of the above. This approach was successfully exploited by German

National Socialists, Italian Fascists, and American Confederates (Neumann 2017: 626) within the policies of which the representatives of other classes were turned into enemies.

According to the 2016 Exit Polls Results released by The New York Times (2016) after Trump's election, to his supporters mostly belonged: 64% of those who thought that the most important political issue was immigration, 79% – who believed that the USA economy was in poor condition, 90% – who were angry about the federal government, 78% – whose financial situation had become worse since 2012 (Fuchs 2018: 83). We can conclude that Trump voters' main concerns were the fear of losing cultural, economic, and political power, which equals the fear of declassification.

In December 2017, a Yale University professor, Snyder (2017), introduced a new concept, that of sadopopulism, which relied on the political situation in the USA during Trump's presidency and further developed the ideas of authoritarianism being supported by those who feared declassification. The concept was later highlighted in more detail in his book *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America*:

Trump was something else: a sadopopulist, whose policies were designed to hurt the most vulnerable part of his own electorate. Encouraged by presidential racism, such people could understand their own pain as a sign of still greater pain inflicted upon others [...]. On one level, a poor person, unemployed worker, or opioid addict who votes away health care is just giving money to the rich [...]. On another level, such a voter is changing the currency of politics from achievement to suffering, from gain to pain, helping a leader of choice establish a regime of sadopopulism. Such a voter can believe that he or she has chosen who administers their pain, and can fantasize that this leader will hurt enemies still more. (Snyder 2018: 272-273)

Thus, sadopopulism describes a phenomenon of the public supporting the policies that are not giving them better opportunities and not making them personally better off for the simple reason that they think these policies can make the representatives of other classes (the "enemies") worse off. Such policies help their supporters overcome the fear of declassification by guaranteeing that, if they choose these policies, they will belong to a certain class within the framework of which, no matter how bad they may be suffering, they are still in a better position than the representatives of other classes (Snyder 2017). This is also the reason why such voters are not criticizing these policies, even if the latter act against them.

Summarizing what has been mentioned before, one of the possible explanations for the phenomenon of Trump being so strongly supported by many USA citizens is their fear of declassification, which, to a certain extent, can be explained within the framework of Snyder's concept of sadopopulism. In this context, we want to take a closer look at Trump's public speeches and analyse his ways of influencing people's agenda or putting the fear of declassification on it by using the theories of priming and framing.

3. Methodology

Our research follows the methodology of Objective Hermeneutics (Lueger and Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 1994: 299), which can be sufficient with small pieces of text as far as the structure reproduction can be demonstrated. Objective

Hermeneutics prefers material that is not produced for the purpose of being analysed, but appears in the context of everyday experience. The analysis includes an explication of Trump's objective motives and objective consequences (i.e. based on real facts and not influenced by personal beliefs and feelings) of his interaction with the audience. Therefore, contextual knowledge is included here, and verbalizations are considered to carry potential structures of meaning that constitute reality.

This study is also based on qualitative content analysis, which is used in both an inductive and a deductive way, with the aim of interpreting data and discovering meaningful patterns, descriptive of the phenomena of priming and framing in Trump's speeches. As we have already discussed, priming describes the process of increasing the importance of certain issues in the recipients' cognitive network, and framing – highlighting these issues from certain angles to impose particular attitudes towards them. Drawing on this knowledge, we have investigated how these processes were exploited in Trump's speeches and whether and how the issue of declassification threat was facilitated within their framework. This technique allowed us to outline the authoritarian potential of Trump's rhetoric and to rationalize his political success.

In our research, the sample size was not determined in advance. Instead, theoretical implications were generated as the sampling proceeded, and the sampling ended when we realized that we had reached theoretical saturation (no new information emerged from the speeches). For this reason, we decided to narrow down our research to the first two years of Trump's presidency. We have chosen to analyse three speeches from each year, with the same interval in approximately four months, which let us see and describe consistent patterns rather than mere coincidences. We decided to focus on Trump's speeches directly and not on the way he or the USA situation was highlighted in the mass media, since he claimed that mass media were mostly fake and that his supporters should either follow his social media accounts or listen to him directly (Trump's 2017 Phoenix, Arizona Rally Full Speech Transcript 2017b).

4. Results

4.1. The declassification threat

In 2016, one of the central themes of Trump's rhetoric was devoted to the problem of the USA citizens suffering from unemployment for the reason that their jobs were stolen because the USA companies were going abroad. For this, Trump blames the government policies in general and the Democrats in particular. For example, he says:

We have a lot to overcome in our country, especially the fact that our jobs are being taken away from us and going to other lands [...]. Look at what the democratic party has done to the city as an example, and there are many others; of Detroit, 40% of Detroit's residents, 40% live in poverty. Half of all Detroit residents do not work, cannot work and can't get a job. Detroit tops the list of most dangerous cities in terms of violent crime. Number one. This is the legacy of the democratic politicians who have run this city. This results from the policy agenda embraced by crooked Hillary Clinton (Donald Trump 2016a. Michigan Speech Transcript: Asks Black Voters "What Do You Have to Lose?").

As a solution to this issue, Trump suggests voting for him and the Republicans, who can change the “destructive” USA policies and are capable of “building a wall” around the border and thereby bringing jobs back to Americans and “protecting” them from foreigners. If he wins, he promises:

Families trapped in welfare will be provided with jobs and opportunity [...]. The government will become lean, effective, responsible, and honest. Our border will be protected, and our children will be safe, very, very safe (Donald Trump 2016a. Michigan Speech Transcript: Asks Black Voters “What Do You Have to Lose?”).

Another attractive characteristic of this speech is that, within its framework, Trump used the word “job” 43 times, 22 framed in a context similar to the one highlighted in the first quotation, and 21 as highlighted in the second. He also rather often used the words “Hillary”, “Clinton”, or “Democrats” (35 times) in the context of incompetent policies. In this way, the term “job” without “Trump” and around “Hillary”, “Clinton”, or “Democrats” always has negative connotations, and vice versa, the word “job” next to “Trump” always suggests positive ones.

Consequently, the issues of the USA’s current economic and political status were primed here. Furthermore, they were placed in the negative frames of money and jobs going abroad and causing poverty due to the incompetent politicians and their “destructive” policies. Framing the issues of economic and political status in such a light facilitates the recipients’ fear of declassification, which can result in the phenomenon of public support of this authoritarian leader. We explain this phenomenon through the theories of priming and framing: if a leader succeeds at activating the concept of declassification threat, it automatically leads to the activation of other ideas connected to it and, at the same time, to the suppression of the non-connected ones. So, in such a constellation, the need to solve the issue of declassification becomes more urgent than the need to sustain democratic values.

At the same time, within the framework of his speech, Trump defines the enemies of the Americans: foreigners stealing their jobs and Democrats incapable of stopping this process or even facilitating it. This speech results in a phenomenon when the recipients’ need to pursue their benefits becomes suppressed and less urgent than their need for a strong leader capable of protecting them from or even hurting the enemies (due to the priming and framing effects). This is a bright example of sadpopulism theory.

On August 15, 2016, Trump held a speech devoted to terrorism in the States (Donald Trump’s speech on fighting terrorism, 2016b). Its main issue was the USA not being safe anymore because of foreigners, who brought terrorism into it. He gave examples of European countries suffering from terrorism and suggested that the same could happen to the States if they did not take immediate action. Moreover, by implying that Hillary Clinton’s refugee plan would cost America around 400 billion dollars, he managed to not only classify immigration as a safety threat, but also as an economic one. For this, he blamed the Democratic Party and their “naïve” policies that stuck to the idea that the Muslim world could change. As a first step to solving this issue, he defined the ability to recognize and name the enemy – the refugees and immigrants (the words he uses rather loosely as equivalents to Radical Islamists).

In this speech, he used the words “Islam”, “Refugee”, and “Immigrant” 34 times in the context of terrorism or potential economic difficulties in the USA.

He also used the names “Obama” and “Clinton” (as Democrats’ representatives) 29 times in the context of incompetent policies responsible for the above-listed issues of terrorism and economic difficulties. Moreover, he used the word “enemies” 3 times with reference to Radical Islamists/refugees/immigrants.

Thus, in this speech, Trump primes the safety and economic issues in the USA. He frames them in the context of terrorism, incompetent policies, and loss of money and activates the threat of losing economic and political power by the recipients. Moreover, he again defines the USA enemies as foreigners and repeats that democratic policies let these foreigners (who brought terrorism to the USA) thrive. At the same time, Trump defines himself as a strong leader capable of recognizing and defeating the enemy.

The same pattern can be seen in the third speech we picked from 2016, which took place on December 30. Its main issue was America losing a lot of money (economic power) and political influence (political power) when it “should be number one” (Donald Trump’s December 30 speech in Hilton Head, S.C., 2016). For this, Trump again blamed Democrats and foreigners, the latter because they stole their money, the former because they let it happen and spent too much on their campaigns (contrary to Trump).

In this speech, he used the words “dollar(s)”, “pay”, “spend(t)” 55 times in the context of America losing their money; “Mexico” – 14 times in the context of stealing from the USA; “Hillary” and “Obama” – 29 times in the context of incompetent policies; “build a wall” – 15 times in the context of what should be immediately done to “rescue” the United States. Another interesting aspect we observed while analyzing this speech was that Trump used the word “love” 11 times to refer to his supporters, as if he was trying to build a bond similar to the one described by Freud. Therefore, we consider that Trump also uses a “Freudian lens”, but it is done through a “sadopopulism” lens. He promises to be a “loving father” who will save those with declassification fear.

Thus, we can conclude that this particular speech was built around the pattern of priming the issues of the economic and political status of the USA and framing them in the context of “threat” or “danger”. This strategy facilitates the fear of declassification and makes the uncritical public support the authoritarian leader. Moreover, Trump tries to delineate the USA’s enemies by blaming the Democratic Party (enemy no. 1) for letting the foreigners (enemy no. 2) take advantage of the USA citizens. In such a constellation, the idea of an urgent need for a strong leader capable of fixing the Democrats’ mistakes and building a wall around the border to protect the USA citizens is primed in the recipients’ cognitive network and facilitates sadopopulism. Furthermore, at some point, Trump even turns to the Freudian methods of winning the uncritical public by trying to establish affectional ties with his audience.

4.2. The new American “hero”

The first speech we picked from 2017 took place on April 29 (Donald Trump Holds a Political Rally in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 2017a). Among its main issues, there were: the USA losing a lot of money in the international agreements (the Democrats’ fault), Trump taking steps to renegotiate or cancel all the agreements that didn’t protect American interests, creating jobs, and protecting the borders by forming an immigration system that would put the interests of the Americans first.

He also tried to introduce another issue that was not present in the speeches of 2016, which we picked for our analysis – the fake media coverage in the USA. For example, he says:

If the media’s job is to be honest and tell the truth, then I think we would all agree the media deserves a very, very big, fat, failing grade [...]. Those are the facts, whether we like them or not. The dishonest media won’t print them, won’t report them because the Washington media is part of the problem. Their priorities are not my priorities, and they are not your priorities, believe me. Their agenda is not your agenda (Donald Trump Holds a Political Rally in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 2017a).

He uses the word “media” 13 times in the context of their being fake, “jobs” 13 times in the context of Trump protecting them from being stolen, “borders” 13 times in the context of Trump doing a great job protecting them, “love” – 10 times with reference to the States or its citizens.

Hence, in 2017, Trump kept following the same lead as he did in 2016, adding the “enemy 3” of fake media to it, and priming the idea that they were a source of lies. Under such circumstances, the urgent need for Americans to be protected from lies got activated in the uncritical public’s minds and became their main priority in comparison with the need for the pluralism of opinions. This strategy helped Trump to disseminate his propaganda. Furthermore, he started positioning himself not as someone who *would* rescue the political and economic situation in the United States, but as someone who *had already started* doing that. In such a way, he reduced the recipients’ fear of declassification. Moreover, he primed the idea that they were being protected and put in a better position than the representatives of other classes.

The second chosen speech took place on August 23, and its main issue was fake media that distorted Trump’s words and deeds (Trump’s 2017 Phoenix, Arizona Rally Full Speech Transcript 2017b). He claimed that without the social media, where he could communicate with his supporters directly, he would never be able to become a president. Another issue was, as usual, Trump creating new jobs and securing the border from immigrants. In our perspective, this could be explained by the “Freudian” approach. For example, he used such phrases as: “Our movement is a movement built on love. It’s love for fellow citizens”, or “We have to come together as Americans with love for the nation and true affection”, or “I love all of the people of our country”.

Within this speech, he used the word “media” 16 times in the context of them being fake, “job(s)” – 15 times, 10 in the context of him bringing the new ones, and 5 in the context that before Trump there were no jobs, “border(s)” – 17 times in the context that he started protecting them and, at long last, “love” – 23 times concerning either his supporters or the USA.

So, among the primed issues, there were: the media, framed in the context of being fake and of being a less reliable source of information than Trump’s words; the economic situation, in the context that it was being improved by Trump and had been bad before him; the political situation, framed in the context that American immigration policies were being improved in favour of Trump’s supporters. From this, we conclude that in this speech, he used almost the same strategies, with the mere difference that the “Freudian” approach was more assertive.

The third speech took place on December 8, 2017 (Donald Trump Holds a Political Rally in Pensacola 2017c). Its main topics were: Trump creating new jobs, facilitating economic growth, making restrictions on immigration policies, and making the USA border safer and stronger. At the same time, he insisted that the USA was still paying for mistakes that the Democrats had made. Within its framework, he used the word “job(s)” 29 times in the context that he kept creating well-paid jobs, “borders” 21 times in the context that they were being better protected, “Democrats” 9 times in the context of weak and dangerous policies, “love” – 15 times with the reference to America or its citizens.

Overall, in this speech, Trump used similar patterns as in both previous ones, with the slight difference that this time he omitted the media issue and put an emphasis on the idea that, although the political and economic situations were becoming better, there was still a lot to work on. In such a way, the declassification threat could be reduced, but only partially resolved, so that the striving for a strong leadership capable of protecting its supporters remained essential. Thus, summarizing everything mentioned above, by priming certain issues (such as the political or economic situation in the country), framing them in the negative context of “threat” or “danger”, and defining a couple of “enemies”, Trump managed to urge the USA democratic society to support an explicitly authoritarian leader and turn a vast amount of its public uncritical. Moreover, he even used the “Freudian” method of putting the public in his favour by trying to evoke their affectional feelings. It should be mentioned that Trump’s speeches often lean towards an episodic frame rather than a thematic one. Using both thematic and episodic framing elements, he tends to highlight specific incidents, cases, or individuals, rather than delving deeply into broader systemic or contextual issues. His communication style often involves vivid storytelling, emphasizing the personal aspects of problems or situations.

5. Conclusion

Our study shows that authoritarian rhetoric uses the strategies of priming and framing to control public opinion and influence individuals’ behaviours. This phenomenon is vividly visible in the speeches of former American president Donald Trump.

The selected analysed 2016 Trump’s speeches were built around the pattern of priming the issues of the economic and political safety of the USA and framing them in the context of “threat” or “danger”. Such an approach facilitated the fear of declassification, which turned into the phenomenon of authoritarian ideology being virally spread in a democratic society. Moreover, Trump defined the USA citizens’ enemies and, by doing so, primed the idea that there was an urgent need to be protected from them. In such a constellation, he activated the need for a quasi-powerful leader, capable to protect his supporters’ agenda, and the need for sustaining democratic values was suppressed. Furthermore, at some point, Trump even managed to establish affectional ties with his audience (Freudian approach) in order to win them over.

In 2017, Trump’s speeches followed the same strategies, with the mere difference that this time, he primed the idea that, although the political and economic situation was becoming better (because of Trump’s actions), there was still a lot to work on. In such a way, the declassification threat could be reduced but

not entirely resolved, so that the striving for a more decisive leadership, capable of protecting its supporters, remained important. In 2017, he also introduced another enemy (the fake media), from which the USA citizens had to be potentially protected and made what we have labelled “his Freudian approach” stronger.

We would also like to point out that, as an authoritarian leader, Trump often frames issues in a way that emphasizes crisis and fear. Trump has used this strategy by portraying certain situations or groups as threats to national security, emphasizing the need for strong and decisive action. He tends to criticize and undermine the credibility of the Democrats and fake media using simple, repetitive messaging to convey his points. Trump’s communication style is characterized by repetitive slogans and catchphrases, simplifying complex issues into easily digestible soundbites. By framing the Democrats and the media as his adversaries, he attempts to undermine their credibility and position himself as the sole source of truth. This strategy is often associated with authoritarian leaders who seek to control information and manipulate public perception.

Although this is a small-scale study, the results suggest that the theories of priming and framing can provide valuable insights into the strategies of authoritarian rhetoric aimed at the uncritical public. Future larger-scale studies could further analyse the audience’s direct response to Trump’s speeches, as well as explore the discursive practices occurring within different groups of his supporters, their attitudes and main issues.

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