

Biased Coverage of Political Rumors: Partisan Bias in the Media's Coverage of Political Rumors in the 2017 Presidential Election in South Korea Through Issue Filtering and Framing

HOON LEE¹

Kyung Hee University, South Korea

JAERYOUNG HUR

Yonsei University, South Korea

JIIYOUNG YEON

Kyung Hee University, South Korea

HONGJIN SHIM

Korea Information Society Development Institute, South Korea

This study aims to shed light on partisan bias that may appear in conventional media's coverage of political rumors, using the 2017 presidential election in South Korea as a context. Specifically, we strive to uncover how media's biased coverage of political rumors is embodied in the way major news media (1) select and (2) frame news stories to damage a candidate whose partisan leaning is less compatible with their ideological tendency. In light of these goals, the results of a content analysis show that the media paid more attention to political rumors concerning a candidate with a challenging ideological stance. Further, findings document that media firms tend to frame political rumors to stress failings concerning a strength of an ideologically discrepant candidate. Essentially, the results of the current research highlight traditional media's liabilities in biased coverage of political rumors in terms of issue filtering and framing.

Keywords: political rumor, partisan bias, conventional media, issue filtering, framing

Hoon Lee: hoonlz@khu.ac.kr

Jaeyoung Hur: jyounghur@yonsei.ac.kr

Jiyoung Yeon: jy.yeon@khu.ac.kr

Hongjin Shim (corresponding author): hjshim@kisdi.re.kr

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The perils of partisan disinformation have rapidly been escalating in tandem with widespread ideological polarization at the elite as well as the citizen levels (Tucker et al., 2018). Notably, political rumors tend to be accepted and shared according to the electorate's partisan attitudes, immediately shaping electoral decisions and thereafter furthering the ideological divide (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Weeks & Garrett, 2014). While social media have typically been regarded as the main culprit in such issues (see e.g., Shin & Thorson, 2017), mass media, such as television and newspapers, have also been identified as a pivotal source of political rumors (Weeks & Garrett, 2014). Indeed, television and newspapers have displayed sizeable agenda-setting effects regarding political rumors, which can then set the stage for propagation through social media (Weeks & Southwell, 2010). In particular, partisan media are prone to picking up unverified political rumors, particularly when stories pertain to a candidate who has a contrasting ideological leaning (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). As such, mass media's coverage of political rumors may exacerbate ideological polarization as they unfairly convey political disinformation to their audience members according to their partisan predispositions.

In light of these concerns, this study aims to shed light on partisan bias that may appear in conventional media's coverage of political rumors. We analyze skewed coverage of political rumors in the midst of the 2017 presidential election in South Korea, which arguably provides an ideal context to investigate partisan bias, given that the election was held unexpectedly following the impeachment of a right-leaning president—the event that fueled ideological animosity. More specifically, we strive to uncover how the media's biased coverage of political rumors is embodied in the way major news media (1) select and (2) frame news stories to damage a candidate whose partisan leaning is less compatible with their ideological tendency. The results of the current research highlight traditional media's liabilities regarding biased coverage of political rumors in terms of issue filtering and framing.

Defining Political Rumors and the Scope of Influence

Rumors refers to unascertained statements that are circulated as if they are plausible facts (Rosnow, 1980). Particularly in an unpredictable situation in which a potential threat is imminent, people may even deliberately spread rumors to cope with it and to pursue self-interest in making money or winning a competition (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Rosnow, 1991; Sunstein, 2014). Thus, during an election period, which involves an extraordinary level of unpredictability, an individual's ideological predilection can translate into a stronger motivation to disseminate rumors that are unfavorable to a potential threat—for example, an opposition party or a candidate (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tucker et al., 2018). Indeed, political rumors expressing a high degree of antagonism toward the opposition often proliferate during a campaign period, as evidenced in recent election campaigns (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Furthermore, the very influence of political rumors is largely contingent on the congruence of the ideological stance of the rumor target and the audience. Mainly because of partisan-motivated reasoning—that is, the tendency to process information in line with the political predisposition (Taber & Lodge, 2006)—people are inclined to embrace adverse rumors concerning the candidate from the party at the other end of ideological spectrum while repudiating those related to the preferred candidate (Garrett, 2011). Such biased processing of political rumors can also lead to a distorted vote choice (Weeks & Garrett, 2014; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020) and error-prone judgment (Allport & Postman, 1965; Garrett, 2011). Moreover, media's

biased coverage of unsubstantiated claims according to the organization's partisan preference can worsen the deleterious influence of political rumors by adding more to ideologically divided publicity (Tucker et al., 2018; Weeks & Southwell, 2010). In extending this line of research, it is worth investigating how the media's partisan bias is concretely embodied in the coverage of political rumors.

Media Bias in the Coverage of Political Rumors

Notwithstanding a multitude of definitions (for a review, see D'Alessio & Allen, 2000), *media bias*, especially with the rapid growth of partisan news channels, refers to the notion that news reports favor the interests of a certain ideological platform over another (Entman, 2007; Peng, 2018). In fact, copious research findings have accumulated that lend credence to the workings of partisan media bias. For instance, a wealth of research has demonstrated that media outlets tend to pick up news stories that are advantageous to their preferred ideological stance while underscoring negative stories about the opposing side (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Baumgartner & Chaqués Bonafont, 2015; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011). On a somewhat different note, Peng (2018) illustrated partisan bias in the media's visual portrayals of presidential candidates by demonstrating that diverse media outlets on and offline tend to depict positively the candidate they endorse (e.g., expressions of happiness) while casting the opposing candidate in an unflattering light (e.g., expressions of anger).

More germane to our analysis of biased rumor coverage, Budak, Goel, and Rao (2016) aptly outlined two distinct processes through which partisan media bias operates: issue filtering, which pertains to how the media selectively report on issues, and issue framing, which considers the ways in which the media present issues to favor one side over the other (see also D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Entman, 2007). Although Budak et al. (2016) found little support for mainstream media's systematic partisan differences, the results attest to skewed selection and slanted framing in the coverage of scandals about the political parties that stand against their ideological preferences. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that media's partisan bias is embodied not in their favorable news reports about an ideologically consonant party but in their lopsided negative coverage of the other side. Given that a news report about political rumor in and of itself tends to be negative, partisan media bias would be also evident in the coverage of political rumors. As such, we discuss in the following sections how partisan bias can be overtly exemplified in how media organizations select and frame news stories about political rumors.

Media Bias Through Issue Filtering of Political Rumors

Media bias in the coverage of political rumors can be most ostensibly detected by the extent to which media institutions select news stories in line with their ideological leanings. As we discussed earlier, people's acceptance of rumors is contingent on whether the ideological stance of the rumor target is congruent. Because of partisan-motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006), individuals' biased processing of political rumors works to reaffirm with their existing norms and values. Consequently, people "choose" to believe vicious rumors about a candidate from the opposing party that can consolidate their existing predispositions, while discrediting attitude-challenging stories about a candidate they endorse (Garrett, 2011; Weeks & Garrett, 2014). Likewise, the coverage of political rumors can be biased to the extent that media firms "choose" to overreport on derogatory political rumors about a candidate whose ideological

stance is incompatible with theirs. Haselmayer, Wagner, and Meyer (2017) offered two reasons for the media's propensity to stress negative stories of disliked actors and to disregard scandals of preferred ones. On the supply front, bias in selective coverage of deleterious news reflects the media's tight connections with consonant political institutions. On the other hand, news media ought to cater to their audience members' demand to choose news stories that are beneficial to ideologically homogeneous political parties and candidates. Accordingly, media bias can be epitomized most overtly through issue filtering of disparaging news stories.

Indeed, the extant literature lends support for partisan bias through issue filtering by demonstrating that media institutions in the United States (Budak et al., 2016; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011) and elsewhere (Baumgartner & Chaqués Bonafont, 2015; Haselmayer et al., 2017) tend to place often undue emphasis on the failings of less agreeable political candidates or parties while discounting adverse stories about preferred political actors. For instance, Budak et al. (2016) found that *The New York Times* overreported on Republican scandals, whereas Fox News paid more attention to Democrat scandals. In a similar vein, Puglisi and Snyder (2011) documented that left-leaning newspapers devoted more editorials and news sections to the coverage of scandals concerning Republican politicians than those involving their Democratic counterparts, while right-leaning newspapers did the opposite. Yet, these authors further noted that partisan bias in the selective coverage of scandals is significantly driven by the supply front (i.e., news makers) even after factors related to the demand side (i.e., audience members) are controlled for. The media's biased coverage of negative news stories was also observed on the Internet, when the findings of a prior work illustrated that left-leaning websites included more negative stories about Republicans, and right-leaning sites featured more damaging reports about Democrats (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Extending this line of research findings that illuminate biased coverage of negative news stories to the media's news reports on political rumors, we put forth the following hypotheses:

H1: The media tend to focus on political rumors concerning a candidate who has an opposing ideological stance.

H1a: The right-leaning media tend to overreport on rumors about liberal candidates compared with conservative candidates.

H1b: The left-leaning media tend to overreport on rumors about conservative candidates compared with liberal candidates.

Media's Framing of Political Rumors About Candidate Trait Qualifications

According to Entman (2007, 2010), *framing* refers to the practice of casting light on a few selected facets of a subject and plugging them together in a narrative, thereby engendering a certain interpretation. Most notably, Iyengar (1991) delineated the distinction between two types of framing: episodic framing, which depicts a reality in terms of individual instances or specific events, and thematic framing, which underscores its broad underlying context and background. This difference in framing, in turn, affects people's attributions of responsibilities for that subject; it is viewed as the repercussions of social and/or

governmental forces (societal responsibility) in thematic framing, whereas it is deemed the result of private actions of individuals (individual responsibility) in episodic framing.

As such, the very importance of framing is inherent in its potential to paint a widely distinct picture of the reality by adjusting the relative importance of perceived dimensions. Indeed, frames can lead to systematically disparate assessments of a political object by making certain ideas more salient while giving other considerations less weight—that is, priming (Entman, 2007, 2010; Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Given that values related to a candidate's image have come to the forefront of political campaigns (Patterson, 1994), it is conceivable that media's framing of political rumors can shape voters' evaluations of a candidate by calling attention to a particular trait qualification, such as personality and performance. In this vein, Stevens and Karp (2012) showcased that media's framing of leadership traits can significantly impact the evaluation of a political actor by making a certain character dimension more prominent.

Previous studies have examined various abstract qualities that the appraisal of a political candidate hinges greatly on. In their early work, Kinder, Peters, Abelson, and Fiske (1980) attended to two key criteria for political actors in the United States: personality that they embody ostensibly and performance that signifies the appraisal of what they did or should do while in office. Further, Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier (2004) delineated a candidate's desirable character attributes with competence, strength, warmth, and trust, which then can be encapsulated into two broad domains: "*the performance-based traits* of competence and strength, and *the interpersonal characteristics* of warmth and trust" (pp. 1182–1183; emphasis in original). Beyond the United States, Johnston (2002) identified two pivotal personality considerations of political leaders in Canada: "*character*, the leader's integrity and empathy; and *competence*, the leader's intellectual and inspirational attributes" (p. 166; emphasis in original). Having reviewed this sprawling literature and compiled the results of a sizable number of studies from 35 elections in seven countries, Bittner (2011) aptly settled on two distinctive trait qualifications of political leaders: character that can be reified by attributes such as honesty and compassion and competence that taps traits such as intelligence and strength of leadership.

Moreover, Clifford (2018) has recently documented that these two trait eligibilities can alter substantially the assessment of political leaders in diverse contexts. More specifically, the author noted that although competence usually plays the most central role in selecting a presidential candidate, moral character is no less influential, especially in shaping the public's judgment about a politician's group behavior. Extending this line of research to the coverage of political rumors, we conjecture that these two trait qualifications—competence and character—are differentially highlighted in distinctive frames of news reports about political rumors, which can alter evaluation of a candidate by making a certain facet more noteworthy. Accordingly, we discuss next how partisan media can frame rumors about political candidates in a biased manner by giving uneven weight to these two trait qualifications.

Media Bias Through Framing of Political Rumors About Candidate Trait Qualifications

To understand partisan bias embedded in the media's framing of political rumors, we need to examine the solid partisan stereotype in relation to two trait qualifications outlined earlier—competence and character. A wealth of evidence from prior works conducted across a multitude of countries for an extended

period (Bittner, 2011; Clifford, 2018; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2017; Hayes, 2005) has been accumulated to present support to the durable partisan stereotype in which conservatives are perceived to be more competent leaders who have stronger leadership, authority, and loyalty, whereas liberals are viewed as possessing a more favorable character, to include compassion, empathy, fairness, and morality. Lakoff's (2016) widely circulated metaphor of a family, which depicts conservatives as strict fathers and liberals as nurturant parents, also alluded to this perceived partisan reputation. Bittner (2011) further documented that voters, regardless of their partisan attachments, are predisposed to assessing political leaders in line with the partisan stereotype, and this tendency is even more pronounced among sophisticates. Political candidates and parties, in turn, put more effort toward bringing to the fore those traits that are deemed to be better by the electorate (Clifford, 2018). Ultimately, the dynamic of this durable partisan stereotype boils down to the notion of "trait ownership," indicating that a particular trait qualification becomes the currency of a political party or candidate, to the extent that the political party or candidate has a good reputation on that dimension (Hayes, 2005).

Extending this line of literature to political rumors, it is arguable that people respond more quickly to negative stories about a specific trait qualification that is perceived as a strength according to this partisan stereotype—that is, a liberal's character and a conservative's competence. In contrast, negative stories concerning perceived weaknesses are less remarkable, and thus less likely to receive public attention, given that they plainly conform to voters' preexisting beliefs. In this light, the affective intelligence theory posits that familiar, nonthreatening cues prompt a reliance of habit, whereas unfamiliar stimuli can result in more attentive message processing (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). On a somewhat different note, a previous study found that novel, surprising stories have more far-reaching viral influence than plausible stories (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Moreover, Hayes (2005) noted in light of "trait ownership" that a candidate's failure to perform well on an owned trait (i.e., perceived partisan strength) can prompt an immediate public reaction, which is tangible in a sharp decline at the polls. As such, we contend that more damaging political rumors about a perceived partisan strength as compared with those about a weakness can draw a higher level of audience attention. Accordingly, we put forward the following hypotheses:

H2: People respond more to political rumors about a partisan strength of a certain party than those about a weakness.

H2a: People respond more to rumors about the competence of conservative candidates than liberal candidates.

H2b: People respond more to rumors about the character of liberal candidates than conservative candidates.

More important, this partisan stereotype painting the perceived strengths of trait qualifications lends plausibility to the media's biased framing of political rumors, especially in a highly divided media landscape such as the one in South Korea (Han, 2018). Given that the media's utmost interest lies in amassing the attention of an audience, they pay more heed to political rumors about a perceived strength of a certain party, which can ripple through the public for the reasons outlined earlier. Furthermore, news reports about a partisan strength align better with the very definition of news; after all, news is out of

something extraordinary. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the media pay greater attention to political rumors about a specific trait qualification that is perceived as a partisan strength:

H3: The media tend to focus on political rumors concerning a perceived partisan strength of a certain party.

H3a: The media tend to focus on political rumors about the competence of conservative candidates.

H3b: The media tend to focus on political rumors about the character of liberal candidates.

Further taking the ideological leaning of the press into account, the media's emphasis on a strength of a certain party in their coverage of political rumors can translate into partisan media's stress on rumors about a trait qualification that is perceived to be a strength of the opposing side. Supporting this line of reasoning, Hayes (2005) maintained that undermining the opposing party's strength rather than emphasizing its own currency is a more rewarding strategy in a political campaign. As such, we expect that partisan media will tend to focus more on rumors about a strength of an ideologically heterogeneous camp—that is, the right-leaning media on rumors related to a trait that is perceived to be owned by liberals, and the left-leaning media on rumors regarding a solid qualification of conservatives. That is, the right-leaning media would place greater emphasis on character (i.e., perceived strength of liberals) rumors, while the left-leaning media tend to center on competence (i.e., perceived strength of conservatives) rumors.

H4: The media tend to focus on political rumors about a strength of the ideologically dissimilar side.

H4a: The right-leaning media place more emphasis on character rumors.

H4b: The left-leaning media place more emphasis on competence rumors.

Finally, the synthesis of the expectations pertaining to biased news reports of political rumors on trait qualifications from H1, H3, and H4 leads us to expect that media organizations pay more attention to a rumor concerning a perceived partisan strength of a candidate, especially when the target for that rumor possesses an opposing ideological stance. More concretely, we surmise that news media can maximize their profits when their coverage of political rumors centers on the perceived strength of an ideologically incongruous candidate, given that such stories can trigger more ripples in people's minds. As such, we predict that the right-leaning media will underscore political rumors concerning liberal candidates' character, whereas the left-leaning media will highlight those regarding conservative candidates' competence.

H5: The media tend to focus on those rumors concerning a strength of a candidate who has a mismatched ideological stance with the media's.

H5a: The right-leaning media tend to focus on those rumors concerning liberal candidates' character.

H5b: The left-leaning media tend to focus on those rumors concerning conservative candidates' competence.

South Korea as a Case to Study Partisan Media Bias About Trait Ownership

The previously mentioned notion of trait ownership—that is, the conservative’s competence and the liberal’s character—has also been settled as a stereotype in South Korea, confining a politician from a particular party to a certain image. For instance, candidates from a liberal party are being assessed with a higher standard in terms of character ethics, yet they are typically portrayed as impotent public servants (Kang, 2014). On the other hand, pledges to strengthen the nation’s economy have long been the main staple for conservative candidates to be elected (Kang, 2016), further attesting to Korean voters’ expectations about conservatives’ competence. Major media in Korea also tend to highlight conservative figures’ competence (or incompetence; Jung, 2021). These contrasting trait qualifications are exemplified by the arguably two most respected presidents from either ideological stance—conservative Park Chung-hee and liberal Roh Moo-hyun. In light of these considerations, this study’s context, the 2017 presidential election in South Korea, should serve as an ideal case to study partisan bias: It was held in the aftermath of citizens’ rallies to oust the incompetent conservative president Park Geun-hye, who afforded her friend Choi Soon-sil undeserved leeway to exploit the government (Koo, 2017).

Method

Data Collection

This study conducted a quantitative content analysis of online news stories published in top five daily newspapers (*The Chosun Ilbo*, *The JoongAng Ilbo*, *The Dong-A Ilbo*, *The Hankyoreh*, and *The Kyunghyang Shinmun*), four composite cable channels (JTBC, TV Chosun, Channel A, and MBN), and three terrestrial networks (KBS, MBC, and SBS) during South Korea’s presidential election period in 2017. We first identified a total of 87 distinct topics of political rumors from the Seoul National University’s fact-check site (<https://factcheck.snu.ac.kr>), arguably most comprehensive fact-checking site in Korea, from January 3, 2017, when the service was launched at the site, until May 9, 2017, which was voting day.² The fact-check center of Seoul National University compiled news articles, in which mainstream media verified stories for factual accuracy that were circulated among the public during the 2017 election period, and presented summaries of media’s fact-checking results. Although some stories are authenticated as being factual, we incorporated topics of all of these articles available through the center’s site during the mentioned period; we defined rumors as statements that were circulated as if they were plausible facts (Rosnow, 1980). While using these topics as keywords, each of which is composed of three to four words, we searched news stories on Naver (<https://www.naver.com>), the most popular portal in Korea, and collected in-link news stories that could be directly accessed within the portal’s interface. However, for *The Chosun Ilbo* and *The JoongAng Ilbo*, we gathered news articles available through an individual media firm’s website using the same keywords, given that news articles from these two sources were not serviced through Naver during this time frame. After deleting duplicate news stories, a total of 1,578 online news articles of political rumors during the election period were found.

² The full list of these 87 topics is presented in the Appendix (<https://bit.ly/3DTkrqx>).

Variable Coding

Media's Ideological Position

According to the traditional media landscape in Korea, three daily newspapers (*The Chosun Ilbo*, *The JoongAng Ilbo*, and *The Dong-A Ilbo*) were coded to hold a right-leaning proclivity, while two daily newspapers (*the Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang Newspaper*) were categorized as left-leaning media. The ideological stance of other media outlets in the current research was classified according to a previous study that examined partisan media bias during the 2017 Korean presidential election period according to the proportion of favorable and unfavorable coverage concerning left- or right-leaning parties (Kim & Cheong, 2018). Particularly, Kim and Cheong (2018) documented that three composite cable channels (TV Chosun, Channel A, and MBN) and one terrestrial network (MBC) placed greater emphasis on news stories against the leading liberal party, while one composite cable channel (JTBC) and two terrestrial networks (KBS and SBS) endorsed the regime change from the former conservative administration. Drawing on these classifications, three daily newspapers (*The Chosun Ilbo*, *The JoongAng Ilbo*, and *The Dong-A Ilbo*), three composite cable channels (TV Chosun, Channel A, and MBN), and one terrestrial network (MBC) were identified as right-leaning media, whereas two daily newspaper (*the Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang Newspaper*), one composite cable channel (JTBC), and two terrestrial networks (KBS and SBS) were coded as left-leaning.

Ideological Position of Rumor Target Candidate

Political rumors we investigated mainly targeted five major candidates in the 2017 Korean presidential election, who represented distinct ideological viewpoints. First, Moon Jae-in from the Democratic Party and Sim Sang-jung from the Justice Party were considered liberal target candidates. On the other hand, Hong Jun-pyo from the Liberty Korea Party, Yoo Seung-min from the Barun Party, and Ahn Cheol-soo from the People's Party were deemed conservative candidates. Although Ahn Cheol-soo can be viewed as an ideologically moderate candidate, he was coded as a conservative candidate, given that he was primarily supported by right-leaning voters; in fact, conservatives votes were split among three candidates (Hong, Yoo, and Ahn) in the 2017 election (W.-T. Kang, 2017). Furthermore, right-leaning media featured more favorable news stories for Ahn's party (Kim & Cheong, 2018). Along this line of consideration, Ahn Cheol-soo was coded as a conservative candidate. Meanwhile, a rumor story without a reference to a specific candidate was coded as one with a neutral target. For instance, a news article about North Korea's alleged bombing of South Korea was regarded as one with a neutral target, for the story did not concern a particular candidate. However, a rumor story apparently critical of a conservative or a liberal position was coded as its respective target, even if that article did not explicitly mention a particular target candidate.³ As a result,

³ As an example of a liberal rumor without a specific target candidate, a newspaper article addressed Hong Jun-pyo's charge against a former liberal president, Roh Moo-hyun, for taking a bribe (JoongAng Ilbo, 2017a). Although this allegation did not directly target a particular candidate, it was coded as a liberal rumor because the story was apparently critical of a previous liberal administration. As an example of a conservative counterpart, a newspaper article claimed that the economic performance of the conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations was weaker than that of the preceding liberal

638 news reports of political rumors were coded as those targeting conservative candidates, whereas 714 articles were of liberal targets. Finally, 226 news articles were identified as neutral.

Framing of Rumors

We coded a news story as character framing when the coverage of political rumors revolved around candidates' personal matters, such as corruption scandals involving family and moral hazards. Examples of character framing included those articles with titles such as "Suspicion of High-Handed Personal Administration of Moon Jae-in's Son" (Chosun Ilbo, 2017) and "Ahn Cheol-soo's Wife, Suspicious 1+1 Preferential Hiring at Seoul National University, Capturing Supporting Document. . ." (SBS, 2017a). In contrast, competence framing encompasses those news reports highlighting the lack of capacity as a public servant or failures to fulfill campaign pledges during his or her previous term of office. These include articles with headlines such as "Controversy over Ahn Cheol-soo's kindergarten remark: Moon Jae-in Said, 'Educational philosophy disappeared . . . no policy competence'" (MBN, 2017) and "Moon Jae-in's Pledge to Create 81 million Public Jobs. . . Is It Possible?" (SBS, 2017b).

Number of User Comments

Users who read an in-link news story on Naver have the capacity to write comments at the bottom of the corresponding article. Prior research lends credence to the link between the number of user comments and the level of public attention. For example, studies (Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015; Ziegele & Quiring, 2013) have documented that user-generated content such as user comments can augment people's attention and further prompt subsequent discussions. In addition, Walther and Jang (2012) noted that people tend to respond more strongly to those news stories on which they can post interactive comments. Along this line of reasoning, we used the number of user comments as a proxy for the degree of public attention. As such, we recorded the number of user comments left for the articles of 10 media firms out of 12 except *The Chosun Ilbo* and *The JoongAng Ilbo*, which did not provide articles through Naver during the time period of this research. On average, 117 comments were posted per each rumor article on Naver ($M = 116.80$, $SD = 611.93$).

Intercoder Reliability

Four graduate students were trained by conducting pilot coding of 100 links that were randomly selected from 1,578 links. The intercoder reliability measure from this preliminary coding was appropriate (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .892$). The second pilot coding of additional 100 articles resulted in an even more solid reliability measure (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .932$). Since then, coding was applied to the entire data set from August 1, 2018, to August 16, 2018 (final Krippendorff's $\alpha = .928$). When three or more of the four coders agreed, the value coding of each variable was determined to be the answer. If only the half of the coders gave the same value, we used the value of the coder who was closest to the average value for each variable.

administration (JoongAng Ilbo, 2017b). In this report, none of the conservative presidential candidates was mentioned.

Results

To begin, we first hypothesized that the media tend to focus on those rumors concerning a candidate who has an opposing ideological stance (H1). As shown in Table 1, the media paid more attention to political rumors when they are related to a candidate who has an incongruent ideological stance ($\chi^2 = 26.458$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). More specifically, the right-leaning media tend to overreport rumors about liberal candidates than those about conservative candidates (49.5% and 39.5%, respectively; H1a). On the contrary, the left-leaning media's coverage of rumors centered more on conservative candidates than liberal candidates (41.8% and 39.2%, respectively; H1b). Interestingly, the left-leaning media (19.0%), as compared with its right-leaning counterpart (11.0%), seem to pay more attention to rumors about a neutral target.⁴

Table 1. Cross-Tabulation of Frequency of Rumor Reports by Ideological Leaning of Media and Partisan Stance of Rumor Target.

| Partisan Stance of Rumor Target | Ideological Leaning of Media | | Total (%) |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| | Right (%) | Left (%) | |
| Conservative | 365 (39.5) | 273 (41.8) | 638 (40.5) |
| Neutral | 102 (11.0) | 124 (19.0) | 226 (14.3) |
| Liberal | 458 (49.5) | 256 (39.2) | 714 (45.2) |
| Total | 925 (100.0) | 653 (100.0) | 1,578 (100.0) |

Note. $\chi^2 = 26.458$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$.

Next, we anticipated that rumors about a perceived partisan strength would trigger more ripples in voters' minds (H2) than would rumors about a weakness. To examine this, we coded the number of user comments on the portal, assuming that the greater the number of user comments written, the more user attention the corresponding news report would draw. We then conducted a two-way analysis of variance examining whether the type of rumor frames (competence and character frames) and the ideological stance of rumor targets (conservative, neutral, and liberal candidates) affect the average number of user comments left for a single news report. The results show that the frame type, the ideological stance of rumor targets, and the interactions between these two exert little influence on the average number of user comments (see Table 2).

⁴ The 2017 election was held rather unexpectedly, ensuing the failure of a conservative administration. Hence, both liberal candidates (Moon and Sim) strongly aligned themselves with progressive policies. On the other hand, candidates from the conservative side, Yoo and Ahn in particular, distanced themselves somewhat from overtly conservative policies, even if they garnered support mainly from conservative voters. Although we are unable to provide a conclusive explication, left-leaning media's relative focus on neutral rumors may be interpreted as their suspicion about some conservative candidates' ambiguous lines.

Table 2. Two-Way Analysis of Variance on the Number of User Comments by Rumor Frame and Target.

| Predictor | The Number of User Comments | | | | <i>p</i> | Partial η^2 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|----------|----------|------------------|
| | Sum of Squares | <i>df</i> | MS | <i>F</i> | | |
| Rumor Frame | 21368.775 | 1 | 21368.775 | .057 | .811 | .000 |
| Rumor Target | 47146.080 | 2 | 23573.040 | .063 | .939 | .000 |
| Rumor Frame \times Rumor Target | 304981.175 | 2 | 152490.587 | .406 | .666 | .001 |
| Error | 589739786.925 | 1,572 | 375152.536 | | | |
| Total | 612040455.000 | 1,578 | | | | |
| Corrected Total | 590511458.492 | 1,577 | | | | |

Note. *N* = 1,578. MS = mean square.

Nonetheless, a post hoc analysis (see Table 3 and Figure 1) illustrates that portal users responded more strongly to rumor reports about liberal candidates' character ($M = 135.51$, $SD = 659.11$) than stories about the character of their conservative ($M = 124.04$, $SD = 440.61$) and neutral ($M = 18.38$, $SD = 37.416$) counterparts (H2a). Conversely, the average number of user comments left for each rumor report about competence was greater for conservative candidates ($M = 108.13$, $SD = 822.90$) than their liberal counterparts ($M = 82.50$, $SD = 271.23$), although fewer than for neutral targets ($M = 142.36$, $SD = 652.490$; H2b). However, none of these differences was statistically significant, mainly because of extraordinarily high standard deviations; in other words, the number of user comments fluctuates immensely from one article to another.

Table 3. Post Hoc Mean Comparison of the Number of User Comments by Rumor Frame and Target.

| Groups by Rumor Frame and Target | The Number of User Comments | | | | Boot 95% CI | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|-------------|--------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Boot Bias | <i>BootSE</i> | LL | UL |
| Character \times Conservative | 124.04 | 440.612 | 0.35 | 27.45 | 78.03 | 180.45 |
| Character \times Neutral | 18.38 | 37.416 | 0.07 | 13.50 | 0.00 | 44.03 |
| Character \times Liberal | 135.51 | 659.107 | -0.63 | 32.53 | 87.28 | 197.17 |
| Competence \times Conservative | 108.13 | 822.899 | -1.69 | 41.33 | 55.12 | 182.94 |
| Competence \times Neutral | 142.36 | 625.490 | -0.67 | 40.59 | 74.42 | 219.62 |
| Competence \times Liberal | 82.50 | 271.231 | -0.43 | 14.87 | 56.83 | 109.79 |
| Total | 116.80 | 611.925 | -0.72 | 15.28 | 92.86 | 144.51 |

Note. *N* = 1,578. Boot 95% CI = 95% confidence interval based on the bootstrapping of 5,000 samples; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

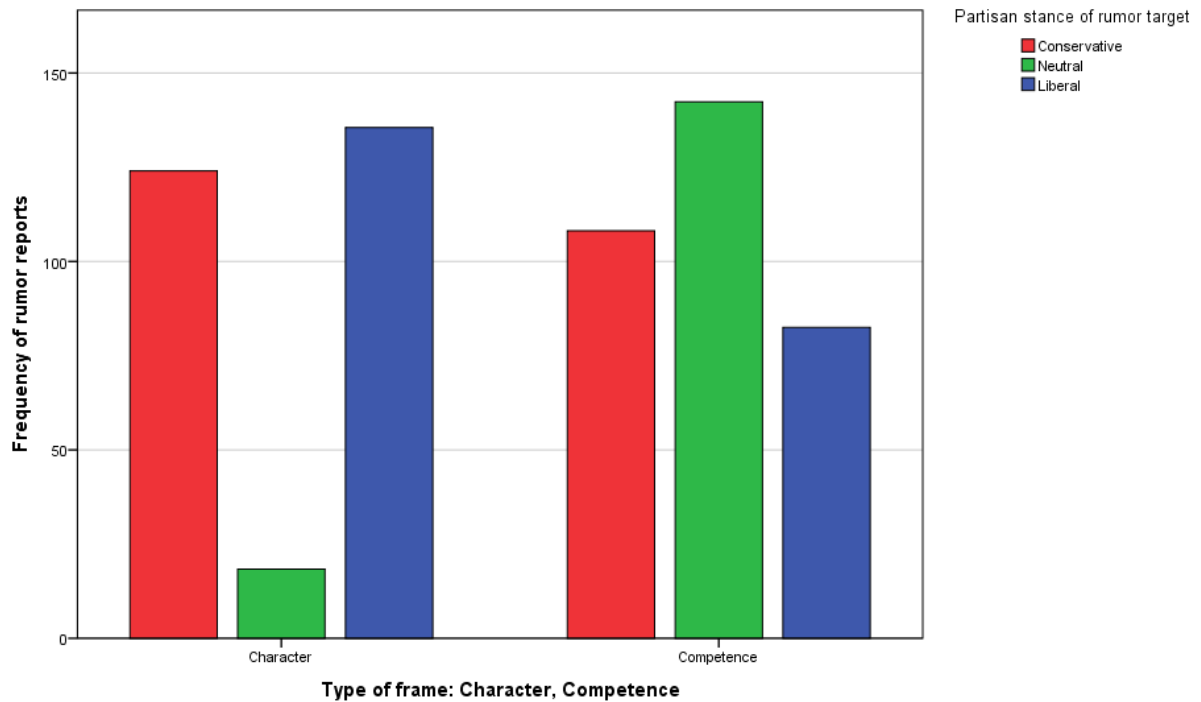


Figure 1. Bar graph for the number of user comments by rumor frame and target.

Given that the media's utmost interest lies in amassing people's attention, we hypothesize that the media pay more heed to political rumors about a specific trait qualification that is perceived as a partisan strength (H3). The results lend support to this expectation, illustrating that whether competence or character is the main theme of news report depends largely on the ideological stance of rumor targets ($\chi^2 = 196.178, df = 2, p < .01$). More specifically, Table 4 shows that competence frames (60.2%) exceeded character frames (39.8%) when rumors targeted conservative candidates, while character frames (56%) prevailed over competence frames (44%) for liberal candidates. Furthermore, the media paid more attention to rumors regarding liberal candidates' character than those regarding conservatives' character, as the former type outnumbered the latter type (400 vs. 254 articles). Conversely, the media wrote more stories about competence rumors for conservative candidates than liberal candidates (384 vs. 314 articles). Together, the results illustrate that the media tend to focus on political rumors about competence of conservative candidates (H3a) and character of liberal candidates (H3b). Interestingly, competence frames (96.5%) dominated character counterparts (3.5%) for neutral targets.

Table 4. Cross-Tabulation of Frequency of Rumor Reports by Partisan Stance of Rumor Target and Type of Frame.

| Type of frame | Partisan Stance of Rumor Target | | | Total (%) |
|---------------|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Conservative (%) | Neutral (%) | Liberal (%) | |
| Character | 254 (39.8) | 8 (3.5) | 400 (56) | 662 (42) |
| Competence | 384 (60.2) | 218 (96.5) | 314 (44) | 916 (58) |
| Total | 638 (100) | 226 (100) | 714 (100) | 1,578 (100) |

Note. $\chi^2 = 196.178$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$

We further hypothesized that a particular media organization gives more weight to rumors about a strength of an ideologically discrepant candidate (H4). The results summarized in Table 5 support this notion, illustrating that conservative and liberal media highlight distinct facets of political rumors ($\chi^2 = 6.676$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). More specifically, the results lend credence to H4a, demonstrating that the tendency to highlight rumors concerning candidates' character was more evident for right-leaning media (44.6%) than their left-leaning counterparts (38.1%). Further, in line with H4b, the left-leaning media paid more attention to rumors about competence (61.9%) than the right-leaning media (55.4%). However, competence frames were more prevalent regardless of ideological leaning of the media.

Table 5. Cross-Tabulation of Frequency of Rumor Reports by Ideological Leaning of Media and Type of Frame.

| Type of Frame | Ideological Leaning of Media | | Total (%) |
|---------------|------------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| | Right (%) | Left (%) | |
| Character | 413 (44.6) | 249 (38.1) | 662 (42.0) |
| Competence | 512 (55.4) | 404 (61.9) | 916 (58.0) |
| Total | 925 (100.0) | 653 (100.0) | 1,578 (100.0) |

Note. $\chi^2 = 6.676$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$.

Finally, we hypothesized that the media tend to focus on those rumors concerning a strength of a candidate who has a mismatched ideological stance (H5). More specifically, we posited that the right-leaning media tend to focus on those rumors concerning liberal candidates' character (H5a), whereas the left-leaning media tend to focus on those rumors concerning conservative candidates' competence (H5b). The findings for these expectations are reported in Table 6. As for the right-leaning media, the results demonstrate that they overreported rumors about liberal candidates as compared with conservative candidates (458 vs. 365 out of 925 articles) and, further, that the former reports were more geared toward liberal candidates' character than competence (54.6% vs. 45.4%). In fact, conservative media paid the most attention to liberal candidates' character (250 out of total 925 articles) in their reports of political rumors. Thus, H5a was supported.

Table 6. Cross-Tabulation of Frequency of Rumor Reports by Partisan Stance of Rumor Target and Type of Frame for Right- and Left-Leaning Media.

| Ideological Leaning of Media | Right | | | | Left | | | Total (%) |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|
| | Partisan Stance of Rumor Target | | | | Partisan Stance of Rumor Target | | | |
| | Conservative (%) | Neutral (%) | Liberal (%) | Total (%) | Conservative (%) | Neutral (%) | Liberal (%) | |
| Character | 157 (43.0) | 6 (5.9) | 250 (54.6) | 413 (44.6) | 97 (35.5) | 2 (1.6) | 150 (58.6) | 249 (38.1) |
| Competence | 208 (57.0) | 96 (94.1) | 208 (45.4) | 512 (55.4) | 176 (64.5) | 122 (98.4) | 106 (41.4) | 404 (61.9) |
| Total | 365 (100) | 102 (100) | 458 (100) | 925 (100) | 273 (100) | 124 (100) | 256 (100) | 653 (100) |
| Chi-square | $\chi^2 = 80.718, df = 2, p < .001$ | | | | $\chi^2 = 116.314, df = 2, p < .001$ | | | |

On the other hand, left-leaning media were slightly more inclined toward reporting rumors about conservative candidates than liberal candidates (273 vs. 256 out of 653 articles), with a particular emphasis on issues other than character (64.5% vs. 35.5%). For those left-leaning media, of primary interest was rumors about conservative candidates' competence (176 out of total 653 articles). Hence, the data lend support for H5b. Meanwhile, both right- and left-leaning media reserved the smallest amount of coverage for rumors about neutral targets (102 out of 925 and 124 out of 653 articles, respectively), and the most interest was given to competence rather than character (94.1% and 98.4%, respectively).

Discussion

While synthesizing a wide scope of literature on political rumors, media bias, and framing, this study sheds light on partisan bias manifested in the media's coverage of political rumors, mainly through issue filtering and framing. We aimed to highlight that how media organizations of differing partisan preference select and frame political rumors with bias against candidates of incongruent ideological stances. As such, the findings presented here do provide broad implications for the literature that draws on media bias and political rumors.

To begin, we attended to political rumors in the context of an ideologically divided media landscape. In fact, past studies documented an individual's motivation to spread rumors that can be detrimental to an opposition party or a candidate (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tucker et al., 2018). Moreover, a sizable body of literature building on partisan-motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006) pointed to audiences' biased processing and, moreover, acceptance of political rumors according to their ideological inclinations (Allport & Postman, 1965; Garrett, 2011; Weeks & Garrett, 2014; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). The present study extended this line of research, but approached partisan bias in relation to political rumors not from the viewpoint of audience members, but from the standpoint of news suppliers. Indeed, news organizations' biased coverage of political rumors can exacerbate harmful influence of political rumors by further widening the ideological divide (Tucker et al., 2018; Weeks & Southwell, 2010).

Relatedly, our study further enriched the solid scholarship on the media's partisan bias by broadening it to include news reports about political rumors. In this regard, we postulated that media organizations, in their coverage of political rumors, tend to selectively pick up damaging news stories about opposing parties and candidates (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Baumgartner & Chaqués Bonafont, 2015; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011) and cast them in an unfavorable light (Peng, 2018). Put another way, we investigated partisan bias that is embodied through issue filtering and framing. As for the first process, we found that the media paid more attention to political rumors concerning a candidate who has a challenging ideological stance (H1). This finding echoes the extant literature on partisan bias through issue filtering, which illustrates that media institutions (Baumgartner & Chaqués Bonafont, 2015; Budak et al., 2016; Haselmayer et al., 2017; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011) tend to place often undue emphasis on the failings of antagonistic political candidates or parties while discounting adverse stories about preferred political actors.

Aside from issue filtering, we suspected that media bias can also be exemplified in how media organizations frame political rumors in line with their partisan predispositions. In this light, we noted that a distinctive frame of political rumors can shed light on a certain dimension of a political candidate that can shape his or her appraisal, and we identified two trait qualifications based on the extant literature—character and competence (Bittner, 2011; Druckman et al., 2004; Johnston, 2002). We further attended to the durable partisan stereotype in relation to two trait qualifications in which conservatives are perceived to be more competent leaders who have stronger leadership, authority, and loyalty, whereas liberals are viewed as possessing a more favorable character, to include compassion, empathy, fairness, and morality (Bittner, 2011; Clifford, 2018; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2017; Hayes, 2005).

Drawing on this notion, we posited that political rumors about a perceived partisan strength can induce a higher level of audience attention than those about a weakness, which can be estimated by the number of user comments. That is, the public tends to pay more attention to rumors about a conservative candidate's competence and a liberal candidate's character (H2). The result presents additional insights regarding the notion of "trait ownership" (Hayes, 2005), implying that news stories about a trait that is supposedly owned by a certain ideological stance are more newsworthy.

Along this line, we found that the media would place greater emphasis on a rumor about a perceived partisan strength (H3), provided that such story would more successfully amass public attention. In addition, the results documented that media firms tend to underscore political rumors about a strength of an ideologically discrepant candidate (H4). Finally, the media's proclivity to highlight rumors about the strength of the other side was augmented when those stories revolved around a candidate of a challenging partisan stance (H5). Taken together, the results illustrate that right-leaning media paid the most attention to liberal candidates' rumors about character, while for those left-leaning media, of primary interest were rumors about conservative candidates' competence. Essentially, these findings contribute to the literature related to partisan bias and framing. More specifically, partisan media tend to frame news about opposing parties and candidates in an unfavorable light (Peng, 2018) by stressing political rumors about a perceived strength of a certain party—that is, conservatives' competence and liberals' character (Bittner, 2011; Clifford, 2018; Goggin & Theodoridis, 2017; Hayes, 2005).

Nevertheless, the results of this study should be interpreted with caveats. First, this study attended less to different press types (e.g., television vs. newspaper), given that the most emphasis was placed on the ideological leaning of a particular source. In fact, a supplementary analysis (results available on request) suggests that newspapers are slightly more inclined toward competence than character framing as compared with television networks. Hence, scholarly efforts would benefit from investigating if partisan bias is more or less prominent for a specific media type. Relatedly, our data only included news reports from traditional media, while overlooking those rumors circulated through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Thus, it is worth exploring how rumor stories are selected and framed by social media channels, especially those with extreme ideological predilections. Finally, this study analyzed partisan bias from the perspective of news suppliers, while speculating that biased coverage of political rumors may supposedly worsen ideological polarization. Although we found notable degrees of partisan bias in the media's coverage of political rumors, it is left unexamined how skewed filtering and framing can affect citizens' attitudes and behavior. For instance, the media's filtering and framing of rumors in line with partisan weaknesses (e.g., conservatives' character and liberals' competence) can consolidate voters' stereotypes about candidates, which could subsequently prompt people's tendency to accept and share political rumors selectively according to the ideological divide. Therefore, future studies should explore the avenue to understanding the impacts of partisan bias in the coverage of political rumors.

Despite these limitations, we can extrapolate from the main findings of this study an ostensible pattern of partisan bias in the media's coverage of political rumors. The current research theoretically contributes further to the rich extant literature of media bias by extending it to the coverage of political rumors. Practically, the findings of the present study can be construed as sounding the alarm against ideological polarization that may stem from biased coverage of political rumors, especially when it is coupled with the well-evidenced tendency of individuals to process news in line with their partisan stance (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

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