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Local television news coverage of the 2024 presidential election

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how local Sunday morning news programs in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio covered the 2024 US presidential election during the final 100 days before Election Day. Using qualitative content analysis of 15 newscasts, the study identifies two dominant frames: horse-race coverage and localized issue framing. Horse-race coverage emphasized polling data and pundit commentary, often without providing additional context or analysis. Localized framing varied across states. In Minnesota and Ohio, coverage centered on the vice-presidential candidates, though Minnesota stations gave more sustained attention to their home-state candidate. In Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, the focus shifted to issues of democracy, voting rights, and election integrity. These findings illustrate how local television stations blended national electoral narratives with state-specific concerns, sometimes reinforcing and at other times diverging from broader media trends. The study contributes to ongoing research about election coverage, media framing, and the role of local journalism in shaping public understanding during high-stakes political events.

Local journalism was not built for this moment. That's the quiet fear pulsing through civic discourse as the United States barrels toward each presidential election more fractured than the last. For decades, local television news was seen as a stabilizing force, an anchor in the democratic imaginary, trusted more than national outlets, closer to the people it serves, and able to translate political stakes into everyday relevance. But, in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, that presumed strength was tested. What happens when the civic function of local news collides with the spectacle of national politics? When public service meets horse-race? When do local anchors become narrators of a democratic crisis? While journalism studies have long documented the rise of interpretive and strategic coverage in newspapers (Patterson, 2016, 2017), the local television space remains underexamined. Yet it is here, on broadcast channels tucked between farm reports and high school sports, that democracy is rehearsed in intimate, affective ways.

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This study examines how local news, often perceived as a vestige of broad civic trust (Darr & Harman, 2024), covered the 2024 US presidential race during its most crucial stretch: the final 100 days. Specifically, we use framing theory to analyze 15 Sunday morning political affairs programs from five local television stations located in strategically important states: Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Ohio. These stations did not just cover the election; they mediated it, shaping public understanding not only of who was winning but of how democracy was functioning. We focus on how these programs framed the election, especially through polling and horse-race coverage, and how those frames construct the boundaries of local journalism's democratic role. By focusing on how local Sunday programming framed the 2024 election, this article helps to understand the version of civic life presented to viewers and the kind of citizen imagined, invited, or overlooked. What emerges from this analysis is a portrait of local journalism at a crossroads. In attempting to replicate the strategies of national coverage (i.e., polling data, pundit chatter, and strategic speculation), these programs risk forfeiting their comparative advantage: contextual depth, community relevance, and interpretive humility. This study suggests that, despite its proximity to voters, local news is increasingly structured by logics of visibility rather than engagement. In doing so, it asks whether the discursive scaffolding of local coverage is truly prepared to serve democratic life, or whether it, too, has become just another reflection of its unraveling.

Literature review

Journalists have long been positioned as central actors in American democracy, particularly during presidential elections, where their coverage helps shape how power is perceived, candidates are evaluated, and public discourse unfolds (Darr & Harman, 2024). Scholars have argued that journalism can inform citizens in ways that encourage political participation and deepen democratic engagement (Gans, 1998, 2011; Patterson, 2016). But that idealized function now operates within a rapidly shifting media environment. The ongoing transition to digital platforms has profoundly affected not only how news is produced and consumed, but also how political beliefs are formed and how democracy itself is experienced (Heitz et al., 2022; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Governments across various political systems have become increasingly aware of how media coverage influences governance, shaping constituent behaviors and beliefs in both predictable and unpredictable ways (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). While a more diverse media diet may moderate extremism and enhance trust in journalism (Heitz et al., 2022), audiences still tend to focus on scandal and spectacle over policy and governance (Gans, 2011). These dynamics were thrown into sharp relief following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, which forced newsrooms to confront new challenges in covering democracy, particularly when institutional norms were openly flouted (Lee & Hosam, 2020).

Press coverage of presidential elections and the presidency

The relationship between journalism and democracy has long been framed in terms of journalism's ability to inform the public, facilitate civic engagement, and serve as a watchdog during moments of heightened political activity (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023; Peterson, 2021). Presidential elections place journalism's civic role under strain,

revealing both the possibilities and limits of election reporting as democratic infrastructure (Gans, 1998, 2011; Peterson, 2021). Yet, as journalism has evolved alongside changing technologies, audience behaviors, and political climates, this idealized function has become harder to realize. News now circulates in fragmented, platform-specific ways that often privilege speed and strategic "game" narratives over depth and context (Peterson, 2021; Schmuck et al., 2016). This has significant implications for democracy. As Heitz et al. (2022) note, shifts in the information ecosystem affect political engagement, trust, and even ideological orientation. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) similarly observe that governments across regime types are increasingly concerned about the political effects of media coverage, particularly how journalism shapes constituents' beliefs and behaviors. In short, journalism's civic function remains central, but its capacity to fulfill that function is in flux.

Some findings offer a measure of optimism. Exposure to a more diverse range of news sources can moderate political beliefs and enhance trust in journalism (Heitz et al., 2022). However, audiences still gravitate toward dramatic conflict, making spectacle a durable organizing logic for campaign coverage (Gans, 2011). The election of Donald Trump in 2016 intensified these pressures by destabilizing familiar reporting conventions and reframing journalism's legitimacy as partisan terrain (Lee & Hosam, 2020; Meeks, 2019). His antagonism toward the press and his ability to dominate the news cycle through controversy pushed news organizations into a crisis-response posture that often reproduced the attention economy it sought to manage (Al-Gharbi, 2020; Patterson, 2017). As Patterson (2017) notes, coverage during Trump's first 100 days was overwhelmingly negative across nearly every policy area, save for Fox News, where positivity remained high. But this negativity did not necessarily translate into critical accountability. Instead, it reflected a press corps caught between crisis response and spectacle management responding to Trump's provocations while reproducing the very attention economy he relied on.

The 2024 election introduced another layer of complexity. Once again, Trump was on the ballot, this time facing Vice President Kamala Harris, a woman of color whose candidacy disrupted familiar racial and gender scripts in American politics. While national outlets wrestled with how to cover the rematch, local news outlets faced their own challenges. Amid newsroom closures, staffing cuts, and economic pressure, local stations increasingly relied on national coverage, syndicated content, and polling to frame their election reporting (Peterson, 2021). The result is a media ecosystem in which local journalism, long viewed as a trusted source of political information, may reproduce the same narrative templates that have narrowed national discourse.

The decline in local political reporting is not solely a function of consolidation or budget constraints. Audience preference also plays a role. As Darr and Harman (2024) and L'Heudé (2023) argue, Americans are not just consuming less news; they're disengaging from it entirely. When political coverage thins out, when voters turn away from news altogether, the civic infrastructure and relational trust necessary for participatory democracy begin to erode, especially in local contexts where capacity has thinned (Darr & Harman, 2024; L'Heudé, 2023; Robinson & Johnson, 2024). This suggests that journalism remains a vital yet deeply contested site of democratic engagement.

Framing theory

From selecting which stories merit coverage to determining the angles through which they are presented, journalists participate in a meaning-making process that shapes public perception, often subtly and without acknowledgment (Brüggemann, 2014). As D'Angelo (2019) and Brüggemann (2014) argue, framing emphasizes specific aspects of an issue while minimizing or excluding others, placing journalists in a position of immense interpretive power. This is not simply a matter of editorial choice; it is a value-laden practice that influences how audiences perceive, feel about, and respond to political events.

Framing theory foregrounds how journalistic choices emphasize particular aspects of political life while minimizing others, shaping how audiences interpret events and evaluate candidates (Brüggemann, 2014; D'Angelo, 2019). These frames emerge not only from individual judgment but from routines, institutional norms, and constraints that define what counts as legitimate political news (D'Angelo, 2019). In election coverage, strategic framing can fuel cynicism toward governance and journalism by centering conflict and competitiveness over policy consequences (Cappella & Jamieson, 2018; Patterson, 2016). Framing also intersects with agenda-setting: repeated emphasis cues what matters and what stakes are at play (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The political consequences of framing are far from trivial. Cappella and Jamieson (2018) found that strategic framing, especially when emphasizing political conflict, scandal, or spin, can fuel public cynicism toward both governance and journalism itself. When journalists frame elections as contests of personality or spectacle, they risk deepening distrust and alienating viewers already skeptical of political institutions (Diddi et al., 2014; Patterson, 2016). In an era marked by eroding public trust and political polarization, these effects are compounded. The problem isn't just what stories are told. It's how those stories direct attention, shape emotions, and structure the terms of political debate. Framing theory also intersects with agenda-setting, which holds that the media shape public opinion by elevating specific issues over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The relationship between audience interest and editorial priority is recursive. As Roslyng and Dindler (2023) note, framing offers a way to grapple with the information saturation that defines today's media environment. In a sea of content, the frame is what gives a story weight. And, in political journalism, that weight carries democratic consequences.

Taken together, the existing literature makes clear that journalistic choices – what is covered, how it is framed, and why it matters –are central to shaping public engagement with democracy. While national election coverage has been extensively critiqued for its reliance on polling, scandal, and horse-race narratives, far less is known about how local television journalism navigates these same pressures. Given the symbolic trust placed in local news and its proximity to communities, it is critical to understand how it contributes to or challenges these electoral narratives. This study, therefore, asks: *How did local television news programs frame the 2024 US presidential election during its final 100 days?*

Method

This study utilized a textual analysis of Sunday morning political news programs aired on local television news stations across five politically significant states: Wisconsin (CBS Madison), Pennsylvania (ABC Harrisburg), Michigan (NBC Detroit), Minnesota (ABC Minneapolis), and Ohio (CBS Columbus) in the final 100 days of the election. Market size varied across stations. Minneapolis and Detroit ranked among the top 15 television markets in the US, while Columbus, Harrisburg, and Madison ranked outside the top 30 (Nielsen, 2023–24). Specific data on the number of viewers for a newscast in a given market and details on viewer demographics was not made available for this study. Such variation in market size shaped the production quality and resources of each program. To allow for a diverse range of newscasts (e.g., ABC, NBC, and CBS affiliates), the markets chosen in both Pennsylvania and Wisconsin had to be comparatively smaller than the markets in the other states studied. Many local news affiliates are no longer producing Sunday morning newscasts, reducing the options for a study such as this one.

Our approach follows widely used qualitative/interpretive framing traditions in political communication that examine how journalists construct meaning in context, complementing quantitative coding by recovering nuance, sourcing choices, and narrative logics (D'Angelo, 2019; van Hulst et al., 2025). Because our questions concern how local shows narrate the election (e.g., weaving polling into storylines, recruiting local experts to "localize" issues), an interpretive design captures framing devices (e.g., metaphors, sourcing, historical references) that are typically flattened in high-volume coding schemes (D'Angelo, 2019; van Hulst et al., 2025). The final 100 days were selected in part because voter attention traditionally increases in this period. These 100 days in 2024 included major political events such as the Democratic National Convention, candidate debates, and the announcement of Harris's running mate, moments likely to influence journalistic framing.

Sunday morning shows were chosen over other local news broadcasts for this study because they are primarily political in nature, unlike weekday evening broadcasts, which may include more enterprise stories on their community that are not political. Sunday political talk formats are designed for elite-cued, policy-oriented discussion and routinely book elected officials, strategists, and policy experts; this makes them a natural site for studying the framing of elections and democratic processes (Patterson, 2017). Viewers are smaller than weekday newscasts but comparatively politically attentive; using these programs, therefore, illuminates how local broadcasters translate national politics for civically engaged audiences (Patterson, 2017). Past research on Sunday morning news shows focused on national broadcasts and the lack of diversity among the shows' guests, especially among Black newsmakers (Jones, 2005). Network Sunday programs remain a small but stable slice of network news consumption and are agenda-setting venues featuring political elites (Patterson, 2017). Beyond this, little research has been conducted on Sunday news shows, and this study seeks to fill that gap.

To capture local election coverage in the final 100 days leading up to the November 5, 2024, presidential election, the study followed a "constructed week" sampling strategy (Riffe et al., 1993). For short time windows, constructed-week sampling remains the most efficient way to capture cyclical variation in news agendas, and subsequent work shows one to two constructed weeks can adequately represent "populations" for many variables

(Riffe et al., 2019). Given our Sunday-only programs and a 100-day window, rotating a constructed "week" across three cycles balances representativeness with feasibility (Riffe et al., 2019). Three episodes per station were analyzed during a 5-week cycle, resulting in a total of 15 programs. This was done to maintain consistency in show quantity and timing across shows. Shows were viewed in rotation by state: Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.[1] The viewing schedule is included in Table 1. An exception occurred in August, when Michigan's station did not air a program on Aug. 11; a Wisconsin program was swapped with Michigan that week. This sampling captured recurring patterns in framing across different market sizes, network affiliations, and political contexts during the campaign's final 100 days. The five selected states offered both electoral and symbolic significance. Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania comprised the so-called "blue wall," widely regarded as critical to both parties' victories. Meanwhile, Minnesota (Tim Walz, Democrat) and Ohio (J. D. Vance, Republican) were the home states of the respective vice-presidential candidates. Programming from these states offered insight into both battleground dynamics and regional political framing.

Each episode was viewed three times to enable a layered and systematic analysis. The first viewing served as an orientation to the episode's structure and content, with close attention paid to formal elements, including the show's format, story sequencing, and segment transitions. We documented the types of stories, including their order of appearance, as well as the balance between national and state-level topics. Particular attention was given to identifying who appeared on the program, including anchors, correspondents, politicians, community members, and experts, and noting their affiliations and roles within the episode. The second viewing was more interpretive, focusing on the framing of election-related content. This included analyzing how hosts, reporters, and guests described candidates, issues, and events; how polling data was presented; and

Table 1. Constructed week schedule.

Date Watched	Market/Station/Station Affiliation	Market Size	Name Of Show
July 28, 2024	Columbus, OH/WBNS/CBS	No. 33 (920,000 Households)	Face the State
August 24, 2024	Minneapolis, MN/KSTP/ABC	No. 15 (1.74 Million Households)	At Issue
August 11, 2024	Madison, WI/WISC/CBS	No. 77 (384,000 Households)	For The Record
August 18, 2024	Detroit, MI/WDIV/NBC	No. 14 (1.85 Million Households)	Flashpoint
August 25, 2024	Harrisburg, PA/WHTM/ABC	No. 44 (715,000 Households)	This Week In Pennsylvania
September 1, 2024	Columbus, OH/WBNS/CBS	No. 33	Face the State
September 8, 2024	Minneapolis, MN/KSTP/ABC	No. 15	At Issue
September 15, 2024	Detroit, MI/WDIV/NBC	No. 14	Flashpoint
September 22, 2024	Madison, WI/WISC/CBS	No. 77	For The Record
September 29, 2024	Harrisburg, PA/WHTM/ABC	No. 44	This Week In Pennsylvania
October 6, 2024	Columbus, OH/WBNS/CBS	No. 33	Face the State
October 13, 2024	Minneapolis, MN/KSTP/ABC	No. 15	At Issue
October 20, 2024	Detroit, MI/WDIV/NBC	No. 14	Flashpoint
October 27, 2024	Madison, WI/WISC/CBS	No. 77	For The Record
November 3, 2024	Harrisburg, PA/WHTM/ABC	No. 44	This Week In Pennsylvania

how narrative devices, such as metaphors and rhetorical contrasts, were used. During the third viewing, researchers synthesized findings across episodes and states, identifying cross-cutting themes, regional variations, and patterns in how local news programs framed the presidential election and its broader implications. Table 1 shows the complete constructed viewing schedule.

Findings: The frames of the leading 100 days

Local Sunday morning political shows in five battleground states consistently employed two key frames during the final 100 days leading up to the 2024 US presidential election: horse-race coverage and local relevance. Across all markets studied, journalists navigated the tension between national narratives and community-centered storytelling, shaping the public's understanding of electoral stakes and citizen engagement. Within the horse-race frame, two subthemes emerged: the incorporation of polling as a narrative device and the reliance on pundit-driven storytelling to dramatize the race. Within the local relevance frame, stations emphasized two additional subthemes: the symbolic weight of the "blue wall" states (Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania) as sites of democratic stability, and the use of community experts and local officials to frame voter concerns, election logistics, and political messaging.

Horse-race framing

Across all five local Sunday news shows, the dominant lens for covering the 2024 presidential election was the horse-race frame, which organized political news around competition, momentum, and viability. Anchors and panelists consistently structured coverage as a contest between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, often relying on polling data and pundit commentary to dramatize the race.

This horse-race logic persisted across markets and dates, particularly in blue wall states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Even when polling data was not explicitly referenced, discussions focused on momentum, campaign strategy, and electoral viability. Guests, often political pundits or analysts, became fixtures in these segments, reinforcing the binary competition between Harris and Trump. When polling data was included, it frequently lacked context. For example, the August 4 Minnesota newscast included voter preferences for Harris's potential running mates. While the anchor relayed Gov. Tim Walz's approval ratings, the political scientist commenting on the data did not compare them to those of other candidates or to past benchmarks. Similarly, the same episode featured polling about J. D. Vance, Trump's vice-presidential pick, highlighting partisan divides: "68% of Republicans think the choice was 'excellent or good,' while 67% of Democrats say it was 'poor or fair.'" They offered no historical context for these ratings.

By contrast, some newscasts made efforts to contextualize polling results. Pennsylvania's August 25 broadcast visually displayed polling margins between Trump and Harris, then layered in third-party candidates to illustrate their potential spoiler effects. The anchor contextualized polling margins by layering in third-party candidates and referencing Clinton's 2016 lead in Pennsylvania to illustrate polling uncertainty. These moments demonstrated a greater awareness of polling's historical context and its limitations as a predictive data source. Other newscasts, including the September 8 Minnesota show, added electoral history to polling coverage. In a pre-produced package

on Sen. Amy Klobuchar's reelection race, the anchor explained, "In three previous Senate elections, Klobuchar hasn't won by less than 20 points. In our first KSTP/SurveyUSA poll since the primary elections, Klobuchar has a slightly smaller but commanding lead of 14 points over Republican Royce White, 50% to 36." This use of historical comparison offered viewers a clearer understanding of trends rather than isolated numbers.

Some shows also directly challenged polling claims. On the October 20 Michigan newscast, a pundit predicted a Harris win in the state, citing enthusiasm from younger voters: "I think the 18–35-year-olds are going to come out in strong force." The anchor interjected: "Where are you seeing that?" This moment of fact-checking signaled a more critical approach to the horse-race frame and an effort to hold pundits accountable. Still, across all five markets, the dominant lens remained electoral competition. Whether polls were shown or implied, newscasts focused heavily on who was winning and losing, often at the expense of deeper policy engagement or civic explanation. It is important to note, however, that, while fact-checking did occur, it is increasingly difficult at local levels given reduced resources and opportunities, especially compared to national outlets and their larger staffs and more abundant resources. One cannot reasonably assume that local stations will be able to fact-check national trends and election security in the same way as Daniel Dale can on CNN; however, there is an opportunity for local news to have a fact-checking operation tied to their local political systems. But this takes time and dwindling resources. If fact-checking signaled a more critical approach to horse-race framing, but local stations don't continue to have the resources to do that level or the quickness of fact-checking as their national counterparts, then there is the likelihood that they will be unable to continue to critically challenge the horse-race framing and thus continue to reaffirm that type of framing despite wanting to hold pundits accountable.

Incorporating horse-race coverage into storytelling

Some newscasts framed conversations as horse-race coverage while embedding discussions of policy issues that matter to voters. For example, the anchor on Michigan's August 18 newscast interviewed an economic expert and asked: "Is there an advantage right now for one candidate on the economy?" While the expert called out Trump for policy promises on inflation, much of the interview focused on which candidate would be better for the economy, or who is "winning" the economic debate for voters. The expert noted Harris was trailing on the issue. Thus, the interview couched the context of Trump's policy promises through brief snippets of horse-race language. Similarly, Pennsylvania's September 29 newscast anchor said, "Harris was in Pennsylvania focused on the economy, which is the top issue for voters, according to the polls." He also said: "Folks think Trump is better suited to fix the 'economy problem.'" In this newscast, the anchor referred to polling without displaying it and explained who would hypothetically be ahead in a race over a specific issue. However, they did not bog down a newscast with numbers or data. Instead, the anchor incorporated some elements of horse-race coverage into the election's storytelling.

This blending of horse-race and issue coverage was consistent across multiple stations, illustrating how electoral competition often serves as the organizing logic for discussing political issues. Even when discussing topics like the economy, the newscasts prioritized candidate strategy and comparative advantage. These moments suggest that horse-race logic is not confined to polling segments but undergirds broader political storytelling.

Rather than often letting horse-race coverage and polling present a "snapshot in time," as explained by the anchor of the Pennsylvania newscast on August 25, the newscasts often use horse-race logic to shape how viewers understand both candidates and issues. While subtle, this approach reinforces a competitive frame that may obscure the complexity of policy discussion in favor of narrative momentum.

Local framing

In covering the 2024 presidential election, Sunday newscasts in blue wall states (Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania) leaned more heavily on local framing than those in Ohio and Minnesota, which often adopted a more national perspective. At the same time, Minnesota and Ohio were the home states of the vice-presidential candidates and were more focused on them. When not focusing on candidate visits, several newscasts spotlighted down-ballot races or election administration. On the August 11 newscast in Wisconsin, the anchor interviewed a local political reporter about state legislative races. The reporter noted: "These [races] are really important for policy, where money goes for things." This kind of reporting not only emphasized local implications but also reflected journalism's democratic role in informing citizens about consequential political decisions.

Other shows used interviews with local election officials to provide logistical information. The October 6 newscast in Ohio featured a segment with a local elections administrator, during which the anchor guided viewers through key dates and voter ID requirements. Their exchange aimed to clarify absentee voting procedures and highlighted the bipartisan structure of ballot handling:

Anchor: "What's going on right now to prepare for the big start to early, or absentee, voting?"

Elections official: "There's lots of things going on, and it's not all happening over the last few days ... We have people trained, and we're ready for Tuesday."

Anchor: "How is registration going in Franklin County for this huge election?"

Elections official: "Obviously, in presidential cycles, there's lots of registration. Every four years, people want to participate in electing a president."

Anchor: "Let's talk about the process a little bit. What happens to the absentee ballots once they start coming in?"

Elections official: "What we do at the court, we're enabled by law to prepare the ballots when they start coming in. And everything done by the board of elections is done in a bipartisan way."

This extended exchange reflects a clear investment in local civic education and attempts to counter misinformation by emphasizing procedural transparency. Localism was also visible in the selection of pundits. Newscasts often featured local lawmakers, reporters, or university faculty as commentators, providing analysis grounded in state-level dynamics. On Michigan's August 18 newscast, an economics professor from the University of Michigan offered analysis on economic issues, adding depth to policy discussions that the anchor alone could not provide.

At times, however, the potential of the local frame was undercut. On Pennsylvania's August 25 newscast, a discussion between partisan strategists about "Project 2025," a Republican policy blueprint, turned into a combative exchange with little connection to state-specific implications:

Anchor: "Talking about Project 2025, is it fair to keep bringing it up? Trump says, 'that's not mine.'"

Democratic Strategist: "Who wouldn't believe anything Donald Trump said, he's so well known for telling the truth. Republicans keep running away from it because it's not popular."

Republican Strategist: "You can criticize Trump for having a shadow-type of platform, Kamala Harris doesn't even have that, really."

Despite having access to local pundits, the conversation never turned to how Project 2025 might impact Pennsylvanians. The lack of localization, combined with a tone of partisan antagonism, diminished the newscast's utility for viewers seeking relevance and clarity; instead, it devolved into the kind of on-air argument news consumers have become accustomed to on large national cable networks.

Blue wall versus the vice-presidential states

A recurring subtheme within the broader local frame was the distinction in coverage strategies between blue wall states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) and vice-presidential states (Minnesota and Ohio). While all stations attempted to make their election coverage locally relevant, the approach and rationale for localization differed depending on their political significance in the 2024 election. Blue wall states received heightened national attention from both parties, prompting stations to emphasize electoral centrality. VP states, in contrast, constructed their relevance by highlighting the vice-presidential candidates from their states and by addressing broader local issues beyond the presidential race.

In blue wall markets, newscasts explicitly and repeatedly asserted their state's decisive role in the election outcome. Wisconsin's August 11 anchor told viewers, "If you weren't feeling important enough in the Badger State, both campaigns stopped in Wisconsin this week," and introduced a Harris soundbite: "It's very good to be back in Wisconsin. The path to the White House runs right through this state." Here, the framing hinges on political importance. Wisconsin is not just a location but a pathway to national power. Michigan and Pennsylvania employed similar narrative techniques. On October 20, Michigan's anchor remarked: "The candidates have taken up residence in 'the mitten,' and it's hard to watch anything on TV but not be swamped by a political ad." By contrast, VP-state stations took a different approach. Without the same degree of presidential campaign saturation, these markets emphasized their connection to the election through home-state vice presidential candidates. Ohio's July 28 newscast framed its segment around J. D. Vance's campaign stop in Middletown, calling it a "hometown rally." Minnesota's September 8 episode would go on to talk about Walz and his time at the Minnesota State Fair, a staple in Midwest culture: "He only had time to grab a pork chop

on a stick and a vanilla milkshake," they shared. His efficiency with time at the fair was highlighted by the fact that he had so little time to win over the rest of the country. The roundtable of the show that day opened with: "Let's start with talking about Gov. Tim Walz. Of course, the entire country is talking about Tim Walz right now." They talked about how Walz had to focus on the entire Blue Wall, and that the fair was a way to connect with states that share similar events and, therefore, values. While Vance's stop was "hometown," Walz's stop was symbolic. Each, however, was meant to target to the localism of the Midwest and, more so, the importance of the localism of Blue Wall states.

These rhetorical cues foreground the candidates' local roots, establishing an affective and political connection between the audience and the national campaign. These differences in framing were not merely rhetorical; they influenced the types of stories included in the broadcast and the way anchors presented political developments. In blue wall states, the presidential election itself was consistently the centerpiece, often introduced early in the newscast and framed through the visits, statements, or policy positions of Trump and Harris. For example, candidate visits to Michigan and Pennsylvania were routinely accompanied by localized soundbites or policy translations aimed at regional voters. In Wisconsin, Harris's visit was not simply reported as a campaign stop but framed as validation of the state's significance: "The path to the White House runs right through this state." In Minnesota and Ohio, however, presidential coverage often coexisted with or was even displaced by other local priorities. The July 28 Ohio newscast featured a long segment on new zoning proposals in Columbus designed to address the city's growing housing crisis. The segment noted: "The city of Columbus is expected to do something it hasn't done in nearly 70 years: change its zoning code. City council will vote on the new proposal tomorrow. It's a huge focus because the city says it would need 200,000 new housing units in the next decade just to keep up with demand." Though this story was not directly tied to the presidential election, its inclusion reinforced the station's commitment to civic relevance and community need. These types of stories offered viewers a more policy-oriented perspective on how local governance might intersect with, or operate independently from, the national race.

Blue wall stations also used local stories to complement their national focus. For example, Pennsylvania's September 29 newscast featured coverage of a March for Life rally, a visit from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and ongoing litigation over mail-in ballots. These stories, while not directly about Harris or Trump, carried clear political implications. These instances demonstrate how stations utilized the local frame not only to report on nearby events but also to connect local political culture to national policy debates.

What emerges is a nuanced understanding of how television news in battleground and non-battleground states negotiate their perceived role in the election. Blue wall markets emphasized presidential proximity and electoral importance, often through repeated messaging that their state was critical to determining the election's outcome. Non-blue wall states, meanwhile, leaned into local pride and civic engagement through the lens of their vice-presidential candidates and broader community issues. This strategic deployment of local framing enabled both groups of stations to maintain relevance for their viewers while calibrating their narratives to suit the geographic and political context. While all stations employed localism to resonate with their audiences, the distinction between the blue wall and the non-blue wall shaped not only the content but also the tone

and structure. In blue wall states, the local frame operated as an entry point into high-stakes political storytelling; in VP states, it became a tool for grounding the national conversation in everyday local governance. Both approaches suggest that, while the local frame is ubiquitous, its expression is flexibly adapted based on campaign relevance, voter engagement patterns, and the symbolic value each state holds in the broader electoral map.

Experts and community voices

One key strategy used by the Sunday morning shows to localize their presidential election coverage was the inclusion of local experts, academics, and community voices. These guests helped frame national stories in local terms and offered interpretations that resonated more clearly with the station's core audiences. Across the five states, stations incorporated local reporters, university professors, political consultants, and community leaders to analyze current events and forecast electoral implications. The choice to include these experts not only emphasized each station's commitment to public affairs journalism but also subtly signaled to viewers that local knowledge is a valuable interpretive lens for understanding national politics.

In Wisconsin and Michigan, this approach was particularly evident. Wisconsin's newscasts featured local political reporters who provided insight into down-ballot races and legislative priorities that directly affected Madison-area voters. On the August 11 broadcast, for example, a local journalist described the importance of state legislative races, explaining how they shape policies and control budget allocations. Similarly, Pennsylvania's newscast on September 29 included an interview with a former Republican lawmaker, who contextualized the importance of democracy in the lead-up to the presidential election. While the segment was ostensibly national in focus, the former lawmaker localized the conversation in discussing the significance of mail-in voting in Pennsylvania, providing nuance that would likely be absent in a national network interview.

These experts also contributed to the diversity of political perspectives and demographic representation within the broadcasts. Michigan's October 20 roundtable stood out as the most demographically varied panel across the study, with participants including Black and white commentators, men and women, and a mix of ideological viewpoints. The anchor's targeted question to a Black radio host about Trump's efforts to win over Black voters in Detroit exemplifies how anchors utilize their guests' community knowledge to delve deeper into political messaging. However, there were also limitations. In that same newscast, the absence of an Arab-American voice was notable given Detroit's significant Arab-American population, especially amid ongoing global events. The panel briefly referenced the electoral role of Arab-American voters but failed to engage a representative voice from the community. This highlights the challenge of achieving truly inclusive representation, even when local framing is prioritized.

Misinformation

Another prominent way Sunday morning newscasts localized their 2024 election coverage was through practical, voter-focused content that emphasized ballot logistics,

deadlines, and voter trust. Several stations used their platforms to provide clear, factual information about voting procedures, often inviting local election officials to explain processes in detail. This framing positioned the newscasts not only as interpreters of political contests but also as resources for civic participation, especially important in an era of widespread election-related misinformation.

In the blue wall states of Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, newscasts featured interviews with county clerks and local election administrators. These segments highlighted registration deadlines, identification requirements, absentee voting protocols, and ballot counting procedures. Ohio's October 6 newscast, for example, devoted a significant portion of its show to interviewing a Franklin County elections official. The anchor walked through key dates leading up to Election Day and questioned the official about preparations for absentee voting, voter registration trends, and ballot handling procedures, even asking the administrator: "You may hear this time of year that these machines are 'hackable' – is that true?" The exchange underscored the bipartisan nature of the election process. It worked to instill confidence in electoral systems: "There's lots of things going on, and it's not all happening over the last few days … We have people trained, and we're ready for Tuesday. … Everything done by the board of elections is done in a bipartisan way." By offering clear and accessible information, the station actively countered narratives of voter fraud or manipulation, common themes in national political discourse.

While many newscasts asked follow-up questions or gently challenged partisan spin, these moments were often fleeting. In Michigan's October 20 newscast, when a pundit offered a speculative prediction about youth voter turnout, the anchor pressed him for supporting data: "Where are you seeing that?" Though brief, the challenge disrupted the flow of unsubstantiated claims and demonstrated that fact-checking could be embedded in the format of political analysis.

Still, not all stations integrated these practices equally. The inclusion of election officials and voter guides varied from week to week, and some markets missed opportunities to combat misinformation, especially on election security, more forcefully or preemptively, despite national and international trends of widespread concern over the spread of misinformation and its effects on democracy. Nonetheless, across all five states, the effort to inform voters, whether by highlighting deadlines or spotlighting trusted community voices, made a key contribution to democratic participation during the final stretch of the 2024 presidential campaign.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how local Sunday morning newscasts framed the 2024 US presidential election during its final 100 days and what these frames reveal about the role of local television journalism in shaping political discourse. Building on framing theory and longstanding scholarship on journalism's democratic function, the analysis reveals both the enduring dominance of horse-race narratives and the flexible, sometimes superficial application of local framing to construct relevance. These findings both reflect and complicate prior research on media influence, political engagement, and the construction of meaning in contemporary election coverage.

The horse-race frame overwhelmingly defined how the election was communicated. Anchors and pundits repeatedly focused on which candidate was ahead, often leaning on polling data, sometimes with historical or explanatory context, but frequently without it. This emphasis on performance and prediction over policy or civic consequence mirrors long-standing critiques of US political journalism (Brüggemann, 2014; Patterson, 2016). As election day drew closer, the stations appeared to use the horse-race frame less, but it still occurred often throughout the 15 weeks of this study. What this study affirms is the resilience of the horse-race frame even in local media, where one might expect a greater emphasis on constituent needs. This tendency aligns with concerns raised in the literature about how journalistic framing can limit the public's access to meaningful information about governance and policy (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001). While some newscasts worked to contextualize polling data or caution against overreliance on forecasts, these efforts were the exception rather than the norm. This imbalance risks fostering political cynicism and disengagement, echoing findings by Cappella and Jamieson (2018) and others who have argued that framing focused on strategy over substance can erode public trust in both journalism and democratic institutions.

At the same time, this study reveals a persistent effort by local stations over the campaign's final 100 days to apply a local frame that connects national political events to their audiences' lived experiences. Local journalism has the potential to support democratic engagement by helping citizens understand how broader political outcomes affect them directly (Darr & Harman, 2024; Gans, 2011; Heitz et al., 2022). The findings here reinforce that potential. In several instances, newscasts used interviews with election officials, local political scientists, or community leaders to explain voting processes or highlight regional issues. These moments represent journalism fulfilling its democratic mandate to inform and empower citizens. Local framing is sometimes more performative than substantive. In some states, particularly where the perceived electoral stakes were lower, the "local" frame relied more on the presence of a home-state candidate than on deep engagement with community concerns. In others, key constituencies, such as Michigan's Arab-American community, were all but excluded from meaningful dialogue, despite their relevance to local political dynamics. These inconsistencies reflect Roslyng and Dindler's (2023) call to critically examine how local news discursively constructs relevance and how that construction can serve to both include and exclude. The literature also warns of how journalists' selective attention can subtly shape audience conclusions, and this study affirms that exclusion can be as powerful a frame as inclusion. These findings are also tied to shows that draw politically attentive audiences, meaning they are tapping already engaged audiences. Future work should take these findings and examine how the frames affect diverse show audiences, and whether the same frames emerge in nightly news coverage, where less political content appears.

Comparing blue wall states (Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania) to non-blue wall states (the homes of the VP candidates, Minnesota and Ohio) revealed another important dimension of local framing. In more electorally competitive markets, local framing emphasized the state's importance through campaign visits, soundbites, and narrative cues from anchors. In less competitive states, localism was established through coverage of home-state vice-presidential candidates or non-election-specific policy issues. This demonstrates a form of editorial adaptability by framing the election in a way that helps stations retain relevance for their audiences, even if the execution sometimes leaned on

proximity rather than substance. This elasticity also affirms D'Angelo's (2019) observation that framing is not only a product of cognitive or individual choices but also shaped by journalistic routines, institutional constraints, and the professional sense-making environment. Local newscasts operate within tight timeframes and limited resources, yet they still make value judgments about what and who matters. The findings here suggest that, while many journalists strive to connect national politics to their communities, doing so requires more than visual cues or geographic references; it demands deeper attention to representational equity, inclusive sourcing, and context.

These frames develop over 100 days. In late July and early August, segments leaned most heavily on horse-race cues where anchors and guests spoke in terms of "winning," "chances," and "momentum," and when polls were shown, they were typically presented with minimal methodological context (e.g., Ohio, July 28; Minnesota, August 4). From late August through September, several programs began to layer context onto polling and to connect national movement to state-level implications; Pennsylvania's August 25th episode paired close-line surveys with reminders about uncertainty, third-party "spoiler" effects, and even brief historical comparisons to 2016, while Minnesota's September 8th episode mixed heavy polling with issue-salience items and down-ballot races. As Election Day approached in October, procedural and voter-education content moved earlier in the rundown: anchors invited local election administrators to explain deadlines, absentee handling, and security, and occasionally pressed pundits to substantiate claims when predictions outpaced evidence (Ohio, October 6; Michigan, October 20). By the final week, Pennsylvania's November 3rd program opened with the Secretary of the Commonwealth. It used on-air clarifications to counter misleading statements, signaling a shift from competition toward participation as the dominant organizing logic, even as horse-race talk persisted in pundit segments. This arc was modulated by state context: blue-wall markets were more likely to lead with presidential proximity throughout, while the VP-state programs devoted comparatively more time in September to home-state vice-presidential developments and other local governance items before converging on voter-process guidance in October.

Beyond blue-wall and non-blue-wall states and time, notable differences in market size (larger: Detroit and Minneapolis; smaller: Columbus, Madison, and Harrisburg) warrant discussion. The larger markets more often built original packages and multi-guest roundtables, paired polling with on-screen graphics and brief historical comparisons, and tended to lead with presidential segments. The smaller markets relied more on single-guest interviews and pre-produced or syndicated inserts, referenced polls verbally rather than visually, and devoted longer segments to election administration with local officials. The underlying frames did not diverge. Horse-race logic organized coverage in both groups, and "local relevance" appeared either through electoral centrality in the blue-wall states or through home-state vice-presidential developments. Notable exceptions complicate a simple size story: a smaller Pennsylvania market offered some of the strongest historical polling context, and Ohio carried the longest voter-process segment. These cases suggest that market scale shapes how frames are executed more than which frames appear, a pattern consistent with research linking resources and routines to format choices in local news (Gans, 2011; L'Heudé, 2023; Peterson, 2021). Larger staffs and production resources appear to enable thicker context within the same dominant frames, while smaller newsrooms emphasize formats that fit tighter time and staffing

constraints. Training in framing can help make routine choices visible and expand repertoires toward explanatory or participatory approaches, but without organizational support and time, journalists will continue to default to efficient, spectacle-friendly formats even when they intend otherwise.

Taken together, this both affirms and critiques the role of local journalism in US elections. On one hand, local newscasts provided important civic education: explaining voter registration deadlines, showcasing local governance, and elevating home-state candidates. These practices support the claim that journalism can enhance political participation and build audience trust (Gans, 1998; Heitz et al., 2022). On the other hand, the dominant reliance on horse-race coverage, under-contextualized polling, and inconsistent representation of community voices suggests that local journalism is still grappling with the same pressures that have long shaped national coverage: speed, competition, and the allure of narrative simplicity. This tension reflects Lorenz-Spreen et al.'s (2023) argument that the digital transformation of news has both amplified its reach and increased the risks associated with political media. Even as local newscasts offer some insulation from online fragmentation and misinformation, they are not immune to the structural logics that favor spectacle over substance. One could argue that such framing is a result of market demands and journalists' resource constraints today. This underscores the urgent need to equip local journalists with better frameworks and training, not just in political coverage, but in framing itself as a tool for ethical, inclusive, and constructive reporting.

We understand the prevalence of strategy-centric framing less as an individual constraint and more as the predictable outcome of professional routines interacting with structural pressures. Decades of research show that "game" or horse-race coverage is a durable newsroom heuristic for organizing campaign news, one that privileges momentum, tactics, and viability over policy explanation (Patterson, 2016, 2017; Schmuck et al., 2016). Those tendencies are amplified by market incentives for speed and conflict in a digital environment that rewards attention and drama (Gans, 2011; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023), and by resource constraints that push local outlets toward time-efficient formats (i.e., poll stories, pundit roundtables, and campaign soundbites), while crowding out labor-intensive verification and explanatory pieces (L'Heudé, 2023; Peterson, 2021). The broader national information economy also sets templates that local producers emulate, from poll-driven narratives to spectacle-oriented talk, especially when national cues dominate the week's agenda (Al-Gharbi, 2020; Meeks, 2019; Patterson, 2017). Training in framing is therefore necessary but not sufficient: it can make routine choices visible and expand repertoires toward explanatory, participatory, and community-centered frames (D'Angelo, 2019; Heitz et al., 2022), yet without parallel attention to organizational capacity and incentive structures, journalists will continue to face conditions that nudge coverage toward spectacle even when they intend otherwise. Here, what could be increasingly important is positioning more metacognitive thinking in journalism practice (Johnson et al., 2025). Journalists will then be able to become more literate about their practices and the behaviors associated with them (Johnson, 2025b). For example, if journalists are more reflective about how they frame their stories and talk more openly about how and why they do so, they can become more transparent about their processes with their audiences. This enables journalists to become more adaptive in their practices (Johnson et al., 2025), which, in turn, builds organizational structures that

allow them to talk more openly about practices such as word choices related to polarized language and framing and help them to define more critically the practices that help their audiences become more news literate of the content they produce (Johnson, 2025a). This is something journalism support organizations like Trusting News do consistently.

This study asked: How did local Sunday morning newscasts frame the 2024 US presidential election in the 100 days leading up to Election Day, and what do these frames reveal about the role of local television journalism in political discourse? The answer is twofold. First, the frames employed by local television largely mirrored those found in national outlets, with horse-race logic dominating the narrative landscape. Second, while many newscasts applied a local frame to root national politics in community relevance, these efforts varied in depth and inclusivity, suggesting a need for more intentional framing practices that serve the diverse publics these newsrooms reach. Local journalism remains a crucial democratic actor. But, to fully realize that role, it must move beyond asserting relevance to cultivating it through careful, inclusive, and contextually grounded framing that prioritizes both political understanding and civic trust.

Conclusion

This study investigated how local Sunday morning newscasts in five politically significant states framed the 2024 US presidential election during its final 100 days. Despite the election being widely framed by political actors as pivotal for the future of American democracy, discussion of democracy itself was limited, occurring only intermittently, primarily in the "blue wall" states of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. This pattern reflects both a missed opportunity and a revealing indicator of how local journalism balances political urgency with audience familiarity. Across all five states, the dominant frame was the horse-race frame. Consistent with national trends identified by Campbell (2024), local news shows frequently focused on which candidate was ahead, leaning heavily on polling data and pundit commentary. While some stations offered valuable context, such as historical comparisons or explanatory framing, polls were more often used to reinforce strategic narratives than to educate viewers about civic processes or electoral meaning. In many cases, the polling served as a narrative shortcut, especially within roundtable discussions, contributing to a strategy-centric framing of the race.

At the same time, this study highlights how local stations attempted to root national coverage in community relevance. Non-blue wall states, such as Minnesota and Ohio, emphasized home-state vice presidential candidates, though to varying degrees. Minnesota appeared more invested in elevating Tim Walz's campaign visibility, while Ohio's coverage of J. D. Vance was less prominent, perhaps due to his existing national profile. This finding complicates the assumptions made by Devine and Kopko (2011) about the guaranteed media advantage for vice-presidential candidates campaigning in their home states, suggesting that editorial judgment and perceived novelty may also influence coverage decisions. In blue wall states, the local frame often carried deeper civic implications. Stations in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania devoted segments to election administration, misinformation, and community-specific voting concerns, framing the election not just as a contest but as a process that requires trust and participation. This more substantive localism suggests that local journalism can still play a constructive role in democracy, particularly when electoral stakes are high and

community engagement is prioritized. The less substantive election coverage in Ohio and Minnesota may signal concerns about the quality of coverage in other non-competitive states and leave news consumers less informed about the state of democracy; however, this research cannot entirely make that determination. Our findings suggest an uneven geography of substantive election information. In the blue-wall states, audiences more often encountered explanatory pieces about voting processes, regional policy stakes, and limited on-air fact-checking. In the two vice-presidential states, audiences more often encountered coverage that constructed relevance through proximity to the running mates or through non-presidential local governance items, with fewer segments that translated national claims into state-specific civic guidance. This asymmetry matters for democracy because news sets agendas and cues importance; when competitive states receive more process-oriented and contextualized information, while others receive thinner, more strategy-centric talk, informational inequality can follow (Cappella & Jamieson, 2018; Heitz et al., 2022; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Over time, such gaps can shape engagement and efficacy, especially among citizens who already rely heavily on local television for political cues (Darr & Harman, 2024; Gans, 2011).

We read this disparity less as a failure of individual journalists and more as an effect of structural conditions. Campaign attention, advertising, and surrogate travel concentrate in battlegrounds, nationalized news incentives filter down to local line-ups, and resource constraints make labor-intensive explanatory work hardest where newsroom capacity is thinnest (L'Heudé, 2023; Peterson, 2021). In that environment, non-competitive markets face stronger pulls toward efficient formats and spectacle-friendly segments, with fewer opportunities to build the participatory frames that support trust and procedural understanding, a pattern consistent with broader concerns about the digital attention economy and democratic risk (Gans, 2011; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). While a full national assessment is beyond our scope, our evidence indicates that the constructive role we document in blue-wall states may be least available where electoral stakes are perceived as lower, which raises normative concerns about equitable access to substantive election coverage. Additionally, these are shows that are meant to be defined by politics, which makes them unique in their content and coverage. Understanding how they frame the news matters, as they tap an already politically- and civically-engaged audience, but what comes next is how these frames can be translated into journalism practice and into other types of news shows at the local and national levels. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that, while local newscasts can serve as vital civic resources, they are not immune to the broader pressures of journalistic routine and narrative convention. Polls and punditry remain dominant tools, often at the expense of explanatory or participatory frames. The tension between informing and entertaining, as well as between national spectacle and local service, continues to shape how election news is constructed at the local level.

This study's limitations include variation in market size and resource availability, which may have influenced content and framing choices. Larger stations may have had more capacity to produce original reporting or host in-depth roundtables, while smaller markets may have relied more heavily on syndicated content or pre-produced segments. Future research might compare stations of similar scale across regions or analyze how editorial decisions differ by ownership structure, staffing levels, or access to political figures. This study focused only on Sunday morning programming; examining weekday political segments or digital-only content could reveal whether similar framing strategies

persist across platforms. Further exploration of how journalists define and deploy "local relevance" in a nationalized media environment would also extend the theoretical and practical insights of this work, particularly as shrinking newsrooms and increasing polarization reshape local journalistic identity and practice.

Note

1. Shows were watched via station websites, not during original broadcasts; therefore, political advertisements were not part of the analysis. As a final note, the demographic profile of the journalists anchoring these programs mirrored national patterns. All five programs were regularly anchored by white men. Of the 15 analyzed episodes, 13 were anchored by white men, while two featured white women as substitutes.

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