

How were Donald Trump and Kamala Harris visually framed by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*
during the 2024 Presidential Election

Emma Bernatowicz

Department of Business, Neumann University

CDM 317: Creation of Knowledge

Dr. Janis Chakars

May 15, 2025

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Introduction

In the 2024 presidential campaigns, the American voters were presented with two vastly different candidates. The concept of visual framing is important in the sense of how the candidate will be perceived. For the Republicans, Donald Trump was focused on economic reform and framing himself as the true American candidate. For the Democrats, Kamala Harris was focused on healthcare reform and was set to possibly accomplish many firsts as a Black and Asian-American woman president. Visually, both candidates were framed differently by their teams than they were by the media. While the goal of campaign teams was to make their candidate look good to the respective audiences, the media had a different goal, which could negatively or positively frame the candidates.

According to Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Eric Bucy from their book *Image Bite Politics: News and the Visual Framing of Elections*, humans are hardwired to comprehend, react, and analyze images and visuals first. Although words are important to the context of an image, often people will not be seeing the words with the pictures. Therefore, in analyzing the images alone, the visual framing can be examined and further explained. Through a content analysis of photographs of Trump and Harris in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, we will see how voters might be influenced by the media's visual framing of each candidate during the campaign.

Literature Review

Visual framing allows both the candidates in an election and the media to tell their own stories. These stories, however, will not be the same and will often lean towards supporting or

criticizing one candidate over the other. Through several studies utilizing different methodologies, the effects of visual framing of candidates can influence the public. In terms of our research question about how Trump and Harris were visually framed, these studies shed light on the different approaches to a study of images.

The research into the role of social media when it comes to politics has emphasized the impact images and visual framing can have on the public's perception of candidates. Molek-Kozakowska and Kampka (2021) explore the use of Instagram in relation to election campaigns. The study further emphasizes how posts are used to reach the young voter audience and how candidates can be built through affective and persuasive imagery. Visual rhetorical literacy, the ability to interpret and critique political imagery, has become an essential part of modern democracy in order for peak participation from voters.

Melek and Raza examined how three major news organizations; Associated Press (AP), CNN, and FOX, utilized Instagram to visually frame coverage of the 2020 US election. The study analyzed the strategies that these news outlets employed, focusing on the differences and similarities in how political figures and events are presented by the media (2023). This study expands on the above study by examining Instagram posts from major news outlets during the 2020 presidential election. The study further expands on the concept of visual framing and the political narratives that can be created by different news outlets. In the study, the argument is presented that different organizations use different visual framing styles to influence how the candidates are perceived by the public.

Often, the narrative news outlets are presenting are different from what the candidates and their teams want portrayed. As stated in the book *Image Bite Politics*, “visual portrayals

facilitate different levels of intimacy between candidates and viewers, highlight appeal or unappealing personal attributes of candidates, and have the potential to craft enduring images that affect electoral support” (Gabe & Bucy, 2009). Visual framing has always been and continues to be a crucial pillar of the electoral process.

Through visual framing, biases can be further pushed and potentially affect the way voters perceive the candidate. The role of media bias, in terms of shaping electoral outcomes, has been heavily debated through these studies. The role of media bias, in terms of shaping electoral outcomes, has been heavily debated through these studies. Perryman, Foley, and Wagner (2020) examined how the reporting of poll results can shape perceptions that voters have of media outlets and their biases towards candidates, which can lead to influencing voter behavior. Through the research conducted, the poll coverage can be negative or positive towards one candidate or another. Due to the inconsistency, voters tend to not trust the media outlets and can often lead to different outcomes than what was projected. Findings suggest that the perception of media bias causes voters to not fully trust and accept information from certain news outlets. This research emphasizes the importance of understanding how coverage during an election can personify media bias, which can alter public trust and perceptions of fairness in political reporting.

One of the main findings in several studies was that visual framing and the study of nonverbal expressions made the viewer feel a certain way. For example, in a study done by Renita Coleman and Stephen Banning “Gore exhibited more positive nonverbal expressions; Bush expressed more negative nonverbal behavior. Survey respondents felt significantly more positive about Gore than about Bush. Gore made them feel more hopeful and proud, and was

more moral, knowledgeable, intelligent, and caring, and was a stronger leader; Bush made them feel more angry and afraid, and was significantly more dishonest and out of touch with ordinary people” (2006, p.320).

Alieva (2023) examines how two major American newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, used the visualization of data which in turn visually framed the 2016 US election. The study focuses on data-driven graphics, charts, and infographics and how the public’s understanding of the election is shaped. The emphasis was on how the visual tools utilized were meant to present complex political data in a more accessible way. This study showcases how these media outlets used data-driven visuals to communicate the election’s narrative. Alieva’s analysis highlights the power of visual content and how it can reinforce or challenge media bias. These findings suggest that even seemingly neutral visual representations can carry implicit biases.

The content analysis method remains a core method when it comes to examining media outlets and how candidates and issues can be framed. Verser and Wicks (2006) conducted a study on presidential candidate websites during the 2000 campaign which revealed that candidates strategically used images to manage public perceptions. Visual representations, such as photos of candidates in family settings, during public speeches, etc. were carefully selected to foster a sense of trust and reliability, influencing the emotional connections voters can make with candidates.

Dastgeer and Hill (2021) performed a content analysis of newspaper headlines during the 2020 presidential election, focusing on the representation of female candidates in comparison to male candidates. This research uncovered the underrepresentation of female

candidates during political coverage. The study found that headlines often overlooked the substance of female candidates' political platforms and instead focusing on physical appearance and happenings in their personal life. The patterns found through such studies highlights how gendered visual framing can affect the impact how voters perceive female politicians.

Meeks (2019) conducted a content analysis on Trump's tweets. The analysis revealed that Trump consistently attacked the media to delegitimize certain media institutions. Trump framed the media as hostile, bias, corrupt, and untrustworthy. Trump was trying to reduce the trust that the public had in the media which also cultivating a relationship with supporters, especially during the election. This was not a traditional content analysis of just graphics and photos, but coded the tweets that Trump was putting out to influence the public.

Coleman and Banning (2006) analyzed the affective framing of presidential candidates in TV news, which revealed how emotional appeals through visuals can and will affect voters. This specific study supports the idea that media outlets are not only presenting information but also utilize affective framing. This allows media outlets to not only factually inform voters, but also to influence voters on a deeper, more emotional level. The utilization and emphasis on affective framing bring a personable and emotional connection between voters and the candidates. The affective framing is meant to make the candidates seem more like the everyday civilian.

The studies discussed showcase how important visual rhetoric and framing are to the election process in the United States. Through the different utilizations and styles of visual framing in the media, voter perception and outcome during electoral times can be affected.

Methodology

To answer the research question: “How were Donald Trump and Kamala visually framed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* during the 2024 Presidential Election?” This study utilizes a specific content analysis, known as a framing analysis, to examine the visual representation of both candidates in the news media coverage during the 2024 election. This research is specifically focused on how the media portrays candidates via images, as well as what the journalist controlled versus what the candidate controlled. The study follows the framework established by Grabe and Bucy (2009), analyzing the visual representation of candidates and the narrative to go with it.

The data was collected from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* website, using a keyword search for both Trump and Harris. The search consisted of typing in the candidate’s name and collecting the news stories that had the respective candidate in the thumbnail image. The time frame studied was from the start of both the Republican and Democratic Conventions until Election Day. The news articles included in the data collection were only those with the candidates in the thumbnail. The process of data collection resulted in 245 total samples, with 149 images of Donald Trump and 96 images of Kamala Harris.

After the data collection, a coding sheet was developed to collar the various aspects that go into the portrayals of candidates. Thirty variables were designed to capture the various dimensions of visual representations. The variables had a few key categories that can be controlled by the candidate or the journalists. In terms of candidate controlled, their appearance and what candidate archetype they wanted to portray were visually analyzed by coders. In terms of the journalist-controlled aspects, the camera angles, lengths, and photo

placements were analyzed by coders. Coding was then conducted by twenty-six student coders who underwent coder training in class. To ensure reliability, a coder-reliability test was conducted before the full data collection began.

This study provided a systematic approach to analyze the visual media portrayals of both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris during the 2024 Presidential Election. Through a framing analysis and utilizing a structured coding blueprint, student-coders ensured an accurate analysis.

Findings

The content analysis of images from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for the two presidential candidates, Harris and Trump, revealed noticeable differences in visual framing. These findings are categorized based on the themes of political archetype, public engagement, physical appearance, and media coverage placement. Through the coding process, researchers were able to find various differences and similarities between the visual framing of both candidates as well as the lack of evidence in regard to any clear bias.

Trump and Harris were depicted more frequently under the statesmen candidate archetype. Both candidates had images coded as the statesman archetype, with Trump having 347 images and Harris having 192 images. Additionally, though, both candidates had a fair number of images falling under the populist candidate archetype, as represented in Figure 1.

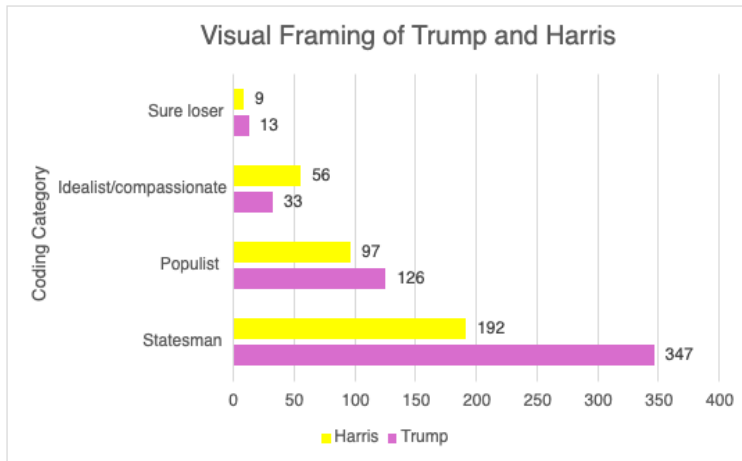


Figure 1

Shown by the numbers in Figure 1, both Trump and Harris have about a 2:1 ratio regarding the statesmen archetype and the populist archetype. Showing that neither candidate falls fully under one political archetype.

A strong contrast emerged in terms of the number of times each candidate was shown wearing a suit. Trump was resoundingly depicted in a suit (139 images), compared to Harris (75 images). Casual clothing was rarely, if ever, seen in media coverage. Harris never appeared in casual clothing compared to Trump that was seen twice in casual clothing. This is exemplary that neither candidate strayed away from the professional, business-like attire and there was no one candidate that looked better than the other as covered by the Inquirer in terms of what they wore.

As established in the methods section of this research, there are aspects that are more controlled by the journalists rather than the candidate or their campaign team. An example of this is shown through the coding of shot lengths, shot angles, and picture placement within

the story. Depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3 are pie charts representing each candidate's numbers regarding shot lengths.

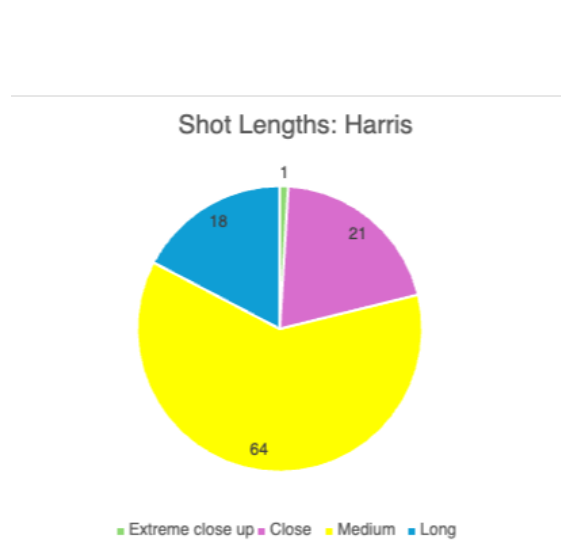


Figure 2

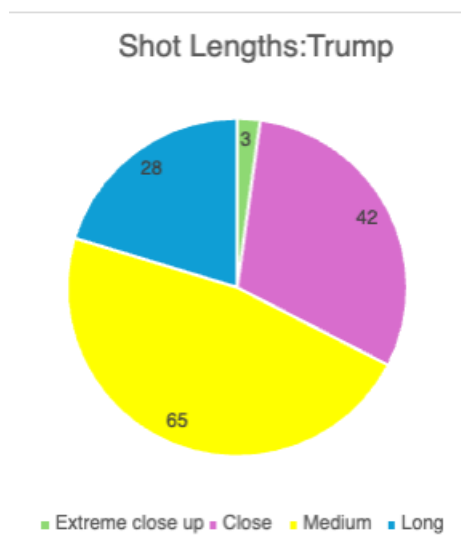


Figure 3

Seen in these charts, both Trump and Harris were mostly shown in medium shots in the Inquirer. This shows no bias in terms of shot lengths and both candidates are shown in a neutral light. This part of the research shows that the Inquirer did not make the candidates look like a sure loser nor did they get too personal with extreme close-ups.

Another aspect of the study that would be controlled by the journalist at the Inquirer is the picture placement in the story. As seen in Figure 4 below, Trump had more media coverage at 139 total images while Harris only had 92 total images.

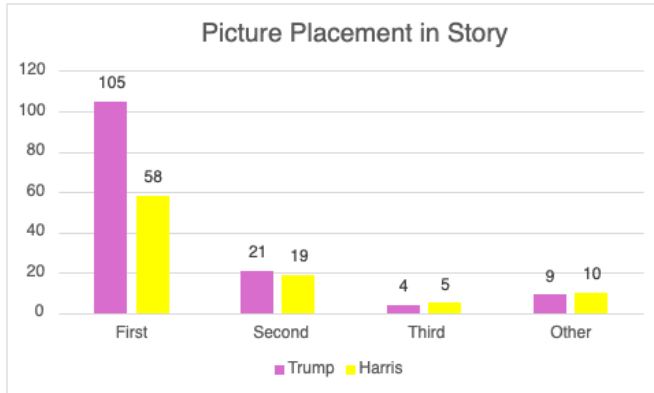


Figure 4

Also seen in Figure 4, Harris had about half the lead images that Trump had. In terms of bias, this might show that the Inquirer favored Trump in this aspect of the study. The amount of lead photos might influence where the readers go first. Trump having a higher number of lead photos displays the idea that he is ‘more interesting’ and grab the readers’ attention. However, the starting point of the study began at the start of each convention. Therefore, Trump being the Republican candidate, was campaigning for a about a month longer than Harris had campaigned. This shows that in relation to one another, Trump had more camera time than Harris had from the start of each national convention.

Facial expression, focused on the eyes and smile, contributed notable difference between candidates. Seen in Figures 5, Harris’s numbers are all pretty equal, but the majority number falls under direct eye contact. This is attributed to Harris falling more under the compassionate archetype as well and showing more of a human connection with the public.

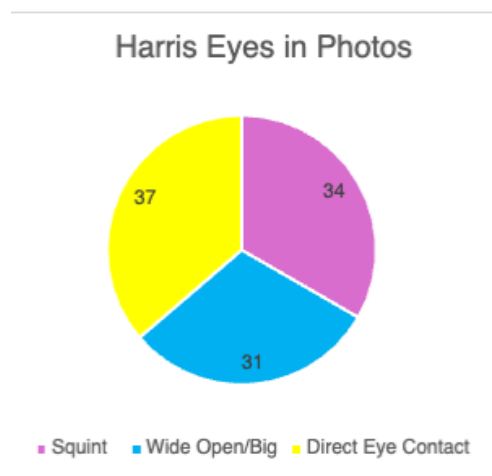


Figure 5

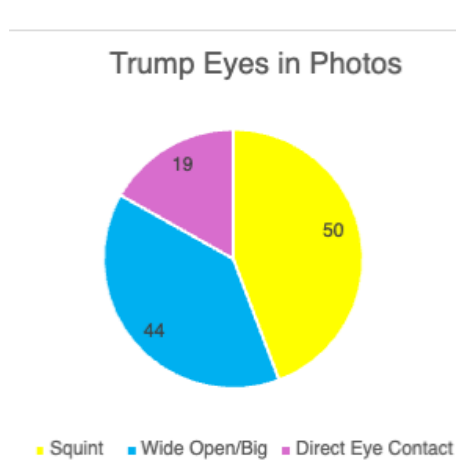


Figure 6

Comparatively, Trump's numbers are not equal and has the majority number falling under squinting. While this does not show bias on the terms controlled by journalists, this might cause the public to have more difficulty connecting with Trump.

Additionally, the study focused on the ways in which the mouth was seen in media coverage of each candidate. Harris was seen smiling or displaying a closed-lip smile (36 images), while Trump was depicted with neutral or straight-line lips more frequently (69 images). These findings additionally add to the political archetypes which each candidate falls into. Harris being depicted more in a compassionate statesman and Trump as a neutral strongly depicted statesman.

The findings of this study do not have evidence to back up the claim that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* is biased towards one candidate over the other. Regarding the findings of this study, the only clear contrast is the total number of photos of each candidate. This however could be attributed to the fact that Trump was campaigning longer than Harris which resulted in more photos. Besides what was found, a future study might further study the idea that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* is actually a politically biased news source. The

findings indicate that Trump was more frequently depicted as the formal, dominant statesmen. While Harris was depicted as the statesman but also falls into the compassionate archetype as well. The visual framing of both candidates essentially aligns with the way their campaign teams wanted them depicted. The findings though show the similarities and differences that are noticeable in the content analysis without any clear bias from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Conclusion

This study sought to analyze the visual framing of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris during the 2024 presidential election through a content analysis of images published by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The content analysis that was done is unique in the sense that this addressed the concepts that had not yet been studied. Drawing from several theories of visual framing and media coverage, research revealed insights into how the visual portrayals of candidates can influence the public perception and how the visual framing can categorize the candidates under certain archetypes. Examining elements such as attire, facial expression, camera angles, image placement, and who they are seen with highlighted both similarities and differences in how each candidate was depicted.

Both Trump and Harris were most frequently framed under the statesmen political archetype, with a shared emphasis on authority and professionalism during their campaigns. However, some of Harris's visual framing falls into the compassionate archetype as well. This part of research shows that Harris is trying to more humanly connect with people through direct eye contact and smiling, which aligns more so with a more empathetic

political archetype. In contrast, Trump's images depict a more dominant political persona with a more traditional and formal presentation. The subtle yet consistent differences in the visual framing of candidates shape the emotional and cognitive connections voters make with the candidates.

There is minimal evidence to back up the claim that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* was completely biased towards one candidate. There was nothing in the study that found overt biased or favoritism to Trump or Harris. The aspects such as shot lengths and attire showed minimal discrepancies in regard to the paper's possible overt bias. Although there is an imbalance in the number of pictures and the picture placements, this could be attributed to the fact that the Republican National Convention started earlier than the Democratic National Convention allotting more coverage for Trump. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* was not overtly biased towards Trump or Harris during the 2024 election; the findings of this study cannot back up the claim that the Inquirer is completely biased towards one candidate.

Overall, this study highlights the essential role that visual framing plays in the time of election coverage. Visual imagery is not merely supplemental to the text, but it can carry the persuasive power and meaning all together. In a media environment saturated with imagery, voters are increasingly influenced by the visual presentation of candidates, often without conscious awareness. In a time where media consumption often dominates, understanding the way the candidate portrayals and visual framing are constructed and received is crucial. While there was not enough evidence to back up the claim that the Inquirer is biased, the research has highlighted the importance of understanding visual framing as the political landscape is being swamped by images. Ultimately, this research reinforces the importance

of media literacy and visual framing awareness among the public during the times of election.

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