

Victim narratives in U.S. Democratic and Republican political speeches: a comparative framing analysis of the 2020 and 2024 election cycles

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Abstract: This study compares victim narratives in eight Democratic and Republican presidential and vice-presidential nomination-acceptance speeches from the 2020 and 2024 U.S. election cycles. Drawing on Entman's framing theory, it examines four dimensions: victim construction, blame attribution, moral evaluation, and proposed remedy. The analysis finds that Democratic speeches more often construct pluralized, rights-oriented victimhood by highlighting differentiated social groups and connecting harm to inequality, rights, and institutional protection. Republican speeches more often organize economic, cultural, and security grievances around ordinary Americans, workers, communities, and the nation, linking them to restorative themes such as order, sovereignty, and national protection. Despite these differences, both parties use victimhood to connect perceived harm with responsibility, moral judgment, political remedies, and electoral choice. The study therefore shows how competing victim narratives can serve as distinct but comparable forms of partisan mobilization in contemporary U.S. electoral discourse.

Keywords: framing theory; victim narratives; political discourse; Democratic Party; Republican Party

1 Introduction

Political polarization has made partisan identity increasingly important in contemporary U.S. politics. Party conflict now extends beyond policy disagreement into questions of social identity, belonging, and the moral character of political opponents [1]. In this environment, campaign speeches do more than introduce policy programs. They also identify groups said to be threatened or neglected, explain who is responsible for those conditions, and present particular candidates as capable of offering protection or recovery. These interpretive choices matter because political messages can turn broad concerns such as economic insecurity, racial inequality, immigration, public safety, or rights into stories about people who have suffered and actors who should be held accountable.

Victimhood offers a useful lens for examining this process. Perceived victimhood can cross ideological and partisan boundaries and can be activated through political communication [2]. It may therefore function not only as an account of suffering but also as a political resource through which leaders define threatened groups and justify action. Research on strategic victimhood has shown how political leaders, especially populist figures, can position favored groups as endangered and present themselves as their defenders [3]. Yet existing work often focuses on public perceptions, individual

leaders, or single-party cases. Less attention has been paid to equivalent Democratic and Republican campaign speeches analyzed through the same set of framing dimensions.

This study addresses that gap by comparing eight presidential and vice-presidential nomination-acceptance speeches delivered at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2020 and 2024. Drawing on Entman's framing theory [4], it examines victim construction, blame attribution, moral evaluation, and proposed remedy through qualitative comparative analysis. The purpose is not to measure which party uses victimhood more frequently, but to identify how the two parties organize it politically. The comparison shows that Democratic speeches tend to construct a more pluralized and rights-oriented victim frame, whereas Republican speeches more often collect diverse grievances into a broader narrative of ordinary Americans, workers, communities, and national decline. At the same time, both parties use perceived injury to connect identity, blame, values, political solutions, and electoral choice.

2 Literature review and analytical framework

2.1 Review of relevant studies

Victimhood has been studied as both an experience of harm and a group-based perception. Collective victimhood refers to a shared belief that one's group has suffered unjust or undeserved harm [5], and later research has shown that such perceptions can shape group boundaries, blame, and intergroup attitudes. In American politics, perceived victimhood has been found across partisan and ideological lines. Political communication research further suggests that victim rhetoric can shift responsibility toward external actors and increase support for leaders who claim to defend the injured group [6]. Studies of Trump similarly describe victimhood as a strategic resource used to present particular constituencies as threatened.

Recent work also cautions against treating victimhood as exclusively right-wing. Both Democratic and Republican partisans may understand their political group through narratives of victimization, although the strength and form of these perceptions differ [7]. Existing studies therefore establish a close relationship between victimhood, political identity, blame, and mobilization. What remains less developed is a symmetrical comparison of how the two major U.S. parties construct victimhood in equivalent campaign speeches. This study responds by comparing the same speech genre across two election cycles, with attention to both partisan contrasts and limited changes over time in contemporary electoral discourse.

2.2 Analytical framework

Framing theory explains how political discourse makes selected aspects of reality more salient. Goffman treated frames as interpretive structures through which people make sense of events [8], while Entman provided a particularly useful formulation for communication research by identifying four central framing functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral evaluations, and suggesting remedies.

These functions closely match the structure of political victim narratives. In this study, problem definition is operationalized as victim construction, or the identification of individuals, groups, communities, or national collectives presented as harmed or threatened. Causal interpretation becomes blame attribution, which identifies actors, policies, institutions, or broader forces held responsible. Moral evaluation concerns the values through which the harm is judged, and proposed remedy examines the political actions or forms of leadership presented as responses. This four-dimensional framework allows Democratic and Republican claims to be compared through a common analytical structure without treating victimhood as a fixed ideological category.

2.3 Data selection and analytical procedure

The corpus consists of eight nomination-acceptance speeches delivered during the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in the 2020 and 2024 presidential election cycles. The Democratic sample includes Joe Biden and

Kamala Harris in 2020 and Kamala Harris and Tim Walz in 2024; the Republican sample includes Donald Trump and Mike Pence in 2020 and Donald Trump and J. D. Vance in 2024. All transcripts are drawn from The American Presidency Project. Restricting the material to presidential and vice-presidential acceptance speeches keeps the communicative setting and electoral purpose broadly comparable across parties.

The study uses qualitative comparative framing analysis supported by close textual reading. Passages are treated as victim narratives when individuals, social groups, communities, or the nation are represented as experiencing harm, loss, injustice, deprivation, or threat. These passages are examined through the four dimensions defined above and compared across parties and election cycles. Because the speeches differ substantially in length, raw frequency is not treated as the main basis of comparison. The analysis instead emphasizes recurring framing patterns and representative examples, preserving the contextual meaning of the speeches while avoiding misleading numerical comparisons.

Using eight speeches also makes it possible to distinguish recurring partisan tendencies from the vocabulary of a single candidate. The corpus is still small enough for close reading, but it includes two speakers from each party in each election cycle and therefore provides a broader basis for comparison than a single-speech case study. The analysis does not claim that every example is representative of all Democratic or Republican discourse; instead, repeated patterns across comparable convention speeches are treated as evidence of tendencies within this specific corpus.

3 Comparative analysis of victim narratives

3.1 Partisan construction of victim identities

Both parties construct political victims, but they differ in the identities most readily placed in that position. The contrast is one of emphasis rather than exclusivity: workers, families, and economically insecure Americans appear on both sides. Democratic speeches, however, more often differentiate victimhood through particular social experiences, whereas Republican speeches more often connect distinct grievances to broader identities such as ordinary Americans, the working class, local communities, or the nation.

In the Democratic material, victimhood is frequently attached to unequal social or institutional exposure. Biden's 2020 speech refers to workers, families, women, Black Americans, immigrants, and people who have been "left-out and left-behind" [9]. Harris similarly presents Black, Latino, and Indigenous Americans as "suffering and dying disproportionately" during the pandemic and connects this suffering to inequalities in health care, housing, employment, and criminal justice [10]. The 2024 speeches retain this differentiated pattern while giving greater prominence to economic insecurity and personal rights. Harris foregrounds middle-class families, workers, older Americans, and women whose reproductive choices have been restricted [11], while Walz uses the language of "neighbors" to connect medical debt, fertility treatment, school meals, and gun violence to everyday vulnerability [12].

Republican speeches organize victimhood more collectively. Trump's 2020 address presents blue-collar workers as people betrayed by political and economic arrangements that moved jobs abroad and also includes victims of violent crime, police officers, and citizens said to be threatened by disorder [13]. Pence similarly emphasizes working families, law-enforcement officers, and communities portrayed as endangered by social instability [14]. In 2024, Vance describes industrial communities as "cast aside and forgotten" and ties their experience to deindustrialization, globalization, and Washington elites [16]. Trump returns to the "forgotten men and women", extends economic victimhood to inflation and immigration, and adds a personal dimension through his account of the assassination attempt [15].

The comparison therefore points to two overlapping but distinguishable tendencies. Democratic victim construction is more often pluralized and group-specific, drawing attention to different forms of unequal vulnerability. Republican discourse more often collectivizes victimhood, linking workers, ordinary citizens, communities, and sometimes the

political leader to a wider narrative of national loss. This does not mean that one party owns a particular type of victimhood; rather, the speeches arrange shared social concerns around different political communities. That conclusion is consistent with research showing that victimhood operates across partisan boundaries while also being strategically used to construct threatened political constituencies.

The cross-cycle comparison also shows continuity within each party. Democratic speakers in both 2020 and 2024 repeatedly build coalitions by placing several distinct groups within a common language of vulnerability, even though the concrete issues change from pandemic inequality to reproductive rights and household costs. Republican speakers likewise maintain a broad image of an injured national or working community, but the 2024 speeches give greater prominence to deindustrialization, border insecurity, and the victimization of political leadership itself. The value of comparing several speeches is therefore not that every speaker repeats an identical list of victims, but that recurring ways of grouping political subjects become visible across different candidates and electoral moments.

3.2 Partisan patterns of blame attribution

Victim construction is closely tied to responsibility. Harm rarely appears in these speeches as an accidental condition; it is attached to a political actor, policy choice, institution, or broader force. Democratic speakers tend to connect injury to leadership decisions, specific policies, or structural inequality. Republican speakers also personalize blame but more often connect Democratic leaders to a broader field of political elites, globalization, foreign competition, immigration, and social disorder.

The 2020 Democratic speeches combine immediate political responsibility with structural explanation. Biden links pandemic deaths, unemployment, lost health insurance, and business closures to the incumbent administration's response. Harris makes the connection explicit by stating that Trump's "failure of leadership has cost lives and livelihoods", while also attributing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minority communities to structural racism. In 2024, the attribution becomes more directly personalized. Harris links restrictions on reproductive choice to Trump's Supreme Court appointments and presents the consequences for women as politically produced rather than accidental. Walz similarly associates economic and social insecurity with the Trump-Vance agenda and Project 2025.

Republican speeches organize blame more expansively. Trump's 2020 address links manufacturing losses to Biden's political record, NAFTA, China's entry into the World Trade Organization, and other trade arrangements, while also presenting illegal immigration, urban disorder, and liberal political elites as sources of insecurity. Pence connects Biden and the Democratic Party with higher costs, open borders, unsafe streets, and the "radical left", bringing several policy conflicts into a common account of threat. Vance's 2024 speech develops this logic through the image of a Washington "ruling class", connecting factory closures and working-class decline to trade policy, globalization, China, fentanyl, and elite neglect. Trump likewise attributes inflation and border insecurity to the current administration while framing foreign competition as a source of national economic vulnerability.

The difference is therefore less about whether the parties blame opponents than about how broadly blame is organized. Democratic speeches usually move from an identifiable harm toward a policy decision, leadership failure, or structural inequality. Republican speeches more often integrate several causal agents into a larger people-versus-threat structure. The boundary is not absolute: Democrats personalize blame and Republicans identify specific policies. Still, the broader adversarial configuration is more consistent in the Republican material, echoing research showing that victim rhetoric often relocates responsibility toward external actors and casts political opponents as victimizers.

Blame also interacts with the scale of the victim identity established in the previous section. When Democratic speakers describe differentiated groups as vulnerable, responsibility can be distributed across different mechanisms: public

policy in one case, institutional inequality in another, or the actions of a named political leader in a third. Republican speakers more often move in the opposite direction by combining several causes into a single narrative of national decline. Trade agreements, elite decisions, immigration, crime, and foreign competition may concern different policy areas, yet their rhetorical effect is cumulative. They make separate grievances appear to share a political source and thereby strengthen the contrast between an injured public and the forces said to have failed it.

3.3 Moral evaluation and partisan value orientation

Victim narratives gain political force when harm is framed as a violation of values that audiences are expected to recognize. Across the corpus, both parties appeal to familiar American ideals such as freedom, dignity, opportunity, security, fairness, family, and national strength. The difference lies less in the possession of separate moral vocabularies than in the way these values are combined and attached to particular forms of victimization.

Democratic speeches consistently link suffering to equality, dignity, and rights. Biden's 2020 address contrasts fairness with privilege and treats racial and economic inequality as failures to fulfill equal opportunity. Harris invokes "equality, liberty, and justice for all" and describes unequal exposure to racism and the pandemic as a violation of equal justice. By 2024, freedom becomes especially prominent. Harris connects it to reproductive choice, voting rights, protection from gun violence, dignity, fairness, and opportunity. Walz similarly frames freedom through health-care decisions, family life, children's safety, and the ability to build a desired future. Democratic moral evaluation therefore tends to interpret harm through unequal access to rights and security rather than through a single definition of social injury.

Republican speeches also emphasize freedom, but more often pair it with order, security, patriotism, sovereignty, and limits on government. Trump's 2020 speech links the protection of crime victims and police to "security, dignity and peace", law and order, strong borders, religious liberty, and gun rights. Pence frames Democratic government as threatening "freedom, prosperity, and security" and contrasts it with free markets, religious freedom, the right to life, and law enforcement. In 2024, Trump places "safety, prosperity and freedom" within a wider promise of national recovery, while Vance grounds political morality in family, citizenship, shared history, and protection of American workers and communities.

The resulting distinction should not be reduced to a simple claim that Democrats value equality while Republicans value freedom. Freedom is central to both sides, but it is framed differently. Democratic speakers more often connect it with personal autonomy, inclusion, and equal rights; Republican speakers more often connect it with security, national continuity, social order, and protection from external interference. Research on Democratic and Republican national convention speeches likewise finds different moral emphases without treating the parties as morally isolated from one another [17]. The corpus therefore suggests competing partisan interpretations of what American political life is expected to protect.

This overlap is analytically important because it shows that partisan competition often concerns the interpretation of shared national values rather than the use of entirely different values. A speaker can invoke freedom while directing attention toward bodily autonomy, voting access, border control, religious liberty, or public safety. The value word remains familiar, but the object said to require protection changes. Moral evaluation thus helps convert the victim categories identified in the speeches into broader visions of legitimate political order. It tells audiences not only that a group has been harmed, but also why that harm should count as a violation of a recognizably American principle.

3.4 Construction of political remedies

The proposed remedy completes the victim frame by turning harm into an argument for political action. Across the speeches, remedies do more than list policies: they identify the candidate or party as the agent capable of reversing

victimization. Democratic speeches generally emphasize institutional protection, social provision, economic opportunity, and the restoration or expansion of rights. Republican speeches more often rely on a restorative vocabulary centered on stronger boundaries, national protection, economic autonomy, and decisive leadership.

In 2020, Biden responds to economic insecurity with employment and manufacturing programs, lower health-care costs, stronger unions, equal pay, higher wages, and protection for Social Security and Medicare. Harris connects pandemic loss and racial inequality to a Biden administration that would address public health, economic exclusion, and racial injustice. The 2024 Democratic speeches retain this institutional logic while linking it more directly to rights and everyday costs. Harris proposes an "opportunity economy", middle-class tax relief, lower housing and health-care costs, and restoration of reproductive freedom. Walz adds paid family leave, affordable housing, lower prescription-drug costs, relief from medical debt, school meals, and protection of reproductive choice. These policies vary, but they share an assumption that public institutions can reduce vulnerability and widen access to security or autonomy.

Republican remedies are more explicitly restorative. Trump's 2020 proposals center on domestic manufacturing, renegotiated trade, border enforcement, law and order, and economic reopening. Pence similarly presents stronger borders, support for law enforcement, free markets, and continued Republican leadership as protections for American freedom and prosperity. In 2024, Trump links inflation and national decline to promises of lower energy costs, further tax reductions, border closure, completion of the wall, and restoration of previous enforcement policies. Vance makes the movement from victimhood to remedy especially visible: after discussing "the villains and their victims", he turns to rebuilding factories, protecting wages, reducing dependence on foreign labor and energy, reshaping supply chains, and putting American citizens first.

The two parties therefore differ primarily in the political form assigned to redress. Democratic speakers more often translate victimhood into social protection, institutional intervention, and rights restoration; Republican speakers more often translate it into national restoration, stronger control, economic protection, and recovered sovereignty. The distinction is not total, because both sides promise jobs, family security, and economic relief. What matters is the narrative relation between injury and cure. Framing research has long noted that political actors emphasize considerations that make preferred policies appear more compelling [18], while victim rhetoric can strengthen support for leaders presented as capable of relieving harm.

Remedy framing also gives candidates a particular political role. Democratic nominees typically present government as an institution that can correct unequal exposure to risk, restore rights, or widen economic security. Republican nominees more often present leadership as the means of regaining control over conditions described as lost or weakened. In both cases, the candidate is placed between the victim and the desired future. This is why the policy lists in the speeches are not separate from the victim narratives: proposals gain persuasive force from the prior description of harm. The promised solution simultaneously defines what the problem was and why a change or continuation of leadership is presented as necessary.

3.5 Partisan differences and shared mobilization logic

Taken together, the four dimensions form two distinguishable partisan configurations. Democratic speeches tend to produce a pluralized, rights-oriented victim frame. Workers, racial minorities, women, middle-class families, older Americans, and other vulnerable groups are not represented as suffering for one identical reason; instead, their experiences are connected through a broader claim that political institutions should protect people from unequal harm and preserve access to rights, dignity, opportunity, and social security. Blame therefore shifts between leadership decisions and structural inequalities, while remedies tend toward institutional protection, social provision, and the restoration of rights. The strong

language of freedom in the 2024 Democratic speeches fits this pattern because freedom is framed through reproductive choice, voting rights, personal autonomy, and economic opportunity.

Republican speeches more often bring separate grievances under collective identities such as ordinary Americans, workers, communities, or the nation. Responsibility is distributed across a wider field of antagonists: Democratic leaders, Washington elites, globalization, China, illegal immigration, crime, and cultural disorder can appear as parts of the same account of national or working-class loss. Security, liberty, order, sovereignty, family, and national continuity then provide the moral basis for remedies centered on restoration. Stronger borders, renewed manufacturing, economic protection, energy production, law enforcement, and leadership capable of reversing decline become responses to an injured political community. This configuration is consistent with research on strategic victimhood, which shows how political discourse can position dominant or nationally central groups as threatened and in need of protection.

The partisan differences nevertheless rest on a shared mobilizing logic. In both parties, victimhood turns abstract political concerns into experiences with identifiable subjects and moral stakes. Harm personalizes conflict; blame supplies a responsible actor; moral evaluation explains why the condition is unacceptable; and the remedy converts grievance into a reason for political alignment. This mechanism fits an environment in which party identity carries strong social and emotional meaning. It does not follow that victim narratives cause polarization, and the present qualitative analysis cannot establish such an effect. What the speeches do show is how partisan boundaries can be narrated: politics becomes a relationship among those said to be harmed, those said to have caused the harm, and those claiming the ability to end it. Evidence that both Democratic and Republican partisans can perceive their groups as victimized further supports treating victimhood as a cross-partisan resource rather than an exclusively right-wing form of rhetoric.

A limited temporal difference is also visible. The 2024 Democratic speeches give greater rhetorical weight to freedom as a language of rights and personal autonomy, whereas the 2024 Republican speeches make personalized and restorative victimhood more conspicuous. Trump's account of the assassination attempt places the candidate himself within the victim position, while Vance links political leadership closely to communities represented as forgotten or abandoned. Eight speeches are not enough to claim a linear transformation between 2020 and 2024, but the contrast suggests that victim frames can adapt to changing electoral conditions. Across both parties, the sequence moves from victimization through blame attribution and moral evaluation to political remedies and, ultimately, electoral mobilization. The parties diverge over who has been wronged and what justice or restoration requires, but both convert perceived injury into a reason for political choice.

Seen in this way, the central contrast is not simply between a Democratic list of vulnerable groups and a Republican list of threatened citizens. Each party constructs a relationship among identity, causation, value, and political agency. Democratic discourse tends to hold together a coalition by recognizing different forms of vulnerability and presenting institutions as protectors of rights and opportunity. Republican discourse tends to hold together a coalition by translating several grievances into a shared experience of loss and presenting restoration as the appropriate response. The two configurations are ideologically distinct, but both give voters a narrative position: they are invited to recognize a victim, accept an explanation of the harm, and view electoral support as part of the remedy.

4 Conclusion

This study compared victim narratives in eight Democratic and Republican nomination-acceptance speeches from the 2020 and 2024 presidential election cycles. Using Entman's four framing functions, it examined how the speeches identify victims, assign responsibility, evaluate harm, and construct political remedies. The findings show that victimhood is not confined to one party. Both sides use narratives of harm and threat, but they organize them around different political

communities and normative priorities. Examining the two parties within the same framework makes these differences clearer because similar electoral functions can be compared without assuming that the underlying grievances, values, or proposed solutions are equivalent.

Democratic speeches tend to construct more pluralized and rights-oriented victimhood, linking different social groups to unequal vulnerability, policy failures, structural inequalities, dignity, equality, freedom, and institutional protection. Republican speeches more often collectivize victimhood around ordinary Americans, workers, communities, and the nation, connecting their grievances to political elites, globalization, immigration, foreign competition, or social disorder and framing remedies through restoration, national protection, stronger boundaries, and economic autonomy. These patterns overlap in practice, but they reveal different ways of defining whose suffering should organize electoral politics.

The comparison also identifies a common structure beneath those differences. Victim narratives connect political injury to responsibility, moral judgment, proposed recovery, and electoral action. Adapting Entman's framework to these dimensions provides a concise way to compare partisan discourse without assuming that victimhood belongs to a single ideology. The comparison also shows why the same language of suffering can support different political projects: the persuasive force of victimhood depends on who is placed in the victim position, how responsibility is narrated, which values are invoked, and what form of recovery is presented as legitimate. The conclusions remain limited to eight convention speeches and cannot establish how voters actually respond to the narratives identified here. Future research could test the same framework across debates, campaign advertisements, rallies, or social media and examine whether similar patterns persist in other forms of U.S. political communication.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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