

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

# **“Tough-minded leader” or “an absolute disaster” –**

A comparative study of evaluative language on Donald Trump as a presidential candidate in news discourse

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**Abstract:**

This thesis examines the evaluation of Donald Trump, the former U.S. president, in news discourse during his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. The polarizing reactions on the media-mogul-turned-politician in news media display attitudes on the candidate during both elections. This thesis attempts to analyze how these attitudes come across as evaluative language in news articles from outlets located on different sides of the political scale. Previous linguistics research into discourse in relation to Donald Trump has heavily focused on analyzing the language of Trump himself, as opposed to language about him. This study will attempt to fill that gap by focusing on evaluative language on Donald Trump.

By utilizing perceived media bias from two organization, Ad Fontes Media and AllSides, Washington Examiner and the Washington Post were selected as the right-wing and left-wing outlets, respectively. The outlets were selected due to similarities in bias, the focus on politics, and the focus on "hard" news reporting. A total of 100 articles, 25 from both outlets from both campaign periods, were sampled from the ProQuest internet database into their respective corpora. In the approach to evaluative language, the theory chosen for the analysis was the Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005). Utilized in several studies on news discourse in the past, the framework consists of different categories along which evaluative language can be

assessed. The system that was utilized in this study was that of ATTITUDE, which focuses on the feelings, emotions, reactions and judgements of the writer in relation to other people, things or phenomena (Martin and White 2005, pp. 42–45). The article data was analyzed and annotated through a close reading approach.

The analysis revealed considerable differences in the amounts of APPRAISAL; both corpora from the 2015–2016 period contained over twice the amount of instances of their counterparts in the 2019–2020 period. Donald Trump was evaluated in a positive manner twice as much in Washington Examiner than in the Washington Post during both time periods, while the amount of negative APPRAISAL had nearly the exact same amount of instances. Additionally, the 2016 campaign period data from Washington Examiner contained the most variation in terms of all three attitudinal categories (AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION) and respective subcategories when compared to the other corpora. General implications based on the results include that Trump's 2016 campaign run had more significance in the media, that media bias could be aligned with the amounts and polarity of evaluation between the outlets, and that Trump's attacks on news outlets during his presidency may have impacted the amount of evaluation he received during his 2020 campaign.

The use of perceived media bias proved beneficial for a comparison, despite not leading up to conclusive results on how slight differences in on the opposite sides of the bias might affect evaluation. The Appraisal framework, while introducing some subjectivity through the qualitative analysis, proved to be useful in assessing different attitudes that writers and other appraisers had of Donald Trump as a presidential candidate. In terms of future research, more attention could be paid on other aspects of news outlets, such as circulation and viewership or authorial differences, even when comparing based on perceived media bias. Overall, this thesis succeeded in its goal to assess how Donald Trump was appraised by two partisan news outlets during his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns.

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## 1. Introduction

Donald Trump has been one of the most, if not the most influential global figures in recent history. After working his way into the White House as an outsider to the U.S. political scene, Trump had a considerable effect on the nation and how politics was viewed both in the U.S. and in the rest of the world. Zelizer (2022b, pp. 44–45) writes that, while Trump gained favor by supporting Republican ideals such as anti-immigration, appeals to religious rights, and by promising more power for the GOP in the U.S. court, what truly gave the president-to-be the necessary power to win was his extreme style of promoting himself and the party while denigrating his opposition. On the other hand, Trump’s eccentricity, and the targeting of fellow Republican candidates such as Ted Cruz or Ben Carson, caused outrage within the GOP and earned the hatred of many within the Party (Zelizer 2022a, pp. 17–18). As an important figure in the political world, Donald Trump’s polarizing campaigning and presidency prove an interesting topic to study.

Media plays a considerable role in the U.S. politics, with content ranging from daily newspapers to cable news providing the latest on current events. Kuypers (2006, p. 10) remarks that, while objectivity has been an ideal quality in news reporting as a presentation of a “true image of the world”, this goal has been difficult to reach. When reporting on events, the media can be seen to frame it in one of three ways: frame it to reflect their views; frame it to reflect what the audience wants to see; or to frame it in the most objective, accurate way (Kuypers 2006, p. 10). D’Alessio (2012, p. 25) mentions the business-nature of news as a force that easily creates bias in reporting; when an important feature of news items is simply that it attracts readers. Similarly, other recognizable features that may affect how something is being reported on are the ownership of a given news company or outlet, and how an owner might limit what gets published; the objectives and standards of given journalists; and the relationships between media and government entities (D’Alessio 2012, pp. 25–38).

In the field of linguistics, news discourse has received considerable research interest. Bednarek and Caple (2012, pp. 5–7) note that news discourse is an important topic of study because of the influence media can have on audiences, especially when considering the vast amounts of different news media there is to consume. This abundance of material to choose from has been approached by different means, such through as corpus linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or

sociolinguistics (Bednarek 2006, pp. 11–12). Bednarek (2006, p. 5) also remarks that studying evaluative language in news discourse enables “challenging” characteristics typical to certain news types, such as the notion of objective reporting. In relation to the previous remarks on the framing of news and the view of news as a business (Kuypers 2006, p. 10; D’Alessio 2012, p. 12), analyzing evaluation may not only be beneficial in uncovering views and attitudes in relation to something but could also provide a clearer picture of potential biases.

News media’s overall role in shaping political races should not be understated. Wells et al. (2022, pp. 284) note that campaign success is also tied to media coverage, which offers a strong advantage for established candidates, but may also lead to candidates being branded in certain ways. As citizens were inquired on what they have “seen or heard” about Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump during the prime of the 2016 election, the audience responses associated Clinton with email scandals and less on her policy positions, whereas Trump was strongly linked to his policies on e.g. immigration, which were often discussed in the news (Wells et al. 2022, p. 285). In relation to political influencing, news outlets have some history of political endorsement in presidential elections, with potential to influence how voters see candidates. Becktel and Sweetser (2018, pp. 105–114) investigate whether political endorsements made by newspapers, celebrities, military leaders and politicians could influence first-time voters’ perceptions of a candidate in the 2016 elections. Focusing on endorsements on the Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, the study explored the variables of authenticity, perception of the candidate and political information efficacy when testing participants from a national pool of first-time voters (Becktel and Sweetser 2018, pp. 109). Albeit not intended as an experiment to seek out a link between voter behavior as a result of endorsements, the results do indicate that endorsements can impact voter’s perceptions of a candidate’s character, emphasizing the importance of such endorsements (Becktel and Sweetser 2018, pp. 110–112).

In addition to mixed attitudes in the political scene, Donald Trump’s campaign success and presidency caused polarizing reactions among the partisan news media. Particularly on the side of cable news, the support for Trump rose along his victories during his 2016 campaign, as Fox News hired personalities to “compliment” the Trump administration (Hemmer 2022, pp. 55–57). Hemmer (2022, pp. 59–60) notes that left-wing news outlets, such as the Washington Post and the New York Times raised the importance of journalistic integrity as a response to the pro-Trump media touting the president early on during his term. During the 2016 campaign, while media

attention on Trump was both positive and negative, he did receive “unusually large” coverage compared to other Republican candidates, including 54 percent of total mentions on cable news between May 2015 and April 2016 (Sides et al. 2019, pp. 60–61).

Kazin (2022, pp. 336–337) reports on how Trump’s outrageous remarks and actions during his presidency earned him negative responses from the masses, beginning from the Women’s March on the day after his inauguration in 2017 and leading up to the protests on his defense of the police after the killing of George Floyd in 2020. Joe Biden’s remarks to the media on Trump’s infamous actions as an incumbent president were considered to have increased the Democrat’s chances in the 2020 election (Kazin 2022, p. 345). Carlson et al. (2021, pp. 63–79, 89–120) write about Trump’s hostile engagement with the news media before and during his presidency, such as calling out those he disagreed with and branding criticism of him as fake news, with supporting conservative outlets such as Fox News amplifying his message. With rough re-election prospects in the horizon in 2020, Trump’s campaign attacked journalists who questioned him on spreading lies about Joe Biden’s son by claiming that the media and the Democrats were attempting election fraud (Hemmer 2022, pp. 62–63). The incumbent president’s hostility even expanded on Fox News, a former favorite of his, over the network calling Joe Biden’s victory in Arizona during election night, even affecting the ratings of the network (Hemmer 2022, pp. 63–65).

Working with the concept of bias in the bipartisan news media of the U.S. and Donald Trump’s presidential campaigning, this study examines how Trump has been evaluated in news discourse during his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. Examining two time periods offers a comparison into this previously unexplored topic, while focusing on evaluative language offers insight into the negative or positive attitudes expressed in the discourse. The data of this study comes from two news outlets from the opposite sides of the political scale, as perceived media bias would suggest: Washington Examiner as the “right-wing” outlet, and the Washington Post as the “left-wing” outlet. Utilizing the Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005), a theory for assessing evaluative language in discourse, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What kinds of attitudinal appraisals are most prominent in the data?
2. Are there noticeable shifts in the presence of APPRAISAL between the time periods and/or outlets?
3. How does the perceived bias compare to the amounts of APPRAISAL?

As general hypotheses for the analysis, given the perceived biases of the two outlets, I expect Washington Examiner to portray Trump in a more positive light, whereas the Washington Post will likely contain more negative evaluation of him as a presidential candidate. Another potential outcome could be that the discourse during the 2020 campaign period would contain more negative and less positive evaluation of Trump overall due to his questionable actions as president. Keeping in mind Trump's hostility against news media during his presidency, I also hypothesize that these attacks might have a potential effect on the evaluation in the 2019–2020 period.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 provides introductions of news discourse and media bias, while moving towards evaluative language and previous relevant studies on the Appraisal framework, as well as those on discourse and Donald Trump. Chapter 3 gives an overview of the data and the methodology of the study, including topics such as the outlets and their selection through perceived media bias. In chapter 4, the evaluative language identified in the data is analyzed through various categories based on the Appraisal framework. Chapter 5 discusses the results in comparison to previous findings, as well as shortcomings and limitations of the study. And finally, chapter 6 considers the importance of the study, particularly in relation to the Appraisal framework, media bias and future prospects.

## **2. Background**

Starting off with a short description of news discourse and “hard” news in section 2.1, the chapter continues onto the concept of media bias and its perception in the U.S. media in section 2.2, followed by introductions to notable theories for assessing evaluative language in discourse, particularly the Appraisal framework in 2.3. In sections 2.4 and 2.5, the framework will be discussed further by examining its contents and through examples of its applications in studies of news discourse. Lastly, section 2.6 provides examples of previous discourse-related studies on Donald Trump.

### **2.1 News discourse and “hard” news**

News, as an overarching topic, can be seen as a vast collection including several different types of news items that are realized through different media such as printed text on paper, broadcasts on radio or television, or even various different types of online formats. Further division can be made into news genres that embody typical characteristics for different kinds of reporting. With a focus on press news, Bell (1991, pp. 14–15). describes several genres, or categories, with their own characteristics, such as “hard news”, a genre focused on the reporting of accidents, crimes and other current events, and “features”, which consist of longer stories with more creative authorial input and are described as the “soft” counterpart to hard news. Bell (1991, pp. 14–15) states that what is notable about the distinction between these two types is that it may not always be straightforward to determine.

Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky (2010, pp. 37–39) note how “hard” news, as a category, has been appraised through several different angles in the last few decades. These characteristics for the genre include the reporting of political, economic or social topics; immediacy in terms of events being reported on; factuality, or objectivity, in reporting; and even the potential incorporation of some commentary or analysis in relation to what is being reported (Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky 2010, pp. 38–39). This relatively large set of characteristics for the genre offers more freedom in the consideration of news outlets, particularly ones focused on politics, to compare, which will be discussed further in section 3.1.

## **2.2 Bias in U.S. news**

Bias has been a point of discussion in the politically influenced environment of the United States, as a phenomenon that has also been studied in news media. In general, the concept of media bias is seen as the favorable or unfavorable portrayal of issues aligning with the left or the right on the political scale (Schiffer 2021, p. 957), a division that is exceedingly notable in the bipartisan system of the US. The perceived bias in reporting has gone neither unnoticed nor uncriticized, as political figures have had input on unfavorable positions taken by the media. As an example of this, Archer (2023) reports on Donald Trump's "attacks" on Fox News during his presidential term and after the outlet had first called Arizona in favor of Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. presidential elections. The study suggests that Trump's attacks and suggestions for an alternative news outlet caused significant losses to Fox News over perceived bias accusations of the former U.S. president. On the Democrats' side, Bernie Sanders, for example, has criticized MSNBC for biased reporting against him during his presidential campaign in 2020 (Archer 2023, p. 3).

Research into political bias in media has favored audience-based approaches such as viewership statistics or surveys in order to measure perceived bias in terms of what kinds of outlets' content do particular audiences consume. Bauer et al. (2021, pp. 22–23) note how previous research has failed in attempts to prove straightforward connections between the political orientation of viewers and its effect on the political slant of a given outlet. Instead, studies have shown that audiences seemingly favor certain news outlets not simply due to favorable viewpoints but due to their popularity, which might translate into higher production quality (Bauer et al 2021, pp. 22–23). As Archer (2023, pp. 17–19) reports, the combination of Donald Trump's hostility towards Fox News and the promotion of an alternative had influenced his followers to switch networks, which could be seen as a change in the perceived bias of the audience.

All in all, the perceptions of media bias vary, change and can even be forced to change, such as for the benefit of one's own agenda. This also makes determining bias difficult in terms of whether genuine bias exists in situations where bias is being considered, or if notions of bias are being used as political tools. In an attempt to alleviate these issues, the study will approach media bias through evaluations made by a watchdog organization monitoring bias in the news, a topic that will be discussed further in section 3.1.

### 2.3 Evaluative language

The language of the news is affected by practices employed by those reporting on events and the standards that these reporters abide by. Thomson and White (2010) remark on the ever-changing state of newspaper journalism, and how standards and practices in journalism may differ considerably between countries, including the notion of what constitutes for objective or subjective reporting (pp. 1–2). While articles representing a genre that is characterized by the objective telling of events, such as hard news, can generally be considered to be written with this principle in mind, subjectivity may potentially get mixed into the discourse. Focusing on writers' attitudes in the form of evaluative language is described as one way to discern and classify news and the types of reporting in news items (Thomson and White 2010, pp. 10–12).

Evaluative language in discourse revolves around the expression of attitudes, views, and ideology, with potential to and sometimes the goal of influencing the audience (Hunston and Thompson 2000, p. 6). Hunston and Thompson (2000, p. 6) consider these functions, along with the capability of organizing discourse, as significant features in considering evaluative language and its study in discourse. In the last few decades, several theories of evaluative language have been conceptualized, some of which have been tuned for the analysis of news discourse. These theories are applied as toolkits for identifying and analyzing potential attitudes, feelings and other positions taken by writers in their texts.

One of the most notable early frameworks for identifying and assessing evaluative language is that of “stance.” Biber et al. (1999, p. 966) describe stance as a multitude of ways for expressing feelings, attitudes, judgements and the like, whether they are linguistic, paralinguistic or non-linguistic. Linguistically, stance can be recognized in discourse in various lexicogrammatical forms, but theory can also be used to identify the semantics behind the writer's linguistic choices (Biber et al. 1999, pp. 968–975).

Another theory to consider is the parameter-based framework of evaluation by Monika Bednarek (2006). This theory approaches evaluative language in news discourse along a set of parameters through which writers or speakers can evaluate the world (Bednarek 2006, p. 41). These evaluative parameters include *core* ones such as IMPORTANCE, which looks at how writers or speakers describe the urgency or relevance of something, or *peripheral* parameters such as MENTAL STATE, which refers to how a writer assesses the emotional status of relevant social

actors in text (Bednarek 2006, pp. 50, 54). The evaluation along the parameters also includes a cline for the force and intensity of the evaluation in a given instance, such as *good-better-best* or *bad-worse-worst*, for a negative polarity (Bednarek 2006, p. 44).

The theory of evaluation chosen for this particular study was the Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005) because it has been used widely in studies on evaluative language, particularly in those dealing with news discourse. The following section gives an overview of the framework and further reasoning for why it was selected for the current study.

## **2.4 The Appraisal framework**

Martin and White's (2005, pp. 33–35) Appraisal framework, a theory situated within Systemic Functional Linguistics, or SFL, functions as a collection of means for interpreting interpersonal meanings in discourse, referring to the connection between the writer(s) and the reader(s) of texts. The Appraisal framework focuses on the identification of evaluative language found in texts in various forms, particularly as value-laden words. Attitudinal evaluations, for example, can be realized in the form of lexical items that convey attitudinal values. Words such as *cunning*, *brilliant*, *maddening*, *criminal* and the like carry different attitudinal positions that can be seen as positive or negative (Thomson and White 2010, pp. 10–11). While this can be compared to the focus on lexicon in linguistic “stance” (Biber et al. 1999), the Appraisal framework includes a deeper categorization when it comes to evaluative words.

The Appraisal framework consists of three main systems for assessing evaluative language: ENGAGEMENT, ATTITUDE and GRADUATION. These, along with their relevant subdomains can be observed in Figure 1 below.

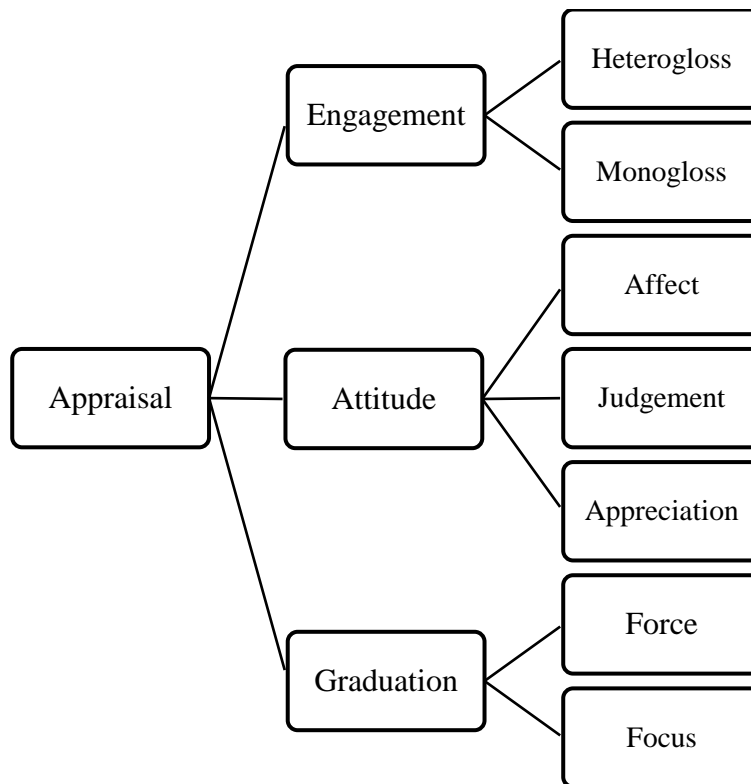


Figure 1. The Appraisal framework (adapted from Martin and White 2005, p. 38).

Of the three systems, ENGAGEMENT is concerned with ways in which speakers or writers situate their texts in relation to previous texts and potential hearers or readers (Martin and White 2005, pp. 36–37). Martin and White (2005, pp. 92–95) describe examining these relationships as a “dialogistic perspective” in the analysis of texts; how a writer acknowledges and “engages with” other texts and readers. ENGAGEMENT consists of two subdomains titled as HETEROGLOSS, focusing on the writer’s acknowledgement of other texts or engagement with the audience, and MONOGLOSS, referring to non-dialogistic utterances such as bare assertions (Martin and White 2005, pp. 97–102). This concept of the communication between the writer and reader offers similarities to that of the “interactional” category in Hyland’s (2005, pp. 48–53) model of metadiscourse, later realized as the category of “engagement” in the theory of “interaction” (Hyland 2008, pp. 11–12), both of which were developed for assessing academic writing.

The second system is that of ATTITUDE, which includes resources for determining the nature of a speaker’s or writer’s feelings and reactions to other people, things or phenomena (Martin and White 2005, pp. 42–45). The system of ATTITUDE is split into three subdomains: AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION. The domain of AFFECT deals with language that expresses

feelings and emotional outbursts, JUDGEMENT revolves around attitudes and assessments or other people and their behavior, and APPRECIATION entails the evaluation of things and phenomena (Martin and White 2005, pp. 35–36). ATTITUDE also includes the consideration for polarity of evaluation, as in whether attitudes expressed are positive or negative, which is an important consideration when examining views, attitudes and ideology found in discourse (Thompson 2014, p. 50).

The final APPRAISAL system is GRADUATION, which centers around the intensity of evaluative language in relation to the other two systems; GRADUATION presents parameters for assessing the degree of evaluation when analyzing instances of ATTITUDE or ENGAGEMENT (Martin and White 2005, pp. 135–137). The system comprises of two subdomains in FOCUS, which refers to the scale of evaluation, and FORCE, which focuses on the degrees of intensity and quantification of evaluation in utterances (Martin and White 2005, pp. 137–153).

Of the three APPRAISAL systems, the current study focuses on utilization of the system of ATTITUDE, along with its subdomains and several respective subcategories, which can be observed in Figure 2.

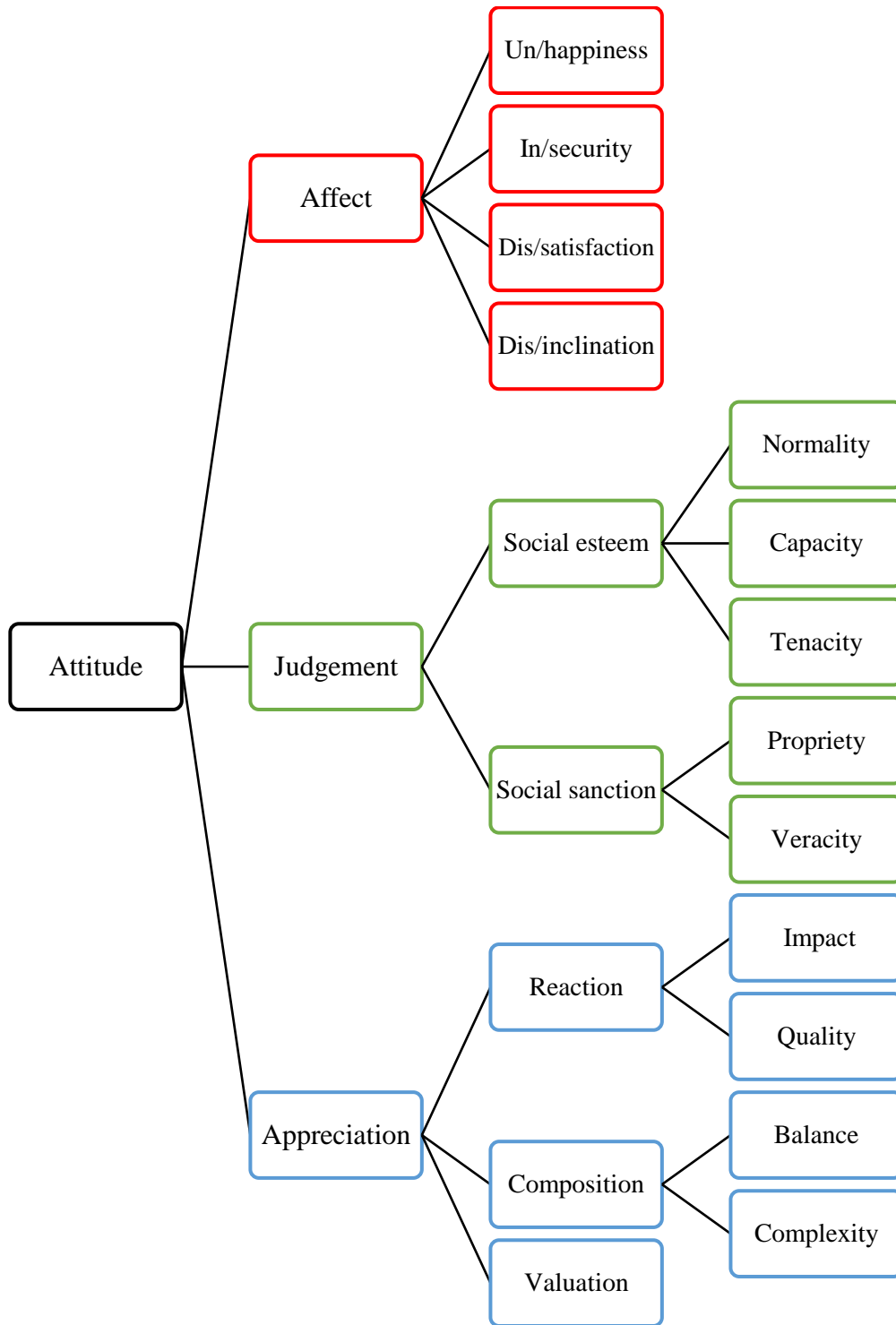


Figure 2. The ATTITUDE system of the Appraisal framework (adapted from Martin and White 2005, pp. 42–56).

For AFFECT, the subcategories deal with feelings and emotional responses of UN/HAPPINESS (e.g. sad/happy, laugh/cry), IN/SECURITY (e.g. anxious/calm, startle/reassure) and DIS/SATISFACTION (e.g. disappointed/impressed, complain/compliment) (Martin and White

2005, pp. 49–50). The fourth subcategory of DIS/INCLINATION deals with intentional responses of fear or desire to triggers (e.g. fearful/longing), as opposed to dealing with emotions such as the other categories. (Martin and White 2005, pp. 48).

JUDGEMENT is divided into SOCIAL ESTEEM, a category dealing with how people or their actions are admired or critiqued in relation to the parameters of NORMALITY, CAPACITY and TENACITY; and SOCIAL SANCTION, which includes assessment of people or their actions in relation to abiding or going against rules, laws, edicts and the like via the parameters of VERACITY and PROPRIETY (Martin and White 2005, pp. 52–56).

The third domain, APPRECIATION, includes lower and upper subcategories. The subcategory of REACTION, relating to affective responses to things or phenomena, consists of further subcategories of IMPACT and QUALITY. COMPOSITION, on the other hand, deals with evaluations related to perception and includes the subcategories of BALANCE and COMPLEXITY (Martin and White 2005, pp. 56–58). The third upper category within APPRECIATION is VALUATION, which revolves around the consideration of views and opinions in assessing things, and has no further subcategorizations (Martin and White 2005, pp. 56–58).

In terms of the current study, the Appraisal framework was chosen due to several reasons. As the Appraisal framework is used for assessing interpersonal meanings through attitudes presented in discourse, the application of the theory goes beyond a focus on simply lexicogrammatical realizations of evaluation but also includes discourse semantics when analyzing discourse (Martin and White 2005, pp. 10–12). Put simply, APPRAISAL accounts for the context of evaluative language in meaning making but lexicogrammatical realization of the language remains as an auxiliary tool in analysis. This relationship gives fuller definitions for the evaluative language that is being analyzed. In addition to this, attitudinal appraisals may also be realized as inscribed, as in explicit evaluative language identified in the text, or as invoked, referring to attempts of eliciting evaluation on what has been uttered (Martin and White 2005, pp. 62–63). While inscribed evaluation can be identified through e.g. attitudinal lexis, texts may also contain instances that “invite” the readers to share and experience particular, more implicit attitudes (Martin and White 2005, pp. 61–68; Macken-Horarik and Isaac 2014, p. 68). Oteiza (2017, p. 458) remarks that the focus on both inscribed and invoked attitudes functions as a way to help understand the interpersonal meanings between the writer and the reader in discourse. The notion

of both overt and covert forms of evaluation make ATTITUDE a system worth focusing on. Overall, the framework's potential has been utilized in several past studies on news discourse, some examples of which are detailed below.

## **2.5 Previous studies utilizing the Appraisal framework**

The Appraisal framework has been widely used in studies investigating evaluative language. News discourse has been an exemplary domain of research where this theory of evaluation has been applied.

In terms of previous studies, Jullian (2011), for example, examines the use of “attributed” appraisal, referring to evaluative content derived from sources other than the author(s) of a given text, and how such evaluative content appears in quotations in news reports. In a comparative study between a variety of Western and Chinese news reports, Jullian (2011) analyzes online news articles written on a Chinese Nobel Peace Prize-winner's imprisonment in his home country due to conflicting views by identifying the proportions of attributed, or averred, and non-attributed instances of data and applying the Appraisal theory in order to determine the types of evaluation present in the texts. The results point towards high amounts of opposing, one-sided evaluation from both Western and Chinese media, but most evaluative language found in instances were considered as originating from external voices (Jullian 2011, pp. 776–778).

With a focus on the conflicting nature of evaluation and journalistic objectivity, Stenvall (2014) investigates an example of the hard news genre in news agency reporting. The study utilizes the Appraisal theory through an expanded adaptation of the AFFECT-domain of the framework in an effort to assess emotional language in objective news reporting. The study raises the notion of objectiveness and its effect on the representation of affect in the news; expressing emotions is bound by rules but in a way that it can still be relatively objective when present. Stenvall (2014, pp. 477–479) notes that “experienced” AFFECT, referring to the description of feelings or emotions experienced by those reported on, may point towards a sense of factuality in describing emotions, but the overall notion of objectivity in expressing AFFECT still remains questionable.

In a more journalistic study of evaluation in the hard news genre, Sabao (2016) adopts a stance towards the utilization of the Appraisal theory in the analysis of texts that are typically classified as objective pieces of writing. Sabao (2016) particularly focuses on the concept of the “journalistic voices” (Martin and White 2005, pp. 167–184), which deal with evaluation and

objectivity in news. With a focus on two hard news reports on the death of a former military leader from two Zimbabwean newspapers, Sabao utilizes the system of ATTITUDE in the analysis of these texts. The utilization of the framework displays a case where the goal of objectivity is not met, as authorial voice, particularly in the form of judgements, is displayed considerably in the news reports (Sabao 2016, pp. 60–61).

## **2.6 Donald Trump and evaluative language**

Donald Trump's presence as the President of the United States has been considerable on a global scale. This presence has also raised interest in the field of linguistics, as research has been pursued on discourse related to the former president. In terms of evaluative language, studies have focused significantly more on the discourse of Donald Trump himself, rather than on evaluations made by reporters and outlets.

One notable viewpoint in the studies on Trump and evaluation has been the focus on elections and the power of evaluative rhetoric in securing support by inciting voters. As an example of this, Ross and Caldwell (2019) examine Donald Trump's tweets during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The study pays particular attention to the negative framing of Hillary Clinton, Trump's main election opponent, through the use of the Appraisal framework. The results reveal a variety of evaluative resources used in the negative framing, with an emphasis on negative judgements (Ross and Caldwell 2019, pp. 20–24). Ross and Caldwell (2019, pp. 14, 21–25) note on Trump's characteristic "de-professionalized" manner of tweeting, and how GRADUATION comes across as a notable resource in emphasizing his rhetoric through capitalization in tweets.

Another topic of interest in relation to the former president is the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020. Jones (2021) looks at stance-taking and attitudes of both UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and of U.S. President Donald Trump during the time they contracted the virus. Jones (2021, pp 1–2) writes how downplaying and poor planning for the pandemic of both leaders are of significance in this evaluative study, which is also reflected in the results. The narratives show how Johnson takes a more repentant stance due to his illness, whereas Trump continues to undermine the severeness of the virus during his presidential campaign (Jones 2021, pp. 7–9). With the exertion of strength and leadership capability despite sickness, the analysis of the illness narratives also points at a portrayal of masculinity in the discourse, as both leaders

attempt to retain a strong image of themselves even by shifting the focus from the severe virus to their own recovery and what enabled it (Jones 2021, pp. 9–10).

Returning to research on social media discourse, Makki and Zappavigna (2021) focus on Trump's use of negative evaluation of Iran as a means to build affiliation with his followers on the platform. Utilizing both the Appraisal framework for evaluative language, and the dialogic affiliation framework for identifying potential bonds between the writer and the audience, the study sets an emphasis on discourse related to the cautionary relationship between the U.S. and Iran, and how Trump negotiates around the topic for potential audience approval (Makki and Zappavigna 2021, pp. 105–107). Notable resources employed by Trump include the negative attitudinal remarks on Iran and its government, the Democrats, and other political opposition, coupled with affiliation-boosting strategies such as emphasizing arguments, discouraging alternative views, and mustering his audience for his causes (Makki and Zappavigna 2021, pp. 118; 120–121).

Due to the focus on the language uttered by Donald Trump, less attention has been paid to reporting of the former president himself, particularly evaluations of him, in the field of linguistics. This presents an opportunity to approach this specific news discourse using a framework for assessing evaluative language. The Appraisal framework has been a significant tool for assessing evaluation in previous studies on news discourse, and is also used to approach the current research topic. The next chapter will take a close look at the data and how the Appraisal framework was utilized in the study.

### **3. Material and methods**

This chapter provides a breakdown of the data for the current study and the methods used in the analysis. To start off with, section 3.1 will provide a description of perceived media bias and how it was applied in selecting data for this study. The chapter continues with short introductions of Washington Examiner and the Washington Post, the two news outlets selected for the study, along with description of the sampling process in 3.2. Afterwards, the Appraisal framework and its utilization in this study will be discussed in section 3.3

#### **3.1 Media bias and outlets**

In order to compare potential differences in evaluative language between partisan news outlets, perceived bias was considered as a factor in the selection of outlets. Ad Fontes Media (2023a) is a public benefit “watchdog” corporation focusing on the analysis of news sources in an effort to identify bias in the media. News sources are scored for the reliability of news and the perceived bias based on analyses made by at least three analysts with “balanced political viewpoints”, referring to the analysts identifying as right-, center- or left-leaning, respectively (Ad Fontes Media 2023a).

As previously noted, the chart was used as a tool for examining bias in the reporting of news outlets for this study, specifically Washington Examiner and the Washington Post. Both outlets publish articles that can be considered as representative of the hard news genre, which act as the material for this study. While other metrics such as newspaper circulation or news website activity could have also been considered in the selection of outlets, this might have introduced issues in the comparability of outlets if perceived bias was also relied upon.

This study utilized the 11.0 version of the interactive media bias map, which was last consulted in December 2023 and can be accessed in the gallery of previous media bias charts in its static form (Ad Fontes Media 2023b). On the chart, Washington Examiner has a bias score of 11.64, placing it near the outer edge of the “skews right” category on the chart. On the opposite side, the Washington Post has a bias score of -8.78, which places it into the middle of the “skews left” category (Ad Fontes Media 2023b). AllSides (2024a), another company focused on analyzing media bias, ranks the outlets as “lean right” (AllSides 2024b) and “lean left” (AllSides 2024c), respectively. While bias, and similar albeit opposing levels of it, were considered as potentially significant measures in the selection of the outlets, the availability of article data and the nature of

published news items also played a part in this selection, as previously noted in section 2.1. As a clarification, some outlets may have had similar perceived bias scores but would represent different news genres such as broadsheet and tabloid. It should also be noted that these sites offer perceptions into bias in news media, but these views on bias are neither absolute nor the sole representations of perceived bias in news.

### **3.2 Data**

The data for the study, consisting of news articles, was sourced from the ProQuest internet database (ProQuest 2024). Several criteria were set when sorting the available data from the database such as sorting by specific date ranges in relation to Donald Trump's 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, and using keywords.

The starting dates for the time periods were determined based on the formal presidential campaign announcements made by Donald Trump on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015 (Diamond 2015), and June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019 (BBC News 2019), for the respective elections. The timeline for the selection of articles was set between the campaign announcement dates and the day before the respective elections, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, in order to have access to as much potential data related to the topic as possible. The period following Trump's campaign announcement for the 2024 U.S. presidential elections was also considered for comparison, but was ultimately left out due to insufficient article data in the ProQuest database.

The keyword "Trump" was used when sampling data from the 2015–2016 period, whereas "Trump AND elect\*" was used in the 2019–2020 period in order to keep a focus on discourse about Trump's candidacy rather than on him as the incumbent president. In addition to these criteria, a set word count range of 700 to 900 words was chosen to limit the differences in the overall word counts for the data between the outlets in order to offer a better comparison between the data. Other similar word count ranges were also tested, but 700 to 900 words resulted in the most prominent amount of articles for both outlets. The word counts were limited because APPRAISAL, the form of evaluative language analyzed in this study, may occur in instances longer than one word, due to which similar total word counts between corpora would allow for better comparisons of it.

After applying the search criteria, articles were randomly sampled from the available ones using MS Excel. Drawn articles were then examined to determine that they were news articles

containing actual reporting of current events over opinion or analysis, and to confirm that the topic of the articles dealt with Donald Trump as a presidential candidate, or by extension related to his presidential campaign. If the article was not applicable, the next article from the list was chosen until applicable. 25 articles were sampled per outlet and campaign period for a total of 100 articles to be analyzed using the Appraisal framework.

Some specific measures were also taken when sorting and sampling applicable articles from the ProQuest database (2024). For Washington Examiner, the database provided information on which section an article was published in, making it easier to avoid articles from sections such as “Opinion”, “Editorial” or “Analysis.” For the Washington Post, the database provided a similar categorization and also an option to sort by “NEWS” or “OPINION/EDITORIAL”, from which the former option was used when sampling for articles. While opinion and analysis articles were specifically avoided in favor of actual news reporting, not all articles were devoid of an author presenting their views, which likely reflected on the results. When compiled, the four corpora, each comprised of 25 articles, had the following total word counts:

**WE 2015–2016:** 19,328 words

**WP 2015–2016:** 19,969 words

**WE 2019–2020:** 20,126 words

**WP 2019–2020:** 20,589 words

In terms of the corpora, “WE” is short for Washington Examiner, “WP” for the Washington Post. These acronyms will be used in reference to the corpora at various points in the next chapter. The article headlines were also included in the total word counts and the analysis. All articles analyzed for the study are listed in the Appendix from page 48 onwards.

### **3.3 Annotation using the Appraisal framework**

The analysis of the news discourse was approached through the Appraisal framework, namely the system of ATTITUDE, which centers on language that exhibits emotions and judgements of people, things and phenomena (Martin and White 2005, pp. 42–45). The reason behind focusing on ATTITUDE specifically was mentioned in section 2.4 and the considerable scale of this study reinforced this focus on just one system of APPRAISAL. The annotation process, conducted in

MS Word, was mainly qualitative, with a focus on close reading of the data in order to identify the evaluative content present in the articles. The annotation scheme was similar to that of Martin and White’s (2005, p. 75), including the appraising items, the appraiser or emoter, the category of the type of APPRAISAL (AFFECT, JUDGEMENT or APPRECIATION) and the relevant subcategory, the polarity of evaluation, indication of whether the APPRAISAL was invoked or not, and lastly the target of evaluation.

When identified, evaluative language in relation to Donald Trump was categorized according to the subdomains of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION, along with the respective subcategories of each domain (Martin and White 2005, pp. 46–58). After the analysis, all identified instances of APPRAISAL were marked on a separate Excel sheet and examined further. The targets of APPRAISAL and the actual evaluative content are excluded as they varied largely between instances. Table 1 gives an example of the data on Excel from the WE 2015–2016 corpus. The rest of the results can be observed in chapter 4.

Table 1. The results of the APPRAISAL analysis on the WE 2015–2016 corpus in Excel. In cells containing separate numbers, the positive instances are listed on the left and negative instances are listed on the right. The subcategories are abbreviated according to the annotation scheme by Martin and White (2005, pp. 46–58).

<b>WE 2015–2016</b>						
total	248 (88 positive, 160 negative)					
inscribed	138					
invoked	110					
authorial	58 (26 positive, 32 negative)					
other	190 (62 positive, 128 negative)					
AFFECT	total: 9, 9	INC: 0, 1	HAP: 4, 4	SEC: 0, 4	SAT: 5, 0	
JUDGEMENT	total: 51, 97	NORM: 6, 8	CAP: 30, 37	TEN: 12, 13	VER: 3, 12	PROP: 0, 27
APPRECIATIO N	total: 28, 54	IMP: 12, 9	QUAL: 14, 20	BAL: 0, 10	COMP: 0, 9	VAL: 2, 6

## **4. Results and analysis**

This section provides the results of the qualitative analysis that was done using the Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005). After starting with an overview of the results of the analysis of APPRAISAL in 4.1 and its subsections, the chapter moves onto the comparison of results of the 2015–2016 and 2019–2020 periods, describing aspects of the evaluative language found in the article data from both Washington Examiner and the Washington Post from the respective time periods through the different categories under the system of ATTITUDE. These comparison occur in the following order: AFFECT (section 4.2), JUDGEMENT (section 4.3) and APPRECIATION (section 4.4)

### **4.1 Attitudinal APPRAISAL – overview**

The APPRAISAL analysis revealed varying amounts of ATTITUDE across the four corpora. As Figure 3 shows, the corpora contained various amount of evaluative language, particularly between the time periods. Positive APPRAISAL varied considerably between all corpora but both Washington Examiner corpora contain noticeably higher amounts of positive evaluation related to Donald Trump as opposed to the Washing Post corpora from the respective time periods. Surprisingly, when negative APPRAISAL is compared, the corpora from the same time periods contain very similar amounts of it, but the amounts are considerably higher in the 2015–2016 corpora.

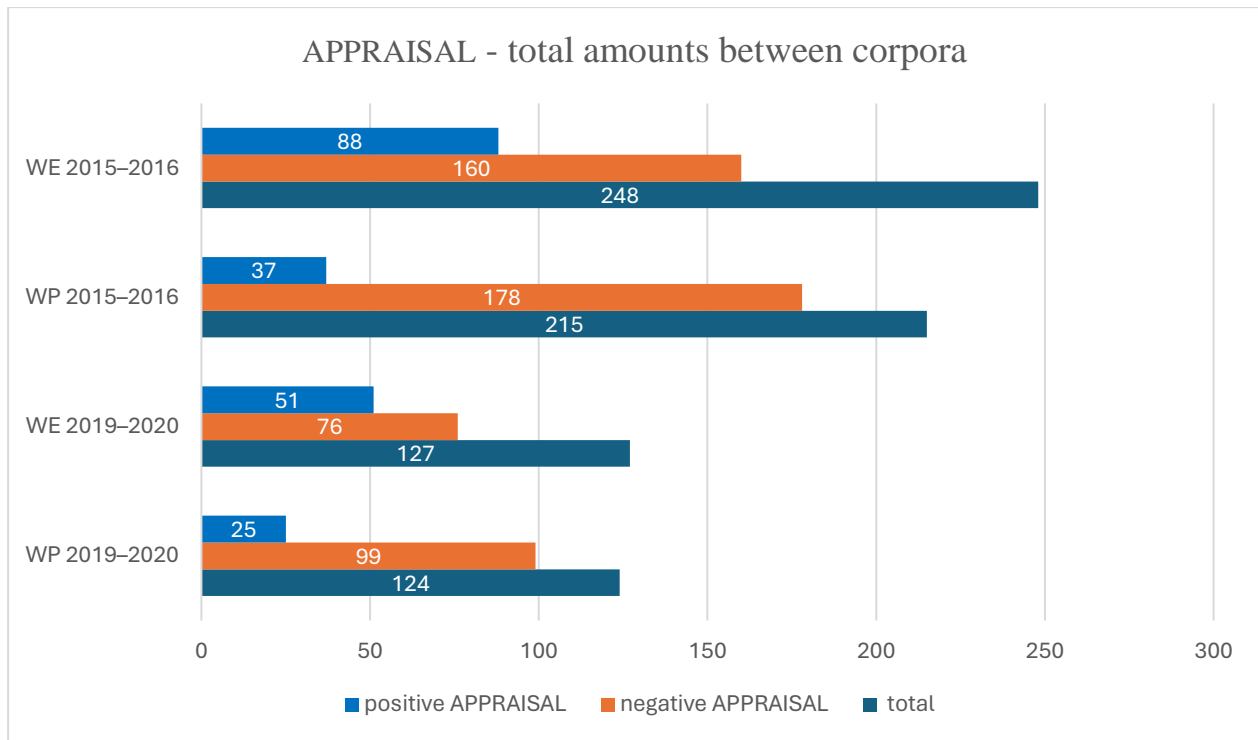


Figure 3. The total amounts of both positive and negative APPRAISAL identified in the four corpora.

These results indicate that Donald Trump was negatively evaluated to a similar extent by the outlets during the same time periods, but in the Washington Examiner data, Trump was portrayed in a more positive light overall.

#### 4.1.1 Sources of APPRAISAL

The second consideration for the comparison of overall results is the source of APPRAISAL, the so-called “appraisers”, or “emoters” whenever AFFECT is considered (Martin and White 2005, p. 72). Figure 4 displays the voices behind the instances of evaluation between the corpora.

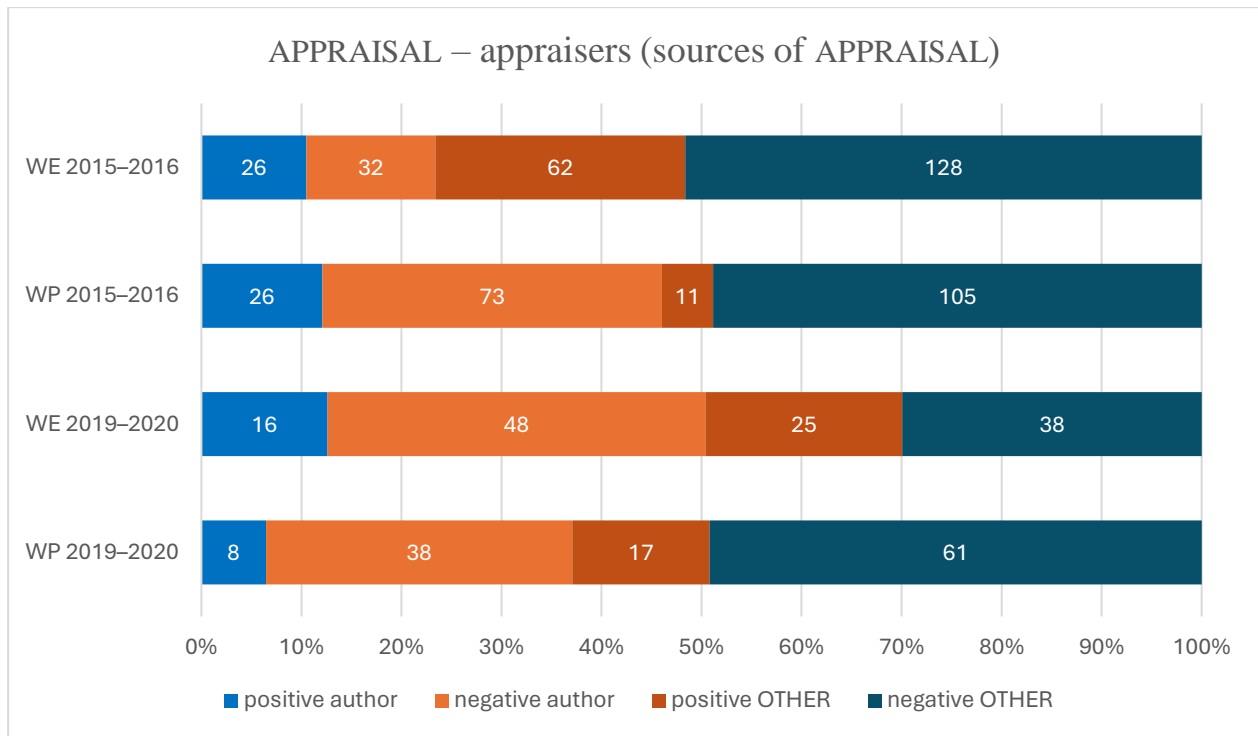


Figure 4. The appraisers and the polarity of evaluation in relation to the raw number and percentages of APPRAISAL in the corpora.

Comprised of two main categories, “author” refers to the writer of the article, whereas “other” refers to various sources mentioned in the articles, mainly in direct or indirect quotations. These sources would vary from government officials to potential voters or media figures. Appraisers besides the author were considered as important in the context of this study, as the evaluative language expressed could reflect the stance of the paper or the author. As the comparison indicates, external voices had considerable presence in the overall amounts of APPRAISAL, particularly in the WE 2015-2016 corpus but also in WP 2019–2020.

The polarity of APPRAISAL between the author and other sources reveal an interesting finding: WP 2015–2016 contains more positive APPRAISAL from article authors and the number matches that of the positive authorial APPRAISAL in WE 2015–2016. Besides this case, Trump is evaluated more positively by other sources in the three other corpora.

Another result to point out is that over 75 percent of the evaluation in WE 2015–2016 comes from other sources, whereas in WE 2019–2019 the amount is slightly less than half of the total amount of instances. For Washington Post, this situation occurs in reverse; the amount of

APPRAISAL from other sources increases between the time periods, albeit not as much in comparison to the decrease in Washington Examiner.

#### 4.1.2 Inscribed and invoked ATTITUDE

While qualitative analysis itself may introduce some subjectivity into the analysis, the consideration of invoked ATTITUDE in the data would introduce more of it. As opposed to inscribed ATTITUDE, referring to language that can be recognized as overtly evaluative as it appears in the text, invoked ATTITUDE refers to language that “suggests” that someone or something is being evaluated. A comparison of these can be seen in the examples (1) and (2) below.

(1) Like the skilled liar he is... (VERACITY, Article 9)

(2) But Trump has made many false claims on social media... (VERACITY, Article 100)

Both examples were annotated as negative JUDGEMENT, evaluating the behavior, character and/or capacity of Donald Trump. In the first example, *skilled liar* is considered as inscribed ATTITUDE, offering a straightforward assessment of the presidential candidate. The second example, on the other hand, contains an instance of invoked ATTITUDE in *has made many false claims*, which suggests that Trump is being evaluated as a “liar”, even in the absence of evaluative lexis. As Figure 5 shows, invoked ATTITUDE was identified more in every corpus except for WE 2015-2016.

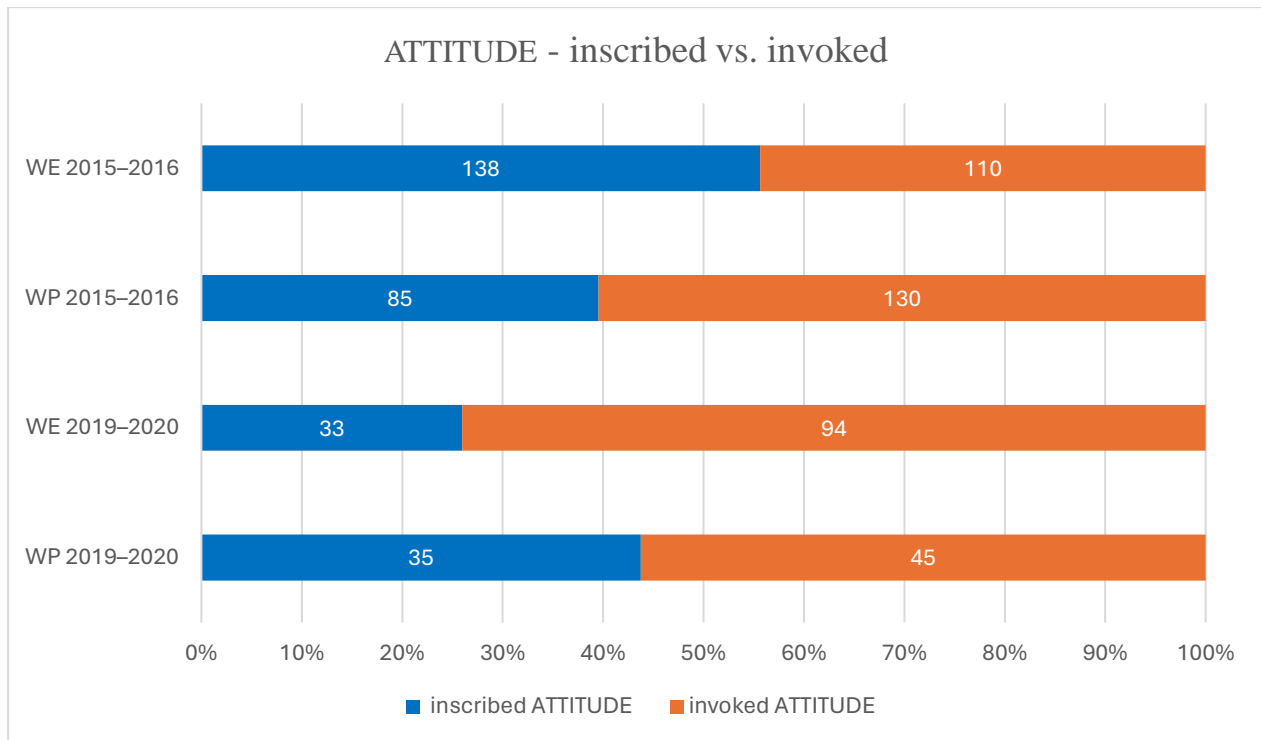


Figure 5. The inscribed and invoked ATTITUDE in the data.

In all corpora except for WE 2015–2016, invoked ATTITUDE is identified in higher amounts than inscribed. This also makes the difference between the two Washington Examiner corpora very interesting, as the evaluation in 2015–2016 corpora consists of close to 45 percent of invoked ATTITUDE, whereas the evaluation in WE 2019–2020 consists of close to 75 percent of it. Similar to the differences between the sources of APPRAISAL between the outlets, the Washington Post corpora experience the opposite changes and in a lesser scale.

In relation to invoked ATTITUDE, Martin and White 2005 (pp. 67–68) note on the use of double coding for results where an instance of APPRAISAL may explicitly belong to one category, while implicitly being categorized in another. An example of this is the following:

- (3) ...the Iowa crowd “seemed mystified and uncomfortable with Trump’s crazy performance. (inscribed COMPLEXITY and invoked CAPACITY, Article 12)

In this example, what is being appraised is Trump’s performance at an event in Iowa. Inscribed APPRECIATION is also accompanied by the invoked notion of the evaluation extending to Trump’s behavior or character as JUDGEMENT. While double coding was used in the analysis, in

examples in relation to specific subcategories of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT or APPRECIATION in the rest of this chapter, double codings will be left out to keep the focus on the respective subcategories.

## 4.2 AFFECT

AFFECT was the least notable form of ATTITUDE in the data in terms of the number of instances. It should be mentioned here that only first-person AFFECT was marked in the analysis, as opposed to third-person AFFECT. First-person, or “unmediated”, AFFECT refers to the emotions and feelings expressed by the appraiser, or emoter, themselves, whereas third-person AFFECT centers on how emotions or feelings of others are described. While third-person AFFECT can be considered as evaluative of Donald Trump, for example, it essentially marks how someone’s emotions or feelings are being evaluated in relation to something, as opposed to direct evaluation through emotions or feelings. Because of this, only first-person AFFECT was focused on in the analysis.

### 4.2.1 AFFECT – 2015–2016

The WE 2015–2016 corpus contained nine instances of both positive and negative AFFECT, with the emoters consisting of government officials or news and media personalities. Instances of UN/HAPPINESS represented almost half of the total AFFECT in this corpus, with examples such as ...*I applaud the honesty and desire to change it* (Article 24) from Sean Hannity, a Fox News commentator, signaling positive evaluation, and by William Armstrong, media surrogate to Ben Carson, another presidential candidate at the time, in his response to Trump’s rally speech ...*it's just sad to watch* (Article 12), signaling negative evaluation. As can be seen in Figure 6, the particularly notable subcategory in terms of positive AFFECT was DIS/SATISFACTION with 5 instances, with an invoked example such as *He single handedly made politics refreshingly fun, unpredictable and interesting* (Article 24).

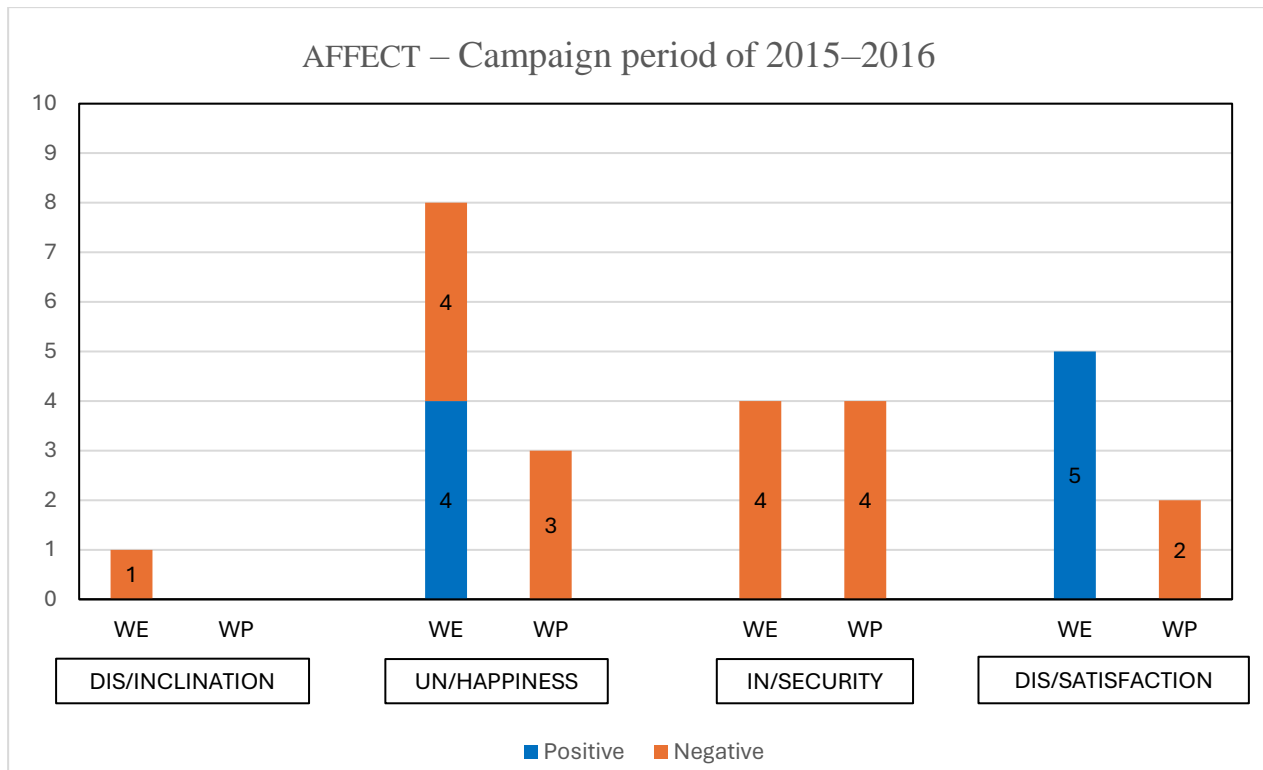


Figure 6. The instances of AFFECT in the 2015–2016 corpora, sorted by subcategories.

On the “opposite” side, the WP 2015–2016 corpus contained only negative AFFECT with 9 total instances. Notably, instances of UN/HAPPINESS (3) were related to hesitation in terms of endorsing Donald Trump as a candidate, by either supporters or members of the Republican Party. Instances of IN/SECURITY (4), on the other hand, were related to a variety of things: Trump’s immigration rhetoric, his ignorant stance on female victims of sexual assault, his denial about Russian interference in government matters, and on his disagreements with Republicans. Examples representing both cases are below:

(4) None of us particularly like Trump... (UN/HAPPINESS, Article 30)

(5) The former officials...say they were bewildered when Trump cast doubt on Russia’s role... (IN/SECURITY, Article 46)

#### 4.2.2 AFFECT – 2019–2020

Compared to the statistics of the previous corpora, the data on the 2019–2020 campaign period had strikingly less instances of first-person AFFECT. With one instance in the WE 2019–2020

corpus and five in WP 2019–2020, the total amounted to less than a third of the amount in the earlier time period.

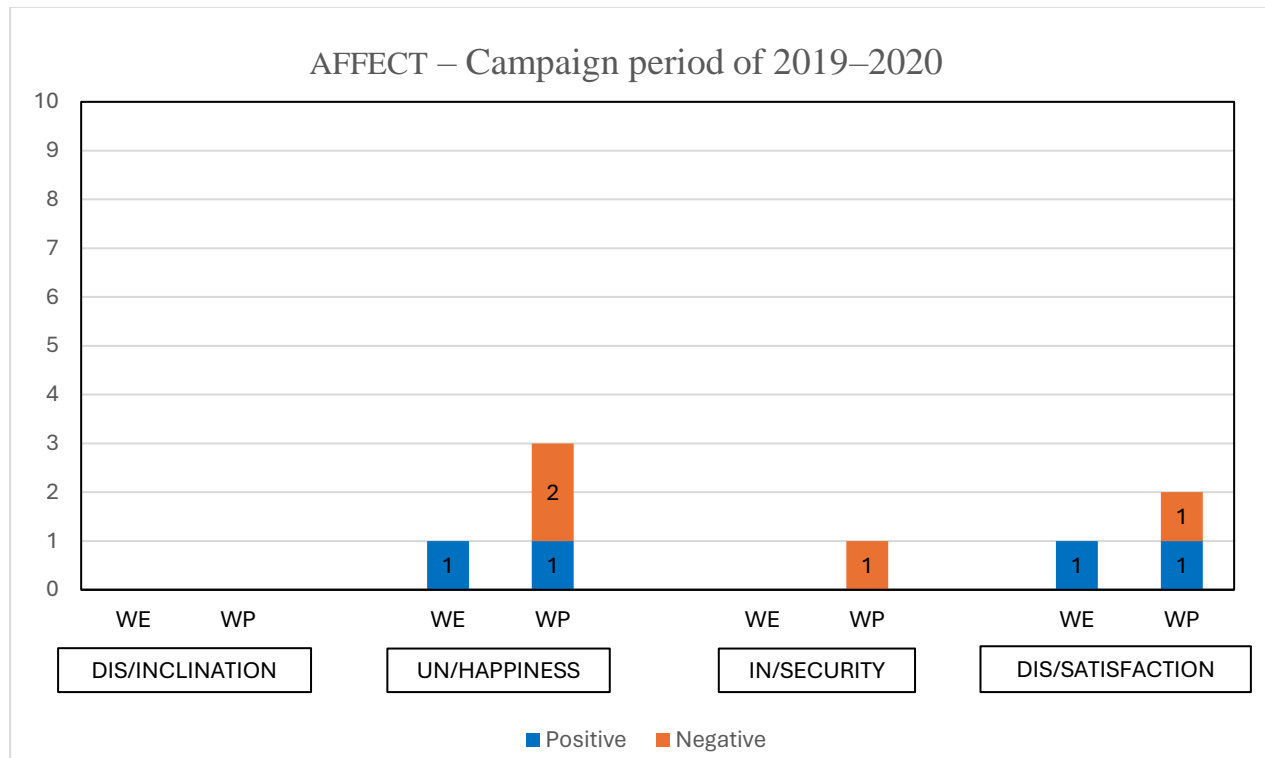


Figure 7. The instances of AFFECT in the 2019–2020 corpora, sorted by subcategories.

While there is not much AFFECT to analyze, notable differences are the absence of negative AFFECT in the Washington Examiner data from the later time period, but also the presence of positive AFFECT in the Washington Post corpus. The one instance of positive AFFECT, namely UN/HAPPINESS, in WE 2019–2020 is from a Trump supporter evaluating how well Trump has managed to rally his supporters together at an event:

(6) What I like most about what he’s done is bring people together... (Article 67)

The examples of negative AFFECT in the WP 2019–2020 corpus include a remark from India’s prime minister Narendra Modi at a shared rally with the then-president and an instance of DIS/SATISFACTION by Long Yongtu, a former Chinese government figure who shares his thoughts on Trump’s potential reelection:

(7) ...Modi said he admired Trump's "concern for every American..."

(UN/HAPPINESS, Article 81)

(8) We want Trump to be reelected; we would be glad to see that happen.

(DIS/SATISFACTION, Article 98)

Overall, the amount of AFFECT in the data was very low and almost insignificant in the 2019–2020 corpora. Still, the drop in the amount of AFFECT between the two time periods could be considered notable but would require more data to be verified.

### **4.3. JUDGEMENT**

JUDGEMENT was the most prominent form of across all corpora. Because Donald Trump was the main focus in the articles analyzed for this study, it is hardly a surprising result, as this domain of the framework focuses on the evaluation of behavior, capacity and character of people.

#### **4.3.1 JUDGEMENT – 2015–2016**

The WE 2015–2016 corpus included a total of 148 instances of JUDGEMENT, 51 of which were positive, with the subcategory of CAPACITY being the most prominent with 30 instances. Of the 97 instances of negative JUDGEMENT, CAPACITY had the highest amount of instances at 37, with PROPRIETY being the second at 27.

The instances of positive CAPACITY in WE 2015–2016 originated from various appraisers, mostly the author of a given article, and, as the name suggests, offer remarks on Trump’s capacity as a candidate and potential the future president with an example such as ...*his image as a tough-minded leader*... (Article 13). With negative CAPACITY, the remarks were the opposite, with Trump being referred to as *unqualified candidate* (Article 1), for example. Negative JUDGEMENT under PROPRIETY included remarks such as “*racist*” (Article 7) , *almost definitely a Putin Puppet* (Article 17), and *an absolute disaster* (Article 4), referring to how “unethical” Trump was being considered as, whether in relation to leading the Republican party or the entire country.

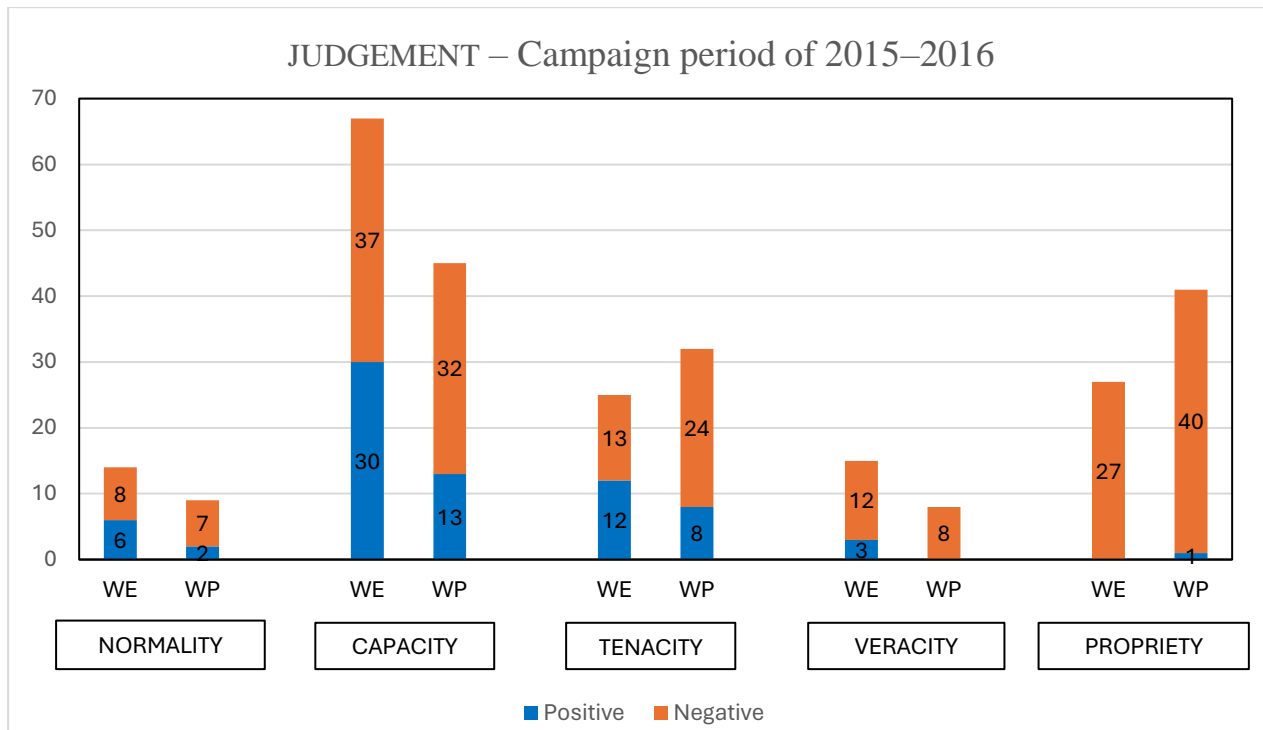


Figure 8. The instances of JUDGEMENT in the 2015–2016 corpora, sorted by subcategories. Note that the scale differs from that of AFFECT in Figures 6 and 7 for legibility.

While the amount of JUDGEMENT is similar between these two corpora, a total of 135 instances being identified in the WP 2015–2016 corpus, only 24 were positive while 111 were negative. Other similarities were found in the subcategorizations of JUDGEMENT; CAPACITY was also the leading category of positive evaluation with 13 instances and instances of negative CAPACITY were also considerable with a total of 32. The highest amount of negative JUDGEMENT was, however, identified as PROPRIETY with 40 instances. In a similar vein to Washington Examiner, positive CAPACITY portrayed Trump as, for example, *tough* (Article 47), *legit* (Article 45), or *has a keen sense of what his supporters want to hear* (Article 2), in a more invoked manner. Negative PROPRIETY also included similar remarks as those in the other corpus, such as with *Trump’s Islamophobia resonates with base, not others* (Article 2).

#### 4.3.2 JUDGEMENT – 2019–2020

The 2019–2020 corpora contained pronouncedly less JUDGEMENT with a total of 80 in the Washington Examiner articles, and 67 in the Washington Post ones. As Figure 9 shows, the trend of having a considerable amount of positive JUDGEMENT continues for WE with 36 instances. Notable subcategories include CAPACITY (15) and TENACITY (19), with remarks on the

incumbent president’s ability to run for a second term in examples such as ...*President Trump made a triumphant return to the campaign trail this week...* (CAPACITY, Article 57) and *He seemed very calm and very focused...* (both TENACITY, Article 52). Most of the total 44 instances of negative JUDGEMENT fell into CAPACITY for a total of 23 instances, providing opposite evaluations of Trump, notably in relation to his presidency, e.g. *Anyone who is responsible for that many deaths should not remain as president of the United States.* (Article 53).

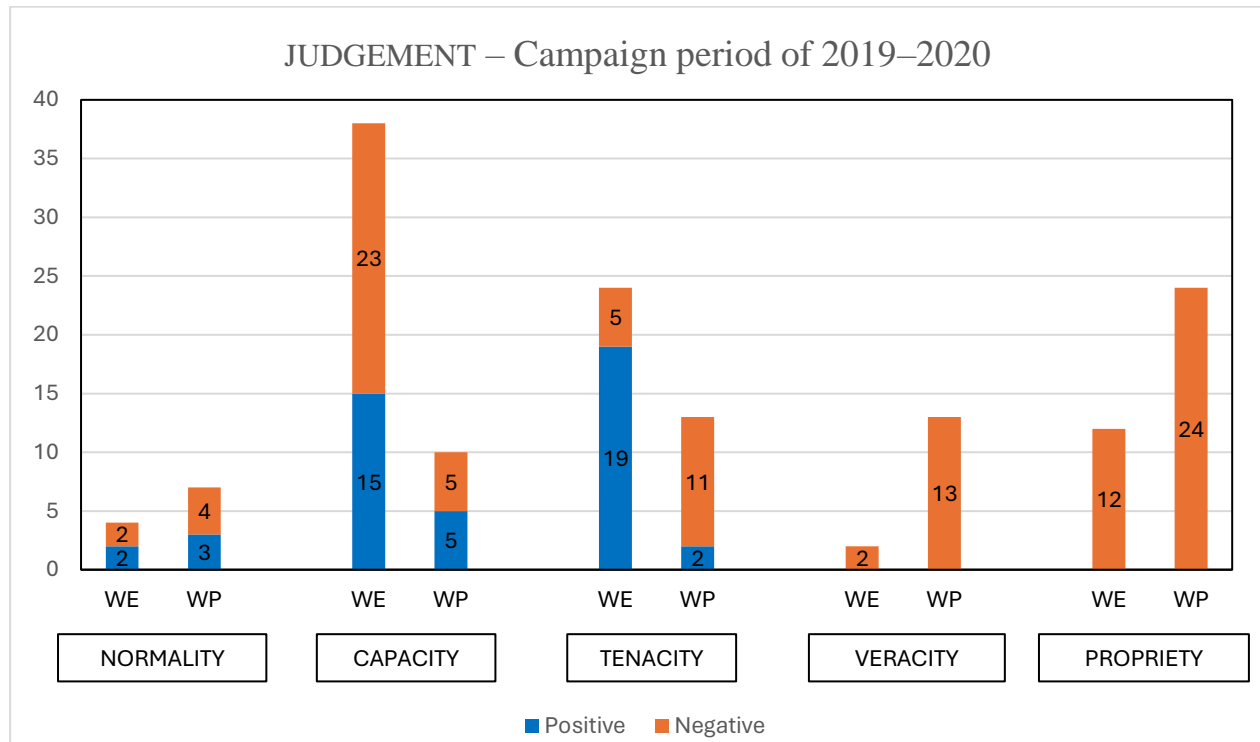


Figure 9. The instances of JUDGEMENT in the 2019–2020 corpora, sorted by subcategories. Note that the scale differs from that of AFFECT in Figures 6 and 7 and from that of JUDGEMENT in Figure 8 for legibility.

JUDGEMENT in WP 2019–2020 was mainly negative, with 57 total instances, 24 of which were identified under PROPRIETY. Such instances included remarks of Trump’s arrogant behavior, e.g. *Trump was full of his usual bluster and braggadocio...* (Article 88), or the president stretching the rule of law while campaigning, e.g. *President again pushes boundaries of Hatch Act...* (Article 78).

Positive JUDGEMENT was also less present in these Washington Post articles, as it was in during the prior campaign period; only 10 instances divided between CAPACITY (5), NORMALITY (3) and TENACITY (2) with following examples: *brings a lot of people to the voting booth*

(CAPACITY, Article 79), *President comes off as collegial even as he defends his rhetoric* (NORMALITY, Article 93), and *A notably subdued Trump twice said that he appreciated the question...* (TENACITY, Article 93).

The presence of JUDGEMENT between the campaign periods points out that the amount of it has considerably lowered in general. Washington Examiner had considerably less negative JUDGEMENT; negative APPRAISAL under VERACITY and PROPRIETY was found less in the WE 2019–2020 corpus in comparison to 2015–2016. Positive evaluation also decreased, particularly as CAPACITY was identified by half the amount as in the 2015–2016 corpus, while TENACITY increased. The Washington Post experienced a bigger drop in the use of JUDGEMENT in general, in both positive and negative varieties. There were some notable shifts in subcategory differences, particularly the proportionately less overall evaluation under CAPACITY and the increase in the amount of negative VERACITY.

#### **4.4. APPRECIATION**

Due to the focus on Donald Trump, a person, APPRECIATION was not necessarily considered to have a strong presence in the data at first. However, a considerable amount of evaluation related to, for example, Donald Trump’s campaigns, his political statements or even social media interactions were found to be relevant to this study.

##### **4.4.1 APPRECIATION – 2015–2016**

In the WE 2015–2016, a total of 82 instances of APPRECIATION were identified, with 28 positive and 54 negative instances. In positive APPRECIATION, the notable subcategories were IMPACT (12) and QUALITY (14), with evaluation being used in reference to Trump’s campaigning, rallies in particular, or his campaign victories and speeches. Examples of these include *His commanding win in the primary...* (IMPACT, Article 13), *...The Republican presidential nominee had laid out such a forceful argument...* (IMPACT, Article 18), and *...he hit all the right notes...* (QUALITY, Article 21). In the negative evaluation under APPRECIATION, QUALITY was the most notable subcategory at 20 instances. The negative remarks focused mainly on Trump’s speeches or campaign, but also on, for example, the candidate’s plans to restrict immigrants’ rights in the country:

(9) Obama dismissed Trump’s plan to stop illegal immigrants from sending money back to their home countries as ‘half-baked’, ‘draconian’ and ‘impractical’.

(BALANCE, QUALITY and VALUATION, Article 16)

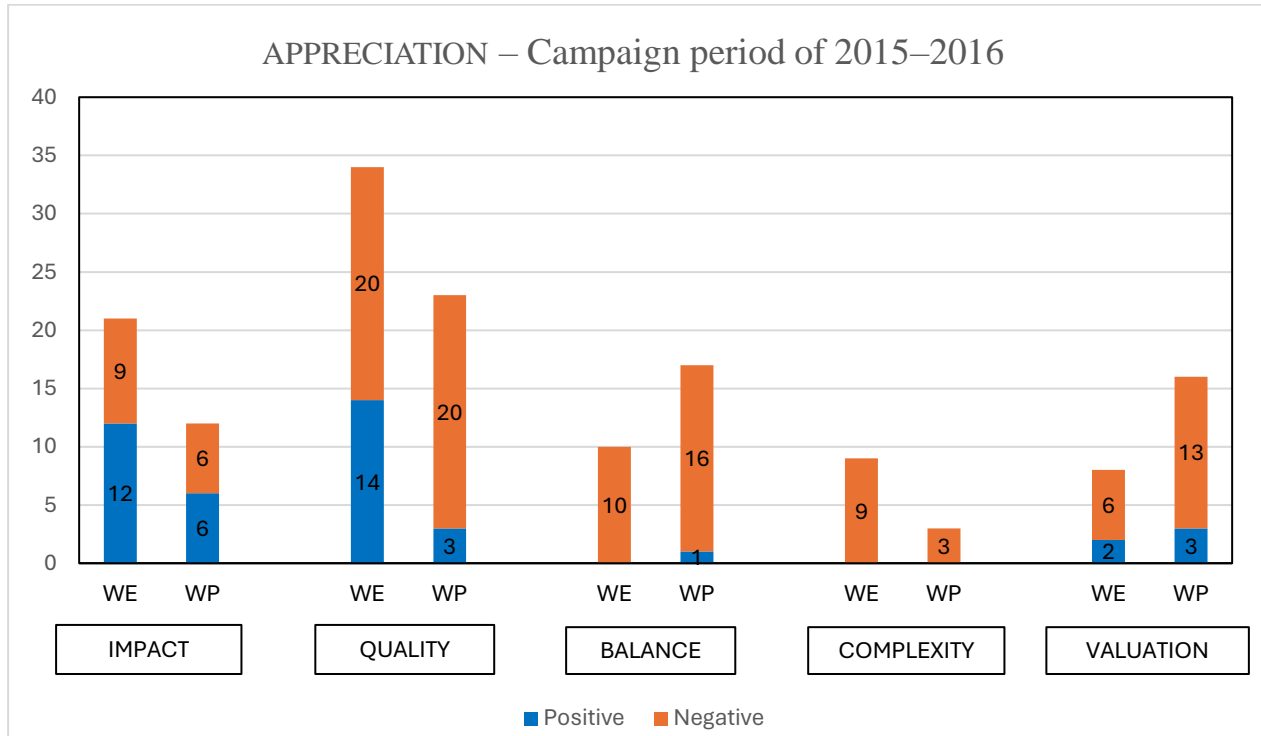


Figure 10. The instances of APPRECIATION in the 2015–2016 corpora, sorted by subcategories. Note that the scale differs from those of AFFECT and JUDGEMENT in previous figures for legibility.

The WP 2015–2016 contained 71 total instances of APPRECIATION, divided into 13 positive and 58 negative ones. Positive APPRECIATION was mostly present under IMPACT (6) or VALUATION (3), with examples such as *he’s provoked some consideration of...* (IMPACT, Article 51), where the effects of Trump’s trade talks are being appraised, and *It seemed like a humble gesture...* (VALUATION, Article 40, referring to Trump meeting with potential voters. Similar to the other 2015–2016 corpus, negative APPRECIATION was mostly realized under QUALITY (20). The targets of negative APPRECIATION were also similar to those in WE 2015–2016: most instances rebuked Trump’s statements and his proposals, for example by Mike Pence, before becoming Trump’s running mate in the election, noting that his proposal to ban Muslim immigration was *offensive and unconstitutional* (QUALITY and VALUATION, Article 47).

#### 4.4.2 APPRECIATION –2019–2020

As was the case with AFFECT and JUDGEMENT, APPRECIATION also experienced a decline in instances between the two time periods. The WE 2019–2020 corpus consisted of 45 instances of APPRECIATION, 13 positive and 32 negative. From the relatively low amount of positive instances, IMPACT had the most presence, with appraisers evaluating Trump’s polling numbers in comparison to Obama’s in the past, the campaign’s outreach to black voters, and the campaign’s prowess in some states:

(10) ...I think the Trump campaign has a real chance this time (Article 74)

Negative APPRECIATION was found mostly under QUALITY (12) and BALANCE (11), with references to Trumps statements, the second presidential debate between Trump and Joe Biden, on Trump’s campaign’s prowess, and even on Trump’s physical appearance:

(11) ...a chaotic, caustic shouting match (BALANCE and QUALITY, Article 78)

(12) ...a strikingly disheveled look (BALANCE, Article 71)

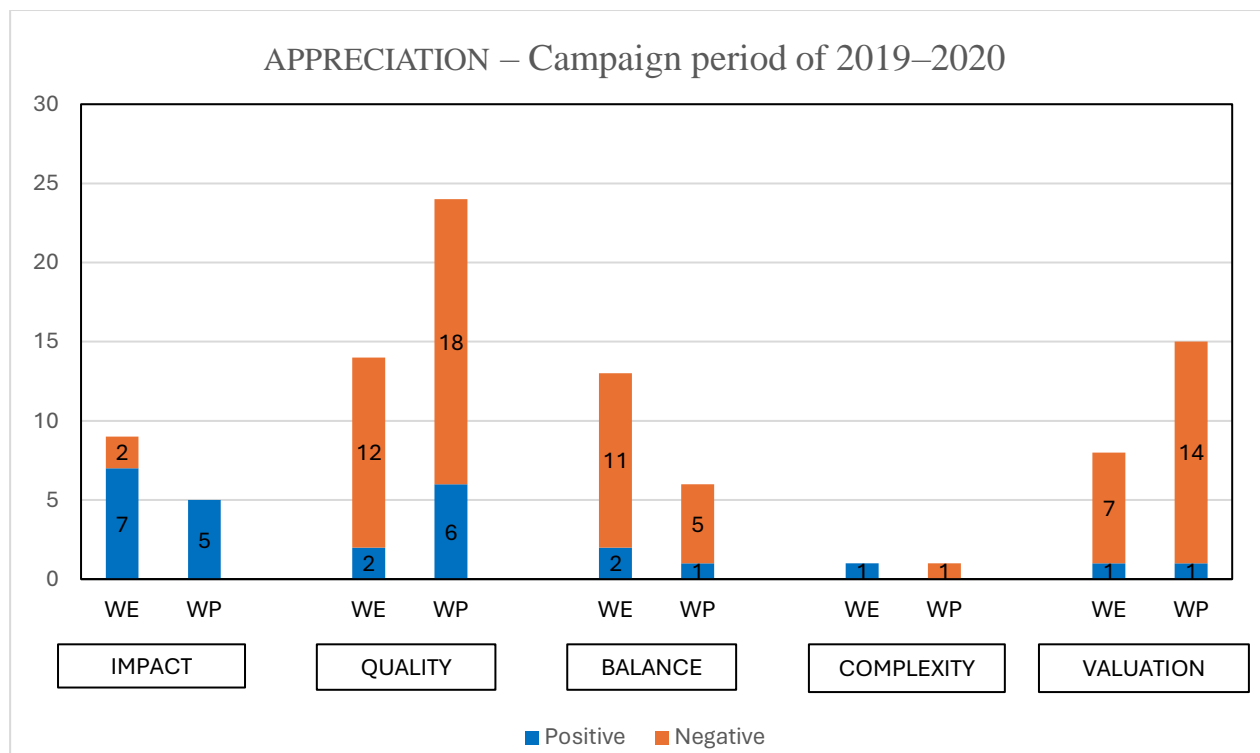


Figure 11. The instances of APPRECIATION in the 2019–2020 corpora, sorted by subcategories. Note that the scale differs from those of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION in previous figures for legibility.

In WP 2019–2020, a total of 51 instances of APPRECIATION were divided into 13 positive and 38 negative instances. Positive evaluation was mostly recognized under QUALITY (6) and IMPACT (5), with the former targeting Trump campaign’s fundraising and reelection prospects, and the latter also targeting Trump’s physical appearance:

(13) ...she thought he had a beautiful smile (QUALITY, Article 88)

(14) This is going to put fuel in the president's engine to go through November 2020

(IMPACT, Article 84)

The negative evaluation was mostly categorized under QUALITY (18) and VALUATION (14), with several remarks referring to either Trump’s reelection prospects or the contents of his Facebook posts in relation to the election:

(15) ...'hateful content' and 'misleading claims' about mail-in voting ahead of the

November election (QUALITY and VALUATION, Article 83)

Overall, the amount of APPRECIATION was lower in the 2019–2020 period but showed similarities in form and what it was targeting. With the exception of WE 2015–2016, the amount of positive APPRECIATION was the exact same across the three other corpora. Positive APPRECIATION was mostly identified under IMPACT, with most instances focusing on Trump’s campaign or statements. Negative APPRECIATION remained more stable between the time periods, particularly represented under the subcategories of QUALITY and BALANCE. The targets of negative APPRECIATION did experience some shifts, but Trump’s campaign and statements still shared considerable attention across all corpora.

## **5. Discussion**

In this chapter, the results of the analysis and their significance are discussed in relation to previous research. First, the results of the evaluation and their implications are explored in 5.1. The chapter then moves onto considering the role and significance of media bias in the study in section 5.2. Afterwards, the application of the Appraisal framework will be reviewed in 5.3, along with a short segment on the general limitations to this study in section 5.4.

Before getting into the discussion itself, here are the research questions this study set out to answer:

1. What kinds of attitudinal appraisals are most prominent in the data?
2. Are there noticeable shifts in the presence of APPRAISAL between the time periods and/or outlets?
3. How does the perceived bias compare to the amounts of APPRAISAL?

### **5.1 Comparison of the evaluation**

To start off with, the overall differences in the amounts of APPRAISAL between the outlets and time periods already presented an interesting finding in the analysis: while it was hypothesized that Washington Examiner would contain considerably more positive evaluation, and it did contain over double the amount of that in the Washington Post in both time periods, the rivaling amounts of negative APPRAISAL was a surprising finding. This negative evaluation could reflect on the perceptions of Donald Trump as a political outsider, and how he lashed out on his opposition even among other Republican candidates, as mentioned by Zelizer (2022, pp. 17–18).

Another surprising difference in the overview was how the APPRAISAL in both outlets had more than halved in the number of instances between the time periods. This could suggest several things, such as considerable changes in the overall editorial line of the two newspapers, changes in the writing staff, or possibly even changes in the environment of political news reporting. One potential cause of less overall evaluation on Trump could be his attacks on other news media outlets and guiding supporters towards other ones during his presidency (Carlson et al. 2021; Hemmer 2022; Archer 2023), which could have affected the way in which news outlets reported on him. Carlson et al. (2021, pp. 88–97) remark that Trump’s attacks on journalists criticizing him were also intended to label them as the “enemy of the people”, thus seeking to direct hatred

from the masses onto them. While the changes in positive evaluation in the 2020 campaign period could suggest several things, such as disfavor against Trump, the drop in negative evaluation suggests that both Washington Examiner and the Washington Post wanted to avoid hostility from the incumbent president.

As for the sources of APPRAISAL, another interesting finding was that most of the relevant evaluative language in the data came from appraisers or emoters other than the authors of the articles, which was the case in every corpus besides WE 2015–2016. Jullian's (2011) study present a similar case, in which the news discourse data analyzed consisted mostly of APPRAISAL from external sources. Another similarity to this previous study is the variety of external voices; Jullian (2011, p. 777) notes that the Western news articles displayed a wide variety of external voices, which can also be said about the evaluation identified in the current study. Jullian (2011, p. 768) suggests that authors may also use evaluation via quotations as means to disguise their own attitudes, which could also be the case in the current study. Further research, potentially by utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis, would be required to determine whether or not evaluation by external sources represents the views of the author(s) or outlet(s) in such a context.

Invoked evaluation was a notable resource in most of the corpora, particularly potent when compared to the amount of inscribed evaluation in the 2019–2020 period. This raises the question of whether the manner of evaluating Donald Trump has shifted to a more implicit form in these outlets over the years, and whether this case could be similar when reporting on other topics. As was noted in relation to the results on the overall amounts of APPRAISAL, the changes between the amounts of inscribed and invoked APPRAISAL could also signal for potentially significant changes in the nature of reporting in these two news outlets, with Trump's aforementioned attacks on news media as a potential cause. When considering invoked evaluation, particularly in relation to the amount that was identified in the context of this study, subjectivity is a notion that ought to be raised, and will be discussed in section 5.3.

First-person AFFECT did not appear in great numbers in the 2015–2016 period and was nearly absent in the second campaign period. What is notable to compare is that both outlets had very similar amounts of negative AFFECT instances in the 2015–2016 period, while Washington Examiner also had a similar amount of positive AFFECT whereas Washington Post had none. The

equal amounts in WE 2015–2016 could echo what Zelizer (2022a, 2022b) remarks about the mixed reception of Trump among conservatives during his first campaign.

The overwhelming presence of JUDGEMENT, the attitudinal category dealing with evaluations of people's behavior, character and capacity, was expected as the focus of this study was on Donald Trump. In the 2015–2016 period, the JUDGEMENT is mostly focused under CAPACITY, PROPRIETY and TENACITY in negative form, and under CAPACITY and TENACITY in positive instances. In the latter period, though instances are far fewer in number, the categories for both polarities present similar findings, except for instances of positive TENACITY being considerably higher in the WE 2019–2020 corpus. This difference between the WE corpora suggests that the evaluative stance on Trump may have moved from considering his capability as a president into valuing his dependability over the years. The increase of negative VERACITY in Washington Post, on the other hand, indicates that Trump was seen as more dishonest. When considering the first research question, JUDGEMENT was the most prominent domain of ATTITUDE present in data because of the study's focus on a person.

APPRECIATION appeared quite stable across all corpora under BALANCE and VALUATION, but notably WE 2015–2016 presented the most differences under IMPACT and QUALITY for both polarities when compared to the other corpora. This points out how much different aspects of Trump's campaigning were evaluated by the conservative outlet. Also, the considerable drop in overall positive APPRECIATION between the Washington Examiner corpora clearly suggests that appraisers had a less favorable view of the president's campaigning, which is also more directly supported by the considerable drop in positive QUALITY, as the subcategory centers on the concept of whether the appraiser likes or dislikes something (Martin and White 2005, p. 56). The Washington Post's equal instances of positive APPRECIATION is a surprising result but further discussion would require more data to examine, the same of which can be said of the subcategorical shifts, most of which were minor. The similar amount of positive APPRECIATION in all but WE 2015–2016, as well as the negative APPRECIATION between the outlets during the separate campaign periods could again point towards how Trump was viewed by conservatives (Zelizer 2022a, 2022b).

As a general point to make based on the comparison between outlets and time periods, it appears that Trump's first campaign had the most impact in terms of evaluation, particularly in the

Washington Examiner articles from 2015 to 2016. It should be noted that Trump received considerable coverage from news media during his campaign (see Carlson et al. 2021, pp. 57–84; Wells et al. 2022, pp. 284–285; Zelizer 2022b, pp. 44–45). The ways in which the evaluation differed between WE 2015–2016 and the other corpora could be somewhat anomalous but likely exemplifies the overall magnitude of Trump’s initial campaign run as a very unconventional candidate for the Oval Office.

## **5.2 Evaluation in relation to media bias**

In terms of the perceived media bias according to Ad Fontes Media (2023b), the two outlets displayed slight differences in the amounts of partisan bias in the reporting, as was mentioned in section 3.1. The effect of this may not be observable in the results, but the overall placement of the outlets on opposite sides of the political spectrum do support a sense of bias in the evaluation, mainly in how much more positively Donald Trump was appraised in Washington Examiner. In the end, should perceived media bias have been focused on extensively, using such perceptions for outlets for the specific years from which data was analyzed (2015, 2016, 2019 and 2020) would have served better for a comparison, if such data were readily available to compare.

As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis and in the previous section, Donald Trump was a polarizing figure even within his party, partially due to views of him not properly representing conservative ideals (Zelizer 2022a, pp. 17–18). This also makes the utilization of media bias along the cline of the bipartisan political system of the U.S. trickier. On the other hand, if Donald Trump was viewed somewhat unfavorably by conservatives, that could explain the considerable amounts of negative APPRAISAL found in the Washington Examiner corpora. These potentially negative views of Trump could also be why the outlet did not endorse a presidential candidate in the 2016 and 2020 elections, in both of which Donald Trump was the popular choice representing the GOP. In 2022, the outlet rejected Donald Trump on account of his role in the January 6<sup>th</sup> Attack on the U.S. Capitol (Washington Examiner 2022).

In relation to the third research question, the general placements of the two outlets on the opposite sides of the political spectrum appear to be related to the higher amounts of positive APPRAISAL, but Trump’s status as a nontraditional Republican candidate complicates the utilization of perceived media bias for views of him and his campaign in Washington Examiner.

### **5.3 The Appraisal framework and the current study**

As for the use of the Appraisal framework, while the theory has been used in previous research on news discourse, it does not come without its “issues”, especially due to the focus on qualitative analysis. The notion of subjectivity has been brought up several times in this thesis, both in relation to the data selection and the analysis, and should be mentioned here again.

Determining what accounts for evaluative language can be guided by word lists and careful consideration, but the choice ultimately falls on the analyst, especially when other, assisting analysts are not afforded. This is especially true in the case of invoked ATTITUDE, the identification of which relies on the analyst’s cultural knowledge. Macken-Horarik and Isaac (2014, p. 76) remark how the analysis of invoked ATTITUDE requires the reader to share certain cultural values with the writer in order to understand what is implicitly evaluative in a given context. While this is the goal to strive for when analyzing implicit notions, there is always a chance for misinterpretation, either by considering something as evaluative when it is not meant as such, or the opposite. Martin and White (2005, p. 62) emphasize the importance of analyzing invoked evaluation due to the attitudinal meanings behind such content, but also note that an analyst must remain critical and consider the difference between individual and social subjectivity; whether something is considered evaluative in general or by the reader alone. While social subjectivity behind potential instances of invoked ATTITUDE was the main consideration, the presence of subjectivity should not be completely ruled out.

Another feature of the framework that may raise issues during analysis is the potential for overlap between categories when the nature of ATTITUDE is considered. Martin and White (2005, pp. 58–61) mention the issue of borders between the categories of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT, and APPRECIATION, They suggest double coding for instances that clearly could fit into two categories (Martin and White 2005, p. 67–68), which was a choice opted for in this study as well. While double coding may alleviate the issue of overlapping, it does not remove it, potentially making the classification of such instances less convincing. In the end, the difficulty of placing evaluative language into categories in the framework indicates that assessing such language is anything but simple, even with a theoretical framework. The analysis then relies on the analyst’s interpretation of the evaluative material being assessed.

While on the topic of categorical overlapping, the same issue can be seen between subcategories within the same domain. An example of this could be *false claims* (Article 83), an instance of inscribed APPRECIATION that was initially considered under the subcategory of BALANCE due to words such as *contradictory* and *flawed* listed under it (Martin and White 2005, p. 56). On the other hand, while VALUATION had value-laden words that were found less fitting in comparison, it's description includes the consideration for whether something is "authentic", which tilted the scale slightly more towards this subcategory. As already mentioned, the analysis was done solely by the author of this thesis, but some "conflicting" categorizations were discussed with a fellow MA student working with the framework in their own study. In the end, some categorization choices still remained uncertain or unsatisfactorily placed due to a lack of suitable points of reference in the framework.

#### **5.4 Limitations of the study**

In addition to some limitations that were already discussed in the chapter, more general ones should also be noted. In terms of the data for the study, only 25 articles were analyzed per outlet and campaign period due to time limitations and the comparative aspects of the study. This could have been increased slightly to provide more representative results on the topic.

Subjectivity should be mentioned once more, as it played a part in the data selection. Articles were randomly sampled from the ProQuest (2024) database using set criteria, but what followed was the assessment of the contents of the articles in terms of topic and genre, particularly for Washington Examiner that did not have a categorization option between "news" and "opinion" on the database. In addition to this, while Donald Trump's candidacy, campaigning, and related topics were the primary topical concern for articles, they were not the sole topics in all cases; such cases could deal with debates between Trump and other candidates, giving away some of the focus from Trump. While these introduced some subjectivity into the sampling, they were considered as necessary measures due to the specific scope of the topic, which was the evaluation of Donald Trump as a presidential candidate. In the end, while subjectivity could not be avoided in various aspects of the study, potential personal biases on the analyst's behalf were always considered and avoided as much as possible when making such choices.

## **5.5 Strengths of the study**

This study was put together with the goal of examining news discourse about Donald Trump, arguably one of the most notable figures in the U.S. and even the global political sphere of the last decade. As mentioned in section 2.6., most discourse-related research on Trump has focused on the presidential candidate or incumbent president himself, as opposed to how he has been perceived in news media, which was the main gap that this study aimed and succeeded to fill to an extent.

Another endeavor of this thesis was the utilization of perceived media bias as a means for selecting data, which was partially successful; while not polar opposites on the political spectrum, the outlets selected based on perceived bias did contain evaluation in the quantity and manner as expected, bar exceptions mentioned in sections 5.1 and 5.2. This success could give some consideration for utilizing perceived media bias in data selection in further studies on news discourse focusing on politics, though perhaps more as an auxiliary factor paired with others in relation to the type of news and specific outlets.

Lastly, this study also contributed to the general field of news discourse studies, and to the study of evaluative language. While pointing out some parts of the Appraisal framework that leave more to be desired in section 5.3, this study has exemplified how the framework is still a functional toolkit for the analysis of evaluation in discourse, particularly when assessing language of news reporting.

## 6. Conclusion

This study endeavored to identify how the former U.S. president, Donald Trump, was evaluated in news discourse from two news outlets during his presidential campaigns for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005) proved to be a useful set of tools in determining what kinds of attitudes can be found in such discourse and how they appeared in an evaluative manner in relation to Trump. The analysis of ATTITUDE indicated key differences between the outlets and time periods, particularly emphasizing how the overall amount of APPRAISAL between the 2016 and 2020 campaigns more than halved in both outlets. The 2015–2016 data from Washington Examiner also pointed out both how extraordinary the case of Trump’s campaign was and how polarizing the reactions to it were. The analysis provided notable results on evaluative language both in terms of how Donald Trump was appraised between Washington Examiner and the Washington Post but also in terms of how the evaluative language differed between the two campaign periods. The results displayed considerable shifts in the manner and amount of both implicit and explicit evaluation of Donald Trump between the corpora, which may indicate changes in various aspects related to reporting on him, or potentially even changes in the general manner of news reporting within the outlets. As indicated in section 5.3, future utilizations of the Appraisal framework would, for example, benefit from enlisting the help of a secondary analyst to decrease potential subjectivity in the results.

The utilization of perceived media bias brought in a comparative position between the two outlets as they were considered to be situated on the opposite sites of the political spectrum, bar the slight differences in the amount of bias. Still, relying on media bias in this way made it difficult to initially find comparable news outlets due to cultural differences between left-wing and right-wing media; outlets with similar levels of bias could result in a comparison between broadsheet news, tabloids, or cable news shows. Future research could address more sources of perceived bias but also pay closer attention to the overall comparability of outlets in terms of aspects such as newspaper genres, circulation or website activity, and ideology or stance related to the topic of study. A future comparison could also benefit from the inclusion of more outlets in order to better determine potential differences in evaluation in relation to media bias. As this study focused on a single notable leader, future studies could also address evaluative language in relation to other world leaders, for which the current study could offer a point of comparison to. This study may

also provide useful for studies on political discourse and news discourse in relation to the upcoming 2024 U.S. presidential election, in which Trump still appears to be a strong candidate at the time of writing this thesis.

Despite some shortcomings, this study highlighted the comparative differences in evaluative languages between two U.S. news outlets, that were perceived to be from the opposite sides of the political spectrum, in relation to Donald Trump, a polarizing figure of great political significance in recent history, during his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns.

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## Appendix – the news articles analyzed for the study

This section lists all the articles analyzed in for this study. The articles are divided into the corpora as follows:

Articles 1–25 (**WE 2015–2016**)

Articles 26–50 (**WP 2015–2016**)

Articles 51–75 (**WE 2019–2020**)

Articles 76–100 (**WP 2019–2020**)

As the news articles were collected from ProQuest (2024), the appendix provides links to the relevant articles in the database. Another reason for this choice was that the Washington Post articles were sourced from the physical version of the paper. Some of such articles could be found on the website of the outlet but differed in form, often lacking text and always published under a different headline. In order to view the articles on ProQuest, an institutional login is required.

As articles are referred to using the assigned numbers based on the sampling of data, articles from the same author during the same year are not listed in an alphabetical order.

Article 1.	Morrongiello, G. (2016). House Republicans Clash over Likelihood of Trump Nomination. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 15 Apr. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1781342955">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1781342955</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 2.	Drucker, D.M. (2016). GOP Insiders Worry about ‘Weak’ June Trump Fundraising. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 7 Jul. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1802497219">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1802497219</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 3.	Adams, B. (2015). WSJ Revels in Trump Attacks. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 13 Nov. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1733030396">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1733030396</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 4.	Friedman, D. (2016). What You Missed This Weekend. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 21 Mar. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1777736328">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1777736328</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 5.	Chaitin, D. (2016). Clinton, Trump Get Ready for Their Close-up. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 26 Sep. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1824016507">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1824016507</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].

Article 6.	Morrongiello, G. (2016). Trump Looks to Tackle Energy Policy in Major Speech. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 26 May. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1792069955">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1792069955</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 7.	Higgins, S. (2016). Trump: ‘I Like Right-to-work Better’. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 23 Feb. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1768477289">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1768477289</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 8.	Drucker, D.M. (2016a). Donald Trump Outsources Campaign Operations to RNC. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 27 May. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1792070196">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1792070196</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 9.	Adams, B. (2016). Former Trump Lawyer Has 20 Reasons Not to Vote for Trump. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 2 Aug. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1808336208">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1808336208</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 10.	Feldscher, K. (2016). Trump Debuts Coal Attacks on Clinton. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 4 May. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1787259309">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1787259309</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
Article 11.	Adams, B. (2016). Trump Calls Clinton ‘Holier Than Thou’ on Birtherism. <i>Washington Examiner</i> . [online] 27 Sep. Available at: <a href="https://www.proquest.com/docview/1824016646">https://www.proquest.com/docview/1824016646</a> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2024].
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