



Power Ownership Matters, Not Political Orientation: Sources and Responsibility Attributions of Fake News in Media Articles around Two Presidential Elections in Korea

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Abstract

This study examines the political status and identities of sources and responsibility attributions of fake news in media articles covering the two recent Korean presidential elections, which saw the election of candidates of different political orientations. Results of quantitative content analysis for 746 stories from four nationwide news outlets showed that power ownership (ruling vs. opposing), rather than political orientation (conservative vs. progressive), better explained the variations in source appearance. In general, regardless of ideological orientation, sources associated with ruling parties blamed fake news more than those from opposing parties. The presidents and nominatives from the ruling party, as well as electives from opposing parties, were major sources blaming fake news. Experts, media, and the private sector were occasionally found to be sources blaming fake news from neutral zones. In terms of responsibility attribution for fake news, while unidentified targets blamed for fake news outnumbered any other identified objects, the president, nominatives, and electives were more frequently blamed when sources were from opposing parties. Theoretical and practical applications of the study results are then discussed to better understand the nature of fake news.

Keywords: fake news, power ownership, sources, responsibility attributions, presidential elections

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Introduction

Fake news is an elusive term. Although poor levels of facticity and the purpose of deception within journalism formats are often considered major elements of fake news (Tandoc et al. 2018), the concept has become entangled with related terms such as disinformation (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). This confusion deepens when politically charged topics are involved, as the ideological positions of different information sources interact with audiences' pre-existing beliefs and biases (Baptista and Gradim 2022a; Van der Linden et al. 2020). Those who control and distribute information bear greater responsibility for this complexity than those who receive it, as the sources cited in media coverage actively shape public attitudes by either challenging or reinforcing a given issue (McCombs 2004). In terms of fake news, political partisanship, which in theory is held to foster healthy debate between conservatives and progressives (Welch et al. 1988), has become a key factor in the propagation of fake news: people will label messages in opposition to their ideological views as false. Further complicating matters, studies of media effects have shown that such political polarization does not always yield consistent results (Egelhofer et al. 2022), though in general individuals tend to distrust information that contradicts their beliefs or ideological orientations (Y. Park et al. 2022).

This complexity necessitates a detailed examination of the characteristics of fake news to better understand its influence on the public. Given the uneven impact of partisanship on fake news perception, accounting for conventional measures is challenging. Politicians' desire for power and their supporters' desire to bolster them can be contributing factors. Recent events, such as the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol, have led to speculation that political power-seeking, intertwined with populism, could hinder the rational evaluation of information, specifically in the dynamics between ruling and opposition factions (Goldstein 2022). Furthermore, mutual denunciation between the ruling and opposing parties skyrockets during periods of heightened political activity, such as elections, when the different sides compete for the authenticity of their respective views (Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996).

Considering the influence of the media on public perceptions (McCombs 2004), it is plausible that media coverage, where actors with diverse political positions play roles as information holders (Mencher 1991), could incite behavior such as that at the US Capitol in 2021. Fake news may be weaponized to discredit opponents, and while it has rarely been examined empirically, power affiliations (ruling vs. opposing) rather than partisanship associations (conservative vs. progressive) may be more closely linked to such denunciations. Therefore, this study aims to determine whether such political tactics are evident in news stories as potential explanations for the theoretical effects of fake news. Although the current study did not directly test the effects of fake news on the public, it explored alternative causes of those effects—beyond political orientation—that could serve as meaningful variables for future research.

Current discussions on fake news originated in the legacy media (Hirst 2017). For the purposes of this study, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of legacy media articles covering the fake news phenomenon, with a focus on politics. Selecting political articles allowed us to examine how power dynamics among news actors shape fake news attribution. Specifically, we seek to determine which of two frameworks better explains why actors accuse others of spreading fake news: power status (whether political actors are defending or challenging power regardless of ideological leaning) or political orientation (whether actors are conservative or progressive, regardless of their position of power). Fake news is generally considered detrimental (Vese 2022), and we assumed that when the term appears in news coverage, it typically functions as an accusation to discredit another. Thus, we treated references to “fake news” in media articles as naturally linked to condemnation.

This study examined two South Korean presidential elections, held in 2017 and 2022, both of which saw heightened public debate around fake news. These two elections are particularly useful cases because they were won by parties of opposing political orientations, meaning that each election automatically reversed which politicians held power and which formed the opposition. This alternation in power allowed us to observe the same political actors in both ruling and opposing positions across the two election

cycles (Rozman et al. 2024). We anticipated these specific election cases would present an appropriate test bed for the questions raised above. Beyond political status, we also analyzed the identities of those assigning blame and those being blamed in fake news stories. Understanding the relationship between these two groups is important because, in contentious media coverage such as fake news disputes, actors frequently shift roles, sometimes appearing as sources of accusations, and at other times as the targets of those accusations (Weaver 1986; Wolfsfeld 1997). By examining both the political status and identities of actors involved in fake news coverage, we aim to develop a fuller understanding of how fake news functions as a political phenomenon.

Fake News Research and Political Communication

The more recent phenomenon of fake news, whose precise definition lacks consensus, stems from the concept of bad news (Tandoc et al. 2018). While scholars have attempted to clarify the definition of the term “fake news,” bad news encompasses broader connotations, making it more challenging to understand (Pritchard 2021). This complexity has ironically allowed certain forms of *bad news*, such as satire and parody, to be accepted, particularly in the political arena under the umbrella of press freedom, as they explicitly or implicitly acknowledge their exaggeration, and can help spur political participation (Reilly 2012). However, the current concept of fake news has not met with such approval, as it is perceived as a deliberate falsehood without the excuses afforded satire or parody (Bucy and Newhagen 2019). Moreover, clarity on how fake news is formed is lacking, and the blurred boundaries between fake news and other bad news continue to deepen the confusion (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017).

Despite this ambiguity, researchers have made progress in studying the effects of fake news. One study found that traditional and new media affect American adults differently in terms of knowledge gaps and susceptibility to fake news, particularly in the context of COVID-19 (Gerosa et al. 2021). This study found that social media in particular was strongly associated with

lower levels of knowledge and higher levels of belief in health-related fake news. However, these differences do not necessarily translate into different perceptions of fake news related to police enforcement in Hong Kong (Tsang 2021). Unlike the findings of Gerosa et al.'s study, Tsang found no meaningful difference between legacy and online media in shaping audiences' awareness of fake news. However, her study did reveal that individuals with opposing political stances had different perceptions of the same information's potential falsehood.

While such differing findings regarding the effects of fake news may reflect variations in research approaches, topics, or theoretical frameworks, some studies do converge on shared theories that deepen our understanding of fake news. For example, research on fake science news has linked the presence of fact-checking information to third-person effects (Chung and Kim 2021). These third-person effects have in turn been connected to hostile media perceptions, which can shape public attitudes toward fake news regulation, a particularly politically charged issue in Korea (Hyun et al. 2024).

Fake news has become an increasingly prominent subject in political communication research, a field that often grapples with deep political polarization. Partisan online media has demonstrated an ability to set the agenda for other online media outlets, while fact-checking websites have had limited countervailing influence (Vargo et al. 2018). Among Americans, the exposure to so-called fake political news is associated psychologically with the desire to discredit antagonistic media outlets (Van der Linden et al. 2020). Other studies have examined misinformation in the communication climate through the lens of spiral of silence theory (Au et al. 2022), finding that fake news fosters a broader informational distrust (Park et al. 2022). However, despite the growing body of research on fake news, which focuses mainly on contentious political issues, a core problem persists: the documented effects may stem less from fake news itself than from people's belief that it exists, and the defining characteristics of fake news remain poorly specified.

Nevertheless, amid these diverse scholarly approaches, a common theme has emerged: fake news is detrimental. Most studies have concluded

that fake news has negative effects that should be avoided (Baptista and Gradim 2022a). While some proponents acknowledge the potential of fake news to galvanize political participation, such ideas are tempered by concerns about its harmful societal impact (Katsirea 2018; Vese 2022). It is generally expected that fake news should be denounced rather than defended. Accordingly, we perceive “fake news” as an antecedent of media effects and conceptualize “fake news blaming” as a form of denunciation, in which sources in news articles condemn others for harmful actions, such as the creation, dissemination, and management of false information.

Since fake news emerged as a prominent topic of public debate in 2016 (Hirst 2017), research has repeatedly examined its relationship with political partisanship, and repeatedly yielded mixed results. As summarized above in the literature, political affiliation does not consistently predict how one will assign blame for fake news, nor does any single political orientation demonstrably produce or amplify it more than others (Baptista and Gradim 2022b; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Additionally, it has been found that no political orientation overwhelmingly uses or frames fake news more than its counterparts, although conservative audiences generally tend to be more susceptible to fake news (Egelhofer et al. 2022; Van der Linden et al. 2020).

We argue that these inconsistent findings reflect the complex and strategically manipulated nature of fake news itself. Existing studies suggest that how political messages are framed and received may depend less on conventional left-right distinctions than on the structural position of the political actors involved, that is, their power status and dominance within the media landscape (Farkas and Schou 2018). To capture this dynamic, we propose the idea of “power ownership”: the capacity to exercise governing authority over a state, most commonly acquired through electoral victory in a democratic system. Though broad in scope, the concept draws on established notions of sovereign command (Chesterman 2007) and hegemonic power (Zompetti 2019), and is intended to move analysis beyond simple partisan categories toward the structural conditions under which fake news is produced and deployed.

In fact, scholars have continuously attempted to identify the various communication strategies employed by political actors to attack their

opponents with misleading information, particularly during elections period. Negative advertising is the most studied example. Although not generally presented in news format, negative advertising shares some similarities, including its persuasive effects, with fake news (Lau et al. 2007; Vesnic-Alujevic and Van Bauwel 2014). Although such advertising content may not be deliberately false, it is typically coupled with bombastic or unproven claims through which politicians denounce their opponents in an attempt to win elections (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 2013; Kaid 2004), just as they are suspected of using fake news to denounce others. While some negative ads have been found to successfully garner support from the electorate (Devlin 1995), other studies have argued that dishonest content can eventually provoke backlash (Ansolabehere et al. 1994). That is, no consistent predictors have been identified to explain the persistent effects of harmful messages in negative advertising (Wattenberg and Briens 1999).

Although much of the literature on political advertising addresses ideological partisanship, few studies have examined the theme from the perspective of ruling versus opposing political status. These studies indicate that challengers tend to employ more agitative advertising than incumbents; however, the effectiveness of such tactics remains unclear (Hale et al. 1996). Even outside the context of elections, there have been insightful discussions of similar demagogic tactics during wartime, where those in power used propaganda to maintain authority and suppress opposition. Studies have shown the effectiveness of these strategies (Lasswell 1971; Perloff 2021). While it remains unclear whether the concept of “power ownership” suggested above aligns exactly with “authority” or “hegemony,” and although fake news differs from negative advertising despite some overlapping features, the inconsistent findings of previous studies seem to suggest a need to investigate the characteristics of fake news today to uncover the hidden causes and effects of false information.

Considering the literature above and returning to the central concern of this study, the literature points toward a more dynamic understanding of political authority than conventional partisan categories allow. As conservatives and progressives compete for electoral dominance, power ownership (the capacity to govern) shifts between ruling and opposing

positions. This shift is not permanent, nor is it tied to any single party; a conservative party may hold power at one moment, a progressive party at another. What matters for our purposes is that ruling and opposing status cuts across left-right distinctions in ways that conventional partisanship labels obscure (Burns 1992). From this it follows that fake news blaming is likely to vary not just by political orientation (conservative or progressive) but by power position: whether an actor is currently governing or in opposition. The inconsistent findings of previous studies on fake news may stem in part from conflating these two dimensions. By separating them, this study aims to identify more precise conditions under which fake news blaming occurs and why its effects have proven so difficult to predict. Given these considerations, we formulated the following research question:

RQ 1. Between the dichotomies of political orientation and power ownership, which better explains the propensity to blame fake news in media articles?

Identities of Actors in News Articles

One established method for analyzing how issues are framed in the media is source analysis. Sources, the individuals and institutions quoted or cited in news stories to convey facts and opinions, are understood to lend events a degree of credibility and authority (Rich 2002). Fake news is no exception: the political actors who appear as sources in fake news stories bring with them a status that shapes how the content is received. Beyond partisan orientation, then, source qualification (who is speaking, and from what institutional position) may be a critical factor in understanding how fake news operates. This study draws on existing source analysis methods to examine that dimension.

Source credibility is the most widely used measure of source quality (Rupar 2006). Credibility is generally understood to rest on proximity to the issue at hand — the closer a source is to the events being reported, the more authoritative their account is considered. On this basis, subject-matter

experts are typically ranked as the most credible sources (Reich 2011), though some researchers have questioned whether such judgments reflect the actual limits of human cognition (Coddington and Molyneux 2023). Below experts in the credibility hierarchy sit the three branches of government (legislative, executive, and judicial) whose official handling of public affairs gives them considerable standing (Bucy 2003; Meyer 1988; Sigal 1986). Further down are civic interest groups such as NGOs, which monitor governmental institutions; private sector actors, including corporations; and finally ordinary citizens (Detjen et al. 2000; Yoon 2005).

However, this conventional credibility hierarchy cannot be applied straightforwardly to fake news in this study, as this study attempts to find fake news actors highly involved with various stakeholders who might purposely use information for self-interest (Mencher 1991; Tsang 2021). Sources from the three estates, as well as non-governmental organizations, corporations, and general citizens, can be stakeholders or actors who blindly support or believe certain aspects of issues related to probable fake news, and professionals may even portray ideologically different viewpoints (G. Lee 2021). Therefore, the conventional typology of source credibility must be reconsidered in fake news studies. This study therefore replaces “credibility” with “identity” as its primary source measure. Rather than ranking sources by believability, identity captures the institutional and professional position from which an actor speaks—their nominal status, not their trustworthiness. We also expand the source categories to include media organizations, which existing research identifies as central players in the circulation of fake news (Egelhofer et al. 2022). Since fake news is understood here as harmful content (Baptista and Gradim 2022a), the sources under analysis are specifically those actors who appear in media coverage to provide facts or opinions bearing on fake news, whether to spread, contest, or frame it. Given these considerations, the following research question is proposed:

RQ 2. What are the features of the sources blaming fake news in terms of their identities?

Beyond who does the fake news blaming, we are equally interested in who is blamed. Previous studies have generally presented the media as the primary targets of fake news accusations, often examining responsibility attribution through the lens of old vs. new media, or through finer distinctions among digital platforms (Baptista and Gradim 2022b; Farhall et al. 2019; Gerosa et al. 2021; Van der Linden et al. 2020). This study takes a different approach; rather than organizing targets by media type, we apply the same identity categories used to classify sources, allowing for a consistent framework that captures the full range of political, institutional, and civic actors who may be cast as responsible for fake news.

In news coverage of contested issues, those who challenge and those who defend the factuality of claims appear side by side (Rich 2002), and frequently exchange positions, with the same actor serving as the source attributing blame in one case and the target of blame in another. This reflects standard journalistic practice, as reporters are trained to cover multiple perspectives on an issue to convey the overall complexity of it (B. Lee and Padgett 2000; Mencher 1991). This technique, known as triangulation, is a well-established norm in journalism (Christians et al. 1991). Because fake news articles lack settled consensus, they are particularly likely to invite this kind of multi-actor, multi-position coverage, drawing in figures who alternately attack and defend the allegations depending on their interests and institutional standing. We therefore expect that election coverage involving fake news accusations will feature both attackers and defenders, and that their positions will vary systematically with political orientation and power ownership. Examining these patterns at the level of individual actors and stories, rather than at the broader structural level favored by prior research, should offer a more precise account of how fake news is constructed and contested in electoral coverage. Thus, we propose the final research question as follows:

RQ 3. What are the features of the targets accused of disseminating fake news in terms of their identities and political status?

Methods

Sampling

This study uses quantitative content analysis to examine the above research questions. We analyzed South Korean news coverage of South Korea's 19th and 20th presidential elections held in 2017 and 2022, respectively, during which fake news debates sparked vehement political struggles over information authenticity (J. Lee et al. 2024). For each election, we sampled one full year of coverage centered on the election date. The first window ran from November 9, 2016, to November 8, 2017, centering on the 19th election held on May 9, 2017, when progressive Moon Jae-In of the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) was elected. The second is from September 9, 2021, to September 8, 2022, focusing on the 20th election of March 9, 2022, when conservative Yoon Suk Yeol of People Power Party (PPP) was elected. Prior to the 19th election, the ruling party was conservative, whereas before the 20th election, it was progressive. We divided the data into two periods, each of which comprised six months before and after the individual election because of the power shifts between conservatives and progressives, which are the original coding bases for this study. The candidates and their supporters represented different political orientations, and their status as ruling or opposition parties shifted naturally with each election outcome. For example, whether conservative or progressive, any political group that won an election was categorized as the "ruling" party, regardless of partisan affiliation. We considered these conditions appropriate for testing our research questions.

News articles were drawn from four major national news outlets based in Seoul, Korea: two daily newspapers and two broadcast television networks. The newspapers were the *JoongAng Ilbo* and *Kyunghyang Shinmun*. The *JoongAng Ilbo* is known as conservative, while *Kyunghyang Shinmun* is considered progressive, and both have been identified as the most partisan representatives of their respective orientation (Lee and Koh 2009). The television networks were Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS). MBC is regarded as

progressive and SBS as conservative or non-progressive (H. Kim 2021; Kwak 2023). Including an equal number of outlets from each political leaning, and across both print and broadcast formats, was intended to offset any overall bias in political orientation or news presentation style.

Assigning partisan labels to specific news outlets is inherently complex. The literature on Korean media generally groups the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Ilbo* as conservative and *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang Shinmun* as progressive, but identifying which outlet is most extreme within each camp is more difficult, as this question has rarely been tested empirically. The *Chosun Ilbo* and *Hankyoreh* are widely recognized as the flagship outlets of their respective political orientations based on their histories and founding backgrounds (G. Lee 2021), though this recognition rests more on reputation than systematic comparison. Further complicating matters, even conservative newspapers have gradually shifted toward more progressive positions over time (Lee and Park 2010), and individual media outlets do not hold fixed partisan stances but shift depending on the issue at hand (Choi 2010). That said, among the limited studies that have empirically examined polarization across Korean newspapers, Lee and Koh (2009) found the *JoongAng Ilbo* and *Kyunghyang Shinmun* to occupy the most extreme positions. We therefore selected these two outlets to investigate the political dimensions of fake news, which form the baseline for our research questions.

Regarding television, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), as the national public service, has the longest history and the most networks in Korea. But it was excluded from our analysis because it is generally under strict control by the ruling party (Kwak 2023), thus its content might understandably be friendly to the ruling party and thus harm our research scheme. Frankly, the soundness of our inclusion of MBC—also recognized as subject to institutional manipulation by government authorities—could be debated. This is particularly relevant because MBC presidents during the 19th election period were believed to have ties to the then-conservative administration, raising the possibility that its coverage might not reflect progressive tendencies. One such network president was dismissed shortly after this election (Park and Han 2020). However, it is worth noting that the

MBC journalist labor union steadfastly resisted these presidents' editorial policies, something that contributed to the president's dismissal (S. Park 2023). These circumstances can be attributed to the overall political orientation of MBC, and therefore it was included in this study.

We collected stories from the political sections of each outlet, focusing on presidential election coverage. Using Big Kinds, an official online news archive operated by the Korea Press Foundation, a government organization, we identified 771 stories containing the exact phrase "fake news." We then refined the data set by removing unrelated items, such as book reviews, as well as duplicate articles by the same reporter that appeared multiple times in the database. The final sample contained 746 articles that included the term "fake news" (*JoongAng Ilbo* [430], *Kyunghyang Shinmun* [205], *SBS* [43], and *MBC* [68]). These stories together had 24,407 sentences, of which 1,458 contained the term "fake news." Sentences containing the exact phrase "fake news" (e.g. 'top spokesperson for the DPK Election Planning Committee explained it as the proof of fake news spread by LKP [formerly PPP] supporters' [MBC, May 3, 2017]; 'Hong, presidential candidate of the LKP, raised his voice against some media's habitual practice of fake news' [*JoongAng Ilbo*, April 30, 2017]; etc.) served as the coding unit, while the individual articles in which they appeared served as the analysis unit; these articles contained an additional 22,949 sentences in total.

We adopted this approach in response to the ongoing, unresolved debate over how fake news should be defined (Baptista and Gradim 2022a). The collected articles contained a wide range of related expressions for fake news, including disinformation, distortion, fraud, and deception, yet it was not practical to treat every possible synonym as an equivalent search term. At the same time, relying solely on "fake news" also appeared to be a limitation. A review of sources using alternative expressions for fake news, such as the abovementioned ones, produced ambiguous but similar meanings, indicating the need to consider a broader approach. Therefore, we reviewed the research design's validity by differentiating the coding from the analysis units. We matched sources that had the term "fake news" to actors using similar terminology in a story to determine whether they were identical. Simultaneously, we traced the identities of actors referred to only

by surnames or abbreviated titles—like “Hong” or “spokesperson”—to their full mention in another part of the article. The same rules were applied to responsibility attribution. We believe this method effectively served the research goal of identifying both the media’s tone toward fake news and the individuals associated with it.

Coding Scheme

1) Identities of Sources and Responsibility Attributions

Drawing on prior literature on source categories, we classified sources according to their role as stakeholders in presidential elections. Presidents and their staff were grouped under the single category *President*. Sources from the three branches of government were coded separately as *Legislative*, *Executive*, and *Judicial*, reflecting the expectation that each branch would respond differently to allegations of political fake news (Lee and Koh 2009). The executive and judicial branches represent offices operating under presidential appointment, while the legislative branch comprises elected lawmakers representing a range of political ideologies. *Interest Groups*, to mean organization that exercise collective civic influence to monitor the formal political system, were treated as a distinct category (Yoon 2005). Media sources were divided into *Traditional*, *New*, and *Media-Mixed* categories given that each is understood to interact with fake news in related but distinct ways (Egelhofer et al. 2022; Park et al. 2022; Vargo et al. 2018). From the private sector, we included both industrial *Corporations* and individual *Citizens*, following precedent from the literature (Detjen et al. 2000; Hansen 1991; Lee and Koh 2009). We added a category *Experts* to capture sources regarded as among the most credible voiced in news reporting (Bucy 2003; Priest 1995). An *Others* category was also included for sources that did not fit the above categories. We also added a *None* category to account for *fake news* assertions made without any identifiable individual source, a possibility we considered likely given the anonymous and ambiguous nature of such accusations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Operational Definitions

Identity (ICR for source [.85] and responsibility attribution [.77])	
Experts	Scholars and professionals with specialized knowledge about media, politics and related fields and without financial or political interests
President	Presidents and their staff
Legislative	(Members of) National assembly, parties, and their candidates
Executive	(Members of) Governmental ministries or their branches
Judicial	(Members of) Justice system
Traditional media	Legacy media including newspapers and broadcasting
New media	Media other than traditional media (SNS, YouTube, etc.)
Media-Mixed	Media in general, combined categories of traditional and new media
Interest groups	Civic groups such as NGOs, NPOs, etc.
Corporations	Commercial industries
Citizens	Ordinary citizens
Others	Sources who cannot be categorized as above
None	For cases of fake news without any identifiable source
Political Status (ICR for source [.88] and responsibility attribution [.78])	
Conservative	PPP, its affiliates and supporters (e.g., Suk Yeol Yoon; ‘Fake news hurts PPP supporters.’)
Progressive	DPK, its affiliates and supporters (e.g., Jae-In Moon; ‘DPK is against fake news!’)
Neutral	Related impartial information about politics (e.g., neuro scientist Professor Kim; ‘We need decent democracy over fake news.’)
None	For cases of fake news without any identifiable source

Note: For political status, only the political orientation of sources and responsibility attributions are explained in the table, because the power ownership is simply coded in accordance with their affiliations with the then-presidency.

Source: Authors.

2) Political Status

Sources were coded as either *Conservative* or *Progressive* based on their political orientation. For reference, the PPP (known as the Liberty Korea Party until the 19th presidential election), was conservative in the 20th election, and the DPK was progressive in both. Sources with clear ties to these parties were coded accordingly. Presidents, candidates, legislators, and

their staff were coded according to their party affiliation. Sources from administrative and judicial bodies were coded in terms of the presidency they served under, reflecting South Korea's well-established spoils system, in which key administrative and judicial appointments are made under strong presidential influence, a pattern that characterized both election periods examined in this study (Cheong and Haggard 2023). Interest groups and the media were coded for partisanship, based on classifications reported in prior research (H. Kim 2021; Kwak 2023; Rozman et al. 2024). Experts, corporate figures, and citizens were coded according to the political orientation evident in their quoted statements. Sources with no discernible affiliation or ideological position were coded as *Neutral*. Sources previously assigned to the *None* identity category were likewise coded as *None*, as their political orientation could not be determined.

Political status carries an additional dimension beyond partisanship: power ownership, defined as whether a group holds governing authority or occupies the opposition, that is, *Ruling* or *Opposing* (Farkas and Schou 2018; Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996; Zompetti 2019). As noted earlier, the two elections in this study were won by presidential candidates of opposing political orientations, meaning that ruling and opposition status shifted between conservatives and progressives after each election. This allowed sources' partisan affiliations to be automatically recorded in terms of power ownership; whichever group won a given election was coded as *Ruling*, and the other as *Opposing*. For instance, progressives following the 19th election and conservatives following the 20th election were each coded as *Ruling*, since each had won the corresponding election. Prior to each election, each was coded as *Opposing*, reflecting the party affiliation of the sitting presidency at the time. A more nuanced coding scheme was applied to foreign heads of state, who appeared occasionally in the articles. Unlike domestic sources, their power ownership was not automatically updated to reflect changes in Korean leadership. Instead, their alignment was assessed relative to each Korean administration. A foreign leader coded as aligned with the *Ruling* party under one Korean presidency could be recoded as aligned with the *Opposing* party after a subsequent election if the new Korean administration held a different political orientation. For example,

the US presidency coded as Ruling-aligned during one period might be recoded as Opposing-aligned in the next, if its political orientation diverged from that of the incoming South Korean president—who was always coded as Ruling. The same coding schemes used for source identities and political status were applied to the attribution of responsibility for fake news.

Coding Procedure

Three communication graduate students served as coders. During the pilot training phase, they were familiarized with the conceptual meanings and operational definitions of all variables. When coding conflicts arose, they discussed issues of mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness with the authors to resolve ambiguities. Over the two-month training period, variable definitions were refined and adjusted until a satisfactory level of inter-coder reliability was achieved across approximately 10 percent of the 1,458 target sentences. Coders then independently coded their assigned units, which were distributed evenly among them. The final inter-coder reliability (ICR) was .82 (Cohen's kappa). Alongside this qualitative assessment, the coders also conducted a qualitative review of all sentences used in the reliability test to examine whether the term “fake news” carried a blaming connotation. They found that it consistently appeared in contexts of condemnation, particularly regarding the harmful influence of false information in media content.

Results

Descriptive analysis revealed that legislative sources were cited most frequently, followed by none, executive, president, experts, traditional media, interest groups, citizens, and corporations. New media, others, media-mixed, and judicial all accounted for less than 1 percent of all sources. For responsibility attribution, the *None* category was the most common, followed by legislative, new media, media-mixed, citizens, others, traditional media, executive and interest groups. President, experts, corporations and

judicial categories accounted for less than 1 percent of all attribution targets (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis

	Source	Res. Att.		Source	Res. Att.
Total (frequency)	1458	1458	Total (frequency)	1458	1458
Identity (%)					
Experts	2	0.1	Media-mixed	0.2	5.3
President	7.2	0.8	Interest groups	1.1	2.1
Legislative	50.4	25.1	Corporations	1	0.1
Executive	7.4	3.4	Citizens	1.1	5.2
Judicial	0.1	0	Others	0.8	4.2
Traditional media	1.6	3.4	None	26.2	44.7
New media	0.9	5.8			
Political Orientation (%)			Power Ownership (%)		
Conservative	25	19	Ruling	40.1	15.4
Progressive	36.4	11.4	Opposing	21.4	15
Neutral	12.3	25	Neutral	12.3	25
None	26.2	44.7	None	26.2	44.7

Note: Res. Att.=Responsibility attribution.

Source: Authors.

Setting aside the *None* category, which cannot be assigned a political orientation, progressive sources appeared most often, followed by conservative and neutral sources. The pattern for responsibility attribution targets was the exact reverse. When the *None* category was excluded and sources were reclassified by power ownership rather than ideology, ruling party sources appeared most often, followed by opposing party sources and neutral sources. For attribution targets, however, neutral figures were most common, with ruling and opposing party targets following in that order.

RQ1: Fake News Blaming by Political Status

Cross-tabulation results showed that statistically significant differences emerged only when sources were classified by power ownership, not by political orientation (see Table 3). Overall, fake news-related source activity dropped sharply from 1,267 before elections to 191 after, indicating the engagement with fake news claims was substantially more intense in the pre-election period. Among sources, ruling party figures blamed fake news more frequently than opposition figures, and both outnumbered neutral sources. A supplementary z-test of proportions reinforced these findings. The only statistically significant proportional difference between the pre- and post-election periods was found among opposing party sources, whose share increased from 19.9 percent before elections to 31.4 percent after. This pattern suggests that ruling party sources were consistently more active in blaming, particularly before elections, while opposition sources showed a comparatively weaker and more variable tendency to do so.

Table 3. Sources Divided by Power Ownership and Political Orientations

Power Ownership	Before Elections	After Elections	Political Orientation	Before Elections	After Elections
Total (frequency)	1267	191	Total (frequency)	1267	191
Ruling (%)	40.6 _a	36.1 _a	Conservatives (%)	23.9	32.5
Opposing (%)	19.9 _a	31.4 _b	Progressives (%)	36.6	35.1
Neutral (%)	12.9 _a	8.9 _a	Neutral (%)	12.9	8.9
None (%)	26.6 _a	23.6 _a	None (%)	26.6	23.6
$\chi^2 = 13.85^{**}$			$\chi^2 = 7.65^{\dagger}$		

Note: Subscript letters in the Power Ownership columns indicate statistically significant differences in column proportions based on z-tests. Only the Power Ownership classification yielded meaningful cross-tabulation results across all variables (df = 3). Cells sharing the same subscript letter are not significantly different from one another; cells with different subscript letters are.

**<0.01 †<0.1

Source: Authors.

The high frequency of *None*, representing fake news claims made without an identifiable source, could not be overlooked in the test, as it may have influenced the results for political orientation, whose cross-tabulation approached but did not reach statistical difference ($p = .054$). We therefore ran an additional cross-tabulation after removing the *None* category, which yielded a statistically significant result for sources classified by political orientation ($\chi^2 = 6.66$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). In this analysis, progressive sources blamed fake news more often than conservative sources, and both outnumbered neutral sources. While this supplementary finding is noteworthy, the primary analysis (retaining all categories and classifying sources by power ownership) will be used for the subsequent research questions, as it best aligns with the original research design. The implications of the supplementary results will be taken up in the conclusion.

RQ2: Identities of Sources Blaming Fake News

To address Research Question 2, we restructured source identity categories by combining groups that were too small in the descriptive analysis to support meaningful statistical comparison. Following the rationale established in the coding scheme section, the executive and judicial branches were merged into a single *Nominatives* category, the three media subcategories (traditional, new, and media-mixed) were consolidated into *Media*, and corporations and citizens were combined into *Private Sector*. To create a parallel contrast with *Nominatives*, the legislature was relabeled *Electives*. Sources in the *None* category were excluded from this analysis, as their identities could not be determined.

Cross-tabulation tests across all three time periods (the full period, before elections, and after elections) yielded statistically significant results, indicating that identifiable sources differed meaningfully in how often they blamed fake news. However, the results should be interpreted with caution, as a number of cells still contained fewer than five cases (see Table 4). Scrutinizing these differences, three separate z-tests of proportions were conducted for each period, revealing statistically significant differences among source categories.

Table 4. Source Identity Divided by Source Power Ownership

	Whole Period			Before Elections			After Elections		
	Ruling	Opposing	Neutral	Ruling	Opposing	Neutral	Ruling	Opposing	Neutral
Total (freq.)	584	312	180	515	252	163	69	60	17
Identity (%)	$\chi^2 = 357.70^{***}$			$\chi^2 = 325.52^{***}$			$\chi^2 = 78.57^{***}$		
Exp.	0.3 _a	0 _a	15 _b	0.4 _a	0 _a	16 _b	0 _a	0 _a	5.9 _a
Pres.	13.2 _a	9 _a	0 _b	10.7 _a	0.4 _b	0 _b	31.9 _a	45 _a	0 _b
Elect.	63.4 _a	86.2 _b	53.3 _c	66.6 _a	94.4 _b	57.1 _a	39.1 _{a,b}	51.7 _b	17.6 _a
Nomi.	18 _a	0 _b	2.8 _c	17.5 _a	0 _b	1.8 _b	21.7 _a	0 _b	11.8 _a
Media	2.7 _a	1.6 _a	10 _b	2.7 _a	1.6 _a	9.2 _b	2.9 _{a,b}	1.7 _b	17.6 _a
Int. G.	1.2 _a	1.3 _a	2.8 _a	1.4 _a	1.2 _a	1.8 _a	0 _a	1.7 _{a,b}	11.8 _b
Prv. S.	0.9 _a	1.9 _a	11.1 _b	0.6 _a	2.4 _a	10.4 _b	2.9 _{a,b}	0 _b	17.6 _a
Others	0.3 _a	0 _a	5 _b	0.2 _a	0 _a	3.7 _b	1.4 _a	0 _a	17.6 _b

Note: Different alphabet subscriptions tell the statistically significant differences (df=14) in column proportions for z-test. Exp = experts, Pres = president, Elect = electives, Nomi = nominatives, Int. G = interest groups, Prv. S = private sector.

***<0.001

Source: Authors.

Although presidential sources were divided into ruling and opposing categories across all three time periods in the cross-tabulation tests, a statistically significant difference between the two groups emerged only in the pre-election period. This suggests that ruling party presidents blamed fake news proportionally more than opposing party presidents, the latter consisting primarily of foreign heads of state whose political orientation differed from that of Korea’s incumbent or newly-elected president. Even the partisan alignments of foreign leaders with close ties to Korea, it appears, did not rival the Korean ruling president’s tendency to blame fake news in the politically charged pre-election climate. No significant difference between the two groups was observed after the elections. Over the full study period, opposing party legislators blamed fake news proportionally more than ruling party legislators, who in turn outnumbered neutral legislators. This opposition-heavy pattern held before the elections as well, while after the elections, opposing party legislators blamed fake news more than those

from neutral zones. Nominatives showed a roughly inverse pattern, with ruling party figures accounting for the majority of fake news blame across the full period and before the elections. After the elections, media and private sector sources from neutral zones blamed fake news more than their opposing party counterparts, and neutral interest group sources were proportionally more active fake news blamers than ruling party interest group sources. Experts, private sector figures, media sources, and others from neutral zones were proportionally more represented than their ruling or opposing party counterparts, both overall and before the elections. In summary, the most distinctive finding concerns the pre-election period: specific source types associated with the ruling (president and nominatives) and opposing (electives) parties each blamed fake news proportionally more than the other, specifically before the elections.

To return to the original, uncombined categories, and again noting the need for caution due to small cell sizes, the z-test results showed that executive branch sources affiliated with the ruling party were proportionally more active in blaming fake news than other source types across all periods. Over the full study period and in the pre-election period, traditional media from neutral zones blamed fake news proportionally more than opposing party sources, while new media and media-mixed sources from neutral zones were proportionally more active than ruling party sources.

RQ3: Identities and Political Status of Targets Blamed for Fake News

Unlike the source identity analysis, we retained the *None* category in the examination of attribution targets. This decision reflects the nature of fake news discourse, in which identified sources rarely defend fake news openly but instead deflect responsibility onto others, even when the identity of the target is unclear. Excluding such cases would have obscured a meaningful pattern in how responsibility is assigned.

Cross-tabulation tests for responsibility attribution across all three time periods yielded statistically significant results, indicating that attribution targets differed meaningfully depending on the period, though caution is again warranted given the number of cells with fewer than five cases (see

Table 5). Three separate z-tests of proportions were conducted to examine percentage differences across periods, revealing the following patterns. Over the full study period and before the elections, presidents and nominatives appeared more frequently as targets when the blaming source was from the opposing party rather than the ruling party. In those same periods, electives were the most common attribution target when sources were from the opposing party, while the *None* category was the least common. The media was blamed most often by ruling party sources before the elections, and over the full study period, media targets appeared more frequently when sources were from the ruling party than from neutral zones. After the elections, however, the media was blamed more by opposing party sources than by ruling party sources, while electives were more frequently attributed responsibility for fake news spreading by ruling party sources than by opposing party sources. The contrasting directions of these patterns, with electives and the media trading places as targets depending on whether the source is from the ruling or opposing party, and shifting further between the before- and after-elections periods, is a notable finding. No other comparisons reached statistical significance.

Returning to the original, uncombined categories, and again with the caveat that small cells require cautious interpretation, z-test results showed that traditional media were blamed proportionally more by opposing party sources than by others across the full study period, while new media were blamed more by ruling party sources than by opposing party sources. Before the elections, both media and media-mixed outlets were blamed more by ruling party sources than by opposing party sources. After the elections, the pattern reversed, with traditional media blamed more by opposing party than by ruling party sources.

Regarding the power ownership of attribution targets, cross-tabulation tests across all three periods yielded statistically significant results. Z-tests revealed that, across all periods, ruling party figures were blamed more by opposing party sources than by their own colleagues, and opposing party figures were likewise blamed more by ruling party sources than by their own, a pattern of mutual targeting that is unsurprising in itself. What is more notable is that the *None* category appeared least frequently as a target

Table 5. Target Identity and Power Ownership Divided by Source Power Ownership

	Whole Period			Before Elections			After Elections		
	Ruling	Opposing	Neutral	Ruling	Opposing	Neutral	Ruling	Opposing	Neutral
Total (freq.)	584	312	180	515	252	163	69	60	17
Target Identity (%)	$\chi^2 = 113.74^{***}$			$\chi^2 = 157.66^{***}$			$\chi^2 = 35.86^{**}$		
Exp.	0 _a	0.3 _a	0 _a	0 _a	0.4 _a	0 _a	-	-	-
Pres.	0.2 _a	1.9 _b	0.6 _{a,b}	0 _a	2 _b	0.6 _{a,b}	1.4 _a	1.7 _a	0 _a
Elect.	24.7 _a	48.7 _b	21.1 _a	23.5 _a	57.5 _b	21.5 _a	33.3 _a	11.7 _b	17.6 _{a,b}
Nomi.	2.6 _a	5.8 _b	3.3 _{a,b}	2.1 _a	6.7 _b	2.5 _{a,b}	5.8 _a	1.7 _a	11.8 _a
Media	18.2 _a	15.4 _{a,b}	10.6 _b	19.4 _a	8.7 _b	10.4 _b	8.7 _a	43.3 _b	11.8 _{a,b}
Int.G.	2.6 _a	1.6 _a	1.7 _a	2.7 _a	1.2 _a	1.8 _a	1.4 _a	3.3 _a	0 _a
Priv.S.	5.1 _a	4.5 _a	7.2 _a	5.2 _a	3.6 _a	8 _a	4.3 _a	8.3 _a	0 _a
Others	5.3 _a	3.8 _a	5 _a	5.4 _a	4.8 _a	4.9 _a	4.3 _a	0 _a	5.9 _a
None	41.4 _a	17.9 _b	50.6 _a	41.6 _a	15.1 _b	50.3 _a	40.6 _a	30 _a	52.9 _a
Target POWNS (%)	$\chi^2 = 205.85^{***}$			$\chi^2 = 203.78^{***}$			$\chi^2 = 24.02^{***}$		
Ruling	8 _a	41.7 _b	7.2 _a	8.9 _a	48 _b	8 _a	1.4 _a	15 _b	0 _{a,b}
Opposing	23.3 _a	10.6 _b	17.8 _{a,b}	22.5 _a	11.1 _b	19 _{a,b}	29 _a	8.3 _b	5.9 _{a,b}
Neutral	27.2 _a	29.8 _a	24.4 _a	27 _a	25.8 _a	22.7 _a	29 _a	46.7 _a	41.2 _a
None	41.4 _a	17.9 _b	50.6 _a	41.6 _a	15.1 _b	50.3 _a	40.6 _a	30 _a	52.9 _a

Note: Subscript letters indicate statistically significant differences in column proportions based on z-tests (Identity: $df = 16$ for the Whole and Before Elections periods, $df = 14$ for the After Elections period; Power Ownership: $df = 16$ for all periods). Cells sharing the same subscript letter are not significantly different from one another; cells with different subscript letters are. Identity category acronyms follow the same conventions as in Table 4.

<0.01 *<0.001

Source: Authors.

when the source was from the opposing party, both over the full study period and before the elections. This suggests that opposing party sources tended to blame fake news with a more clearly identified target in mind, compared to ruling party and neutral sources.

Conclusion and Discussion

Investigations of the proposed research questions showed that fake news blaming may be linked to power ownership rather than the conservative–progressive dichotomy of political orientations. Presidents and nominatives associated with the ruling party actively blamed fake news during the elections. This indicates that politicians in power utilize fake news for power maintenance, although ironically, the ruling parties in this study lost the elections. Conversely, lawmakers from opposing parties were more active in blaming fake news than their counterparts, and most other sources denouncing fake news were from neutral zones. These trends were more apparent before than after the elections, when politicians’ need for public support diminished. Another notable finding was unidentified targets outnumbered identified targets, suggesting that fake news blame was directed at no one in particular more often than at a specific individual or group. Compounding this, unidentified targets were blamed more frequently by sources holding power, regardless of political affiliation, a pattern that points to a troubling disconnect between political actors and the broader public. Together, these findings suggest that the fake news debate is being leveraged as a tool in political power struggles, with ordinary community members effectively sidelined or ignored in the process. While conclusions drawn from a single study should be treated with appropriate caution, this interpretation may help account for the inconsistent findings reported by previous studies.

The source analysis in this study allows us to reconsider the factors responsible for audiences’ fake news perception gaps on such issues as COVID-19 (Gerosa et al. 2021) and police enforcement (Tsang 2021), domains in which individuals in positions of power played a central role in shaping the discourse. The results of this study indicate that these gaps might be accredited more to power ownership than political orientation, which previous research has inconsistently argued as a key factor in fake news cognition. Research on third-person effects, traditionally examined through the lens of partisan identity (Chung and Kim 2021) might draw on the politically neutral sources identified in this study, such as experts and

certain media outlets, to clarify the role that power-independent figures play in shaping perceptions of fake news. Similarly, the *None* category in the responsibility attribution analysis may offer a productive connection to other theoretical frameworks: the audience resonance effects examined in fake news cultivation research (Y. Park et al. 2022) and the spiral of silence theory's concept of individuals using perceived public opinion to calibrate their own views (Ross et al. 2019), could both be enriched by considering how unknown or unidentified actors contribute to the political normalization of public discourse. More broadly, the combination of source and target analysis with power ownership classification employed in this study offers an alternative lens for political communication theory, one that moves beyond the conventional conservative/progressive dichotomy. As the findings of this study suggest, neutral or unidentified sources whose political status is ambiguous may produce theoretical frameworks that diverge meaningfully from those built on traditional partisan categories, and in doing so may help answer scholars' calls for deeper investigations into the nature of fake news phenomena (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019).

A finding worth discussing is that all ruling parties in this study lost their respective elections, despite being more active than opposing parties in blaming fake news. This is both a puzzling and an intriguing result. Politicians routinely employ communication strategies to win the support of constituents, and tactics such as negative advertising are a recognized part of that toolkit, even if such tactics are criticized for their indecent intentions. Previous studies asserted that challengers use negative advertisements more than incumbents, though findings on which side ultimately benefits have been mixed (Hale et al. 1996). By contrast, those in power have historically made greater use of propaganda resembling attack advertising those they govern, and this approach has been shown to be effective for regimes seeking to consolidate authority in wartime contexts (Perloff 2021).

Contrasting these uneven and complex phenomena found in previous studies with the findings of this study begs further questions: Does the difference in format between advertisements and news-style content containing unproven or false information explain the gap in usage between ruling and opposing political sectors? Does the difference between peace

and wartime determine whether such strategies help winning or losing parties? Furthermore, do electorates distinguish the attack nature of advertisements from fake news blaming, and if so, does this recognition affect their attitudes, and eventually their votes? While the current study raises these questions, it does not answer them. Its findings differ somewhat from those of previous studies, though both share common ground in examining so-called *bad news* or misinformation. The present findings, therefore, may inspire further studies that will expand our understanding of this topic.

This study has several limitations. First, the potential influence of conventional ideological classification cannot be entirely dismissed. When unidentified sources were removed, differences by political orientation became statistically significant and even met rigorous statistical thresholds, suggesting a partisan dimension to fake news blaming that is broadly consistent with prior research. MBC's coverage is a particularly relevant case in point: although categorized in this study some of its leadership at the time was believed to have conservative leanings (S. Park 2023), and the full statistical test for political orientations produced only the marginal differences. This ambiguity may offer a bridge the findings of this study and those of more traditionally framed research. That is, refining the classification of political orientation by taking into account internal editorial management structures rather than relying solely on generalized institutional labels, may yield a clearer picture of how power ownership and partisan polarization interact, particularly in the context of fake news discourse and policy.

At the same time, the patterns identified in this analysis may reflect not only the behavior of the sources and targets themselves, but also the framing choices of the news outlets that covered these events. Since the data were drawn from news articles, the results may partly be a product of media framing rather than the actions of political actors alone. The prevalence of the *None* category for both sources and targets is particularly relevant here, as the decision to reveal or withhold an actor's identity rests largely on journalists' judgment, a question better addressed through dedicated media framing research. It should also be acknowledged that the goal of achieving

a fine-grained understanding of responsibility attribution in fake news coverage was constrained by small sample sizes in certain categories. Both of these limitations could be addressed in future studies drawing on larger datasets.

Research such as this that focuses on a single country may invite questions about generalizability. However, this study is an attempt to better comprehend fake news by examining a nation that has grappled directly with the concept's ambiguities. Alongside comparable single-country studies from various national contexts (Baptista and Gradim 2022a; Farhall et al. 2019; Tsang 2021; Vargo et al. 2018), this work adds to a growing body of research that is gradually deepening our knowledge of the current phenomena of fake news as a global phenomenon.

Beyond its theoretical contributions and limitations, this study has practical implications for journalism practice. Reporters are generally expected to be as transparent as possible about their sources, and decisions about source exposure generally rest on editorial judgment (Mencher 1991; Rich 2002). The disclosure of target identities, however, depends less on reporters than on the sources themselves; if a source does not identify who they are referring to, neither journalists nor the public can fully assess the claim or engage with it meaningfully in public discourse. This points to a responsibility for journalists to press sources persistently to identify their targets, particularly on sensitive issues such as fake news. The patterns of responsibility attribution documented in this study may serve as a useful foundation for developing such practices in the field. Ultimately, we hope these findings contribute to a richer understanding of the nature of fake news, both in academic research and journalistic practice.

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