



## **CANCEL CULTURE AT THE BALLET BOX: FRAMING STRATEGIES IN THE 2024 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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Master Thesis  
June 2025

Word count: 16 025

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## **Abstract**

Cancel culture is one of the most polarizing phenomena in contemporary society. It originally emerged as a digital grassroots tool to hold individuals accountable for their harmful actions. However, the term has since evolved into a hot topic of debate across the political digital spectrum as some view it as a form of social justice, whilst others see it as a threat to individual rights

This research investigated how cancel culture and related issues were framed by the different political parties on X during the 2024 presidential election in the United States. Moreover, this thesis examined the changing role of cancel culture in political communication and its usage by various political parties to shape public perceptions. To achieve this, it analysed 500 purposively sampled tweets from Democratic, Republican, and Independent-affiliated political figures and commentators using a two-stage qualitative method that combined inductive thematic coding with framing analysis.

The study identified five dominant frames and found that the concept "cancel culture" itself was often deliberately avoided. This was most seen among Democratic-affiliated actors, who focused more on themes such as accountability and civic responsibility. Furthermore, Independent voices often challenged the dominant narratives presented by both major parties and offered alternative perspectives. Nevertheless, Republican actors reframed cancel culture as a threat to free speech and blamed this threat on the Democrats. These findings suggest that cancel culture has shifted from being a standalone cultural controversy to functioning as a flexible rhetorical tool embedded in broader ideological battles. The study also highlights how political actors change their messaging strategies in response to a quickly evolving discursive environment. Additionally, it illustrates how social media platforms like X enable real-time discursive shifts and allow actors to adapt strategic language to align with current political agendas. In doing so, cancel culture becomes a mirror of and a mechanism for broader partisan conflicts in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Cancel culture, Framing, U.S presidential election 2024, X, Free speech, Accountability

## Table of content

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| 1.1 Topic of research.....   | 4         |
| 1.2 Societal Relevance .....   | 5         |
| 1.3 Academic Relevance.....  | 5         |
| 1.4 Aim and Research Questions of the Study .....                            | 6         |
| <b>2. Theoretical Framework.....</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| 2.1. Political Communication in Democratic Societies.....                    | 8         |
| 2.2 Digital Activism as a Participatory Form of Political Communication..... | 10        |
| 2.3. Cancel Culture as a Rhetorical Tool in the Age of Digital Activism..... | 12        |
| 2.3.1 History of cancel culture.....   | 12        |
| 2.3.2 Cancel culture as a rhetorical tool.....                               | 13        |
| 2.4 Media's Construction of Social Reality.....                              | 15        |
| 2.5 Framing Theory in Media and Politics.....                                | 17        |
| <b>3. Research Design and Methods.....</b>                                   | <b>19</b> |
| 3.1 Choice of Method and Epistemological Approach .....                      | 19        |
| 3.2 Data Collection and Sampling Method.....                                 | 19        |
| 3.2.1 Content analysis.....  | 19        |
| 3.2.2 Sampling.....  | 20        |
| 3.3 Operationalisation.....  | 21        |
| 3.4 Data Analysis and Method Description .....                               | 22        |
| 3.5 Reliability and Validity.....  | 24        |
| <b>4. Result.....</b>  | <b>26</b> |
| 4.1 Free Speech Under Threat Frame.....                                      | 26        |
| 4.2 Accountability as Democratic Legitimacy Frame .....                      | 28        |
| 4.3 Republican Hypocrisy Around Cancel Culture and Related Issues .....      | 31        |
| 4.4 Cancel Culture is Losing Power and Usage.....                            | 33        |
| 4.5 Framing the Enemy Through Symbolic Language.....                         | 34        |
| <b>5. Conclusion and Discussion.....</b>                                     | <b>37</b> |
| 5.1 Summary and Interpretation of Findings.....                              | 37        |
| 5.2 Answer to the Research Question .....                                    | 38        |
| 5.3 Academic and Societal Relevance.....                                     | 39        |
| 5.4 Limitations and Future Research .....                                    | 40        |
| <b>Reference list .....</b>  | <b>42</b> |

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Topic of research

On November 6, 2024, Donald Trump declared in front of a large crowd of supporters being the victor of the 2024 American presidential election (Lutz, 2024, para. 4). It marked the conclusion of one of the most dramatic and polarizing election cycles in recent American history. This is because it was shaped by unprecedented events such as an assassination attempt on Trump and a change of the Democratic nominee in the middle of the election due to concerns over President Joe Bidens age (Lutz, 2024, para. 4). As a consequence, Vice President Kamala Harris had to step in his place as the Democratic nominee (Lutz, 2024, para. 4). It also represented Trump's second non-consecutive term after his initial victory in 2016 and his third attempt at the presidency.

Amidst this turbulent political backdrop, the role of culture wars and identity-based narratives became even more important. These dynamics were already highly visible during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, with cancel culture serving as a prime example (Fahey et al., 2023, p. 69). During that time, it was used as a powerful political tool and identity marker by people such as Donald Trump and his allies. For instance, the 2021 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) adopted the theme "America Uncanceled" (Fahey et al., 2023, p. 69). It featured speeches, such as those from Senator Ted Cruz, denouncing cancel culture as a threat to American culture (Fahey et al., 2023, p. 69). However, it was also used as a tool of action by the Republicans, whether intentionally or not (Jacobo, 2021, para 4; Mueller, 2021, p. 3). The most visible example of this is the actions of Donald Trump after losing the 2020 election. He used his X account to basically "cancel" the results of the presidential election when it did not go his way. His actions provoked some of his followers to storm the Capitol in Washington, D.C, in 2021, causing the death of 5 people (Jacobo, 2021, para 4; Mueller, 2021, p. 3). This shows how cancel culture has moved beyond cultural criticism to become a big part of broader partisan divides and political strategies (Clark, 2020, p. 90; Fahey et al., 2023, p. 70).

When broadly defined, cancel culture is the social practice of publicly calling out and often boycotting individuals for wrongdoings ranging from offensive comments to criminal behaviour. Moreover, some defend it as a form of social accountability and justice, whilst others see it as an attack on free speech and democratic values (Clark, 2020, p. 90; Fahey et al., 2023, p. 70). Therefore, it reflects societal tensions around values and political discourse (Fahey et al., 2023, p. 71).

Given the prominence of cancel culture in the 2020 election, this research aims to analyse how the concept evolved in the political discourse of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Specifically, it investigates how major political factions framed cancel culture and related issues on X in 2024.

## **1.2 Societal Relevance**

As cancel culture evolved from a cultural flashpoint to an important political narrative during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, political actors from all sides used it to influence voters and shape public discourse (Picarella, 2024, p. 2). Therefore, analysing how cancel culture was talked about and presented in the 2024 election gives important insight into the evolution of political messaging. It also shows how controversial cultural issues are repackaged to help achieve strategic goals.

Furthermore, cancel culture is closely connected to digital media as it plays a significant role in ongoing debates such as platform responsibility and content moderation (Picarella, 2024, p. 3). This is because social media platforms like X, Instagram, and Facebook now control which content gains visibility and which viewpoints are suppressed (Picarella, 2024, p. 3). Moreover, it has made the relationship between political actors and digital platforms much more important in shaping public narratives. An example of this interconnection was the presence of major tech leaders at President Trump's 2025 inauguration (Helmore, 2025, para. 2). Additionally, political parties have deliberately used cancel culture narratives to influence tech platforms' content moderation policies. For instance, right-wing leaders have often framed the de-platforming of conservative figures as ideological censorship and an assault on free speech (Farris et al., 2025, p. 9). However, progressive actors have advocated for more moderation policies and framed them as an important tool to ensure a safe digital environment (Farris et al., 2025, p. 9).

Equally important is the way these political framings overlap with cultural identity and group belonging. This is because cancel culture narratives are often part of identity politics and align with broader societal discourses surrounding these topics (Nilsson & Lopes, 2024, p. 11). For example, the #MeToo movement, which was a big focal point of cancel culture, was framed by some conservatives as something that unfairly targeted men and undermined due process (Adrian, 2021, p. 40). This then deepened divides between those who saw it as essential for social justice and those who viewed it as a threat to societal norms. Moreover, these identity-driven narratives shape how individuals see themselves in relation to society and one another. It also fosters solidarity within political tribes while deepening societal divisions (Nilsson & Lopes, 2024, p. 11).

Thus, cancel culture is a critical battleground for political and cultural conversations. This study will help to understand the evolving language of political persuasion, the role of social media in shaping discourse, and the broader societal tensions that continue to define democratic life in the digital age.

## **1.3 Academic Relevance**

A growing number of scholars have researched the concept of cancel culture as a complicated socio-cultural phenomenon that influences power dynamics and cultural norms. Firstly, Clark (2020) defines cancel culture as a source of societal polarization, as well as a tool for holding people accountable (p. 89). Expanding on this, Tandoc et al. (2022) identified several factors that influence

people's willingness to take part in cancel culture (p. 1958). These include positive attitudes toward it and a sense of social approval. Their study also found that people who believe in a just world are less likely to participate, while beliefs about fairness had little influence. Notably, many participants viewed cancel culture as a way for marginalized individuals to express their concerns (Tandoc et al., 2022, p. 1958). This suggests that its motivations are based on perceptions of justice and visibility and go beyond the digital world alone. Moreover, there has been little to no academic attention devoted to its role in the 2024 election, despite cancel culture's continued relevance in political and cultural discourse.

At the same time, scholarship has addressed how digital platforms shape political participation. However, this research often focuses on engagement metrics over the actual content used by political actors. An example of this is the research conducted by Gerodimos and Justinussen (2014) on the Obama 2012 campaign (p. 127). They found that the Obama campaign mainly used Facebook as a top-down promotional tool, which guided followers to act through curated messaging (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2014, p.127).

These findings illustrate the significance of examining how various political groups employ cancel culture, whether explicitly or implicitly, thereby offering a deeper understanding of ideological divisions and the manipulation of public opinion during election periods. Thus, this thesis investigates how cancel culture and related issues were presented on the platform X during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. In doing so, it contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of political science and communication, media studies, and sociology. As such, the main research question that will be answered is:

“How did major political parties present cancel culture and related issues during the 2024 U.S. presidential election on X?”

#### **1.4 Aim and Research Questions of the Study**

This qualitative research aims to explore how different political parties and candidates used cancel culture narratives to support or discredit opponents. Furthermore, this paper draws on the theoretical premise that social media is a powerful agent in the socialization process, shaping how individuals understand identity and power (Genner & Süss, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, social media influences personal beliefs and worldviews as well as reflects the varied opinions and perspectives of its users. In particular, platforms like X have become key arenas for political struggles, where rhetorical strategies are quickly adapted and shared (Pond & Lewis, 2019, p. 216).

In addition to the central research question, the study answers three sub-questions that will help to better understand the relationship between cancel culture and political messaging:

1. *What dominant frames did Democratic and Republican-affiliated political actors use when referencing cancel culture or related issues on X during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?*

This question will help answer how the two main political parties framed cancel culture to align with their goals and influence support.

2. *How did references to cancel culture intersect with broader cultural and political themes in political discourse on X during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?*

This question will examine how cancel culture was integrated within larger narratives.

3. *To what extent did Independent or non-affiliated political individuals on X challenge, reinforce, or reframe dominant partisan narratives around cancel culture during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?*

This question investigates how political actors outside of the dominant political parties disrupted the mainstream framing of cancel culture.

## **1.5 Chapter Outline**

This thesis is made up of 6 chapters. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework on which the analysis will be based. It begins by introducing the field of political communication, followed by a discussion of relevant theories such as cancel culture, framing theory, digital activism, and the media's construction of reality. These provide the conceptual foundation for analysing how political actors construct meaning and shape public perception through strategic rhetoric. Then, Chapter 3 explains the reasoning for using qualitative framing analysis by highlighting its effectiveness in examining how political narratives are constructed and contested. It also details the methodological approach, which is inductive thematic coding and inductive framing analysis, as well as the data collection process, which is purposive sampling. Chapter 4 presents the results of the framing analysis, which will illustrate how different political factions framed cancel culture to advance their broader agendas. Finally, Chapter 5 critically discusses the political implications of these frames within the context of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, and concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings, explaining the study's limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Political Communication in Democratic Societies

Many scholars have explored how political actors create narratives to influence public opinion, a field known as political communication (Stieglitz et al., 2013, p. 1278). The concept of political communication can be defined as the study of how information is used to influence political processes and public opinion (Graber, 1993, p. 305; Stieglitz et al., 2013, p. 1278). It includes the strategic interactions between political actors, the media, and the public, and analyses how narratives are created and shared in the different sociopolitical contexts. Moreover, the field investigates formal and informal channels of communication, ranging from campaign speeches to social media posts and grassroots activism (Graber, 1993, p. 305).

Although political communication is one of the biggest issues in political life, it is a relatively young subdiscipline within the field of political science (Graber, 1993, p. 305). However, it has grown quite rapidly in recent years to cover diverse areas such as election campaigning, media effects, political persuasion, framing, and public opinion formation (Pfetsch & Esser, 2012, p. 26).

A foundational figure in the field is Harold Lasswell, who proposed in 1948 a widely used model for studying communication: *"Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?"* (Graber, 1993, p. 306). However, Lasswell's model has been criticised for overlooking ideological conflicts, the context in which meaning is produced, and the fact that a message can be received differently by different parts of a community (Graham, 2007, p. 230).

Another major contribution comes from Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh (1999), who developed a historical framework for understanding the evolution of political communication in democratic societies since World War II. They divide this transformation into three distinct phases. The first one is the era of party-dominated communication, the second one is the age of television, and the final one is the age of media abundance (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 211). Each age is shaped by different technologies and audience behaviours. They also all contain internal paradoxes that challenge democratic ideals (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 211; Graber, 1993, p.306).

The first age, which covers more or less the two decades following the war, is often referred to as the "golden age of parties." During this period, political institutions held the most important position in the communication process, and political parties were closely tied to social divisions such as class or religion. Citizens generally had long-lasting party loyalties, and political messages were often issue-based. Moreover, leaders focused on issues and long-term reforms rather than campaign gimmicks (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212).

Thus, political communication during this time was transmitted through a relatively homogenous media system that reinforced party affiliations (Magin et al., 2016, p. 1698). However, this period had a huge contradiction, as although messages were policy-driven, most voters did not critically evaluate them. Instead, they voted largely out of loyalty to their social group, and only a

small group of floating voters were open to persuasion. Even so, these individuals were less politically engaged and harder to reach (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212).

The second age began in the 1960s due to the rise of television as the dominant political medium. Television's wide reach and neutrality dramatically changed political communication (Magin et al., 2016, p. 1699). This is because it weakened the power of partisan exposure by reducing the influence of party newspapers and affiliated organizations, making it more difficult for citizens to consume only content aligned with their political views (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212). At the same time, the nonpartisan nature of television news made more people undecided and subsequently encouraged a more individualistic form of political loyalty.

Television also expanded the audience for political messages, reaching citizens who were previously disengaged from the political process. As a result, long-term influences such as early political socialization gave way to short-term factors like breaking news and personality politics (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212). To meet the demands of this new medium and its broad audience, political parties professionalized their communication strategies. Media consultants and opinion polling became a central part of the campaigning process. Furthermore, politicians began to tailor their language and image to fit with television formats, prioritizing personal appeal and strategic news management over dialogue. However, this era came with another paradox: as citizens became more open to different political ideas, they were being offered increasingly emotionally driven and media-filtered content (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212).

The third age was characterized by media abundance and fragmentation, as the expansion of communication platforms, such as online media and social networks, dramatically altered how political information is circulated and consumed (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 244). In this age, political communication has become a continuous process rather than something that happens only during election campaigns. Politicians also faced constant pressure to answer directly to events and manage an increasingly complicated media environment (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 213).

Moreover, professionalization intensified even more. Therefore, political strategists now occupy central roles within parties and even in government, influencing campaigns and policymaking (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 244). Additionally, campaigns were planned to the last detail and leaders were encouraged to preventively shape media narratives through "spin" and message discipline (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 215).

Finally, the age of media abundance was also defined by heightened competition. This is because political messages now competed with each other as well as with entertainment and other forms of content (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 215). This environment created "infotainment," a mix of news with entertainment values, and pressured media organizations to prioritize sensationalism over informed policy discussions. Consequently, traditional norms of political journalism were challenged and trust in both media and politicians declined (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 215).

In recent years, Blumler (2016) has added the Fourth Age. In this era that we currently live in, communication abundance has intensified even more, creating a huge competition between political content and entertainment. This abundance can undermine serious political issues but also empowers watchdog journalism and activism, with the internet acting as a “Fifth Estate” (Blumler, 2016, p. 21). Furthermore, politicians now operate on two sides, which are crafting messages for both traditional media and online platforms and adjusting their tone and style accordingly. A significant development is the rise of grassroots political communication alongside institutional forms (Blumler, 2016, p. 21). This refers to the process by which everyday citizens and community-based groups utilize communication to advocate for and mobilize political or social change from the bottom up, rather than through elite or institutional channels (Magin et al., 2016, p. 1700). Moreover, non-party actors such as NGOs and campaigners increasingly influence public debate, as they have more credibility and flexibility than political elites. The internet helps this by enabling cost-effective outreach and mobilisation (Blumler, 2016, p. 21).

Additionally, the audience, which was once passive, is now active and engages more than ever in political discourse through digital networks. Thus, scholars must now adopt a flexible, multifaceted approach to political communication (Blumler, 2016, p. 26). This research will be based on the Fourth Age, as it provides the most accurate and relevant framework for understanding how political communication functions in today's highly digital and participatory media environment.

## **2.2 Digital Activism as a Participatory Form of Political Communication**

Throughout history, activism has been one of the most powerful ways of challenging injustices (Yilmaz, 2017, p. 14). The term “activism” can be defined as the actions aimed at promoting and influencing social and political change (Cammaerts, 2013, p. 217). Activism was traditionally exerted through protests and civil disobedience. These are methods that are based on public visibility and collective action to challenge systems of power. At its core, activism is about making one's voice heard and gaining support to influence public policy (Cammaerts, 2013, p. 217). In the United States, a legacy of activism has shaped major social and political movements, particularly in the fight against racial inequality and gender discrimination (Schwedler & Harris, 2016, p. 281).

With the rise of the internet came the rise of digital activism. It can be defined as the use of digital technologies to promote or oppose social and political causes (Kaun & Uldam, 2017, p. 2099; Ng, 2022, p. 41). This form of activism lets people and organizations raise awareness online (Ng, 2022, p. 41). Nonetheless, digital activism has undergone significant changes since the early days of the internet. During the era known as “Web 1.0” in the 1990s, digital activism was primarily in the form of websites and email lists (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 22). Furthermore, these platforms gave activists the opportunity to share information and build communities at a lower cost and across geographical boundaries. It also made coordination much easier than through traditional media. However, some people criticized it at the time by arguing that digital tools were most effective when

combined with traditional offline activism, such as physical protests and legal actions (Ng, 2022, p. 42).

Some early examples of hybrid activism that combine online and offline elements are the Zapatista movement in Mexico and the 1999 protests of the World Trade Organization in Seattle (Kaun & Uldam, 2017, p. 20101; Ng, 2022, p. 42). In both cases, digital tools played an important role in organizing and spreading information, while the actual protest relied heavily on physical presence in public areas (Kaun & Uldam, 2017, p. 20101; Ng, 2022, p. 42).

The rise of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook in the early 2000s marked a big turning point. Facebook was created in 2004 as a college social networking site that focused on photo sharing and social interactions, while Twitter was developed in 2006 and was supposed to be used as an internal communication tool for a podcasting company (Ng, 2022, p. 42). Nevertheless, by the early 2010s, these platforms became central to political activism, especially during major events such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. These movements showed how social media could be a useful tool to rapidly spread information that mobilizes broader public participation, even if offline activism was also a big part of it all (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 480; Kaun & Uldam, 2017, p. 2100).

However, a newer wave of activism has emerged in which the activism itself is primarily digital. This so-called “hashtag activism” is characterized by social movements that are largely played out online, although they can lead to real-world consequences (Ng, 2022, p. 42).

Nevertheless, Hashtag activism has faced backlash as some people argue that it is less meaningful than traditional activism. An example of this is the critic Malcolm Gladwell, who labelled it “slacktivism,” as he expressed that clicking “like” or sharing a post lacks the risk associated with protesting, like for example during the civil rights-era protests (Kaun & Uldam, 2017, p. 2103; Ng, 2022, p. 42). However, this opinion does not take into context where digital activism carries real risks, such as in authoritarian states where online opposition can lead to arrest, as seen in China or during the Arab Spring. Moreover, academics have highlighted the power of digital activism for marginalized communities (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 22; Ng, 2022, p.43). Examples of this are movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, which have shifted public discourse. More specifically, these movements brought the issues of race, gender, and power to the forefront of mainstream debate. They were so successful that their influence extended to the highest levels of political agendas (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 22; Ng, 2022, p. 43).

Another concern is the nature of political expression on platforms like Twitter, where speed and emotional intensity dominate. This environment is often full of polarized, extreme content, which is more likely to go viral and keeps users engaged for longer (Ng, 2022, p.43). Nevertheless, this type of engagement can also reflect a deep emotional investment and collective identity formation, which are crucial elements of social movements (Ng, 2022, p. 43). Ultimately, the evolution of digital activism from early Web 1.0 organizing to hashtag movements demonstrates that activism must be understood in context.

This means that digital activism should be viewed as an important extension of political communication. It reshapes *who* communicates, *how* messages are crafted and shared, and *how* political influence is exerted (Ng, 2022, p. 43). Thus, digital activism is a form of political communication that enables citizens and grassroots movements to engage in real-time dialogue and challenge dominant narratives. Additionally, it encourages participatory democracy and challenges the elite's dominance of the public sphere (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 22). Finally, in the context of the Fourth Age of political communication, digital activism shows how communication has become more and more decentralized and hybrid, blurring the lines between institutional authority and grassroots agency (Blumler, 2016, p. 26).

## **2.3. Cancel Culture as a Rhetorical Tool in the Age of Digital Activism**

### *2.3.1 History of cancel culture*

The origins and interpretations of cancel culture are complicated and go far beyond the simplified depictions often found in mainstream media. Even though in this day and age, the concept is associated with digital backlash or ideological censorship, the practice of cancelling individuals or institutions for perceived transgressions has been around for years (Lendvai, 2025, p.1).

The expression “*cancel culture*” originally emerged from a misogynistic joke but gained broader attention between 2014 and 2016 on “Black Twitter”, which is an informal digital community where Black users exchange cultural critiques and build solidarity through shared dialogue (Lendvai, 2025, p.1). According to Meredith D. Clark (2020), “cancelling” in these spaces was never about censorship (p. 90). Instead, it was an extension of the traditional practices of resistance and activism among marginalized groups that did not have direct access to normal channels of justice (Clark, 2020, p. 90; Pearson, 2021, p. 13). Furthermore, the act of cancelling involved publicly withdrawing support from individuals or entities who engaged in harmful behaviour, and thus, enforced social norms through collective action. It also functioned as a way of drawing attention to issues that might otherwise be overlooked, which sometimes prompts broader consequences, including institutional or legal responses (Clark, 2020, p. 90; Pearson, 2021, p.13).

Historically, cancelling reflects earlier forms of protest and boycott. Public withdrawal of support has long functioned as a political tool of resistance, with examples being anti-colonial boycotts in early 20th-century China and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the 1950s U.S. civil rights movement (Lendvai, 2025, p.1). In this context, cancel culture can be understood as a contemporary evolution of these tactics that is shaped by the logic and reach of digital media platforms (Lendvai, 2025, p.1).

However, as cancelling practices gained prominence, their meanings and connotations began to change. This is because media coverage and political discourse increasingly reframe cancel culture

in negative terms, such as it being a threat to open dialogue and democratic values (Pearson, 2021, p. 14). Furthermore, conservative political actors and elite media figures have reframed the term to criticize progressive social movements (Pearson, 2021, p. 14). More specifically, they portrayed cancel culture as mob behaviour as well as ideological suppression (Pearson, 2021, p.14). This rhetorical shift became especially pronounced under figures like Donald Trump, transforming cancel culture into a political talking point and a symbolic battle in the broader culture wars (Clarke, 2020, p. 90; Shapiro et al., 2021, para. 3).

In this day and age, cancel culture functions as a broad and contested term. At its core, the debate surrounding cancel culture revolves around questions such as “What is allowed to be said? What is the line between free speech and hate speech? What forms of accountability are considered acceptable in public life?”.

### *2.3.2 Cancel culture as a rhetorical tool*

Given the polarizing and evolving nature of the term, this study employs a broadened analytical lens, viewing cancel culture as an umbrella term that encompasses a range of overlapping themes rather than a standalone phenomenon (Keohane, 2024, p. 2). More specifically, the research considers thematically related rhetoric around the concept, rather than limiting the analysis to tweets that explicitly mention “cancel culture”.

An example of concepts analysed is accountability. It refers to the expectations that organizations and individuals have to explain their actions to an audience that has the authority to evaluate and sanction them (Khan, 2024, p. 2). Moreover, it is a concept with multiple dimensions that changes depending on the social or cultural context. At an individual level, accountability refers to the obligation to answer for one’s behaviour (Khan, 2024, p. 2). For organizations, accountability means providing answers to various stakeholders, including legal bodies and consumers, regarding their conduct (Khan, 2024, p. 2). Finally, accountability is also about a political and relational process embedded in power dynamics. It plays a huge role in shaping trust and performance in institutional behaviour (Khan, 2024, p. 2).

In the context of cancel culture, accountability has become a central part of the debate. This is because a lot of people view cancel culture as the tool to hold people accountable in this day and age (Brownlee, 2021, para. 5). The way they do this is by calling out individuals or organizations believed to have committed moral transgressions (Rom & Mitchell, 2021, p. 612). These “callouts” are often seen as a way to challenge injustice and demand transparency. In this sense, cancel culture can serve to democratize accountability, letting normal citizens hold powerful figures accountable, especially in cases where traditional institutions have failed to do so (Clark, 2020, p. 90; Rom & Mitchell, 2021, p. 612). Moreover, many believe that public call-outs force individuals to confront their actions and expose harmful ideologies such as racism or misinformation, according to a study done by Vogels et al. (2021) for the Pew Research Center. One respondent from the research

conducted described it as a way to “[make] people face what they say online head-on by explaining themselves” (Man, 30s, Conservative Republican). For this group, speaking up is a moral imperative: silence in the face of discrimination implies complicity. As one man put it, “If you do not say something, then you are giving your tacit approval. It is important to stand against offensive behaviour in all interactions not just on social media” (Man, 60s, Moderate Democrat). Therefore, accountability is seen as a strategic and very visible concept that is done through cancel culture. Furthermore, cancel culture operates as both a rhetorical frame and a digital performance, used by political actors to align with or challenge public sentiment, and to construct legitimacy in an era where platforms rather than institutions increasingly control influence (Vogels et al., 2021, para. 5-8).

Another illustration of themes that are important to analyse when researching cancel culture is free speech and censorship. These two concepts are important ideas that are very closely connected. The famous philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1968) explained them through two kinds of freedom, which are negative and positive liberty.

Firstly, free speech is connected to negative liberty and can be defined as the freedom to express oneself without being stopped by others (Lang, 1993, p. 119). Furthermore, it is the right to share one’s thoughts and opinions openly through every medium possible (Lang, 1993, p. 119). This type of freedom is one of the most important aspects of democracy, as it enables people to participate in public debate and challenge those in power, even if their views are unpopular (Lang, 1993, p. 119).

Secondly, the concept of censorship is connected to positive liberty and refers to the freedom to take part in shaping the rules and values of society. More specifically, it limits speech when it is seen as harmful or offensive (Lang, 1993, p. 120). Most of the time, it is used to protect public morals, such as when violent or sexual content is removed. Other times, censorship is used to stop speech that spreads hate or reinforces inequality, such as racist messages (Lang, 1993, p. 120). Censorship can also happen through self-censorship, when people choose to stay silent because they fear backlash or punishment (Lang, 1993, p. 120). Thus, both concepts are integral to how society handles expression, as free speech supports individual rights, while censorship focuses on protecting others and maintaining fairness.

A big part of the discussion around cancel culture is the tension between free speech and censorship, as many critics argue that cancel culture acts as a kind of censorship and goes against free speech (Farris et al., 2025, p. 9). Additionally, it might pressure people into silence out of fear of being publicly shamed or boycotted, which is a form of self-censorship. From this perspective, cancel culture can be understood as a modern example of how positive liberty is used to shape collective values as it rejects speech that is seen as offensive (Farris et al., 2025, p. 9). At the same time, it raises concerns about the loss of negative liberty, where individuals may no longer feel free to express differing views.

Therefore, in this light, the concept of cancel culture is a rhetorical battleground in which important issues intersect, rather than representing a single unified practice (Keohane, 2024, p. 2).

Moreover, its meaning is context-dependent, often shaped by the speaker's political orientation and communicative intent (Keohane, 2024, p. 2). As such, cancel culture operates both as a cultural practice and a political instrument. It is strategically employed in public discourse to express one's values and influence opinions of authority in the digital age (Keohane, 2024, p. 2).

This structure of cancel culture discourse also fits within Blumler's (2016) framework of the Fourth Age of Political Communication, where traditional, top-down elite messaging coexists with grassroots digital activism (p. 26). As mentioned in the previous chapter, this era is characterized by media abundance as well as a very active audience. These conditions are perfect for practices like cancelling to grow. Finally, as examined in this study, cancel culture serves as a strategic rhetorical tool and a cultural phenomenon. As such, it is this dual function, both cultural and political, that makes cancel culture the crucial concept of this research.

## **2.4 Media's Construction of Social Reality**

Discussions about whether the media properly represent reality must start with a fundamental philosophical debate: does reality exist independently of human perception? This is the question that lies at the center of realism and constructivism in epistemology and social theory (Yan, 2019, p. 41).

Firstly, realism explains that the world exists objectively and independently of human perceptions. According to this view, knowledge is based on mirroring a pre-existing reality. Moreover, realists argue that the meanings we attribute to things are discovered rather than created (Yan, 2019, p. 41). However, this perspective has been criticized for overlooking the interpretive and culturally embedded process that shapes how individuals actually understand the world around themselves (Sandywell, 2008, p. 96).

Thus, constructivism offers a different approach. It argues that meaning is constructed by individuals through languages and social interaction instead of residing in the material world itself (Dreher, 2016, p. 54; Yan, 2019, p. 41). Thus, meaning is not discovered. Instead, it is produced. Additionally, people make sense of their environment based on shared cultural codes and experiences (Yan, 2019, p. 41).

This perspective is known as the "social construction of reality," which was introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1966). Their work in the sociology of knowledge argued that reality is not simply "out there" waiting to be perceived (Dreher, 2016, p. 54). Instead, it is constructed through the ongoing social processes that develop through communication and shared understanding (Yan, 2019, p. 42). As such, social constructivism sees knowledge and meaning as historically and culturally situated. What appears "natural" or "given" is actually the outcome of social interactions (Dreher, 2016, p. 54; Yan, 2019, p. 42). In media studies, this framework is very important. It helps explain how the media construct reality by framing certain narratives and encoding specific values instead of just reporting on the world (Yan, 2019, p. 42).

This concept was developed further in media and communication studies by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Norman Fairclough, who both explain how the media contribute hugely to the construction of social reality. Their work was influenced by the theories of Michel Foucault, who argued that discourse serves as a tool for communication as well as an important mechanism through which power is exerted (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 4). According to Foucault, discourse defines what can be said and thought within society and establishes what is seen as true versus not (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 4). Thus, power and knowledge are inseparable, and those who control discourse hold the power to shape society's perception of reality. This theory has gotten a new relevance in the digital era with the emergence of algorithmic framing. These algorithmic systems determine which content is visible and amplified across platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 3). Moreover, they select what users see based on encoded values as well as engagement metrics. As a result, certain voices are more visible than others (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 3). This invisibility highlights underlying social hierarchies and commercial interests (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 3). Therefore, algorithmic framing acts as a modern form of discursive power, as it organizes social meaning and influences what becomes accepted in public discourse (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 3).

Building on Foucault, Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Model, which he first published in 1980, showed how media messages are produced within a framework of dominant ideologies (Hall, 2019, p. 48). According to Hall (2019), media producers construct messages by encoding them with specific meanings that are shaped by cultural norms and power structures (p. 49). However, audiences may decode the messages in different ways by accepting or opposing them depending on their social positions. Moreover, Hall (2019) explained that the media shapes what counts as reality by prioritizing certain interpretations and ideologies, thus reinforcing existing power relations (p. 48).

At the same time, Norman Fairclough developed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (1989) to examine how media language influences power relations. He argued that discourse is a product of social structures as well as a force that shapes them (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9). Moreover, media texts construct subjects and relationships through linguistics that are deeply ideological, even though some may seem neutral according to Fairclough. Finally, he highlighted how discourse contributes to dominant groups maintaining control by making their worldview common sense (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9).

In the context of this study, the social construction of reality offers an important lens for understanding cancel culture as a contested concept shaped by political communication (Norris, 2021, p.4). The concept of cancel culture does not have a fixed or universally agreed-upon definition. Instead, it is constructed and framed by political actors and media outlets in ways that reflect their ideological objectives (Keohane, 2024, p. 2). Through framing strategies such as presenting cancel culture as a threat to free speech, political actors actively shape how the public understands this phenomenon. Moreover, these frames contribute to the broader process of constructing reality in the

digital public sphere. Thus, cancel culture is a cultural trend as well as a discursively constructed field of political struggle where meanings are negotiated and values are contested.

## 2.5 Framing Theory in Media and Politics

This study examines how frames on X shape public discourse and influence political agendas. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Entman's framing theory, which focuses on how media organizations and political actors construct meaning and mobilize support. Building on this framework, the analysis explores how political actors strategically frame issues in digital discourse to influence interpretation and guide public opinion.

According to Robert Entman's (1993) definition of framing, it is essentially about selection and salience. Specifically, it involves emphasizing certain aspects of reality in an article to support a specific causal interpretation or treatment recommendation for the topic being discussed (p. 52). Thorbjørnsrud (2015) expanded on this and explained that the way media frames topics can significantly shape public opinion and alter the political discourse surrounding issues like cancel culture (p.773).

Moreover, a key distinction in framing studies is between issue-specific and generic news frames (Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018, p. 12). Generic frames are considered more universal and tied to journalistic routines, often transcending specific topics (Erbel, 2018, p. 208). In contrast, issue-specific frames, such as those related to welfare, are closely linked to particular subjects and help define their social or political context (Erbel, 2018, p. 208). In this research, issue-specific frames will be analysed.

In terms of politics, Entman's framing theory explains how political actors strategically use language and media to shape public perception and influence political outcomes. Specifically, politicians craft specific narratives that guide public interpretation by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others (Erbel, 2018, p. 208). Moreover, this type of presentation influences how people think of political issues, often evoking emotional responses such as fear or hope (Entman, 1993, p.52). Therefore, the theory helps explain how politicians manipulate public opinion by simplifying complex issues into emotionally resonant themes and making them more digestible to voters (Iyengar, 1996, p. 63).

In their study "*The Political Psychology of Cancel Culture: Value Framing or Group Identity?*", Diether et al. (2024) investigate the public's attitudes toward cancel culture. There, they distinguish between two key categories of rhetorical framing (p. 1140). The first one is value-based frames, which rely on shared democratic principles to shape opinion (Collins, 2008, p. 132). The second one is identity-based frames, which work through partisan cues that provoke in-group loyalty and out-group hostility (McCabe, 2023, p. 1139). This distinction is very important in polarized political environments where attitudes toward cultural controversies are more and more driven by affiliation instead of ideological reasoning.

In the first framing category, they explore two value-based frames. The first is the free speech frame, which presents cancel culture as a direct threat to open discourse and civil liberties. In this way of presenting it, cancel culture is associated with censorship and authoritarian social control. In contrast, the accountability frame interprets cancel culture as a form of grassroots justice. Moreover, this frame appeals to those with a justice-oriented political perspective, particularly those invested in social equity (Diether et al., 2024, p. 1140).

In addition to these value-based narratives, the authors introduce two identity-based frames that rely on group affiliation and partisan identity rather than democratic ideals (Diether et al., 2024, p. 1141). The in-group victim frame depicts the target of cancel culture as a member of the audience's own political or cultural group, such as a conservative public figure being "silenced" by progressive critics. This frame triggers emotional defensiveness and solidarity, thus motivating individuals to reject cancel culture as an unfair attack on their community. At the same time, the out-group perpetrator frame projects cancelling behaviour to political or cultural opponents, such as "woke activists" or liberal elites. This framing positions cancel culture as an aggressive strategy used by ideological enemies, which heightens opposition and reinforces group boundaries.

Importantly, the authors find that identity-based frames are more influential than value-based ones in shaping people's views on cancel culture. This is because, while both frame types affect opinion, group identity cues provoke stronger reactions than appeals to universal values such as free speech or justice (Diether et al., 2024, p. 1141). As such, these findings reflect broader trends in political psychology that show how partisan identity often trumps ideological consistency, especially on culturally charged issues (Diether et al., 2024, p. 1141).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings highlight the strategic importance of framing in political communication. Political actors can gain support and discredit opponents by carefully selecting whether to present cancel culture as a question of moral justice or partisan persecution. Moreover, framing is descriptive and performative. It constructs political realities and assigns moral weight to actors and actions.

As such, this typology of value-based and identity-based frames provides a strong foundation for analysing political messaging. In the context of this study, these frames will be used as a reference to examine how U.S. political factions in the 2024 presidential election employed cancel culture-related discourse on X to shape public perception and strategically position themselves within broader culture war dynamics.

### **3. Research Design and Methods**

This methodological chapter provides an analysis of the research design and analytical procedures used in this study. It starts by introducing the qualitative research approach as well as outlining the logic behind combining inductive thematic coding with inductive framing analysis to examine how cancel culture and related issues were framed by political factions during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Then, the chapter explains the data collection process, which involved purposive sampling of 500 tweets published on X by political actors affiliated with Democratic, Republican, and Independent camps. Tweets were selected based on their relevance to the research topic and their date of publication. Following this, the chapter details the analytical framework guiding the study, including the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns (p. 594) and framing theory to interpret how these patterns were strategically constructed. Finally, it explains the coding procedures and tools used, including manual coding with Atlas.ti and the development of a structured codebook.

#### **3.1 Choice of Method and Epistemological Approach**

This study used a qualitative research approach as it provides an in-depth analysis of real-world issues by focusing on underlying meanings and motivations (Brennen, 2021, p. 7). Moreover, qualitative research seeks to answer "how" and "why" questions, which makes it well-suited for analysing how major political factions framed cancel culture and issues related to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Furthermore, this approach provides a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that influence political discourse (Brennen, 2021, p. 7). Thus, qualitative analysis reveals the framing techniques that shaped public perception by examining the narratives employed by different political parties.

Additionally, this methodology was grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which sees knowledge and meaning as socially produced, as mentioned in the theoretical framework. Therefore, cancel culture is treated as a discursive construct shaped by language and ideology (Yan, 2019, p. 42). By focusing on how meaning is created rather than being assumed, this approach offers a deeper understanding of the cultural and strategic functions of political communication in the digital age (Yan, 2019, p. 42).

#### **3.2 Data Collection and Sampling Method**

##### *3.2.1 Content analysis*

This study employs content analysis as its primary data collection method. The method originally came from the field of mass communication research during the 1950s (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21). It is defined by Krippendorff (1980) as a method to analyse content that enables one to draw reliable conclusions based on its context (p. 21). At heart, content analysis seeks to identify and

interpret the underlying meaning in diverse forms of communication such as texts and language-based media (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21).

Additionally, a textual content analysis approach was used to examine and interpret political discourse related to cancel culture on the social media platform X. This process involves breaking down the data into smaller units and organizing them within an analytical framework developed during the coding process (Carley, 1993, p. 82). Only the textual elements of the tweets were analysed, and non-textual components such as images or emojis were excluded to keep a consistent way of analysing.

Furthermore, content analysis was chosen because it can examine a large amount of textual data in an objective manner (Prasad, 2008, p. 3). Finally, the method's flexibility in coding enhances the validity and reliability of the findings (Prasad, 2008, p. 3).

The social platform X was chosen as the site of analysis in this study due to its important role in shaping political discourse and amplifying partisan messaging (Castanho et al., 2020, p. 778). As Garbaudo (2024, para. 4) explains, X has become a powerful platform for real-time political communication, with political elites using it to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and directly reach their audiences. This dynamic is particularly relevant in the U.S. political context, where X serves as a space for agenda-setting and public positioning (Devlin et al., 2020, para. 13). Furthermore, Castanho Silva et al. (2020, p. 778) highlighted that X offers a "hybrid arena" where institutionalized and populist communication styles intersect, enabling politicians to mix formal discourse with emotional or strategic messaging. Given cancel culture's contested nature, X serves as a perfect ground for observing how political actors frame such issues to construct meaning and mobilize supporters.

### *3.2.2 Sampling*

The dataset for this study is made up of 500 tweets collected from the social media platform X. These tweets were shared by political actors and commentators affiliated with the Democratic, Republican, and Independent political factions in the United States. All in all, 75 political actors were analysed, ranging from elected officials and party candidates to political commentators and other influential figures who played an important role representing the different parties. Examples of these are obvious choices such as Kamala Harris, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, J.D. Vance, Bernie Sanders, as well as less obvious people like Charlie Kirk, Cory Booker, and Nina Turner.

The sample was divided into three groups, with 200 tweets by Republican-affiliated figures, 200 tweets by Democratic-affiliated figures, and 100 tweets by Independent or non-affiliated political voices. This distribution gave way to a balanced comparison between the political parties. However, the number of tweets per person differed, as not everyone analysed was equally active and vocal on X. Also, only tweets coming directly from a person's account were used, thus excluding any reposts or comments under a tweet.

The tweets were collected over the twelve-month period from December 2023 to November 2024. This choice was made to make sure that coverage of the most important stages in the presidential election cycle, such as campaign launches, primaries, televised debates, and major controversies, was included. Moreover, this specific timeframe was selected to capture real-time responses and evolving narratives around the topic of cancel culture.

Finally, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify and select the tweets that were directly relevant to the research objective. Purposive sampling can be defined as a non-probability sampling technique in which data is selected based on its relevance to the research questions (Rai & Thapa, 2015, p. 10). Therefore, this method lets researchers focus on cases that offer in-depth insights into specific issues (Rai & Thapa, 2015, p. 10). Furthermore, Tweets were identified through manual searches on the X platform using targeted words such as "cancel," "cancel culture," "cancelled," "called out," "call out," "accountability," "free speech," "censorship," "censored," "woke," and related terms. These keywords were chosen based on their strong association with cancel culture debates.

**Table 1.** *Sampling overview*

| <b>Political Affiliation</b> | <b>Number of Tweets</b> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Democratic-affiliated</i> | 200                     |
| <i>Republican-affiliated</i> | 200                     |
| <i>Independent/Other</i>     | 100                     |

### 3.3 Operationalisation

As this study focuses on analysing how major political parties frame cancel culture and related issues in X during the 2024 US presidential election, the central concept examined in this study is cancel culture, which is conceptualized as a discursively structured field that includes overlapping themes such as accountability, censorship, freedom of expression, and ideological politics, as detailed in the theoretical framework (Clarke, 2020, p. 90; Keohane, 2024, p. 2).

To capture how cancel culture was presented in political discourse, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on tweets posted by verified accounts and included both explicit mentions of the term “cancel culture” and implicit references to thematically related ideas between December 2023 and November 2024. Some of the keywords used during the coding process included: “cancelled,” “woke,” “called out,” “held accountable,” “freedom of expression,” “censorship,” “de-platformed,” and “silenced.” This broader approach allowed for the inclusion of tweets that engaged with the discourse surrounding cancel culture, even in the absence of the explicit term. Moreover, these rhetorical cues were treated as linguistic indicators in the cancel culture debate.

The operationalisation of framing theory was guided by Entman's (1993) model, which identifies four main functions of framing: problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and suggested remedy (p. 52). Each theme identified through the inductive coding process was reinterpreted through this framework to see how cancel culture and associated issues were constructed by political actors. For example, if a tweet framed cancel culture as a way to "hold corrupt elites accountable," this was coded as a positive moral evaluation with a justice-oriented remedy. Moreover, tweets describing cancel culture as "mob censorship" or an attack on free speech were coded as negative moral evaluation and as framing the problem as ideological suppression. Additionally, framing was treated as a strategic act in this research as political figures use it to persuade and mobilise supporters (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Sub-concepts such as free speech and accountability central to the analysis were also operationalised. Accountability was identified through references to moral or political responsibility, including phrases such as "face consequences" or "be held responsible." Moreover, Free speech and censorship were captured and coded through expressions referring to ideological control or suppression, such as "freedom of expression" and "woke censorship". These categories are based on the theories explained in Chapter 2, reflecting and showing the ongoing debates around how cancel culture is used in politics.

Overall, this operationalisation process provided a structured and theory-informed approach to identifying how cancel culture was framed across political affiliations on X during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. It served as a bridge between the theoretical foundations and empirical analysis, allowing for a systematic and conceptually coherent interpretation of cancel culture in the context of the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

### **3.4 Data Analysis and Method Description**

This study used a two-stage qualitative analysis approach of inductive thematic coding followed by inductive framing analysis. It enabled a comprehensive examination of how cancel culture and related issues were constructed by different factions during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Furthermore, it allowed the research to first identify what main issues related to cancel culture were used and then interpret how these issues functioned within frames.

The first phase of analysis involves inductive thematic coding, using the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2019). Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method that is used to analyse and interpret patterns of meaning within a dataset (Li et al., 2021, p. 145). Additionally, thematic analysis provides a systematic approach, allowing researchers to organize and describe data in detail while also interpreting its broader social significance (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). This makes it very well-suited for studies exploring complex, value-laden discourse where meaning is constructed through language (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

The process began with a period of familiarisation with the dataset, where each tweet was read multiple times to really grasp the tone and context. Then, the first impression and noteworthy language were noted down to identify potential patterns. This was followed by the generation initial codes, during which important features of the tweets were highlighted and assigned labels. For example, phrases like “*Republicans censor,*” “*Kamala Harris against free speech,*” or “*Democrats will hold Republicans accountable*” were codes used as indicators of larger thematic tendencies.

Next, these individual codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, such as *cancel culture is dead/ cancelled, cancel culture hypocrisy by Republicans, Democrats party of censor, Republicans don't hold accountable*. These themes were developed continually and refined over time to ensure internal coherence. Moreover, during the theme review phase, overlapping themes were combined and irrelevant ones were thrown away (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). This led to a clearer structure of interpretation. Finally, each theme was well defined and named to capture its core meaning.

Then, five final themes were developed to reflect the main narratives and framing strategies used by political actors in relation to cancel culture during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. These themes were constructed through a repetitive process of code grouping and interpretation, grounded in the language and rhetorical structures found within the dataset.

This second phase draws on framing theory, a method of analysis that looks at how communicators shape meaning through selective emphasis (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Framing was first introduced by Goffman (1974) as a “*schema of interpretation*” that allows individuals to understand and classify events (p. 21). Later, this idea was formalized by Entman (1993), who defined framing as the process of selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of a reality to promote a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Moreover, frames guide public interpretation by connecting issues to broader cultural values and emotional cues (Entman, 1993, p.52).

Entman's (1993) four fundamental framing functions served as an interpretive framework for the inductive application of framing analysis in this study (p. 52). Instead of using preset frames, the study used thematic coding to find patterns in the data and then examined how each theme worked in terms of defining the problem, assigning blame, assessing morality, and offering a solution (Entman, 1993, p.53). Moreover, this method helped maintain theoretical coherence while allowing the analysis to stay rooted in the data (Entman, 1993, p. 53).

To further clarify the transition from raw data to interpretive insight, Table 2 provides an overview of the coding structure by illustrating how emergent themes were systematically grouped into broader frames. This step was essential for establishing analytical coherence and transparency. Each theme originated from repeated rhetorical patterns and linguistic markers identified during the first coding phase and was subsequently interpreted through the lens of Entman's (1993) framing functions (p. 52).

**Table 2.** *Illustrative Coding Table: From Themes to Frames*

| Frame  | Associated Themes   |
|--|---|
| <i>Cancel Culture is Losing Power and usage</i>                      | Cancel culture is dead/cancelled<br>Cancel culture explicitly used in a tweet   |
| <i>Republican Hypocrisy Around Cancel Culture and related themes</i> | Cancel culture hypocrisy by Republicans<br>Republicans are against free speech  |
| <i>Democratic Accountability</i>                                     | Democrats hold accountable<br>Republicans don't hold accountable<br>Republicans hold accountable<br>Voters/voting will hold people accountable  |
| <i>Symbolic Tools: Woke, Calling Out, MAGA</i>                       | The act of calling out as a tool<br>'Woke' named as something negative<br>'MAGA' associated with something negative   |
| <i>Threat to Free Speech</i>   | Cancel culture = threat to free speech/censorship<br>Democrats party of censorship<br>Democrats against free speech<br>Republicans party of free speech<br>Voters/voting will protect free speech |

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity

Validity and reliability are concepts often associated with quantitative research instead of qualitative research. However, some scholars such as Silverman (2011), explain that these terms can be used to refer to similar standards that ensure the academic rigor qualitative research demands. The concept of reliability signifies the degree to which the findings are independent of accidental circumstances (Silverman, 2011, p. 362). In other words, reliability guarantees that other researchers applying the same procedures to the same dataset would arrive at similar interpretations (Silverman, 2011, p. 362). To make sure of this, the research was designed to be as transparent as possible, with every step explicitly outlined. Furthermore, a structured codebook was developed, and manual coding was done using Atlas.ti. Additionally, self-reflexivity, which is a core element of qualitative reliability (Tracy, 2010, p. 842), was conducted by reflecting on the researcher's position and potential influence on interpretation. Moreover, the process of theme-to-frame mapping was also reflective as the codes and themes were repeatedly revisited to make sure that internal coherence as well as being able to capture the political nuances present in the dataset. This process aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2019) emphasis on achieving thematic saturation and maintaining analytical validity (p. 594). By

carefully basing each step of the analysis on the data, the method stayed rigorous and avoided forcing any preconceived assumptions on the findings.

Validity in qualitative research refers to the “extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomenon to which it refers”, according to Hammersley (1995, p. 197). Here, validity was ensured by grounding all interpretations of the findings in direct textual evidence, and illustrative quotes were included in the results chapter to strengthen the claims. Moreover, incorporating various analytical lenses through the use of both inductive thematic coding and framing analysis added interpretive depth and helped avoid potential biases.

Theoretical transparency was essential in this research, as it was rooted in a constructivist paradigm and informed by framing theory. This enhanced both the rigor and sincerity of the study and thus contributed to the overall trustworthiness in interpreting how cancel culture was framed during the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

Finally, this study did not raise any ethical concerns related to harm or privacy as it involved non-intrusive methods and relied solely on publicly available data.

## 4. Result

Building on the thematic coding process presented in the previous chapter, this section used an inductive framing analysis to interpret how political actors constructed meaning around cancel culture during the 2024 U.S presidential election. Each theme developed in the coding phase is treated as a frame and is analysed according to key functions such as problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and suggested remedy (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

### 4.1 Free Speech Under Threat Frame

The frame that came up the most in the dataset, particularly among Republican-affiliated accounts, was the portrayal of free speech being under threat. This frame appeared in 132 out of the 500 tweets analysed (see Table 3), making it the most frequently occurring narrative. The problem definition of this frame identifies a crisis in democratic discourse, where the right to express unpopular or opposing opinions is perceived as under attack due to cancel culture. Furthermore, the causal attribution is mostly directed at Democratic leaders and left-leaning activists, who are accused of controlling public discourse and marginalizing ideologies that don't conform to their ideas. Additionally, the moral evaluation is clear: Democrats are framed as authoritarian and suppressive. In contrast, Republicans are presented as the last defenders of constitutional freedoms such as the First Amendment, as well as the only political faction committed to preserving open dialogue. Finally, the remedy proposed within this frame is political resistance, such as encouraging citizens to vote for candidates who promise to protect free speech. Within this broad frame, two subframes emerged that help further explain how the narrative was strategically constructed.

The first and most dominant subframe, appearing in 81 of the 132 tweets (see Table 3), presents the *Democratic Party as the party of censorship* and fundamentally opposed to freedom of expression. This subframe depicts Democrats as ideologically uniform and hostile to independent or critical thinking. A good illustration of this comes from Tulsi Gabbard, a former Democratic congresswoman who endorsed Donald Trump during the 2024 campaign and was later appointed Director of National Intelligence. She tweeted: "Independent thinkers like me have no home under the Democratic Party of censorship and total conformity and war. Under President Trump's leadership, the Republican Party welcomes people like us" (@TusliGabbard, 2024). This statement frames the Democratic Party as exclusive and silencing, while positioning the Republican Party as inclusive and open to ideological diversity. Similarly, Republican activist Charlie Kirk wrote: "Hakeem Jeffries is a fraud. The Democratic Party is the party of: (among other things listed) censorship" (@charliekirk11, 2024). This tweet underscores the accusation that Democrats strategically suppress critical voices and control public discourse.

The second subframe, found in 40 of the 132 tweets (see Table 3), emphasizes the portrayal of *the Republican Party as the defender of free speech*. Within this subframe, Republicans are depicted

as protecting freedom of expression and actively working to restore it in the current political environment. Additionally, this subframe constructs a narrative in which free speech is framed as being under attack by Democratic leadership, and only a Republican victory could reverse this. An illustrative example comes from Robert F. Kennedy Jr, who responded to journalist Tucker Carlson by tweeting: “Yes, I will restore free speech, end the forever wars, and protect children's health once we get Donald Trump in the White House” (@RobertKennedyJr, 2024). This message positions Trump’s return to office as the step toward rescuing the constitutional right to free expression. Similarly, Senator Ted Cruz tweeted: “Free speech is on the ballot this election. The only way to save free speech is to defeat Kamala Harris”, referencing accusations that Harris had weaponized the Department of Justice (@tedcruz, 2024). These kinds of statements frame Democratic leaders as opponents of free speech as well as an active threat to it. In particular, Kamala Harris and Tim Walz were frequent targets in this subframe. For instance, Kennedy also tweeted: “Agreed. A vote for Kamala Harris is a vote for four more years of censorship and abuse of power,” reinforcing the idea that the protection of free speech depends on Republican electoral success and resistance to Democratic governance (@RobertKennedyJr, 2024).

Finally, while much less frequent, several tweets directly linked cancel culture to the suppression of free speech. In one example, conservative commentator Charlie Kirk stated: “Quit being silenced, quit letting cancel culture cancel your voice as a leader in work, in the workplace, and in building a successful business” (@charliekirk, 2024). This shows how cancel culture and free speech are rhetorically connected, as cancel culture is framed as a vehicle through which political speech and religious values are silenced. Even though these direct connections were mentioned less often, they reinforce the overarching narrative that cancel culture is not a form of justice but a tool of repression.

A final, much less prominent subframe suggested that voters themselves could act as protectors of free speech through their electoral choices. However, this idea was minimally represented, appearing in only 0.8% of tweets in the dataset (see Table 3), and thus was not seen as a significant rhetorical strategy within the broader frame.

It is important to note that the frame of free speech under threat, along with its subframes, was completely absent from Democratic-affiliated tweets. None of the Democratic tweets in the sample portrayed cancel culture as a threat to free speech or engaged with the idea that their own party might be suppressing expression. Additionally, this frame appeared in only 7 tweets from Independent-affiliated actors, most of which expressed vague support for free speech without fully adopting the Republican narrative. This distribution highlights the partisan nature of the “free speech under threat” frame and its strong alignment with Republican identity and messaging strategies during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The “Free Speech Under Threat” frame provides critical insight into how Republican-affiliated actors strategically employed cancel culture discourse during the 2024 U.S.

presidential election. Ultimately, this frame, along with its two subframes, constructs a narrative in which cancel culture is reinterpreted as a form of ideological suppression.

**Table 3:** *Free speech under threat frame in tweets*

|   | <b>Democratic<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Independent<br/>Tweets (N=100)</b> | <b>Republican<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Overall<br/>(N=500)</b> |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Cancel culture = threat to free speech and values | 0 (0%)                               | 2 (2%)                                | 5 (2.5%)                             | 7 (1.4%)                   |
| Democrats against free speech                     | 0 (0%)                               | 5 (5%)                                | 41 (20.5%)                           | 46 (9.2%)                  |
| Democrats = party of censorship                   | 0 (0%)                               | 0 (0%)                                | 35 (17.5%)                           | 35 (7%)                    |
| Republicans = party of free speech                | 0 (0%)                               | 0 (0%)                                | 40 (20%)                             | 40 (8%)                    |
| Voters/voting will protect free speech            | 0 (0%)                               | 0 (0%)                                | 4 (2%)                               | 4 (0.8%)                   |

**4.2 Accountability as Democratic Legitimacy Frame**

The second most prominent frame that emerged in 25 % of the tweets (see Table 4) is about the importance of accountability and how different political factions practice it. More specifically, it is about the emphasis by Democratic actors on holding individuals and organizations accountable for harmful or unethical behaviour. This frame often appeared in tweets calling for accountability of political figures like Donald Trump.

Using Entman’s (1993) model, the problem definition within this frame identifies a crisis of accountability in U.S. governance, where certain individuals or institutions evade consequences despite alleged wrongdoing. The causal attribution blames the other parties for protecting powerful actors. Additionally, the moral evaluation praises Democratic efforts to restore checks and balances while condemning GOP resistance as letting people get away with everything. Finally, the proposed remedy is that if you vote for democrats, they will bring back accountability. Three subframes emerged from the coding process, the most prevalent of which is “Democrats Hold Accountable.”

This subframe is characterized by Democratic actors portraying themselves as the party of accountability. Out of the 120 tweets coded under this frame, 58 were written by Democratic individuals (see Table 4). Moreover, these tweets frame Democrats as the party that is working to restore accountability in government and society at large. For example, President Joe Biden emphasized this role during his re-election campaign when he said on X that his administration would “never stop fighting to deliver relief to borrowers, hold bad actors accountable, and bring the promise of college to more Americans” (@JoeBiden, 2024). This framing positions Biden and the Democratic Party as agents of justice and accountability.

Similarly, Hakeem Jeffries, a famous Democratic leader, addressed Republican actions surrounding reproductive rights by saying that “MAGA extremists destroyed Roe vs. Wade and reproductive freedom in America. And now they are lying about it. We will hold them accountable” (@RepJeffries, 2024). His tweet relates accountability to the defence of individual freedoms as well as the importance of challenging political dishonesty.

Additionally, the focus on accountability also extended to target Republican figures. An illustration of this is when the 2024 election approached, many tweets explicitly stated that Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential nominee, would take a hard stance on Donald Trump. Democratic vice-presidential nominee Tim Walz wrote that “Kamala Harris is tough, experienced, and ready to hold Donald Trump accountable” (@Tim\_Walz, 2024), reinforcing the narrative that the Democratic nominee is prepared to address past abuses of power head-on.

Notably, this subframe also includes calls for intra-party accountability. Democratic voices expressed that ethical conduct should be upheld even within their own ranks. For example, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer advocated for a culture of mutual responsibility, urging: “Let’s choose to move forward, together. Let’s chart a better path for our politics. If you see an unproductive word that tries to tear us apart, call them out, no matter who they come from. Hold each other accountable, even in our party” (@gretchenwhitmer, 2024). This framing adds a layer of credibility to the Democratic narrative by portraying themselves as self-critical and honourable.

The second subframe identified within the broader theme of Democratic accountability is *Republicans Don’t Hold Accountable*. This subframe appeared in 35 of the 127 tweets coded under this theme and serves as a direct contrast to the Democratic self-framing as enforcers of justice. It portrays the Republican Party as either unwilling or unable to impose accountability on its own members, often protecting individuals accused of misconduct.

A large portion of tweets within this subframe focused specifically on Donald Trump, who was framed as the central figure representing this lack of accountability. Of the 35 tweets (see Table 4), 14 emphasized his refusal to accept responsibility for his actions. For example, Kamala Harris pointed directly to Trump’s role in restricting reproductive rights, stating that “Women are dying because of Donald Trump’s abortion bans—and he refuses to take accountability for the pain and suffering he has caused” (@KamalaHarris, 2024). This tweet supports the view of Trump initiating

harm but denies any culpability, a pattern that many Democrats argue characterizes broader Republican behaviour.

Senator Chris Murphy also highlighted this issue, framing Trump and his close allies as deliberately undermining democratic institutions for personal gain. He tweeted that “Donald Trump and his billionaire friends want to rig the rules of government to enrich themselves and have no one hold them accountable” (@ChrisMurphyCT, 2024), thus suggesting that the lack of accountability is not incidental.

Additionally, other tweets generalized this critique to the Republican Party as a whole, accusing them of ignoring or excusing problematic behaviour among its members. For example, Congressman Daniel Goldman addressed what he saw as a double standard, noting that “My GOP colleagues are quick to attack the Dems for antisemitism. It’s time for them to hold their own accountable” (@danielgoldman, 2024). This framing highlights the claim that Republicans apply moral scrutiny selectively, targeting opponents all while protecting allies from consequences. The overall implication is that accountability, and thus cancel culture, has become a partisan issue with only one side actively upholding it as a core democratic principle.

The third and final subframe within the larger theme of *Accountability as democratic legitimacy* is “Voters Will Hold Accountable.” Although this subframe was identified in only 12 of the 127 tweets coded within the accountability theme, it holds a symbolic role, as it highlights the fundamental democratic mechanism of electoral power, which is seen as the ultimate source of accountability. Supporting someone, and not the other, is at the core of cancel culture.

This frame was clearly expressed in a tweet by President Joe Biden, who stated, “He (Donald Trump) is worried the voters will hold him accountable for the cruelty and chaos he created. They will” (@JoeBiden, 2024). Biden’s statement positions the voters as both aware and capable of rejecting a legacy of what he characterizes as disorder and injustice. Furthermore, this frame suggests that when institutional actors fail to act, voters have both the right and the responsibility to restore accountability.

It is worth mentioning that another subframe titled “Republicans Hold Accountable” was identified. However, it only appeared in 1.4% of the dataset (see Table 4), making it insignificant in comparison to the other subframes identified in this frame.

**Table 4:** *Accountability as Democratic Legitimacy*

|  | <b>Democratic<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Independent<br/>Tweets (N=100)</b> | <b>Republican<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Over all<br/>(N=500)</b> |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Democrats hold people accountable          | 58 (29%)                             | 6 (6%)                                | 0 (0%)                               | 64 (12.8%)                  |
| Republicans don't hold people accountable  | 35 (17.5%)                           | 5 (5%)                                | 0 (0%)                               | 40 (8%)                     |
| Republicans hold people accountable        | 1 (0.5%)                             | 5 (5%)                                | 1 (0.5%)                             | 7 (1.4%)                    |
| Voters/voting will hold people accountable | 12 (6%)                              | 1 (1%)                                | 1 (0.5%)                             | 14 (2.8%)                   |

**4.3 Republican Hypocrisy Around Cancel Culture and Related Issues**

Another frame that came up in the dataset, specifically in tweets directly addressing cancel culture, focuses on what many see as Republican hypocrisy. While Republican figures are known to speak out against cancel culture, several posts point out that their actions don't always match their words. They're accused of preaching free speech while simultaneously backing efforts to shut down opposing views. This contradiction, which was identified in 45 tweets, is framed as a strategic inconsistency that raises questions about the genuineness of their stance on free speech and cancel culture.

Using Entman's (1993) framework, the problem definition within this frame lies in the gap between Republican discourse and action, as the party that claims to champion free expression is accused of practicing political suppression. Moreover, the causal attribution often points to partisan interests, which in this specific case suggest that Republicans exploit the language of cancel culture and free speech selectively, as tools for political advantage. Additionally, the moral evaluation portrays this behaviour as self-serving and hypocritical, while the remedy proposed through the frame is to publicly call out these contradictions to question the authenticity of Republican claims.

This frame was particularly visible among Independent political commentators, who contributed 57.7 % of the tweets coded under this theme (see Table 5). A notable example comes from American journalist and political commentator Mehdi Hasan, who reacted to the mass arrests of pro-Palestinian student protesters in Texas. He wrote that the events in Austin were a "reminder that conservatives reel in authoritarianism" (@MehdirHasan, 2024) and added that media figures who believed conservatives genuinely cared about free speech or were against cancel culture were "naive fools." In this tweet, Hasan challenged the integrity of conservative rhetoric as well as broadened the criticism to include media complicity in legitimizing those claims.

Similarly, Nina Turner, a former Ohio State Senator and longtime ally of Bernie Sanders, addressed Republican support for banning progressive policies. She tweeted that "the 'anti-cancel culture' crowd seems to be ok with cancelling DEI and affirmative action" (@ninaturner, 2024),

drawing attention to the selective application of cancelation tactics by conservative leaders. Furthermore, Turner implied that Republicans use it against initiatives that they ideologically oppose rather than oppose cancel culture on principle, thus exposing a double standard in their framing of what constitutes censorship.

Additional commentary came from Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai, an Independent presidential candidate, who used his platform to call out two of the most prominent public figures of the Republican party, Elon Musk and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Claiming that neither was sincere in their advocacy for freedom, Ayyadurai stated, “One purports to be a free speech absolutist whilst the other for medical freedom. NEITHER IS TRUE” (@va\_shiva,2024). His accusations challenge the credibility of well-known figures often associated with the Republican defence of free expression, further reinforcing the frame's criticisms of bad-faith engagement with these values.

Democratic voices also contributed to this frame, with 18 of the 45 tweets coded in this category being authored by users affiliated with the Democratic Party (see Table 5). For instance, Former Missouri Senator Claire McCaskill reacted to right-wing censorship efforts with the rhetorical question: “Say what? Censorship and cancel from the right?” (@clairecmc, 2024). Her reaction highlights the moral evaluation of Republican hypocrisy. Likewise, Adam Kinzinger, a former Republican Congressman who left the republican party over its direction under Donald Trump, bluntly declared, “Cancel culture is now what the right does” (@AdamKinzinger, 2024). His perspective adds further legitimacy to the critique that the GOP is guilty of what it condemns, especially since he originally comes from within Republican ranks.

Most importantly, this frame was completely absent from Republican-authored tweets. Additionally, no GOP-affiliated actors engaged in self-reflection or acknowledged these critiques, suggesting that the accusation of hypocrisy is one-sided and primarily used by critics from outside the party.

**Table 5.** *Republican Hypocrisy around cancel culture frame*

|   | <b>Democratic Tweets<br/>(N=200)</b> | <b>Independent Tweets<br/>(N=100)</b> | <b>Republican Tweets<br/>(N=200)</b> | <b>Over all<br/>(N=500)</b> |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cancel culture hypocrisy by Republicans | 16 (8%)                              | 15 (15%)                              | 0 (0%)                               | 31 (6.2%)                   |
| Republicans are against free speech     | 2 (1%)                               | 11 (11%)                              | 1 (0.5%)                             | 14 (2.8%)                   |

#### 4.4 Cancel Culture is Losing Power and Usage

When cancel culture is mentioned explicitly, the only other recurring frames emerging from the dataset were the portrayal of cancel culture as a diminishing phenomenon. This frame constructs the narrative that cancel culture is no longer a relevant or powerful force in political or cultural life, and that its influence and impact have significantly faded. First of all, the problem definition presents cancel culture as an overblown or “has been” concept that no longer deserves serious attention. Moreover, the causal attribution often points to progressive overreach, which leads to a decline in legitimacy and public influence. Additionally, the moral evaluation is more often than not celebratory, portraying the decline of cancel culture as either justified or amusing. Lastly, the suggested remedy is rhetorical disengagement, as tweets adopting this frame state that society should move on and stop giving cultural or political weight to ‘cancel culture’ as a meaningful term or movement.

This frame was most used by Republican-affiliated actors, with it being mentioned in 3% of republican tweets (see Table 6). They often expressed triumph or mockery over the idea that cancel culture had lost its cultural and political force. For example, conservative commentator Candace Owens tweeted, “It’s true, the absurd lengths taken to try and cancel me completely backfired. As I’ve said, people have never been more awake to the nonsense. Cancel culture is cancelled” (@RealCandaceO, 2024). This tweet shows the moral evaluation of cancel culture’s downfall as a welcome and deserved shift. Similarly, Republican influencer Riley Gaines, responding to a story about the Southern Poverty Law Center allegedly silencing NTB anonymous writers, tweeted: “Cancel culture is fading; @splcenter will soon realize and all of these activists posing as journalists will be out of a job” (@Riley\_Gaines\_, 2024). Here, cancel culture is also framed as actively collapsing, and those associated with it are losing relevance.

Even though it was the least used in the dataset, its significance lies in what it reveals about the shifting narratives around cancel culture. Moreover, this framing was also employed by Independent actors (see Table 6), as exemplified by Andrew Yang, founder of the Forward Party, who tweeted, “Is cancel culture over yet? One can only hope” (@AndrewYang, 2024). However, his comment reflects a detached scepticism rather than partisan critique, indicating that this frame was not a dominant narrative among Independents.

In contrast, Democratic-affiliated accounts did not invoke the frame of cancel culture as a fading force. Even more surprising was that the term “cancel culture” being used as a tool appeared explicitly in only 12 tweets across the dataset: six from Democrats, three from Republicans, and three from Independents. Among Democrats, the few explicit mentions framed cancel culture not as outdated, but as a tool of legitimate resistance or justice. For instance, Alex Parkhomenko, former DNC National Field Director, tweeted: “It’s time for this non-stop nonsense to stop, and Kamala Harris is the person to stop it. Let’s cancel this trashy

show. We've seen enough...". This message mirrors the logic of suggesting accountability rather than criticising cancel culture itself. Moreover, the only three times that republicans use cancel culture as a tool is when they use cancel culture to cancel itself, as mentioned above, which goes hand in hand with the "cancel culture is diminishing" frame.

The near absence of the "cancel culture is dead" frame, or it being actively used as a tool among all three parties, reflects a likely strategic avoidance of the term. This is because, given the way the term has been weaponised by conservatives in the past, Democrats and Independents may deliberately be steering clear of it to avoid culture-war narratives.

**Table 6.** *Cancel culture is losing its power frame*

|   | <b>Democratic<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Independent<br/>Tweets (N=100)</b> | <b>Republican<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Over<br/>all<br/>(N=500)</b> |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Cancel cancel culture/ it is dead / canceled          | 0 (0%)                               | 4 (4%)                                | 4 (2%)                               | 8<br>(1.6%)                     |
| "Cancel culture" explicitly used as a tool in a tweet | 6 (3%)                               | 3 (3%)                                | 3 (1.5%)                             | 12<br>(2.4%)                    |

**4.5 Framing the Enemy Through Symbolic Language**

The final frame identified in the dataset is the use of symbolic language, such as the terms "woke," "MAGA," and "calling out", as rhetorical tools to assert ideological superiority and delegitimize opposing viewpoints. This frame was found in 82 out of the 500 tweets analysed (see Table 6). It offers fascinating insights into how cancel culture is part of broader identity-based and cultural conflicts. Moreover, cancel culture is a linguistic battleground within this frame, where ideologically loaded terms are used and weaponized to provoke and mobilize.

The problem definition in this frame illustrates a crisis in public discourse, where political language is reduced to emotionally charged catchphrases. For example, the terms "woke" and "MAGA" are no longer used as neutral descriptors but as ideological signifiers that create in-group and out-group identities. Similarly, "calling out" as a performative or opportunistic act is often used to signal moral superiority rather than pursue justice. Additionally, the causal attribution in this frame changes depending on political alignment but is consistently directed at the opposing sides. Furthermore, the moral evaluation within this frame is binary. Among conservative voices, "woke" is deployed to characterize progressives as authoritarian or disconnected from reality. In contrast, Democratic and Independent actors use "MAGA" to criticize what they see as extremism and anti-

democratic values within the Republican Party. In both cases, symbolic terms carry intense moral judgments and are used to vilify the other side.

From the Republican side, the term “woke” was the most frequently used symbolic label, as it appeared under this frame in 33 out of the 82 tweets coded (see Table 7). The term was always associated with something negative, such as being a threat to traditional American values and representing liberal overreach. For instance, J.D. Vance, vice president under President Donald Trump, tweeted: “We 100 percent need to fire the woke generals. The Biden-Harris campaign makes me want to vote DJT even more” (@JDVance, 2024). This example portrays “wokeness” as a dangerous and irrational force that undermines national integrity. Similarly, Republican activist Charlie Kirk posted: “Kamala calls Columbus Day part of our shameful past... perpetrating violence, stealing land, and spreading disease. This clip is such a stereotype of left-wing woke crazy that I assumed it was AI. It is 100% real” (@charliekirk11, 2024). Here, “woke” is used to ridicule progressive narratives, associated with the negative word “crazy” and frame Democrats as out of touch with American heritage. Notably, “woke” appeared only in Republican tweets, with no Democratic or Independent accounts using the term in this negative way.

From the Democratic side, the most frequently used symbolic tool was the act of “calling out,” which appeared in 19 of the 82 tweets coded in this frame (see Table 7). These tweets framed “calling out” as a civic duty, often in response to misinformation or unethical behaviour, particularly from Donald Trump. For example, Alexander S. Vindman, former Director for European Affairs at the U.S. National Security Council, tweeted: “Why is the media covering this weirdo @DonaldTrump, spewing lies without fact checking? They should call out the lies” (AVindman, 2024).

Among Independent-affiliated accounts, “calling out” also emerged as the dominant symbolic tool, as it appeared in 17 tweets (see Table 7). These tweets similarly framed “calling out” as a form of moral resistance, often emphasizing personal responsibility. For example, political activist Nina Turner tweeted: “Trump does not believe in draining any swamp, and I will be the first to call him out on it” (@ninaturner, 2024). Here, it becomes a performative declaration of moral opposition, positioning the speaker against a corrupt or deceptive adversary. In this sense, “calling out” functions as a discursive weapon used to frame the enemy through moral language. It reinforces the idea that symbolic action, such as publicly denouncing, is central to challenging dominant narratives and resisting political deceit.

The final term, “MAGA,” was used significantly less but still appeared in 12 tweets, all from Democratic-affiliated accounts (see Table 7). This term means “Make America Great Again” and is one of the most famous slogans of Donald Trump. These tweets framed “MAGA” as a shorthand for extremism and anti-democratic values. For instance, Representative Eric Swalwell tweeted: “The Republican Party is dead. This is now a MAGA extremist party that prefers violence over voting” (@RepSwalwell, 2024). This usage constructs “MAGA” as an ideological threat rather than merely a

campaign slogan, positioning it as a symbol of political danger and regression. Importantly, “MAGA” was not used by Republicans or Independent actors in this dataset, suggesting its partisanship and that it is weaponized mainly by Democratic actors.

**Table 7.** *Strategic symbolism in cancel culture*

|  | <b>Democratic<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Independent<br/>Tweets (N=100)</b> | <b>Republican<br/>Tweets (N=200)</b> | <b>Overall<br/>(N=500)</b> |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| MAGA associated with something negative    | 11 (5.5%)                            | 1 (1%)                                | 0 (0%)                               | 12 (2.4%)                  |
| The act of calling out mentioned as a tool | 19 (9.5%)                            | 17 (17%)                              | 0 (0%)                               | 36 (7.2%)                  |
| "Woke" named as something negative         | 1 (0.5%)                             | 0 (0%)                                | 33 (16.5%)                           | 34 (6.8%)                  |

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

### 5.1 Summary and Interpretation of Findings

This thesis aimed to investigate how cancel culture and its related issues were presented by major political factions on X during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. To do so, it analysed 500 tweets from Democratic, Republican, and Independent-affiliated political actors, using a qualitative methodology that combined inductive thematic coding with framing analysis. The aim was to identify the main patterns of discourse among Republicans and Democrats, explore the relationship between cancel culture and broader themes, and evaluate the extent to which Independent voices challenged or reinforced partisan narratives.

According to the findings, the five main frames that emerged were “*Free Speech Under Threat*,” “*Accountability as Democratic Legitimacy*,” “*Cancel Culture is Losing Power and Usage*,” “*Republican Hypocrisy Around Cancel Culture*,” and “*Framing the Enemy Through Symbolic Language*.” The results illustrated the transformation of cancel culture from a political buzzword into a more fragmented discursive tool. It also revealed how political actors adapted their rhetorical strategies in response to shifting cultural norms and partisan goals, as described by Blumler (2016) as the Fourth Age of Political Communication.

The most prominent frame in the dataset was “*Free Speech Under Threat*,” which was mainly used by Republican-affiliated figures. Although free speech is a core democratic value, it was presented here in a way that emphasized group identity. This portrayed Republicans as silenced defenders of freedom of speech and Democrats as authoritarian oppressors. Thus, while the frame uses a democratic ideal, it does so in a highly partisan and polarizing manner, aligning with identity-based framing (Diether et al., 2024, p. 1141). It also showed the shift toward emotionally resonant language, which is often seen in the Fourth Age of Political Communication (Blumler, 2016, p. 21), where political messaging relies more on outrage and tribal identity than policy substance. Moreover, according to Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model, this reflects how dominant political actors encode preferred meanings into political messaging, which their target audience decodes through an in-group lens shaped by cultural alignment and partisan identification (p. 21).

In comparison, Democratic actors reframed the concept of cancel culture through a lens of accountability. The *Accountability as Democratic Legitimacy* frame promoted ethical leadership and moral justice. Here, tweets referenced the importance of holding figures like President Donald Trump accountable, and some even went as far as to call for the Democratic Party to reflect on its behaviour. Furthermore, these appeals were framed as democratic imperatives rooted in shared principles, not as partisan attacks. This aligns with value-based framing, as defined by Diether et al. (2024), where political messaging is anchored in societal norms. However, it is also important to note that Democrats sometimes pointed out Republican inaction, which added identity-based elements to their messages. This indicates that framing is often a combination of different approaches, rather than only sticking

strictly to one type or the other. This framing also relates to the tradition of grassroots activism, as Democrats indirectly linked their discourse to movements rooted in citizen empowerment and bottom-up resistance, reflecting the broader shift toward grassroots political communication described in Blumler's Fourth Age (2016, p. 21).

The *Republican Hypocrisy Around Cancel Culture* frame was mainly used by Independent and some Democratic actors, and further complicates the rhetorical battlefield. These tweets criticized Republicans for denouncing cancel culture while engaging in behaviour similar to censorship themselves. Furthermore, these contradictions were framed as hypocritical and strategic, echoing the critiques made in constructivist media theory (Hall, 1980, p. 48; Fairclough, 2003, p. 9), where discourse is a site of power and ideological control.

The most interesting and important finding of this research was the rhetorical shift away from the term "cancel culture" itself, as seen through the frame of "Cancel Culture is Losing Power". In 2020, cancel culture was a central issue of debate across political party lines (Clark, 2020, p. 89). However, during the 2024 American presidential election, the term was avoided as a strategic tool, particularly by Democrats and Independents. Instead, they reframed discussions through more constructive or civic language, such as accountability and free speech, as mentioned above. Moreover, it was usually described as something that no longer mattered or had lost its influence when it did appear. This could suggest that as the term became politically loaded and associated with negative right-wing narratives, actors across the spectrum began to distance themselves from this concept deliberately. In Foucault's (1977) terms, this silence can function as an act of resistance or as a refusal to bring attention to a term whose meaning has become ideologically contaminated.

Lastly, the *Weaponizing Symbolism* frame revealed how cancel culture discourse is integrated within broader identity politics and cultural struggles. The use of emotionally charged terms like "woke," "MAGA," and "calling out" served as symbolic markers of group loyalty and ideological alignment. Republicans used "woke" to mock and vilify progressives, while Democrats used "MAGA" to signal extremism and democratic decay. Additionally, Independents frequently used "calling out" as a way to symbolically position themselves against figures like Donald Trump, casting them as representations of corruption and hypocrisy. In this context, "calling out" becomes a symbolic act of resistance used to define the enemy through criticism as well as through morally loaded confrontation (Ng, 2022, 41; Gerbaudo, 2017, p.480).

## **5.2 Answer to the Research Question**

In conclusion, this thesis found that the concept of cancel culture was strategically redefined and avoided across political lines during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. For example, this study discovered that Republicans leaned on identity-based frames, portraying themselves as defenders of free speech. Furthermore, Democrats framed related issues through a value-oriented lens of civic

responsibility and justice, often avoiding the term “cancel culture” altogether. Additionally, Independent voices played a role in disrupting dominant narratives by calling out partisan inconsistencies and redefining cancel culture through symbolic civic engagement.

As outlined in Section 2.3.2, many scholars found that cancel culture is a site of ideological struggle in digital political discourse as well as a tool for social accountability (Clarke, 2020, p. 89; Keohane, 2024, p. 2; Rom & Mitchell, 2021, p.612). This study supports these perspectives while also introducing a novel contribution, which is that during the 2024 election, explicit references to "cancel culture" significantly decreased. Instead, political actors deployed their associated themes such as accountability, free speech, and censorship, and only rarely directly named the term.

Therefore, cancel culture intersected with broader political and cultural themes, such as identity, justice, and national values, as a discursive site of struggle. Democrats aligned it with accountability and democratic renewal, while Republicans used it to provoke fears about ideological censorship. Moreover, its meaning and usage remain fluid, based on political orientation and strategic intent. Ultimately, the study highlights that cancel culture in the digital age is a rhetorical battlefield where core values such as free speech, civic responsibility, and justice are actively debated as they unfold.

### **5.3 Academic and Societal Relevance**

The cultural and political significance of cancel culture has only intensified since the 2024 election, when President Donald Trump returned to the presidency for a second term. This is because Trump's administration has engaged in actions that mirror the very tactics often condemned as “cancel culture,” such as targeting universities that promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), calling for boycotts of companies perceived as too progressive, and publicly attacking political opponents through media platforms (French, 2024, para. 8). At the same time, President Trump has made it a political priority to reintegrate figures who were previously “cancelled”, using his platform to restore their legitimacy (Wren, 2024, para. 7). As *Politico* (2025) reports, this dual strategy lets him frame himself as a champion against cancel culture, whilst also use it to serve his own goals (Wren, 2025, para.15). These developments blur the line between condemnation and participation in cancel culture, suggesting that the concept is now embedded in institutional governance as a tool for policing ideological boundaries. Moreover, it confirms the thesis’s central finding: cancel culture functions as a flexible rhetorical strategy across the political spectrum.

Academically, this thesis contributes to the field of political communication by offering an empirically grounded framing analysis during an important electoral cycle. It operationalizes Entman’s (1993) framing functions, Diether et al.'s (2024) identity-versus-value-based framing distinction, and Blumler’s (2016) Fourth Age of Political Communication to analyse how symbolic language, partisan identity, and media logic interact in digital political discourse. Moreover, the five

identified frames provide a typology that illustrates how meaning is strategically constructed to mobilize support and influence perception.

The findings also have broader societal relevance. For instance, a similar rhetorical trend can be observed internationally in countries like Brazil, where the former President Jair Bolsonaro used cultural grievances and symbolic language to rally support and deflect criticism (Araújo & Prior, 2024, p. 230; Fontes de Azevedo, 2021, para.11). Much like in the U.S., Bolsonaro's government framed free speech and traditional values as being under threat by progressive forces (Araújo & Prior, 2024, p.230; Jeantet, 2019, para 5). This shows that the rhetorical logic around cancel culture has global implications and can be used as a way to understand political polarization in other democratic contexts.

For media professionals and political strategists, the study illustrates the importance of monitoring how politically charged terms evolve and are strategically employed to shape democratic debate. Understanding this rhetorical evolution is important to better navigate political discourse as well as to preserve meaningful democratic dialogue.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Future Research**

This study also has some limitations. First of all, the dataset is only made up of tweets, which is just one way for politicians to communicate with their audiences. Additionally, while X provides direct, real-time access to political messaging, it favours virality over quality. Moreover, political discourse unfolds in more complicated ways across other forms of media such as televised debates, long-form interviews, podcasts, press releases, and traditional news coverage. These platforms could showcase different ways of framing and narrative control. Therefore, future studies could investigate data across these media environments to capture a more global view of how cancel culture and related issues are framed and discussed in the public sphere.

Secondly, the dataset was made up of only 500 tweets from political actors and commentators, selected for their relevance to the research question. While sufficient for a qualitative framing analysis, this limited sample may exclude different perspectives, such as from grassroots movements or voices outside the mainstream political elite. Future research could expand the sample size and diversify the range of actors by including marginalized communities and Gen Z influencers, whose rhetorical strategies may differ from those of institutional voices.

Thirdly, this study focused on the 2024 U.S. presidential election, a highly polarized context that may have amplified identity-based narratives. If future research were to investigate how cancel culture is framed in calmer political periods or different cultural contexts, such as a European multiparty system or global South democracies, it could help determine whether the observed framing trends are universal or uniquely American.

Lastly, the term “cancel culture” appeared in the dataset often sparingly or indirectly. Future research should investigate why this is the case. Moreover, tracking alternative terms such as “accountability culture,” “censorship,” “ideological bias,” or “political correctness” could help scholars better understand how political rhetoric changes over time.

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## Appendix A:

### Codebook of thematic coding

| Theme                                     | Definition   | Codes   | Example  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Cancel culture is dead/cancelled          | This theme captures the idea that cancel culture has lost its power, relevance, or impact. Tweets coded under this theme express sentiments that cancel culture is no longer an effective force in public discourse or that its influence has faded. | -Cancel cancel culture<br><br>-Cancel culture is dead<br><br>-Cancel culture is not a big threat to society                               | “Cancel culture is fading”   |
| Cancel culture explicitly used in a tweet | This theme captures tweets in which the term “cancel culture” is directly invoked to encourage or actively participate in the cancellation of individuals or groups.   | -Cancel DT<br><br>-Cancel if not supporting DT<br><br>-Cancel trump so that he drops out of the race<br><br>-Democrats cancel Republicans | “Let’s cancel this trashy show”  |
| Republicans are against free speech       | This code captures tweets accusing Republicans of undermining or restricting free speech, despite often positioning themselves as its defenders.   | -Republicans are a threat to free speech<br><br>-Republicans are not for free speech<br><br>-Trump will silence people                    | “You signed the letter in defense of free speech, yet you falsely smeared peaceful protestors as gangs of hoodlums”                    |
| Cancel culture hypocrisy by Republicans   | This theme captures tweets that accuse Republicans of undermining their own claims to be defenders of free speech. While they often denounce cancel culture, tweets highlight cases where Republicans engage in cancel-like behaviour themselves.    | -Republican hypocrisy against cancel culture<br><br>-Republicans are the ones cancelling now  | “Where are all the free speech MAGA people? Trump is suing Ann seltzer and her firm for releasing a poll in Iowa ... Total Hypocrites” |

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| Democrats hold accountable                 | This theme includes tweets portraying Democrats as actors who enforce accountability through civic and moral means  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Democrats hold accountable</li> <li>-Accountability shield democracy</li> <li>-Accountability is good</li> <li>-Democrats will always hold people accountable</li> <li>-Hold DT accountable</li> <li>-JB is calling for accountability</li> <li>-KH will Hold DT accountable</li> <li>-The Democrats will hold DT accountable</li> </ul> | “ We will hold them accountable”   |
| Republicans don't hold accountable         | This theme reflects criticism of Republicans for failing to address misconduct within their own ranks.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Republicans don't hold accountable</li> <li>-DT refuses to hold accountable</li> <li>-DT is scared to be held accountable</li> <li>-DT refuses to take accountability</li> </ul>   | “Women are dying because of Donald Trump, and he refuses to take accountability” |
| Republicans hold accountable               | This theme captures moments when Republicans are depicted as taking action to punish or call out perceived wrongdoing, often framed as moral or political correction. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Hold JB accountable</li> <li>-Hold KH accountable</li> <li>-Holding Democrats accountable</li> <li>-Republicans hold accountable</li> </ul>  | “We will hold the current president accountable and push him out”                |
| Voters/voting will hold people accountable | This theme expresses trust in democratic participation as a corrective force. Tweets  | -Voters/voting will hold people accountable  | “... the voters will hold him  |

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|  | anticipate that voters will enforce accountability at the polls.   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-By voting against DT, he will be held accountable</li> <li>-Voters will hold DT accountable</li> <li>-Voters will hold democrats accountable</li> </ul>  | accountable in 2024  |
| MAGA associated with something negative    | This theme includes tweets where the MAGA slogan or identity is portrayed negatively, associated with bigotry, extremism, or authoritarianism. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-MAGA is a threat to the marginalized</li> <li>-MAGA Mentioned</li> <li>-MAGA is restricting rights</li> </ul>  | “extreme MAGA Republicans continue to coddle serial fraudster George Santos” |
| The act of calling out mentioned as a tool | This theme treats calling out as a purposeful act of exposing wrongdoing. It may be depicted positively or negatively                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Call out Democrats</li> <li>-Call out Republicans</li> <li>-Calling out</li> <li>-Calling out white supremacy</li> <li>-Got to call it out</li> <li>-JB will call out DT and Republicans</li> <li>-Media is calling out</li> <li>-Democrats not calling out</li> </ul> | “We have to call out Donald Trump for what he is”                            |
| Woke named as something negative           | Tweets coded here use ‘woke’ derogatorily to criticize progressive movements, portraying them as overreaching, insincere, or authoritarian.    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Woke (insult)</li> <li>-Woke Ideology</li> <li>-Woke ideology wants you to die</li> <li>-Woke left</li> </ul>  | “When you cave to the woke mob, it NEVER stops them from hating you”         |

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|  |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Woke women</li> <li>-Woke is dead</li> <li>-Woke is fatal to humor</li> </ul>  |   |
| Cancel culture = threat to free speech | This theme frames cancel culture as a tool of ideological control, equating it with censorship and an existential threat to democratic debate. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Cancel culture is censorship</li> <li>-Cancel culture over free speech</li> <li>-Free speech protects against cancel culture</li> <li>-not thinking the same= censored</li> </ul>  | “Quit letting cancel culture silence your voice”  |
| Democrats against free speech          | This theme includes tweets accusing Democratic politicians or voters of suppressing dissent and limiting open expression.                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-DEI is against free speech</li> <li>-Democrats against free speech</li> <li>-Both Dems and Reps are against free speech</li> <li>-Democrats scared of free speech</li> <li>-Democrats hate free speech</li> <li>-Democrats are against free speech</li> <li>-KH is against free speech</li> <li>-KH will take away right to free speech</li> </ul> | “the insane shift by the left away from meritocracy and personal liberties (e.g censorship of Free speech under the guise of “hate speech”) |
| Democrats party of censor              | This theme portrays the Democratic Party as institutionally aligned with censorship and cancel culture practices.                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Democrats party of censor</li> <li>-Democrats censor</li> <li>-Democrats want to censor</li> </ul>   | “ Weird that the Democrats used to be the party of free speech and are now the biggest  |

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|--|---|---|---|
|  |   | -JB censors<br>KH censors   | proponents of censorship”   |
| Republicans party of free speech       | This theme presents Republicans as defenders of free speech, contrasting them with Democrats depicted as suppressors of dissent.        | -Republicans party of free speech<br>-Free speech as American and important<br>-Free speech is democracy<br>-People want free speech<br>-Protect free speech<br>-Republicans will save free speech<br>-Republicans will bring back free speech<br>-Team Trump= free speech<br>-Trump =victory for free speech | “When you save free speech, this is the applause you get. God bless you Donald trump”           |
| Voters/voting will protect free speech | Tweets in this theme argue that voting Republican is essential to preserving freedom of speech and pushing back against cancel culture. | -Vote Trump = free speech<br>-Vote Trump= protect constitutional rights   | “ what would be so terrible in another Trump presidency? Free speech? Free gas? Secure Borders? |

## **Appendix B: AI Use Declaration**

I confirm that AI tools were used only for activities explicitly permitted under the 2024–2025 academic policy. All uses were supplementary, non-substantive, and did not involve the analysis of private or sensitive data.

### **Thesis Title Refinement:**

I used OpenAI's ChatGPT to help refine and improve the wording of my thesis title to ensure clarity and alignment with academic conventions.

### ***Prompt used:***

"Please help me reword this research question into a clear and formal academic thesis title: 'How did major political factions frame cancel culture and related issues to align with their agendas during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?'"

### **Reference list:**

I also used ChatGPT to make sure that my reference list was in the correct APA7 format

### ***Prompts used:***

"Please correct this reference list and let me know what needs to be changed to adhere to APA7 formatting"

### **Idea Generation:**

ChatGPT was used in the early stages of the research to suggest keywords and help brainstorm frame-related words for the coding process (not used for private data).

### ***Prompt used:***

"What are potential thematic keywords associated with political framing of cancel culture on social media?"

### **Grammar and Clarity:**

I used Grammarly for grammar and wording refinement in several non-analytical sections of the thesis (e.g., introduction, discussion, abstract) to improve clarity and flow. No original ideas were generated by AI.