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THE ROLE OF POLITICAL LEADERS IN REGULATING COLLECTIVE EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE: A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS DURING A TIME OF CRISIS

 <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2026-0007>

► Received: 22 October 2024 ► Accepted: 09 February 2026

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Abstract

We investigate how political leaders regulate collective emotional resilience during periods of crisis. Our objective is to understand the mechanisms through which leaders foster emotional stability within society by analysing their communication strategies. Specifically, we examine the discursive strategies employed by Democratic leaders (President Joe Biden, and Vice President Kamala Harris) and Republican leaders (former President Donald Trump, and Senator JD Vance) in their public statements following the attempted assassination of Trump on July 13, 2024. Using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we explore how collective emotional resilience is discursively regulated. In doing so, we make three noteworthy contributions to the extant literature. First, our findings contribute to the study of leadership by testing Goldenberg's (2024) strategies for regulating collective emotions in a real-life context. Second, we validate both the crisis leadership functions identified by Boin et al. (2016) and the resilience-building practices uncovered by Gigliotti (2024). Third, and most importantly, we extend the theory of collective emotions by introducing the concept of discursive-moral regulation, which explains how leaders shape collective emotional resilience through moral and rhetorical governance.

Keywords

political leadership, collective emotional resilience, emotion regulation, crisis management

Introduction

The role that political leaders play in shaping emotions is central to leadership studies (Rhodes & 't Hart, 2014) because emotions influence both political behaviour and decision-making. Emotionally intelligent leaders are better at managing both their own emotions and those of others (Ciulla, 2023; Goleman, 2020), and they can skilfully use emotions to navigate their political environment (Kushner Gadarian & Brader, 2023). By transmitting their emotional states to their followers, leaders can affect their judgements and choices (Stapleton & Dawkins, 2021). Therefore, leaders strategically use rhetoric that resonates with public emotions to engender loyalty and support (Lupia & Menning, 2009). However, environmental factors also shape leaders' emotions, as seen in leader-member exchanges (Troth et al., 2023).

Leaders play a more pronounced role in emotional regulation during wars, outbreaks of political violence, economic recessions, and electoral defeats, because these destabilizing events threaten societal values and require an urgent response (Ansell et al., 2014). During such crises, leaders must perform important functions: they must interpret and make sense of the crisis, guide and coordinate responses, communicate effectively to help the public understand the crisis and to maintain its trust, manage post-crisis inquiries, and learn from the crisis to prevent reoccurrences (Boin et al., 2016). Similarly, Gigliotti (2024) identifies five practices that are essential for successful post-crisis leadership: (1) fostering learning, (2) building resilience, (3) promoting meaning-making, (4) driving reinvention, and (5) facilitating renewal.

Although the emotional dimension of political leadership has attracted the attention of the scholarly community, there is still much to learn about how leaders promote collective emotional resilience during crises. We rely on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to nudge us forward and to help us better understand the concept of collective emotions regulation (Goldenberg, 2024). We do so by examining the public statements made by both Democratic leaders (President Joe Biden, and Vice President Kamala Harris) and Republican leaders (former President Donald Trump, and Senator JD Vance) after the July 2024 assassination attempt on Trump, focusing on how they regulated the public's emotional resilience. Our findings not only validate established crisis leadership functions (Boin et al., 2016) and resilience-building practices (Gigliotti, 2024), but also advance collective emotions regulation theory by identifying an additional discursive-moral dimension that explains how leaders shape collective emotions through moral framing and rhetoric. In what follows, we present the theoretical background that informs our work; we describe the context in which our study is situated; we articulate the methodology that we used to perform our discursive analysis; and, finally, we set out and discuss our original findings.

Collective emotional resilience and its discursive regulation

Emotions are responses to signals regarding circumstances important to an individual's goals that activate specific nervous systems. Emotions extend beyond individual experiences and are shaped by social context, each following a unique logic (Shah, 2024). Hence, emotions can be experienced individually or collectively. Collective emotions are defined as a "macro-level emotional response to a specific situation by multiple individuals interacting" (Goldenberg, 2024, p. 183).

Emotions play a significant role in political behaviour because they drive collective actions. Anger and outrage can lead to social movements (van Zomeren et al., 2008), while joy and grief can sometimes foster group cohesion (Goodwin et al., 2001). Emotions can also spread quickly through groups, thereby amplifying collective actions such as riots (Le Bon, 1895). Furthermore, emotions reinforce group norms (Halperin, Schori-Eyal, 2019) and mediate communication by influencing how messages are delivered and received (Collins, 2004). Therefore, understanding emotions is vital for managing conflicts (Gur et al., 2021).

Emotional resilience, although a multifaceted and contested concept, generally refers to the capacity to adapt to, and recover from, stress (Sousa et al., 2013, p. 238). At the systems-level, emotional resilience is of obvious importance because it is essential for communities to respond to and recover from crises. Not surprisingly, it is linked to public trust, hope, and social cohesion. Thus, socially astute leaders who productively harness emotions during crisis management are presumed to be better facilitators of public preparedness and recovery (Yorke, 2020, p. 45).

Scholarship across many cognate fields has explored how social structures affect emotional resilience (Black et al., 2024; Ungar, 2008) and how communities respond to disasters (Aldrich, 2012). This literature indicates that leaders play a central role in shaping emotional resilience through their appeals and rhetoric. Consequently, ethical leadership and emotional intelligence are essential during crisis management (Markey et al., 2021; Sanfuentes et al., 2021; Prummer et al., 2024). Narratives of trauma and resilience influence public perception, while leaders activate resilience by building trust and connection (Brassett, 2018; Teo et al., 2017). Zubrzycka-Czarnecka (2024), for example, demonstrates that positive emotions in public discourse enhance resilience.

Although our work focuses on collective emotions, it is nevertheless informed by the process model of emotion regulation that Gross advanced in 1998 (a, b) and subsequently refined in 2015. This model outlines how individuals, not collectives, can systematically influence their own emotions. It assumes that emotions unfold over time, and that regulation can be accomplished at five points during this developmental process:

- Situation selection – choosing whether to encounter, or to avoid, situations based on their likely emotional impact (e.g., deciding not to attend a stressful event).
- Situation modification – directly altering the prevailing circumstances to change their emotional impact (e.g., bringing a friend to a potentially uncomfortable event for emotional support).
- Attentional deployment – directing one's attention during an emotionally challenging situation. This can be accomplished either through distraction (e.g., focusing on the non-emotional aspects of the situation) or concentration (e.g., narrowly focusing on specific emotional elements).
- Cognitive change – altering how one appraises a situation to adjust its emotional significance. This is commonly achieved through “reappraisal” whereby an individual reinterprets the situation in a less threatening or more constructive way.
- Response modulation – influencing physiological, experiential, or behavioural responses immediately after an emotion has been fully generated (e.g., inhibiting the expression of emotions by taking deep breaths to calm down).

These stages are sequential and cumulative such that that earlier stages can influence the later ones. Likewise, different emotion regulation strategies can be employed at each stage, and their effectiveness can vary depending on contextual and individual differences.

Although much of what we know comes from studies about how individuals regulate their own emotions, there is a small but growing body literature considers the collective regulation of emotions. These studies tell us that collective emotions can be shaped either by leaders in a “top-down” manner or by groups in “bottom-up” fashion (Ashkanasy, Tse 2000; George, 2000). Goldenberg, building on the foundation laid by Gross, identifies various strategies for regulating collective emotions. One approach is to target the emotion-eliciting situation (Goldenberg, 2024, p. 186), which can be achieved by strategically choosing the situational focal point of the collective emotion (situation selection) or by modifying the existing situation to alter the emotions associated with it (situation modification). In the first instance, rituals can serve as a tool for regulating emotions, while in the second instance, collective action can be employed. A second way to alter collective emotions is by modifying a group’s attention to emotional stimuli in order to enhance cognitive processing and increase the likelihood that members will simultaneously experience the same emotional response. Presumably, leaders can impact collective emotions by directing attention either to or away from the emotion-eliciting stimulus, but it is also possible that this type of emotional regulation emerges naturally as the group’s level of fixation on the stimulus changes (Goldenberg, 2024, p. 186). A third way to regulate emotions is through cognitive change, which involves altering how an emotional situation is thought about or how the emotion itself is experienced (Goldenberg, 2024, p. 186). Finally, collective emotions can be modified through response modulation, which involves addressing the actual emotional response. At the collective level, this often occurs when one or more group members change their emotional responses in a way that influences others in the group (Goldenberg, 2024, p. 186).

Our study analyses the discursive strategies used by both Democratic and Republican leaders to stabilize the American public in the wake of the failed attempt on Donald Trump’s life. We assume that emotional well-being is an essential element of collective resilience, and through discourse, leaders are capable of either intensifying or quelling strong emotions during crises (Liu et al., 2022).

Study context

In the decades leading to the 2024 presidential election, pundits portrayed the U.S. as deeply divided along progressive and orthodox cultural lines. However, the academic literature is more nuanced. Some scholars—most notably Fiorina et al. (2011)—find that Americans tend to be moderate centrists who diverge little in their policy preferences, even on moral or religious issues. However, Americans have become more ideologically consistent and more likely to affiliate with the party that best reflects their views (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008), but it is debated as to whether this “sorting” constitutes polarisation. Affective polarisation, based on social identity theory, measures partisans’ feelings towards their “in-group” versus the “out-group” (Miller, Conover, 2015). Here, the literature convincingly establishes that Americans are affectively polarised, even if their policy preferences overlap (See, Iyengar et al., 2019). Furthermore, the pronounced ideological gap between conservative and liberal members of Congress has raised concerns about institutional gridlock (Hetherington, 2009).

The years preceding 2024 were tumultuous. The Covid-19 pandemic killed over 1.2 million Americans, eroded trust in government, and sowed discord (Fleishman, 2024). Animated protests followed the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Then, on 6 Jan-

uary 2021, Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol to prevent Biden's certification. The House of Representatives impeached Trump for instigating the attack (Andrews et al., 2021), but the Republican controlled Senate did not convict him. In 2022, hate crimes surged to record levels (Anti-Defamation League, 2023), and the numerous civil and criminal cases brought against Trump inflamed his supporters (Bensinger & Frankel, 2022). Robert Pape's June 2024 poll showed 10% of Americans condoned using force to restore Trump to the presidency, while another 7% supported using force to prevent him from becoming president (Pape, 2024).

By the summer of 2024, both Trump and Biden had secured enough delegates to be their parties' nominees. Both used apocalyptic rhetoric, with Trump claiming American would "no longer have a country" if Biden won, and Biden portraying Trump as a threat to American values, freedoms, and safety (Olorunnipa, 2024). On 27 June 2024, the two candidates squared off in a debate in Atlanta, Georgia. During this debate, Biden's performance was lacklustre, prompting him to call certain campaign donors and reassure them about the viability of his candidacy. During this telephone call, he expressed his intention to redirect the national conversation back to Trump's vulnerabilities, and stated, "We're done talking about the debate; it's time to put Trump in a bull's-eye" (Shear, 2024). Although Biden initially made this statement in a private setting, his campaign later distributed the quote to journalists (Salama et al., 2024).

On 13 July 2024, Trump narrowly survived an assassination attempt during a rally in Pennsylvania, which left one dead and two seriously injured (Gold et al., 2024). After a bullet grazed his right ear, and as the Secret Service was whisking him offstage, Trump boldly shook his fist and shouted "Fight, Fight, Fight," prompting his supporters responded with a vigorous chant of "USA-USA-USA" (Arnsdorf & Botsford, 2024; Gold et al., 2024). Authorities identified the shooter as 20-year-old Thomas Crooks, but his motives remained unclear (Thrush, Goldman, 2024). Disinformation spread rapidly, with conspiracy theories from both political extremes blaming either a staged event by Trump (Taylor, 2024) or an orchestrated attack by Biden's allies (Hsu et al., 2024). In the aftermath, newspapers described the public as traumatised and fearful (Bauerlein & Wolfe, 2024), sentiments which were reflected in an Ipsos/Reuters poll that found 79% of Americans felt the country was "spiralling out of control."

Biden expressed relief that Trump's injuries were only minor, suspended his campaign ads, and apologised for his "bull's-eye" comment (Baker, 2024; Salama et al., 2024). The Senate unanimously passed a resolution condemning the violence (S. Resolution 800 2024), and both Democratic and Republican leaders called for calm (Scherer, 2024). However, hyperbolic claims persisted, with some accusing Biden of instigating the shooting through his rhetoric (Homans, 2024). Most journalists doubted that civility and unity would prevail given the political stakes involved, the tenor of the campaigns, and the depth of the partisan acrimony. Scherer et al. (2024), for example, concluded, "There [is] little evidence ... that calls for greater understanding across party lines had filtered down to the grassroots—or that any softening of divisions [will] last."

The Secret Service faced scrutiny for its failure to protect Trump, leading to multiple congressional inquiries. Kimberly Cheatle, the agency head, resigned amidst bipartisan outrage (Broadwater et al., 2024). With investigations and hearings underway, tantalizing new details emerged. Most notably, local law enforcement had flagged Crooks during the

rally, but details about the gravity and imminence of the threat he posed did not reach Trump's security detail in time (Barber & Gurman, 2024).

Data and methods of analysis

Scholars have explored various methods to operationalise collective emotional resilience (Zubrzycka-Czarnecka, 2024), and here we use Norman Fairclough's (2003, 2013) critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine narratives by Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Donald Trump, and JD Vance following the attempt on Trump's life. We view access to the material world as mediated through discourse, where language and social knowledge play instrumental roles (Bierre & Howden-Chapman, 2024). Therefore, Fairclough's CDA (2013) positions discourse as central to policy and political analysis, and it offers a comprehensive framework to examine discursive practices related to collective emotional resilience after the failed assassination. The research question we pose is: How was collective emotional resilience regulated during the political crisis that followed the attempt on Donald Trump's life during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign? To answer this question, we focus on discursive practices and employ CDA's three-dimensional framework that calls for (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice analysis, and (3) social practice analysis (Fairclough, 2003). While Fairclough advocates a comprehensive application of his framework, we limit our analysis to discursive practices in order to maintain a tight focus in this small-scale study.

Our analysis considers six public communications: (1) Remarks by President Biden (Roosevelt Room, 14 July 2024); (2) President Biden's Address to the Nation (15 July 2024); (3) Remarks by Vice President Harris at a Political Event (17 July 2024); (4) JD Vance's Speech at the Republican National Convention, Night 3 (17 July 2024); (5) Donald Trump's Republican National Convention Speech (18 July 2024), and (6) JD Vance's post on X (formerly Twitter) published two hours after the incident (13 July 2024). We selected these texts purposefully based on their temporal proximity to the assassination attempt and their relevance to the emotional resilience of the American public. We applied a discursive leadership approach (Fairhurst 2011, 496) that focused on the role of language in constructing leadership, power dynamics, and identity negotiation through discourse. During data analysis and interpretation, we followed the logic of abduction.

We first performed a textual analysis of the transcripts to identify and describe the discursive/rhetorical practices and strategies that the four leaders used to regulate collective emotional resilience (Goldenberg, 2024). Next, we implemented select aspects of Fairclough's critical discourse textual analysis in a fragmented manner (Jacobs 2019). Linguistic analysis at the micro-level (concerning the form of the texts) was entirely omitted so we could devote greater attention to the discursive practices that the leaders employed to manage the emotional stability of Americans. Additionally, we applied Aristotle's rhetorical modes—*ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* (Richardson, 2007)—to analyse how leaders use rhetoric to promote collective emotional resilience and regulate public sentiment.

Table 1. Codebook

Analytical Domain	Category / Code	Operational definition (what to code)
A. Collective Emotional Resilience Regulation	A1. Targeting the emotion-eliciting situation – situation selection (e.g., rituals)	Altering emotions by selecting a specific situation to be the focus of collective emotion.
	A2. Targeting the emotion-eliciting situation – situation modification (e.g., collective action)	Modifying the existing situation in ways expected to change the emotions associated with it.
	A3. Modifying attention – enhancing shared attention	Shifting collective attention toward an emotion-increasing or cohesion-building stimulus.
	A4. Modifying attention – diverting attention away	Diverting attention to reduce emotional arousal or polarization.
	A5. Cognitive change – about the emotional situation	Reframing how the situation is interpreted to alter subsequent emotions.
	A6. Cognitive change – about the emotion itself	Reframing how the (collective) emotion is viewed to alter responses.
	A7. Response modulation	Altering emotions by modelling a measured response that influences others in the group.
B. CDA Discursive Practices	B1. Active and passive styles	Use of active vs. passive constructions to signal agency or objectivity.
	B2. Ambiguity	Use of vague/elastic terms allowing multiple interpretations.
	B3. Audience	Positioning, addressing, or segmenting intended audiences.
	B4. Cohesion	Lexical ties that signal programmatic intent or unity.
	B5. Context	Indexing production and interpretation within wider socio-political settings.
	B6. Framing	Selection/emphasis that regulates how events are perceived.
	B7. Ideology (hegemony)	Articulation of shared values that naturalize a viewpoint.
	B8. Intertextuality	Incorporation of other texts/voices to authorize claims.
	B9. Metaphor	Figurative language that structures understanding/action.
	B10. Modality (truth/obligation)	Degree of commitment: what is/ought to be.
	B11. Order of discourse (power/stance)	Positioning authority and speaker–audience power relations.
C. Aristotle's Rhetoric	C1. Ethos (credibility)	Establishing trustworthiness, character, and moral authority.
	C2. Logos (reasoning)	Use of evidence, causal chains, and coherent arguments.
	C3. Pathos (emotional appeal)	Orchestrating audience emotions to support the claim.

Source: Based on Goldenberg (2024), Jacobs (2019), and Richardson (2007).

With the assistance of QDA Miner Lite software, the texts were read three times, each time utilising a codebook and open coding. Previous codes were revisited and compared with subsequent ones to achieve a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the texts' content. We then interpreted the data with reference to the concept of collective emotions regulation and the literature on leadership during times of crisis. We divided the tasks related to the paper's sections among ourselves; however, all sections were mutually reviewed and consulted.

Like any research tool, CDA has limitations. First, it is vulnerable to accusations of partiality and selection bias because it can only accommodate the analysis of relatively small text segments. But even so, it is still an excellent fit for projects such as ours where the selected texts are highly germane to, and compatible with, the investigatory question. Here, the public statements we analysed issued from the most relevant leaders during the exact moment in time when the need for collective emotions regulation was at its peak. Second, CDA is sometimes criticised for reducing all aspects of social life to language. But here, we do not assert an indistinguishability between the material and discursive realms. Instead, we argue that access to the material world is mediated through language and discourse. Finally, a perennial critique of the CDA is that it attaches too much importance to individual actors and discounts the constraints imposed on them by contextual circumstances and institutional structures. Although this is a legitimate concern, we addressed it by contextualising individual agency within a broader social and political framework. In the end, there were compelling reasons to use CDA as the vehicle for exploring how communication strategies directly impact public emotions during what was perhaps the most important flashpoint in recent history, and meaningful steps were taken to counter CDA's limitations.

We used generative AI (ChatGPT5) to assist in the production of this manuscript. First, we relied on it for language support and mechanical tasks such as paraphrasing, reformulating sentences, improving clarity and readability, harmonizing terminology, and minor reference reformatting. Second, we used it as scholarly assistant in an advisory capacity, consulting with it on the coherence of successive stages of the project. All AI outputs were reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors. More importantly, the overall logic and intellectual contribution of the article—including the identification of the research question, selection of theoretical frameworks and methods, choice of sources, and the design of the analytic and interpretive strategy, as well as revisions made in response to peer review—are entirely the result of the authors' multi-stage work. AI was used with responsible-use guidelines (accuracy checks, source verification, privacy, and IP safeguards), and the authors retain full responsibility for the content.

How was collective emotional resilience regulated during the political crisis that followed the attempt on Trump's life during the presidential campaign in the U.S. in July of 2024? Both the Democratic and Republican responses to the attempted assassination of Donald Trump reveal structured, yet contrasting, strategies designed to regulate collective emotions.

Situation Selection and Framing of the Event

Both camps constructed the assassination attempt as a moment of national emotional significance, yet the way they framed the event diverged sharply. For the Democrats, Pres-

ident Biden and Vice President Harris used situation selection to foreground the attack as a moment for national reflection, empathy, and shared mourning. Biden stated: “Good afternoon. Last night, I spoke with Donald Trump. I’m sincerely grateful that he’s doing well and recovering. We had a short but good conversation. Jill and I are keeping him and his family in our prayers.” Similarly, Harris stated, “My husband, Doug, and I are thankful he was not seriously injured. As soon as we saw what was happening, we said a prayer for his well-being, and our thoughts immediately turned to Melania, whom we have met, and their family.” Their carefully chosen openings (referencing prayers, emphasizing compassion, and offering condolences) situated the event within a context of unity and moral decency.

Trump, however, declined to use the attempted assassination as an opportunity for national reflection or to define it as a moment of vulnerability. Instead, he framed it as an affirmation of collective strength and loyalty. He did so by stating, “Let me begin this evening by expressing my gratitude to the American people for your outpouring of love and support following the assassination attempt at my rally on Saturday.” He also treated the event as a test of *his* character, faith, and fortitude. Accordingly, he observed, “There was blood pouring everywhere, and yet in a certain way I felt very safe because I had God on my side. I felt that.” In sum, Trump interpreted the shooting as a providential trial and leveraged religious and heroic imagery to promote resilience and emphasize courage.

Situation Modification and Emotional Direction

Both Biden and Harris used situation modification to translate emotion into institutional and behavioural control. Biden did so by ordering reviews and investigations in an attempt to transform anxiety into procedural assurance. To this end, he stated: “Let the FBI do their job, and their partner agencies do their job. I’ve instructed that this investigation be thorough and swift. And the investigators will have every resource they need to get this done.” Harris followed suit by not only urging restraint and civility, but also redirecting the public’s attention to the importance of meaningful deliberation in a democratic republic and the gravity of the upcoming presidential election. She remarked, “At the same time, the hallmark of American democracy, the hallmark of any democracy is a strong competition of ideas, policies, and a vision for the future. And just as we must reject political violence, we must also embrace a robust discussion about what is at stake in this election.” Hence, the two Democrats tried to harness emotions to reinforce the value of following established processes and procedures, boost confidence in institutions like the FBI, and reaffirm the nation’s commitment to the values that underpin the deliberative aspects of democracy. Simply put, they operationalized emotional regulation in systemic and normative terms.

Trump and Vance also relied on situation modification, but they employed this technique to either mobilize their supporters or to cast aspersions on their political opponents and detractors. Linking the assassination attempt to renewal and continuity, Trump commented: “Four months from now, we will have an incredible victory, and we will begin the four greatest years in the history of our country.” Rather than making an aspirational statement like Trump, Vance affixed blame. He directly attributed the incident to Democratic rhetoric, explicitly blaming the Biden campaign for inciting violence. Here, he remarked: “Today is not just some isolated incident. The central premise of the Biden campaign is

that President Donald Trump is an authoritarian fascist who must be stopped at all costs. That rhetoric led directly to President Trump's attempted assassination." These statements illustrate how both Trump and Vance were drawing on emotions to promote collective determination. Trump tapped the emotion of pride (in what could be achieved), while Vance turned to the emotion of fear by inviting Americans—particularly Republican supporters—to think about how plans for a "better" future could be derailed by Trump's death.

Attention Regulation: Inclusion versus Mobilization

Both sides employed attention regulation to steer collective focus, but with different emotional economies in mind. Biden invited Americans to focus on national unity, while Harris directed the public's attention toward both gratitude and unity. Biden, for example, called unity "the most elusive goal of all," adding that "nothing is more important than that right now – unity." Harris expressed her appreciation for the U.S. Secret Service, first responders, and local authorities, then emphasized national unity through her patriotic statement that "the United States of America is the greatest democracy the world has ever known." What Biden and Harris said, of course, matters but it is equally important to consider what they did not say. Neither Democrat made any attempt whatsoever to attribute responsibility for the failed attempt on Trump's life. By purposely ignoring who should be blamed while underscoring the importance of unity and gratitude, both leaders diverted the public's attention away from a salient concern that is worthy of public discussion.

In contrast, Trump invited his audience to focus on symbols of courage and collective endurance. He did so by remarking, "As you already know, the assassin's bullet came within a quarter of an inch of taking my life." In a similar vein, Vance elaborated further: "I want all Americans to go and watch the video of a would-be assassin coming a quarter of an inch from taking his life. Consider the lies they told you about Donald Trump, and then look at that photo of him, defiant, fist in the air. When Donald Trump rose to his feet in that Pennsylvania field, all of America stood with him." Both of these statements are channelling admiration and pride, and they are intended to solidify political support and to mobilize supporters. Neither statement tamps down the expression of emotions; quite the opposite—especially the statement offered by Vance. His statement gives his audience license to feel a strong sense of moral outrage, then directs this anger toward those ostensibly responsible for the assassination attempt. By vaguely referring only to "they," he is inviting his audience to determine who is responsible so as to amplify the impact of his statement.

Ultimately, the messages that issued from both sets of leaders used active voice to signal agency and on lexical cohesion to communicate programmatic intent and/or shared purpose. The Democratic leaders repeatedly drew on emotionally charged lexemes that emphasized terms like "unity," and "democracy;" and both Democrats tried to project decency through expressions of concern for Trump and his family. These terms and expressions essentially functioned as inclusive moral anchors. Although the Republicans used similar rhetorical techniques, they relied on very different terminology, and they used the techniques to achieve very different ends. Their use of terms and phrases such as "fist in the air" (fight), "great[ness]," "country" and themes of courage were designed to project strength, encourage endurance, engender pride, and mobilize supporters. Even Trump's invocation of God ("I had God on my Side") was an expression of strength. With this lan-

guage, he was essentially claiming that he is resilient and perhaps even invincible because God stands with him, and more subtly, he was signalling that it is virtuous to remain defiant and strong when faced with adversity. If defiant strength were not virtuous, then surely God (presumably righteous and the fount of virtue) would be unwilling to stand with him during this crucial test of his character.

Cognitive Change: Moral Reflection versus Providential Destiny

A similar pattern emerged in regard to cognitive reframing. Both sets of leaders utilized this rhetorical technique, but their messaging was fundamentally different. The Democrats' cognitive reframing centred on democracy and moral renewal. Biden, for example, cast the failed assassination as a test of national character ("It's not who we are as a nation."), while Harris used it to normatively define the boundaries of democratic civility. To this end, she stated: "The bottom line is no one should have to fear for the safety of a loved one because they serve in public office." In essence, both Democrats encouraged the public to harness the fear and anger caused by the attempt on Trump's life by inviting citizens to view the unsettling incident as an occasion for moral reflection and as an opportunity to reaffirm the nation's commitment to civil debate.

The Republican cognitive reframing, by contrast, used the event to support a narrative of providence and destiny. Trump portrayed his survival as "by the grace of almighty God," transforming what could be perceived as vulnerability into a divine affirmation of his leadership and a confirmation of his mission. Vance reinforced this narrative by stating, "My friends, tonight is a night of hope, a celebration of what America once was, and with God's grace, what it will soon be again." Unlike the two Democrats who sought to normalize emotion through moral reasoning, both Republicans sublimated emotion into strength and purpose.

Not surprisingly, the ideological content of the messages issuing from the two sets of leaders was drastically different. Biden and Harris discursively expressed democratic humanism—faith in institutional justice, empathy, and civic self-restraint. Conversely, Trump and Vance discursively articulated providential populism—faith in divine purpose, patriotic strength, and moral struggle. Both Democrats emphasized an obligation to peace and moral unity, while the two Republicans stressed an obligation to perseverance through heroic determination. Thus, both sets of leaders used obligation modality, but to further different ends.

Response Modulation and Emotional Modelling

Biden and Harris performed response modulation by modelling calmness, empathy, and restraint. Biden's measured tone, slow cadence, and references to prayer invited the public to emulate his composed demeanour. Biden's opening statement (discussed earlier) is also instructive here: "Thankfully, former [President] Trump is not seriously (...) [injured]. (...) I'm grateful he's doing well. And Jill and I keep him and his family in our prayers." Harris also performed response modulation by issuing a message to the family of Corey Comperatore, the person who lost their life in the deadly attack. The tone of her message was solemn and dignified, and projected empathy, sympathy, and concern. Here she stated, "Our heart goes out to the family of Corey Comperatore, a true hero who died protecting

his family. And Doug and I, of course, are holding them close to in our hearts.” In both instances, the two Democrats were attempting to model a restrained emotional response to abate tensions and lower the level of emotional arousal of those who received their message.

Trump and Vance, in contrast, modelled toughness, fortitude, resoluteness and defiance. Trump’s steady narration of the attack and insistence on “standing before you with confidence, strength, and hope” projected assuredness and controlled power. Vance furthered this narrative by describing how Trump behaved after his brush with death. Vance stated, “And then President Trump flew to Milwaukee and got back to work. Now that’s the man I’ve gotten to know personally over the last few years. He is tough and he is, but he cares about people. He can stand defiant against an assassin one moment, and call for national healing the next.” Although Trump and Vance modelled how their audience ought to behave, their messaging is not indicative response modulation at all. Quite the opposite. Rather than encouraging their audience to reduce their level of emotional arousal, they are trying to channel their audience’s emotions to facilitate unity and perseverance. In fact, Vance’s tweet (quoted in our earlier discussion of situation modification) was designed to heighten emotional arousal by directly and unambiguously blaming the assassination attempt on the Biden campaign’s rhetoric.

Aristotelian Rhetoric

Both sets of leaders relied heavily on Aristotelian rhetorical practices after the attempt on Trump’s life. First, both sides demonstrated the use of *ethos* by trying to engender trust, establish their credibility, and enhance their perceived moral authority. The two Democrats practiced *ethos* by relying on their institutional authority (current President and Vice President), by portraying themselves as morally credible, and offering expressions of empathy for Trump, his family, and the Comperatore family. Biden’s outreach to Trump is especially indicative of *ethos* given his empathetic/measured tone and steady cadence, while Harris’s overtures appealed to temperance and decency. The *ethos* of the two Republicans rested on strength, fortitude, and divine providence. Trump, most notably, positioned himself as an “anointed survivor,” while Vance assumed the role of a loyal witness testifying to Trump’s courage, determination, moxie, resoluteness, and ostensible connection with God. Second, both sides practiced *logos* by offering reasoned arguments and by explaining causal relationships. The Democrats’ *logos* tended to be procedural, normative, and rooted in democratic values. The Republicans, on the other hand, demonstrated *logos* by alluding to causal chains linking the attack, unity, and renewal. Finally, both sides relied on *pathos* by appealing to their audience’s sensibilities. Although *pathos* was evident in the messages issuing from the two Democrats, their use of it was modest, understated, and passive—subtle expressions of empathy, concern, sorrow, and solidarity. In stark contrast, the two Republicans dominated the emotional field. Rather than trying to subdue and mollify emotions, they tried to provoke an emotional response in those who received their messages. Shock was transformed into pride, and fear converted to purpose. This is best illustrated by Vance’s tweet where he bypasses *ethos* and *logos*, turning directly to *pathos* so as to elicit the emotion of anger.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our analysis shows that both Democratic and Republican leaders methodically attempted to regulate the emotions expressed by the American public in the immediate aftermath of the failed attempt on Trump's life. Although both sides relied on the same rhetorical toolkit, their messaging diverged sharply. Biden and Harris stressed the need for emotional restraint, the importance of civil discourse, and the importance of pursuing accountability through institutional channels. Consistent with Trump's "Fight, Fight, Fight" exclamation on the Pennsylvania stage, the Republican message was much simpler: Adversity must be defiantly met with courage, strength, fortitude, and resilience. Both camps offered emotional appeals to stabilize the shaken and traumatized nation, but the way the two sides approached this objective could not have been more different. Democrats tried to diffuse tensions, soothe, and reduce the magnitude of the public's emotional response. The Republican rhetoric, however, was designed to activate emotions and enlist them to mobilize supporters.

These findings speak directly to the extant literature on political leadership and crisis management. First, they validate Boin et al. (2016) and Ansell et al.'s (2014) work on core crisis leadership functions—sense-making, coordinating responses, public meaning-making, accountability management, and learning—by confirming that leaders actually perform these functions as they go about regulating the public's emotions during times of crisis. Biden's calls for calm and for a procedural review of the incident exemplify sense-making and an effort to maintain the public's trust, while Trump's emphasis on resilience is an attempt to coordinate the public's response. Second, the results resonate with Gigliotti's (2024) emphasis on cultivating resilience, meaning-making, and facilitating renewal in the post-crisis phase. Both camps attempted to transform the shock that the public experienced into a resource for collective endurance, albeit through very different emotional pathways.

Although our work reinforces some of the literature, it also shows there are limits to the conventional wisdom concerning how leaders manage public sentiment during times of crisis. First, the emotional intelligence literature (e.g., Goleman, 2020; Ciulla, 2023) suggests that leaders who are emotionally astute may be better at crisis management because they are able to recognize the emotional state of their audience and more skilled crafting messages that play on their audience's emotions. Our findings certainly lend support to this view as the two sets of leaders in our study issued messages that fit the situational context and were attuned to the emotional state of the American public. However, we think that there is more going on here than simply emotionally astute politicians crafting messages that resonate with their audience because discursive form and moral framing mattered in profound ways. In essence, the leaders we studied were not only orchestrating their audience's emotions through rhetoric, but also trying to dictate which emotional responses were morally appropriate and which ones were not. This suggests that although EI-centric explanations are helpful, they only offer partial insight into what happens in situations where there are different moral orders competing within the same political arena. Second, the role that leaders play in regulating collective emotions through their rhetoric cannot be fully explained through Goldenberg's (2024) four categories of regulation strategies—situation targeting, attention modification, cognitive change, and response modulation. While these categories capture the mechanics of how emotional regulation is

accomplished, they do not fully account for how political discourse itself becomes the basis of emotional governance in moments of national crisis. Once again, we think that the missing piece of the puzzle lies in the additional, cross-cutting dimension of regulation that involves discursive framing and moral anchoring.

Our study catapults us forward by narrowing the gap left by Goldenberg (2024) and the literature on emotional intelligence. The missing element, which we call “discursive-moral regulation,” captures how leaders use language not merely to redirect emotions but to redefine the moral and epistemic boundaries of collective feeling. Through framing, narrative sequencing, and the invocation of shared ethical vocabularies (“unity,” “family,” “fight,” “democracy”), political leaders actively construct and police the boundaries of the emotional playing field by trying to dictate which emotions are appropriate for citizens to experience, interpret, and express. Rather than simply increasing or decreasing emotional arousal, discursive-moral regulation stabilizes the audience’s emotional state by providing it with moral coordinates that stipulate what emotions are socially legitimate or illegitimate. For example, Biden and Harris employed moral anchoring to channel grief and anxiety into civic empathy and democratic restraint. Their discourse was not merely designed to divert the public’s attention and/or alter its cognition; it defined which emotions (compassion, composure, and civic pride) were morally valid responses. In contrast, Trump and Vance employed discursive-moral regulation to transform fear and anger into moralized defiance, framing these emotions as patriotic and virtuous. In both cases, language was the conduit through which emotional legitimacy was either conferred or withdrawn, and language served as the vehicle through which “inappropriate” emotional responses were sanctioned so as to move the audience to the desired emotional affect.

In sum, we corroborated central insights from the crisis leadership and resilience scholarship (Ansell et al., 2014; Boin et al., 2016; Gigliotti, 2024), and more importantly, we offered a meaningful theoretical contribution to the study of how collective emotions are regulated. By advancing and validating the concept of “discursive-moral regulation,” (a bridge between emotion regulation theory and critical discourse), we demonstrated that discourse is more than just an avenue by which emotion is expressed but rather a tool that leaders use for affective governance. Leaders, we discovered, do not merely manage emotions during times of crisis; they try to use their rhetorical toolkit to shape how citizens interpret and inhabit their emotional roles within the polity. Recognising this regulatory mechanism furthers our understanding of how rhetoric organises, legitimises, and mobilises collective affect. Therefore, future scholars should consider integrating the normative and communicative dimensions of leadership rhetoric into their models. Second, there are normative and ethical implications that deserve consideration. When leaders engage in discursive-moral regulation, they may very well accomplish the laudable goal of stabilizing their polity and restoring tranquillity, but this may prevent members of the polity from authentically expressing their emotions. Another possibility worth consideration is that political leaders may use discursive-moral regulation as a tactic for accomplishing goals that are antithetical to democratic values.

This was a pilot study based on a small number of select communications that issued from leaders during a very narrow time period, leaving ample opportunities for future researchers to extend our knowledge. Future researchers should consider expanding the scope of their inquiries to encompass communications from other time periods, cross-national settings, and messages presented in a purely visual form. We explored communi-

cations that leaders directed toward members of the public in top-down fashion, but it is also possible that citizens attempt to regulate the emotions of their leaders in a bottom-up manner, perhaps through direct correspondence or indirectly through their social media posts. Although valuable, our work does not consider how the audience received the messages such that important inroads could be made by combining discourse analysis with audience-centred evidence gleaned from surveys, physiological indicators, or digital-trace measures. Similarly, experimental designs could offer valuable insight as we did not explore the effects that the messages exerted on the audience's opinions, attitudes, and behaviours. Finally, given the cross-sectional nature of our work, a longitudinal analysis that tracks changes in moral vocabularies and affective patterns over time would productively extend our knowledge.

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