

การแบ่งประเภทบทบาทในข่าวการประท้วง:  
การวิเคราะห์การมีส่วนร่วมของนักการเมือง นักวิจารณ์ และผู้ประท้วง  
Categorizing Roles in Protest News:  
An Analysis of the Participation of Politicians, Critics and Protesters

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Received: August 30, 2025 Revised: January 29, 2026 Accepted: February 5, 2026

### บทคัดย่อ

ข่าวการประท้วงเป็นพื้นที่สำคัญของการประกอบสร้างการมีส่วนร่วมของพลเมืองในเชิงวาทกรรม โดยมีบทบาทในการกำหนดความเข้าใจของสาธารณชนเกี่ยวกับความชอบธรรม การคัดค้าน และการมีส่วนร่วม ในระบอบประชาธิปไตย บทความวิจัยนี้ศึกษาว่านักการเมือง นักวิจารณ์ และผู้ประท้วงถูกนำเสนออย่างไร ในวาทกรรมข่าวการประท้วง และการนำเสนอดังกล่าวมีส่วนต่อการสร้างความหมายเชิงอุดมการณ์อย่างไร โดยอาศัยแนวคิดจากการศึกษาวาทกรรมสื่อและทฤษฎีการประเมินค่า (Appraisal theory) บทความนี้ เสนอกรอบสำหรับวิเคราะห์ว่าการประเมินค่า การอ้างแหล่งที่มา และการจัดสรรบทบาทมีส่วนทำให้รูปแบบต่าง ๆ ของการมีส่วนร่วมสาธารณะได้รับหรือถูกลดทอนความชอบธรรมอย่างไร บทความเสนอนักการเมือง มักถูกวางตำแหน่งให้เป็นผู้มีอำนาจเชิงสถาบันและเป็นผู้คลี่คลายปัญหา ซึ่งช่วยเสริมสร้างวาทกรรม เรื่องระเบียบและการปกครอง ขณะที่นักวิจารณ์ทำหน้าที่เป็นผู้มีอำนาจในการตีความที่ช่วยไกล่เกลี่ย ความเข้าใจของผู้รับสาร แม้ว่าการปรากฏตัวของพวกเขาจะถูกกำหนดโดยลำดับความสำคัญด้านบรรณาธิการ และอุดมการณ์ก็ตาม ในทางตรงกันข้าม ผู้ประท้วงกลับอยู่ในตำแหน่งทางวาทกรรมที่ถูกโต้แย้งมากที่สุด เนื่องจากการเลือกใช้คำศัพท์และการประเมินค่าอาจประกอบสร้างให้พวกเขาเป็นได้ทั้งผู้กระทำการ ในระบอบประชาธิปไตยหรือแหล่งของความปั่นป่วน ด้วยการเน้นให้เห็นการนำเสนอตัวแสดงทางสังคม ในเชิงความสัมพันธ์ บทความนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าภาษาข่าวที่ใช้เป็นกิจวัตรมีส่วนช่วยกำหนดขอบเขตของ ความชอบธรรม การมีส่วนร่วม และความเป็นพลเมืองอย่างไร ทั้งยังนำเสนอข้อสนับสนุนเชิงทฤษฎี ต่อการศึกษาวาทกรรมเชิงวิพากษ์และการศึกษาสื่อ

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## Abstract

Protest news is a key site for the discursive construction of civic participation, shaping public understandings of legitimacy, dissent, and democratic engagement. This research paper examines how politicians, critics, and protesters are represented in protest news discourse and how these representations contribute to ideological meaning-making. Drawing on media discourse studies and Appraisal Theory, it proposes a framework for analyzing how evaluation, attribution, and role allocation legitimize or delegitimize different forms of public participation. The paper argues that politicians are commonly positioned as institutional authorities and agents of resolution, reinforcing discourses of order and governance. Critics function as interpretive authorities who mediate audience understanding, although their visibility is shaped by editorial and ideological priorities. Protesters, by contrast, occupy the most contested discursive position, as lexical and evaluative choices may construct them either as democratic actors or as sources of disruption. By foregrounding the relational representation of social actors, this paper highlights how routine news language helps define the boundaries of legitimacy, participation, and citizenship, offering a theoretically grounded contribution to critical discourse and media studies.

**Keywords:** Protest News, Roles, Participation, Politicians, Critics, Protesters, Appraisal Theory, Ideological meaning-making, Media discourse, Critical discourse studies

## 1. Introduction

Protest has long been recognized as a central form of collective political participation through which groups articulate grievances, contest authority, and pursue social change (della Porta & Diani, 2020; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Yet protests do not enter public consciousness as “events” alone. In contemporary media environments, what the public comes to know as a protest is often mediated through news discourse through the selection of voices, the organization of narratives, and the evaluative language used to describe actors and actions. Because news is not a neutral mirror of reality, media representation becomes a key site where legitimacy, responsibility, and social order are discursively negotiated (Entman, 1993; Hall, 1980).

A substantial body of scholarship has shown that protest coverage is shaped by patterned journalistic routines that can marginalize dissenting voices and emphasize conflict, spectacle, or deviance what is commonly discussed as the protest paradigm. Research demonstrates that news tends to privilege official perspectives, foreground confrontation, and rely on frames that may delegitimize protesters, particularly when protest claims challenge dominant power arrangements (Brown & Harlow, 2019). Importantly, recent work suggests that protest representation is increasingly complex in hybrid media contexts: delegitimizing and legitimizing frames may coexist, and digital technologies may be framed simultaneously as empowering tools and as controversial instruments of disruption (Balan, 2024). This implies that ideological meanings are not only transmitted through broad frames but also through the subtle interplay of narrative positioning and evaluative language.

Recent studies further underline that protest coverage is not simply “about protesters.” Instead, it is an interactional communicative field in which multiple actors compete for definitional power over what the protest “is” and what it “means.” For example, research on framing in polarized media contexts shows that outlets aligned with different political positions construct distinct portrayals of protest participants, often mobilizing conflict- and morality-based frames to orient audiences toward particular interpretations (Jevtić, 2025). In addition, scholarship on evolving protest coverage in digital ecosystems highlights that legacy media and social media may function as partially separate systems, producing different forms of proximity/distance to protesters and shifting the conditions under which protests gain

legitimacy (Aharoni, 2025). Audience-side research also indicates that people especially youth frequently perceive protest coverage as ideologically loaded and emotionally consequential, which can shape trust, political engagement, and interpretations of collective action (Vlazakis & Baka, 2023).

Within this discursive terrain, three social actor categories recurrently occupy central roles in protest news: politicians, critics, and protesters. Crucially, these roles are not independent; they are relational positions that co-produce one another within news narratives. Politicians tend to function as institutional authorities whose statements can define the “official” meaning of protest whether as democratic participation, social disorder, or a security threat. Critics (e.g., academics, commentators, lawyers, journalists, and public intellectuals) frequently operate as interpretive mediators who frame protest events through explanatory and evaluative discourse, lending moral, historical, or ideological context. Protesters, as visible participants in collective action, are often subject to intensified evaluation, where legitimacy may be negotiated through labels (e.g., protesters, activists, rioters) and through moral assessment of motives and methods. This relational configuration matters because news discourse typically hierarchizes voices: institutional authority is often normalized, critical commentary is selectively amplified, and protesters are positioned as objects of evaluation whose agency may be celebrated, minimized, or problematized.

Despite extensive research on protest framing, existing work frequently (1) focuses on protesters alone, (2) treats “sources” as a technical issue rather than a role-constructing practice, or (3) analyzes frames without sufficiently theorizing how multiple actor categories are positioned together to construct ideological meaning. Consequently, we still need a clearer conceptual account of how protest news assigns role identities and allocates credibility across politicians, critics, and protesters within the same discursive space. Addressing this gap is especially important because ideology in protest news is not only communicated through explicit political claims but also through how roles are built: who is treated as an authority, who is treated as a moral judge, and who is treated as legitimate civic participants versus disruptive outsiders.

Accordingly, this article examines how protest news constructs the participation of politicians, critics, and protesters and how such role constructions contribute to ideological

meaning-making. Building on critical media theory and discourse-oriented approaches to representation, the article argues that protest news functions as a structured arena of role allocation in which actor categories are positioned through narrative hierarchy, sourcing practices, and evaluative language. By conceptualizing these roles relationally, the study contributes to media and discourse scholarship by clarifying how ideology becomes naturalized in protest coverage through the patterned construction of participation and legitimacy.

## 2. Protest News

Building on the discussion in the Introduction, protest news can be understood not merely as a neutral record of contentious events but as a central discursive space in which social conflict is interpreted, organized, and evaluated. News reporting functions as a mediating force between moments of civil unrest and public consciousness, shaping how protests are understood, judged, and remembered. Through editorial decisions concerning visibility, tone, sourcing, and emphasis, protest news plays a decisive role in constructing legitimacy both of protest movements themselves and of the authorities responding to them.

Extensive scholarship in media and communication studies demonstrates that the framing of protest events has direct implications for democratic participation. When protests are framed primarily through violence, disorder, or irrationality, they tend to be associated with deviance and social threat, legitimizing state intervention or repression. Conversely, when coverage foregrounds grievances, collective goals, and peaceful organization, protests are more likely to be interpreted as legitimate expressions of civic engagement deserving public sympathy and support. These contrasting representational strategies reveal that protest news is not simply descriptive but evaluative, actively shaping moral judgments about participation and dissent.

This evaluative power renders protest news a key site of ideological struggle. Empirical research across diverse sociopolitical contexts illustrates how media representations of protest reflect and reproduce broader power relations. In the United States, coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement exposed sharp partisan divides, with competing narratives oscillating between racial justice and law-and-order frames. In Hong Kong, protest reporting became a battleground between democratic discourses emphasizing civil liberties and authoritarian

narratives centered on sovereignty and national security. Similarly, during Thailand's 2020–2021 demonstrations, state-affiliated media frequently framed dissent as unlawful or destabilizing, while independent outlets highlighted demands for democratic reform. Such cases illustrate what Hall (1980) conceptualized as ideological encoding, whereby media discourse simultaneously reflects existing power structures and actively contributes to their reproduction.

Central to this process is the unequal distribution of discursive authority within protest news. Official sources particularly politicians and state representatives are often granted privileged visibility and treated as credible definers of events. In contrast, protesters are frequently represented through frames of emotion, irrationality, or deviance, while their demands receive comparatively limited analytical attention. This pattern aligns with Herman and Chomsky's (1988) argument that news media tend to sustain elite ideological dominance by normalizing institutional perspectives and marginalizing grassroots voices. Protest news, therefore, does not merely mirror social conflict; it actively constructs the discursive boundaries of legitimacy, authority, and civic participation.

Importantly, protest news operates as a communicative arena in which participation and legitimacy are continuously negotiated under conditions of unequal power. While protesters constitute the most visible agents of collective action, they are rarely positioned as authoritative interpreters of their own movements. Instead, politicians and critics are frequently foregrounded as rational evaluators who explain, justify, condemn, or reframe dissent. This asymmetrical allocation of voice reinforces hegemonic norms that cast institutional authority as stabilizing and grassroots mobilization as potentially disruptive. As a result, news discourse not only shapes public understanding of protest events but also regulates who is perceived as a legitimate participant in democratic life.

Understanding protest news in this way underscores the need to move beyond treating media coverage as a background context and instead to analyze it as an active ideological mechanism. Protest news is a site where meanings of participation, legitimacy, and resistance are discursively produced through patterned framing practices and role assignments. This insight provides the conceptual foundation for the following section, which examines how ideology operates within protest news more explicitly by identifying the dominant ideological orientations that emerge through the representation of different social actors.

### 3. Ideologies in Protest News

Protest news does not merely recount episodes of public dissent; it operates as a powerful ideological site in which meanings of civic participation are constructed, evaluated, and normalized. In democratic societies, participation is widely regarded as a cornerstone of political life, enabling individuals and groups to articulate demands, contest authority, and engage in collective decision-making. However, the media's representation of protest participation profoundly shapes how such engagement is understood, valued, or discredited. Through framing practices, source selection, and narrative organization, protest news becomes a discursive arena where competing ideological interpretations of participation are negotiated.

Ideology in protest news is expressed not only through explicit political positions but also through the patterned ways in which participation is represented. Media discourse can affirm participation as a legitimate democratic practice by foregrounding grievances, collective goals, and moral claims. At the same time, it can undermine participation by framing protests as chaotic, unlawful, or socially disruptive, thereby discouraging public sympathy and legitimizing repression. These contrasting representations reveal how protest news actively defines the boundaries of acceptable civic engagement, particularly for marginalized or oppositional groups whose access to institutional power is already limited.

Central to this ideological process is the differential positioning of social actors involved in protest events. Protest news rarely treats all participants as equal contributors to public discourse. Instead, politicians are frequently granted authority as institutional representatives who define the official meaning of events and propose policy-oriented solutions. Critics such as academics, journalists, and commentators often function as interpretive intermediaries who contextualize protests, offering explanations that translate dissent into recognizable ideological frameworks. Protesters themselves, despite being the primary agents of collective action, are commonly positioned as objects of evaluation rather than authoritative voices, their legitimacy negotiated through moral judgment, emotional framing, and assessments of order or disorder. This hierarchical allocation of voice reflects deeper power relations embedded within media institutions and journalistic norms.

Participation in protest news therefore extends beyond physical presence in demonstrations to include broader forms of representation, interpretation, and symbolic

performance within the public sphere. Media function as platforms on which actors perform identities, with their visibility and legitimacy shaped by ideological framing and audience interpretation. As political communication research suggests, public conversation mediated through news plays a crucial role in connecting information consumption to political action, enabling audiences to interpret events collectively and align themselves with particular ideological positions (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). In the digital era, these dynamics have intensified, as participation now encompasses online expression, mediated commentary, and the circulation of protest narratives across platforms.

Importantly, ideology in protest news is not imposed unilaterally but emerges through the interaction of institutional authority, mediated critique, and grassroots activism. Protest coverage is co-produced through the interplay of politicians' official statements, critics' interpretive commentary, and protesters' embodied or mediated expressions of dissent. Yet these contributions are not equally weighted. Media framing practices tend to privilege institutional voices while subjecting protester participation to heightened scrutiny and moral evaluation. As a result, protest news shapes public perceptions not only of specific events but also of who counts as a legitimate political actor and what forms of participation are deemed acceptable.

Understanding these ideological dynamics requires moving beyond broad discussions of framing and participation to examine how ideology is constructed at the level of discourse itself. While this section has outlined the dominant ideological patterns through which protest participation is represented, the following subsection turns to the linguistic dimension of protest news. By analyzing specific lexical choices and evaluative language used to describe politicians, critics, and protesters, Section 3.1 demonstrates how ideological meanings are produced and stabilized through words, thereby providing concrete textual evidence for the arguments advanced here.

### **3.1 Ideological Meaning at the Lexical Level**

While the previous section has outlined the dominant ideological patterns through which protest participation is represented, ideology in protest news becomes most visible at the lexical level. Ideological positioning is not conveyed solely through broad frames or narrative structures, but through specific word choices that evaluate actors, actions, and

events. Lexical selection functions as a subtle yet powerful mechanism through which news discourse assigns legitimacy, responsibility, and moral value. By examining how particular words are used to describe politicians, critics, and protesters, it becomes possible to observe how ideology is embedded in routine journalistic language.

One of the most salient lexical strategies in protest news involves the naming and labeling of social actors. In coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests, for example, CNN frequently referred to participants as protesters or demonstrators when reporting on peaceful marches, as in reports describing crowds that “gathered to demand racial justice.” Such labels carry relatively neutral or positive Judgment, aligning protest participation with democratic expression. In contrast, during episodes emphasizing confrontation, both CNN and The New York Times have used terms such as rioters or people involved in unrest when describing property damage or clashes with police. Although these labels may appear descriptive, they encode negative moral evaluation by foregrounding disorder and illegality, thereby positioning protest participation as deviant rather than civic. Through these lexical choices, news discourse implicitly evaluates protesters’ legitimacy without explicitly stating a political stance.

Ideological meaning is further constructed through verbs that attribute agency and intention. In reports on protest-related policy responses, The New York Times commonly introduces political actors through verbal processes such as said, announced, defended, or called for, as in sentences noting that “the mayor said the city would restore order” or that “officials announced new security measures.” These verbs construct politicians as rational decision-makers and authoritative definers of events. By contrast, protesters are often associated with material processes such as clashed, blocked, set fire to, or refused to disperse, particularly in moments of conflict. This asymmetrical distribution of agency frames institutional actors as deliberative and responsible, while grassroots actors are framed primarily through physical action and disruption, reinforcing an ideological hierarchy between authority and dissent.

Adjectives and adverbs also play a crucial role in shaping evaluative meaning. In protest coverage by CNN, modifiers such as peaceful, largely calm, or organized are frequently used to qualify demonstrations during daytime reporting. These descriptors function as positive Appreciation, legitimizing protest as orderly and socially acceptable. Conversely, The New York

Times has at times described protests as violent, chaotic, or unruly when focusing on nighttime events or clashes, intensifying perceptions of threat and instability. Within the Appraisal framework, such lexical items guide readers toward particular emotional and moral responses, even when the article maintains a formal tone of objectivity.

Critics occupy a distinct position within this lexical economy. Their voices are often introduced through interpretive verbs such as argued, warned, explained, or noted. For instance, expert commentary in *The New York Times* frequently includes statements in which scholars or analysts “warned that heavy-handed policing could escalate tensions” or “argued that the protests reflected deeper structural inequalities.” These reporting verbs position critics as cognitive mediators who translate protest events into broader ideological narratives, lending authority to particular interpretations while marginalizing others. The selective inclusion and framing of critical voices thus contributes to the normalization of certain ideological explanations of protest.

Taken together, these lexical patterns demonstrate that ideology in protest news is not imposed through overt political commentary but is produced through routine linguistic choices that shape how participation is understood. Words do not merely describe protest events; they evaluate them, distribute authority among actors, and regulate the boundaries of legitimate civic engagement. By foregrounding institutional voices as rational and responsible while subjecting protesters to intensified moral scrutiny, lexical choices reinforce broader ideological hierarchies embedded in news discourse.

This analysis of ideological meaning at the lexical level provides concrete textual evidence for the arguments advanced in the previous sections. The following sections build on this foundation by examining in greater detail how politicians, critics, and protesters are discursively positioned through these evaluative language patterns. In doing so, the discussion demonstrates how ideology is systematically embedded in protest news through the interaction of language, power, and participation.

## 4. Politicians

Building on the lexical patterns discussed in the previous section, politicians in protest news are discursively constructed as central institutional actors whose authority is reinforced through both narrative positioning and evaluative language. News coverage typically portrays politicians as responsible for maintaining public order, negotiating policy responses, or managing social conflict. Through these representations, politicians are positioned as legitimate problem-solvers and primary definers of protest meaning, while protest participation is framed as something that must ultimately be addressed through formal political channels. This positioning privileges institutional power and promotes an ideology that values stability, hierarchy, and policy-driven solutions over grassroots mobilization or civil resistance.

At the level of discourse, the authority of politicians is sustained through recurrent lexical and narrative strategies. Their statements are frequently introduced through neutral or authoritative reporting verbs such as said, announced, emphasized, or defended, which construct political actors as rational and credible sources of interpretation. In contrast to protesters whose actions are often described through material processes emphasizing disruption politicians are associated with deliberative and communicative processes that foreground control, responsibility, and governance. This asymmetry reinforces an ideological hierarchy in which institutional voices are treated as legitimate interpreters of protest, while dissenting voices are positioned as issues to be managed rather than perspectives to be prioritized.

The ideological function of this framing becomes particularly visible during high-profile protest movements, such as the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the United States. During these events, politicians' appearances whether expressing support, condemnation, or calls for order were carefully staged and widely circulated across news platforms. Media attention to political speeches, symbolic gestures, and policy announcements foregrounded elite perspectives, often narrowing the discursive space available for grassroots voices. As a result, political participation was framed less as a collective civic process and more as an institutional response centered on leadership and authority.

Politicians also strategically use protest contexts for image management and ideological positioning. Media representations may frame political involvement in protests as

evidence of empathy and leadership, or alternatively as opportunistic performances aimed at consolidating power. The interpretation of such actions depends not only on journalistic framing but also on audience reception. Drawing on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, audiences may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings of political performances in protest contexts. Wahl-Jorgensen (2008) further emphasizes the role of emotion in shaping these interpretations, as audiences respond affectively to perceived authenticity or manipulation. Consequently, political participation in protest news becomes ideologically charged, capable of reinforcing institutional trust or intensifying public polarization.

The rise of digital media and participatory journalism has introduced new dynamics into the representation of politicians in protest news. Practices such as "gatewatching" (Bruns, 2005) allow citizens to contest and reinterpret elite narratives, while social media platforms enable rapid circulation of counter-discourses. Nevertheless, institutional power continues to grant politicians privileged visibility and agenda-setting influence (Kammer, 2013). Government-aligned outlets tend to downplay dissent and emphasize order, whereas oppositional or independent media highlight conflict and ideological division, producing divergent constructions of political legitimacy. These competing representations underscore the contested nature of protest news as a site where political authority is continuously negotiated.

In this context, politicians function not merely as participants in protest events but as symbolic anchors of institutional ideology. Their discursive positioning reinforces norms of governance, authority, and social order, shaping public expectations about how protest participation should be resolved. While politicians are granted legitimacy as authoritative voices, this privileging simultaneously marginalizes alternative forms of participation and interpretation. The following section turns to critics, whose role in protest news differs from that of politicians by emphasizing interpretation and mediation rather than institutional authority, thereby further complicating the ideological landscape of protest representation.

## 5. Critics

In contrast to politicians, who are typically positioned as institutional authorities, critics occupy a distinctive role in protest news as interpreters and mediators of meaning. Critics including academics, journalists, commentators, and public intellectuals operate largely

outside formal political structures, which affords them greater discursive flexibility to question official narratives, expose underlying ideological assumptions, and offer alternative interpretations of protest events. Their participation exemplifies what Hall (1980) conceptualized as cognitive mediation, a process through which meaning is not passively transmitted but actively negotiated between texts, producers, and audiences.

Critics frequently draw upon cultural, historical, and political knowledge to reframe protest events in ways that challenge dominant institutional perspectives. Rather than defining protests through order–disorder binaries, critical commentary often situates dissent within broader structures of inequality, governance, and democratic struggle. As Fiske (1987) argues, meaning is not fixed within media texts but emerges through interaction with audiences, and critics play a key role in shaping this interaction by providing interpretive frames that guide public understanding. Through analysis, explanation, and moral evaluation, critics translate protest actions into intelligible narratives that can either legitimize or problematize collective resistance.

The ideological function of critics is particularly visible in contexts where official narratives seek to delegitimize protest movements. During the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, for instance, state-aligned media frequently framed demonstrators as violent separatists or threats to national security. In response, academics and independent journalists used digital platforms and outlets such as Hong Kong Free Press to reframe the protests as struggles for civil liberties, democratic participation, and human rights. Through this discursive intervention, critics shifted the interpretive focus from “security” to “freedom,” thereby contesting state-centered ideologies of sovereignty and control (Hermida, 2010). Such cases illustrate how critics expand the ideological boundaries of protest news by destabilizing hegemonic meanings and legitimizing alternative perspectives.

Audience reception is central to the effectiveness of critics’ interventions. From the audience’s standpoint, critics may function as trusted guides who help make sense of complex or contested events, or as ideological challengers whose authority is resisted. Identification with critical voices often depends on shared political values, emotional resonance, and perceived credibility. Drawing on Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model, audiences may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings of protest news, sometimes aligning more

closely with critical interpretations than with institutional accounts. Wahl-Jorgensen (2008) further highlights the importance of emotion in this process, showing that critics who express moral outrage, empathy, or ethical concern can elicit strong affective engagement and foster a sense of solidarity among audiences.

Despite their potential to challenge dominant narratives, the visibility of critics in protest news is not ideologically neutral. Media organizations selectively amplify critical voices that align with their editorial orientations whether liberal, conservative, or nationalist while marginalizing others. As a result, some interpretations gain legitimacy and circulation, while alternative or more radical critiques remain excluded from mainstream visibility. This selective amplification reflects deeper ideological positioning within media institutions and shapes the boundaries of legitimate public debate. Critics, therefore, do not simply oppose institutional power; they operate within discursive constraints that condition whose interpretations are heard and normalized.

In protest news, critics function as key meaning-makers who mediate between institutional authority and grassroots dissent. Their interpretive role complicates the ideological landscape by opening space for alternative readings of protest participation, while simultaneously revealing the limits imposed by media structures and audience alignment. The following section turns to protesters themselves, examining how those most directly involved in collective action are discursively positioned and evaluated within protest news, and how their legitimacy is negotiated through language, imagery, and framing practices.

## **6. Protesters**

Protesters occupy a paradoxical position in protest news as both the most visible agents of collective action and the most intensely contested subjects of evaluation. Their participation ranging from street demonstrations and symbolic assemblies to digital activism represents a direct and embodied form of civic engagement. Yet this participation rarely appears in news discourse as self-defining or authoritative. Instead, the legitimacy of protesters is continuously negotiated through ideologically charged frames that evaluate their actions, motives, and social significance.

Media representations of protesters frequently reflect broader ideological divisions

within society. During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, for example, liberal outlets such as The New York Times tended to foreground structural racism, human rights, and moral claims, framing protesters as principled actors seeking social justice. In contrast, conservative media outlets, including Fox News, often emphasized violence, disorder, or threats to public safety, constructing protesters as lawless or destabilizing forces. This binary framing exemplifies how dissent may be alternatively represented as democratic participation or as a threat to social order, depending on the ideological orientation of the media outlet.

Such patterns align with Gitlin's (1980) observation that protest coverage often contributes to the marginalization of dissent by prioritizing stability and institutional order over the voices and grievances of protesters. McLeod and Hertog's (1999) concept of the protest paradigm further explains how news reporting tends to center on spectacle, conflict, and deviance, while minimizing protesters' goals, demands, and structural critiques. These representational tendencies are not merely journalistic conventions but ideological practices that privilege hegemonic perspectives and cast counter-hegemonic demands as disruptive or illegitimate. Through this process, news discourse regulates the boundaries of acceptable civic participation.

The ideological consequences of such framing are significant. Protesters who are portrayed as dangerous or irrational may invite public fear, moral panic, or support for repression, while those framed as peaceful, organized, or morally justified may attract sympathy and political support. In both cases, media discourse shapes public perceptions of legitimacy and determines whether protests are interpreted as meaningful democratic expression or as deviant behavior requiring control. For marginalized groups including women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities these dynamics are further complicated by stereotypical or tokenistic representations that limit visibility and constrain the recognition of political agency (Couldry, 2010; Milioni, 2015).

Despite these constraints, protesters remain central to ideological contestation in protest news. Their actions challenge dominant power structures and demand visibility within the public sphere, forcing media institutions to engage with claims that may disrupt established narratives. As Butler (2015) argues, collective assemblies and embodied performances of protest assert political presence precisely through their visibility, even when that visibility is

contested or problematized. Protesters thus function as both subjects and objects of ideological struggle: they enact dissent, while simultaneously being defined, evaluated, and disciplined through media discourse.

Taken together, the representation of protesters highlights the ideological stakes of protest news. Protesters are rarely granted the same discursive authority as politicians or critics; instead, they are positioned as figures whose legitimacy must be constantly assessed and justified. This positioning underscores the asymmetrical power relations embedded in protest coverage and reveals how news media actively participate in shaping whose voices are heard and whose dissent is recognized. As the final section will argue, examining the discursive construction of politicians, critics, and protesters together reveals how protest news operates as a site of ideological negotiation that extends beyond reporting events to shaping meanings of participation, legitimacy, and citizenship.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has examined how protest news constructs the meaning of participation through the discursive representation of three key social actors: politicians, critics, and protesters. Rather than treating protest coverage as a neutral reflection of events, the analysis has shown that news media actively shape ideological meanings by allocating roles, authority, and legitimacy in patterned ways. Politicians are predominantly positioned as institutional problem-solvers, critics as interpretive mediators, and protesters as subjects of moral evaluation. Together, these role constructions define the boundaries of acceptable civic participation and influence how dissent is understood within democratic societies.

Across the analysis, the study demonstrates that ideological framing in protest news is not conveyed solely through overt political commentary but is embedded in routine journalistic practices, including source selection, narrative hierarchy, and lexical choice. By privileging official voices and institutional perspectives, news discourse often reinforces existing power relations, while protester participation is subjected to heightened scrutiny and conditional legitimacy. These findings support earlier observations that protest coverage tends to marginalize dissent by framing it as disorderly or threatening when it challenges dominant norms, while selectively legitimizing forms of participation aligned with institutional stability (Gitlin, 1980).

Importantly, the analysis highlights that critics play a pivotal yet constrained role in mediating protest meanings. While critical voices can reframe protest events by situating them within broader social, historical, or moral contexts, their visibility is shaped by editorial orientations and ideological alignments within media organizations. As a result, not all critiques circulate equally, and the interpretive space of protest news remains structured by institutional power. Protesters, despite being central agents of collective action, are thus rarely granted discursive authority over their own representation, underscoring the asymmetrical power relations that define protest reporting.

The study further illustrates how ideological meanings operate at the linguistic level. Drawing on insights from Appraisal Theory, the analysis shows that evaluative language plays a crucial role in positioning social actors and guiding audience interpretation. Lexical choices that invoke Judgment, Appreciation, or Affect such as labeling protesters as “activists” or “rioters,” or framing political responses as “responsible” or “necessary” encode moral evaluations that legitimize certain actors while delegitimizing others. Through these evaluative resources, ideology becomes naturalized in news discourse, appearing as common sense rather than as a contested political construction.

By integrating role analysis with lexical evaluation, this article contributes to media and discourse studies in two key ways. First, it offers a relational framework for understanding protest news that foregrounds how politicians, critics, and protesters are discursively constructed together rather than in isolation. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of examining ideological meaning at the level of language, showing how seemingly neutral word choices function as mechanisms of power and exclusion. In doing so, the study responds to calls for more fine-grained analyses of how ideology operates within protest reporting.

The findings have broader implications for both scholarship and public engagement. For researchers, they underscore the importance of combining ideological, discursive, and linguistic perspectives when analyzing media representations of protest. For news audiences and practitioners, the study highlights the need for critical media literacy and awareness of how language shapes perceptions of legitimacy, participation, and citizenship. As protests continue to play a central role in contemporary political life, understanding how news discourse constructs whose voices matter remains essential for evaluating the democratic function of the media.

## 8. References

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