Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Economic Events

POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB
SCHOOL of PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Manipulation and Harmful Narratives Following the Supreme Court's Tariff Decision

Crisis Background

On February 20, 2026, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled 6-3 in Learning Resources, Inc. v. Trump that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act does not authorize the president to impose tariffs, striking down the Trump administration's "Liberation Day" reciprocal and trafficking duties and triggering a Court of International Trade order to refund roughly $170 billion to importers.

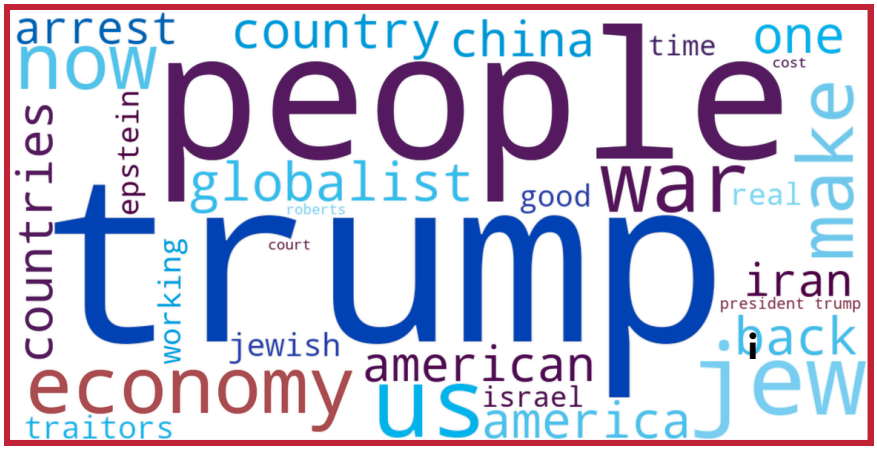
The decision generated substantial online discussion due to the central role of tariffs in the Trump administration's policy agenda. While discussions of tariffs have previously coincided with hateful rhetoric targeting actual and perceived immigrants, online reactions to this decision extended beyond just those communities.

Themes: Harmful Narratives

Following the SCOTUS ruling, online discourse was dominated by **antisemitic conspiracy theories** alleging Jewish individuals or communities were responsible for the ruling or exerted control over SCOTUS, and in some cases, the entire U.S. government. These claims were often laundered through the well-established antisemitic euphemism "globalist." Making baseless accusations or attributing complex political or legal developments to a hidden Jewish conspiracy reinforces longstanding tropes and normalizes sentiments that target Jewish communities.

Online discussions also blamed China and perceived Chinese-aligned individuals as the primary cause of domestic economic challenges. Rather than engaging with legal or political questions, narratives utilized **black and white thinking** to reduce complex problems to a binary conflict between the U.S. and China. This oversimplification presented support for tariffs as synonymous with patriotism while depicting those not supportive as inherent threats to American economic security and way of life.

Many posts also employed **us vs. them** framing across online discourse, fomenting division between various communities by rhetorically positioning Trump-aligned groups and individuals against Jewish individuals and communities, those alleged to have ties to or sympathize with the government of China, and left-leaning political parties and politicians, as well as SCOTUS itself. In many cases, rhetoric escalated into accusations of "treason" by the justices. These narratives incorporate language that can delegitimize democratic institutions and contribute to the normalization of violence toward targeted communities and public officials.



Word Cloud of Common Terms in Sample Posts Related to SCOTUS's Tariffs Decision

This word cloud visualizes prominent terms found in the qualitative sample of posts related to the SCOTUS ruling. Posts ranged from January to March of 2026 and were identified using key term searches related to tariffs and SCOTUS. The terms "tariffs" and "tax" were removed from the sample, as well as "stop words" (e.g., and, or, a, the, he, she, I, etc.), since they were found in almost every post. The larger a word is, the more prominent it was in the sample. Notably, Trump, Jew, Jewish, globalist, China, traitors, and war were all included as some of the most prominent words of the sample.

Preventing Manipulation

PERIL's evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A common starting point is to point out manipulation as a tactic of bad actors who are trying to persuade you. In addition, these three tactics can be addressed directly through evidence-informed responses:

Conspiracy theories can be reduced by fostering critical thinking, engaging in empathetic communication, and providing education on digital literacy.

Black and white thinking can be addressed with messages that challenge harmful narratives by identifying gray areas and using more moderate language (e.g., replace "always/never" with "sometimes").

Us vs. them narratives can be mitigated by shifting focus from divisive labels to common goals while promoting empathy and shared interests.

PERIL analyzes harmful, salient, and fast-moving narratives to inform violence prevention. In this series, we highlight prevalent manipulation strategies that appear in the aftermath of common crises.
Scan QR for more resources developed from PERIL's research.