The Subtle Honesty of Words: Symbols that Shape American Politics

by
Patrick J. McHugh

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Approved by:

Michael MacKuen, Advisor
James Stimson, Reader
Bill Jacoby, Reader
Tom Carsey, Committee Member
John Aldrich, Committee Member
Abstract

PATRICK J. MCHUGH: The Subtle Honesty of Words: Symbols that Shape American Politics.
(Under the direction of Michael MacKuen.)

This project brings new textual-analysis tools to the study of political symbolism and shows that we must take language more seriously as a political institution. I argue that symbols shape how we think about the world and are the medium that allows us to negotiate collective decisions. The following chapters demonstrate that political actors reveal their beliefs, goals, and philosophical disagreements through the language they use. We also see how politicians’ language is shaped, in a variety of ways, by the strategic environment. If we want to know what politicians intend to do, it is often more prudent to heed the symbols they use than to listen to the explicit promises they are making. This project touches on a variety of subfields in political science, including political communication, parties, elections, interest groups, legislative behavior, and political theory. In each case, it is clear that political science must consider how language organizes the systems we struggle to know. While we tend to view political language with a jaundiced eye, this project repeatedly demonstrates that it is at the heart of how collective decisions are made.
Dedication

This project is dedicated to the future; be gentle with us.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

"If our speech has no meaning, nothing has meaning" - Camu

Giving Language the Attention it Deserves

Much of what makes democracy distinctive is the power of words and ideas, instead of naked force, to shape how we live together. Students of politics have long recognized that democratic policy is deeply affected by how citizens and leaders describe the world. Individuals and polities choose different paths depending on how the possible alternatives are presented. Leaders become appealing to some groups and repugnant to others, in part, because of how they articulate themselves. George Bush’s critics lambasted his gaffes while supporters saw his folksy manner as how an honest American ought to speak. At an even deeper level, language shapes our very perception of the world. The way words fit together into a system of meaning creates patterns of thought that organize our understanding of existence. Language is not a neutral medium; the linguistic forms we use to communicate determine the futures we can imagine. Language is an institutional foundation of democracy, just as important as election laws, legislative procedures, or constitutional arrangements.

Unfortunately, the wealth of thought about political language has not been matched by sufficient empirical analysis. The dearth of empirical work on the topic is largely a function of how complex language is, making rigorous analysis extremely difficult. Happily, new
analytical methods are overcoming this barrier. This dissertation is part of a growing movement, in political science and elsewhere, that constitutes an emerging science of language and meaning. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate that political science must devote more serious analytical attention to language. Without more rigorous and sustained analysis of language, we ignore the central means by which collective decisions are made.

**Language has Always been Central to Democratic Theory**

Language was a central, almost fetishistic, concern at the birth of western democratic theory. Athenians experimenting with collective decision-making realized that words and ideas were at the heart of how groups of people make democratic choices. The art of Sophistry developed as social elites hired tutors to train their sons in the art of political persuasion. These teachers were effectively the first political communication consultants, and talented Sophists were in as much demand then as they are today. Socrates and Plato found Sophistry distasteful and dangerous, but not because they thought that words were unimportant. Most of the Platonic dialogues are meditations on the true meaning of central political concepts like justice, piety, and duty. Socrates saw the misuse of language as the root of most social ills and problems and, if remedied, he thought society would govern itself more wisely if it used language more appropriately.

Socrates’ fate at the hands of his fellow citizens, together with the Peloponnesian War debacle, made political theorists dubious about democracy for over two thousand years. Thucydides dwelled on the instabilities that arise from letting too much ride the on passions aroused by political address. The general consensus that dominated political thought until just a few hundred years ago was that democracy was too volatile to be sustained because group decision-making so easily falls prey to charismatic and well-spoken leaders. Better, it was thought, to let educated elites deal with ruling society because the masses could not be trusted to sift good arguments from bad and choose the
Contemporary democratic theory continues to focus on how language is used and how it works on the user. In many accounts, language is the primary instrument of power. Critical theory from Marx onward devotes a great deal of attention to how language creates obedience. Social hierarchies require certain ways of thinking, and language constructs the perspectives and assumptions needed to avert revolution. Marx’s notion of “false consciousness” is an effort to capture how working people can come to believe in a system designed to rip them off. Foucault spent even more time pondering how language constructs our understanding of the world. The more we discover about how humans process language, the more clear it becomes that we are subconsciously using structures of meaning that shape what we perceive.

There is another side to language, one that has received just as much attention in contemporary democratic theory. Language is one of the only resources of the oppressed and one of the only domains of competition in which disempowered groups can hope to win. The recognition that language was essential to the maintenance of the status quo also focused theorists’ attention on how it could serve the interests of change. Many of the same critical theorists who highlight how language produces conformity also believe that breaking these confines is a necessary precondition for effective political action. A great deal of feminist thought, for example, aims at changing the biases built into how we communicate. Language has increasingly become a battleground in itself, a resource to be fought over and used. Most modern social movements, of whatever ideological stripe, are engaged in a struggle over how the world should be described. We may not have come full circle back to Socrates, but the struggle to comprehend democracy continues to be centrally concerned with how language shapes the choices we make.

Language in Political Science

While empirical political scientists have not devoted as much of their time to language as political theorists, there are still important bodies of work that attempt to capture
the importance of how we communicate. The theory chapter will discuss the relevant literature in more detail, but it is useful to briefly outline the theoretical traditions that inspire, and stand to gain from, a rigorous analysis of political language.

Most centrally, this dissertation seeks to push our understanding of symbolism in political communication. Cobb and Elder’s book *The Political Uses of Symbolism* is the most influential work on the topic in political science 1983. Their central point, a point with intellectual lineages discussed already, is that symbols are essential to how we think and act. At the core of the argument is the claim that symbols mediate our interaction with the experiential world. Moreover, the meaning of symbols is not limited to the physical characteristics of things in the world, but is also determined by the associations that symbols evoke. We use symbols to simplify the world into recognizable forms that can be comprehended and communicated. I contend that studying language provides a way of capturing the symbols that are important to particular groups, leaders, and voters. To date, most of the political science work on symbolism has focused on the act of symbolic address, not the actual content. This dissertation strives to test whether symbols structure political thinking and action.

Within the broader world of symbolic address, the dissertation contributes to our understanding of abstract values. The work on abstract values has mostly drawn on survey research or analysis of voting patterns. Milton Rokeach 1973 did some of the most important early work on the topic. Rokeach argues that abstract values organize how people think about specific choices, and he used surveys to show that people have stable attachments to some values over others. Elsewhere in political science, abstract values enter the conversation virtually every time ideology is mentioned. While the claim has not been sufficiently tested, we often assume that voting patterns, whether in Congress or the citizenry, arise from ideological arguments over which values deserve the most consideration (e.g. egalitarianism vs. libertarianism). I fall with those who believe that abstract values matter enormously. In the final two empirical chapters, these symbols will be singled out. By studying the content of political communication in a way that has not been done before, I try to push our grasp of how abstract values shape political behavior.
Of course, I think that language is essential to virtually everything we study in political science, but these two bodies of work will constitute the central foundation for this work. By using tools that give us rigorous access to the content of political communication in a new way, we can push our understanding of how language shapes and facilitates democratic choices. The next section briefly outlines what is new about the content analysis methods used here.

**Accessing Deeper Meaning through Counting Words**

Political scientists have examined the content of political discussion before, but this dissertation takes a different approach than most of the existing literature in our field. In the last five years, political scientists have started to adopt content analysis tools developed in computational linguistics, data mining, and library science. The methods used here fall under the general heading of “Computer-Aided Text Analysis,” which captures a wide range of specific tools developed for different purposes. The common feature of these tools is that they use word-counts as the baseline data for measuring quantities of interest. By feeding prepared texts into a computer program, we can create count matrices of how often every word is used in each of the selected texts. These data can then be used to identify whether texts are using the same terminology or not. Examining text in this way is very new in our discipline and most political scientists are initially dubious that anything meaningful could be gained from studying word-counts out of context. However, experience has shown that studying language in this way works. In the Methods Chapter, I will review some of the applications of these methods. Computerized content analysis is ubiquitous in the world of digitized text; Google’s search engine is based on these tools, the news media increasingly uses them to identify what politicians are talking about, businesses use them to manage data, and libraries use them to categorize their catalogs.

In spite of the growing evidence that counting words is a sensible way of studying language, we have only started to wrestle with what it means theoretically to do so. In political science, these tools have largely been seen as new hammers for old problems, as
time-saving alternatives to hand-coding. While this is partially true, I believe that this misses much of what is unique about this method of analyzing communication. When political scientists code text by hand, we are usually searching for identifiable promises or explicit policy positions. Studying word-usage takes us into a different sphere of meaning. Instead of focusing on the literal elements of meaning, these tools access more subtle messages contained in how people articulate themselves. One of the central findings in cognitive linguistics is that most of our language processing faculties, both for interpreting and creating of speech, work subconsciously. Communicating requires sifting enormous amounts of data and using too many shared rules for our conscious minds to handle. We are consciously aware of some elements of meaning, but many others are processed and registered subconsciously.

It is increasingly evident that humans are quite adept at recognizing the patterns contained in how someone talks about the world, in addition to the surface meaning of their words. People’s choice of words reveals a great deal about how they see the world, the experiences they have had, who they spend time talking to, and how they are likely to act. Novelists and playwrights can convey characters’ backgrounds without any explicit description by crafting how characters articulate themselves. The same literal meaning will be conveyed in very different terms depending on your audience. Linguistics makes a distinction between a word’s denotation (its literal definition) and its connotation (the set of associations that a term evokes). Much of how we react to what someone says is driven by the connotative associations that their language creates. Studying word-usage provides a means of capturing these more subtle elements of meaning that usually escape a superficial reading. The next section outlines the specific questions that will drive this work and the contributions made to our understanding of political language.

Contributions of this Study

It is essential to demonstrate that word-usage reveals the intentions and beliefs of political actors. If language shapes how people think about public policy, actors with different goals
should use different words to describe their views. This question will be examined in a number of contexts and, in each case, evidence will be presented that differences of opinion are connected to different ways of describing the challenges we face. Chapter 4 examines congressional debate on two issues and shows that word-usage is systematically related to how legislators voted. This chapter will also show that the same distinctive patterns can be found in newspaper opinion pieces and think tank reports that discuss the issues Congress is debating. This question reemerges in Chapter 7 where differences between the Democratic and Republican platforms are analyzed. Results will be presented that show a very strong connection between polarization in the parties’ national platforms and subsequent party-line voting in Congress. In both cases, it is clear that actors with different goals also disagree over how public policy should be described. While I cannot directly test whether these differences in language come before or emerge from differences of opinion, these findings show that word-usage is powerfully related to actual governance.

While language provides a way of capturing the real intentions of political actors, it is also fundamentally strategic. Politicians and activists are constantly searching for ways of describing their views that resonate with the electorate. However, saying that language is strategic is an extremely general observation. The real question is how strategic considerations influence the language that elites use. Again, we have more ideas than knowledge on this topic. This work engages the strategic nature of political discourse in a number of contexts. Chapter 4 examines what happens when the majority party in Congress schedules debates that put the minority party on the wrong side of public opinion. Chapter 4 examines congressional debates over repeal of the Estate Tax, dubbed the “Death Tax” by conservatives, where Democrats were forced to defend an unpopular levee. I argue that Democrats were wary of using characteristically liberal language when defending their views because doing so would play into the Republican strategy of portraying Democrats as tax-and-spend liberals. Evidence will be presented that ideological differences between Democrats did not translate into how they defended their views on this bill, while ideological distinctions between Republicans were clearly on
display. While I cannot make universal claims based on one case, this points to an under-appreciated effect of strategic considerations on how elites defend their views. Chapter 6 challenges a common assumption in political science about how strategic forces shape electoral appeals. It is commonly assumed that losing parties will attempt to emulate the winning party’s approach in the next electoral cycle. While this may be true in some cases, I maintain that a far more systematic effect accounts for how parties change their language from one election to the next. Both parties are trying to hit the same moving target (what the public wants to hear) and this should cause both parties to respond to many of the same signals. Evidence is presented that both parties change their language at the same times, and in many of the same ways. Instead of the losing party shifting its appeals to match the winner, both parties appear to be responding to the same cues from the electorate. This is a key example of how studying language forces us to reconsider how strategic forces influence the behavior of political elites.

Abstract values are a particular concern of this work. Rigorously analyzing the content of political language provides a means of accessing the signals contained in the abstract symbols that political actors use. I maintain that abstract values are meaningful components of political discourse and, if true, that these symbols should signal how campaigning elites intend to govern. Going a step further, I argue that abstract values often contain more reliable cues about how elites will govern than the explicit policy pledges they make on the campaign trail. Chapter 7 tests whether differences in the abstract values that parties use in their national platforms more accurately capture how often they will vote along party lines in the subsequent Congress than explicit differences in their policy promises. Evidence will be presented that when parties appeal to different ideals during the campaign, they are likely to vote along party lines more often over the next two years. Moreover, the signals of polarization contained in the parties’ use of abstract symbols are much more informative than differences in their literal policy stances. Far from being empty “mom and apple pie” appeals, the ideals that parties highlight during the campaign are systematically prescient of how they will govern in the coming years. I will argue that voters are aware of the connotative meaning of elites’ use of abstract symbols and, while
this claim is not directly tested, Chapter 7 does indicate that it is rational for voters to heed the cues contained in the ideals that politicians invoke. This is a particularly striking example of why we need to push beyond a superficial reading of political language if we want to really grapple with what is being communicated. Political science often views abstract symbols as irrational fluff, but the results reported here imply that we need to seriously reconsider this conventional wisdom.

The study of language has long been a side-bar in political science. We tend to examine language only when it is inescapably necessary to do so, and most of the analysis has not penetrated the literal surface of meaning. The goal of this work is to demonstrate that we now have methods of conducting rigorous work on how language organizes politics. We have more than two thousand years of thought on the importance of language in democratic politics, but empirical science has only started to really wrestle with these important questions. This dissertation demonstrates that language is systematically connected to how we govern ourselves and, along the way, shows that we need to reconsider some basic assumptions about how language shapes political outcomes. Language shapes our very perception of the world, it creates identities and coalitions, it is a contested resource, and it deserves to be given as much attention as any other institutional feature of democratic politics. I believe that we are witnessing the genesis of a new subfield in political science, one that will ultimately reshape our understanding of what democracy is and how societies make collective decisions.

Outline of this Study

Chapter 2 articulates the theoretical perspective guiding this project in more detail. Most of the ideas and claims outlined in this project are not new. The conceptual foundations of this project date back at least to the 1960’s and in reality have roots that go back much further. Thinkers from Socrates to Aristotle, from Marx to Gramsci, from Foucault to Habermas, and from Vaclav Havel to Barack Obama all believe that language shapes how we understand and act in the world. Despite this wealth of commentary, there is still
relatively little rigorous empirical work on how symbols organize political beliefs, choices, and behavior. This chapter outlines a general perspective about why symbolic politics matters and identifies a number of specific elements of that theory that are examined in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 reviews the content analysis methods that are used in this project, as well as alternative approaches that are not pursued. This chapter begins by reviewing the origins of computer-aided content analysis and how these tools have been incorporated into political science. Chapter 3 then reviews the specific methods used in this study and provides some evidence why these approaches, and not more conventional methods of content analyzing text, were chosen.

Chapter 4 studies the use of language during floor debate in the House or Representatives. Two issues from the late 1990’s and early 2000’s will be studied: the debate over repealing the Estate Tax and deliberations over trade relations with China. This chapter serves as an initial case study for the theoretical perspective pursued throughout this project. First, Chapter 4 demonstrates that analyzing word-usage provides reliable estimates of how political elites feel about policy questions. There are systematic differences between how the two sides of these debates articulated their views. Even without the benefit of human reading, we can infer a member’s position on an issue by examining the symbols that he or she uses. Second, this chapter tests whether the symbolic disagreements that emerge during floor debate also exist outside the halls of Congress. Chapter 4 reports evidence that interest groups and op-ed writers employ many of the same symbols as members of Congress who share their views. Third, Chapter 4 shows that word-usage reveals when an issue falls along ideological lines and when it does not. Finally, this Chapter examines how strategic forces influence the language which members of Congress use. The Estate Tax debate was a strategic hammer that Republican leaders in Congress were using to put Democrats in an uncomfortable position. Democratic Representatives could not easily walk away from the Estate Tax, but the levee was unpopular with the electorate. In such a situation, the minority party is pressured to de-emphasize the ideological stakes of the issue. Democrats should have borrowed conservative symbols
in an effort to escape the “tax-and-spend” label that Republicans were trying to affix to them. Evidence will be presented that the Republican leadership succeeded in shifting the debate onto their chosen symbolic grounds. While Chapter 4 only looks at a few issues, the results support the central theoretical claims made here. Word-usage is systematically tied to governance and leaders are clearly concerned with how the symbols they use will play with constituents.

Chapter 5 will trace the evolution of party platforms in the United States. This chapter will outline why platforms deserve our attention, how platforms are written and how this process has changed in recent decades, why platforms are much longer and cover more issues today than in the 19th century, when major fights erupted within the parties over what particular planks should say, and where the parties prosecuted arguments over specific policies in their platforms for several elections running. While this chapter will be entirely descriptive, it provides a qualitative account of how the language examined in the last two empirical chapters comes into being.

Chapter 6 examines how the language used in party platforms changes from one election to the next. There is a great deal of received theory in political science that focuses on how electoral outcomes influence the positions that parties adopt in the subsequent election. One common expectation in this line is that losing parties will attempt to emulate the winning party in the next election. I will argue that this claim relies upon an overly simplistic rendering of the symbolic landscape and ignores the range of potential responses a party can have to an electoral loss. Regardless of how intuitively sensible this claim may seem, it fails to capture the most important forces that cause parties to change their appeals or remain steadfast. The work that has been done on this question has found little evidence that parties always respond to a loss by copying what the winner was doing Finegold and Swift (2001). Consistent with the expectation that parties are operating within a complex symbolic context, and consistent with the expectation that political elites are all searching for the most symbolically appealing way to make their cases, I expect that Democrats and Republicans will both respond to many of the same societal demands when crafting their language. I hypothesize that when one party changes it
language, we should expect to see the other responding in similar ways, regardless of who won the last election. Both parties must work with many of the same symbolic resources contained in political language and, as such, we should see the language of both parties reflecting whether the symbolic demands of the electorate have changed.

Chapter 7 tests the connection between symbolic polarization in campaign language and partisan disagreements in Congress. If divisions in congressional voting are shaped by differences in how the parties organize the world symbolically, differences in platform language should tell us how often the parties are likely to vote in opposition to one another in Congress. In this last chapter, I will explicitly test whether abstract values carry reliable signals about how elected politicians intend to govern. While we often view symbols like “freedom,” “liberty,” “progress,” or “God” as filler with little rational use, I argue that these words often capture essential differences in perspective that shape legislative coalitions. Political science work on party platforms has focused almost exclusively on the explicit promises that parties make. While policy pledges are important, I maintain that abstract values often reveal more about whether Democrats and Republicans are living in different conceptual worlds. To test this contention, I measure differences in the abstract values emphasized in national platforms and use these data to predict levels of party-line voting in the subsequent Congress. Even when controlling for the differences in the policy pledges that are being made, parties that emphasize different symbols are likely to oppose one another in Congress over the next few years.

Finally, Chapter 8 reviews what this project teaches us about symbols in politics and what these lessons mean for future scholarship. Symbols are shown to contain reliable cues about how political actors will behave, and are often more reliable than the literal meaning of the statements being made. While we tend to think of symbols as fluffy and inexact, they contain extremely rational signals about how campaigning elites intend to govern. This project clearly shows that symbols deserve more attention than they have received in our discipline thus far. Symbols are not unique, or uniquely suspicious, elements of political communication; they are at the heart of how societies choose how to govern themselves.
Chapter 2

Communities in Speech: How Language Makes Symbols Political

Introduction

This project’s central goal is to demonstrate that language organizes politics. At an intuitive level, we accept that language is important in democratic politics, but there is relatively little rigorous quantitative work on the matter. Language is not a neutral medium that can used as we see fit; it comes with well established internal structures that shape our very understanding of the world. Language is an institutionalized system of meaning that can be bent and changed, but not ignored. This project seeks to turn our attention to the systems of meaning that, like electoral laws or congressional procedures, are institutional structures that shape democratic choices.

Language is the mechanism that gives meaning and structure to political symbols. I argue that symbols are the cognitive reality much of the time and that language is essential to how symbols acquire meaning. Citizens and leaders alike are often thinking more about the symbolic meaning we have invested in political events, people, and institutions, much more than the concrete facts. When we express an opinion about a bill, or are motivated to support a political leader, or think about an institution, we are not interacting directly with that thing, but with its symbolic rendering. Modern mass politics requires
dealing with too much information and too much complexity for anyone to perceive it directly, even the well informed. Instead, we must rely on symbols to construct a simplified rendering of how the political world fits together. As such, language itself must be seen as an essential political institution. For symbols to matter politically, they must have some degree of shared meaning. If symbols evoked completely idiosyncratic reactions in people, they could not have the structuring impact on attitudes and behavior that we know them to have. Language itself is a system of symbols, and in using it every day we are forced to clarify how these symbols fit together and what they mean to the people with whom we are communicating. The words we use, and our learned understanding of how these symbols relate to each other, construct our understanding of the world.

This dissertation is an effort to test a few of the implications of this claim. If language itself gives structure and meaning to the symbols we use to interpret experience, there should be evidence that word choice is connected to the structure of political competition. I hypothesize that political movements must use the linguistic resources available to make their efforts register as symbolically relevant and pressing. We should see that political actors with the same goals also reveal similar symbolic attachments when they speak about their intentions. I also hypothesize that party coalitions are shaped by the words that party leaders choose to use. Just as party leaders debate over which specific policy positions to adopt, I maintain that they must make hard choices about the symbolic structure of their communication. If we see parties themselves as symbols, their use of language should shape how those labels are associated with other symbols. In no small way, the way party leaders speak and write defines what the parties mean.

These are only a few examples of how language structures political competition and choices, but they are useful starting points. Once again, there is a wealth of theory about how language shapes politics, but a dearth of quantitative analysis. In part, this is because language is so complex, and serves so many different functions, that it is difficult to analyze rigorously. This project lays out a core perspective about how language gives shared meaning to the cognitive systems we use to comprehend reality, and tests a few implications of this perspective. This chapter begins with a discussion of what symbols
are and the cognitive purposes they serve. Next, I review the evidence that symbols shape political attitudes and behavior. Then I discuss why we should see language itself as a mechanism that gives structure to our symbolic maps of the world. Finally, I articulate a few testable implications of the claim that language is a fundamental institutional structure that shapes political action.

The Need for Symbols

The complexity of reality forces us to use symbols to simplify the glut of perceptual data into something that we can process. Symbols provide a cognitive structure through which actors develop a blueprint for interpreting the complexities of social and political life Geertz (1973).

Cobb and Elder list three essential cognitive functions that symbols serve 1983. First, symbols serve the need for psychic economy. Symbols summarize and index the complex information we have about objects in the world. Second, symbols are essential to communication. “Efficient communication requires that experience, knowledge, and feelings be summarized and condensed in readily recallable form. Symbols provide common reference points for categorizing shared information, values, and anxieties” Cobb and Elder (1983). In this way, symbols serve as essential mechanisms that allow us to connect with other people and share information. Finally, symbols “distinguish among people and establish social identities” Cobb and Elder (1983). Just as we need symbols to simplify and summarize objects in the world, we need symbols to organize our understandings of ourselves. Symbols, like “working-class” or “blue blood,” capture sets of relationships between social groups that shape our lives. Being a member of the working-class entails a host of relationships with other elements of society, and by identifying with that symbol a person makes those relationships part of our understanding of who they are.

Consider how the symbol “tree” can serve the cognitive needs Cobb and Elder have identified. In the first case, “tree” condenses and summarizes everything that we have learned or experienced about trees. We know lots about trees; they grow, they fall, they
are made of wood, they make oxygen, they provide shade, they can be made into furniture, they can get sick, and so on. If we had to think through all of this complex data every time we encountered a tree, walks in the woods would hardly be relaxing. Having a representative symbol, allows us to summarize our understanding about how trees fit into our experience of reality. Secondly, the word “tree” allows us to have conversations about trees. When we read about trees in the Amazon being cut down, we are able to understand a great deal of what that implies, even without having ever been to a rainforest ourselves. Symbols allow us to augment our experiential understanding of things with information provided by other people. For instance, our understanding of what a tree fundamentally is would be limited and false if we only knew about coniferous trees in the Pacific Northwest. However, by having a symbol that is shared with people on the far side of the world, we can come to understand that palm trees are fundamentally similar to redwood trees and expand our understanding accordingly. The next time we hear or read the word tree, that symbol now carries meaning that was not based in personal experience, but that is critical to thinking accurately about what trees are. Finally, a “tree” can be a very important marker of social identity. Graduates of Stanford University certainly use the symbol as a stand-in for what distinguishes them from the rest of the collegiate world. If you’re a logger trees are central to self-understanding, just as they are in a different way for tree-huggers. Symbols give structure to our experience of the world, allow us to communicate about those experiences, and construct self-understandings of how we fit into that experience.

**What is a Symbol**

“A symbol is any object used by human beings to index meanings that are not inherent in, nor discernable from, the object itself” Cobb and Elder (1983). Anything can become a symbol. Words, images, people, building, smells, colors, textures, all can become symbols if they are invested with meaning. Take the “tree” example again. The physical object that we call a tree only becomes a symbol by virtue of the meaning we invest in it. “A
symbol may be defined as a thing the value or meaning of which is bestowed upon it by those that use it” White (1949). This is what Cobb and Elder mean by a symbol not being inherent in the thing that is being symbolized. What a tree means to us is not defined by its physical characteristics; it is a function of what meaning we have invested in the symbol “tree”. While the substance of a symbol is not necessarily defined by its physical condition, our understanding of the physical object becomes indistinguishable from the symbolic meaning it is given. When we think of a tree, we think of the symbolic meaning of the symbol “tree” for us. Even when we encounter a real tree, our understanding of it is often driven more by the symbolic associations the concept “tree” evokes than by the physical characteristics of the tree we are considering. The “liberty tree” started life as an elm on a Boston street corner, but when protesters opposing the Stamp Act used it as a meeting point, it became a symbol of the American Revolution. The “liberty tree” was no longer just an elm; it became a marker of violent struggle, hopes for the future, and an emergent national identity.

Symbols can be purely personal, in that they only carry specific meaning for an individual, but most symbols have socially negotiated meanings. What Mead calls “significant” symbols are objects that people collectively invest with meaning 1934. Everyone probably has some idiosyncratic meanings associated with the symbol “tree” (e.g. it reminds us of the first tree that we climbed), but a great deal of the symbolic meaning of a tree is learned through how the symbol is used in human communication. At an obvious level, when we read the word “tree,” we know we are talking about something with leaves or needles, a trunk, and roots, instead of a granite rock. The shared meaning of the symbol evolves and changes over time by virtue of what meaning is being invested in the symbol by everyone who uses it. For example, we now know that trees convert carbon dioxide into oxygen. As that fact became part of common parlance about trees, the symbol of a tree acquired this shared understanding of what a tree means. As a consequence, our personal experience of trees is shaped by the symbolic meaning that has been invested in them. Significant signs shape our understanding of the world by expanding the range of associations that we attach to things we encounter based on how they are understood.
socially.

Referential Versus Condensational Symbols

Edward Sapir made a useful distinction between what he called “referential symbols” and “condensational symbols” 1934. Referential symbols are rudimentary labels for physical objects, so the meaning of these symbols is relatively concrete and stable. In a purely referential symbol, everyone would take the same meaning from it so there would be virtually no difference between individual understanding and shared meaning. Numbers are good examples of essentially referential symbols; the meaning of the number 5 in mathematics does not depend on personal perspective. Part of what makes formalized symbolic systems work is that they rely on symbols that are purely referential within the system, such that each time a symbol is used it means precisely the same thing. Condensational symbols refer to symbols that summarize different individual meanings into a social understanding of things in the world. The definitions of condensational symbols are not formally stipulated as referential symbols are, but emerge from sustained communication about what symbols mean to different individuals. For example, the American flag is a concrete object but its meaning as a symbol has little to do with its physical characteristics. The American flag evokes a wide range of feelings, thoughts, and emotions from different people, and its meaning as a social symbol encompasses these diverse reactions.

Many symbols have both referential and condensational elements, but it is the condensational elements of meaning that make symbols political. The Washington Monument refers to a physical object and if you asked someone how to get there, they would know precisely what you were asking. There is nothing political about the referential meaning of the Washington Monument, but there are differences of perspective over its condensational meaning. For some, the Washington monument is a symbol of American greatness, a tribute America’s influence. To others, it is a phallic symbol denoting the essentially masculine nature of American power. These two perspectives both inform the shared meaning of the Washington Monument, but they also reflect differences of world-view
that shape political conflict. Competition over what the definition of this symbol ought to be is constitutive of conflicts over how American power ought to be exercised. Every political symbol of any importance is going to evoke differences of attitude and reaction of this sort. Part of what makes language so important to the structure of political competition is that language is where differences of symbolic meaning are negotiated.

**Values as Condensational Symbols**

Abstract values are among the most fascinating political symbols. I argue later that values are particularly important examples of how language itself provides structure to our symbolic understanding of the world, which is part of why they receive special attention in this project. Values are a particular kind of political symbol, so it is useful to look carefully at how values are typically defined in political research and how that definition maps onto the concept of symbols.

A value is defined by Rokeach as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” 1973. He makes a further distinction between what he calls “instrumental values” and “terminal values.” Terminal values are ends in themselves; they are the conditions of life that we want to realize. Instrumental values are more means-oriented; they are claims about the ways of being that will bring about the good life described by terminal values. Examples of terminal values Rokeach used in his work include “happiness,” “freedom,” “pleasure,” “wisdom,” “national security,” and “salvation.” Instrumental values are concepts like “ambitious,” “logical,” “loving,” “honest,” and “courageous.” While we would accept that all of these are essentially good things, and have opposites that are demonstrably bad, people differ over which values are the most important. Rokeach argued that we are forced to make choices between these values, and to decide which values are the most desirable bases for action.

I will discuss how language gives shape to what Rokeach calls “value systems” later, but for now I want to focus on how values themselves can be seen as condensational symbols. First, consider the inherent vagueness of many abstract values. We may have
a sense of what freedom means, or know an act of honesty when we see one, but we're often hard-pressed to provide a concrete definition of what values actually mean. This is not function of ignorance. The greatest political thinkers across history have struggled to produce a satisfactory definition of what freedom is, what its opposite looks like, and what is required to attain it. Part of what makes abstract values condensational is that they are virtually impossible to boil down into a suitably specific definition that works correctly wherever the concept is relevant.

This lack of perfect clarity does not make values meaningless; rather, it makes their meaning fundamentally condensational. The definition of freedom is profoundly contingent upon how people use the term, what it gets applied to, and the other values it is connected with. Freedom could be used as a purely negative thing, as in the freedom from external oppression. Others have argued that we must have many of the basic human needs met (food, shelter, etc) before freedom can be attained. Social contract theorists claim that we should give up some specific liberties to create a society that makes each of us more free than we would be in the absence of social order. To different people, at different times, freedom has meant all of these things. As cognitive symbols, the actual meaning of abstract values is largely determined by our experiences of how the term is used. An abstract value condenses our experience of how the term has been used, what is has been connected to, what choices it has been used to champion and attack, and who emphasizes it.

This is true both for terminal values and instrumental values. Terminal values, by definition, reference some ideal condition that does not exist in the actual social world. We can often more readily point to the absence of these values in reality than their close approximation. Therefore, the meaning of these symbols captures the received social understanding of, and divisions over, what the ideal actually implies. Even instrumental values, ones that we can more easily associate with particular behaviors and particular people are still symbols for broad patterns of choices. No one is perfectly honest, but we do have many examples of honesty in action and its diverse consequences. The term summarizes this body of information, both experienced and learned, about what these
abstract ideals mean.

Symbols Versus Signs

The definition of symbol that I will use here is very closely related to the central concept in semiotics, the sign. According to the linguist Ferdinand Saussure, the sign consists of two interrelated parts: the signifier and the signified Saussure (1983). Taking a material example, the signifier can be an object that we encounter through perception, and the signified is the concept that is called to mind by that object. For example, the American flag is just a physical object, but because of we have communicatively invested this object with particular meaning, it becomes a stand-in for the broader concept of the United States. In this formulation, neither the signifier nor the signified can exist without the other, and all signs are defined in reference to each other. The notion of the sign captures the inherently social character of meaning, and the way that signs work together to construct a structure for interpreting the world.

There are a few reasons that I am using the word symbol to describe what this project is examining instead of the semiotic sign. First, Saussure was clear that the connection between signifier and signified was entirely arbitrary. The only thing that connects the signifier to the signified is the fact that many people use the same signifier to think about and discuss the same signified. However, this denies that there is anything other than social convention and practice that determines the meaning of things in the world. Many signs are shaped by material realities that are not social constructions. The word “war” signifies a great deal that is socially constructed, but death and destruction are not social fictions. There is no one-to-one connection between a sign as some material reality, but the meaning of many signs is shaped by forces that are not purely social. Secondly, even the American flag example I gave would be too materialistic for Saussure’s tastes. Although the field of semiotics has moved toward examining more physical signs, the concept is meant to apply to things that have no physical manifestation. Since I am concerned with written language, which has an inherently physical character, the concept of a sign is overly broad. Finally, and following from these two points, Saussure’s signs cannot be
examined independently. The entire system of signs is necessary for any sign to exist and signs only exist in the act of relating them to other signs. While there is a great deal of truth to this perspective, I also believe that we can gain important insights from examining individual signs, or in this case words. All together, the concept of symbols is favorable because it incorporates many elements of the semiotic sign, without making theoretical claims that I am not interested in sustaining.

Symbols are Political Reality

Our experience politics is fundamentally symbolic. In many ways, “symbolic politics” describes the essential nature of political life in modern mass democracies. Most political perception, argument, communication, and action cannot be anything but symbolic. We often talk about symbolic politics as a particular sort of politics, and a dubious form at that. It is more accurate to recognize that modern representative democracy is an inescapably symbolic enterprise. Even though concrete decisions are being made, real resources are being allocated, and people really do go to jail as a result of political choices, mass politics operates through the cognitive structure provided by shared symbols.

First, most of our information about politics is mediated through other peoples’ accounts of what is happening. Virtually every important political event occurs far away, involves people we will never meet, and is reported to us by strangers. We are not interacting directly with the empirical “reality” but with a set of symbols carried in language and images. Secondly, political institutions are fundamentally symbolic entities to most citizens. Most citizens know little about the institutional mechanisms that elect leaders, shape legislation and regulations, or deliver rewards and punishments to the population. Words like “courts,” “elections,” “welfare,” “subcommittee,” or “bureaucracy” all refer to institutional features of government, but they also summarize these complex institutions into symbolic forms that we can comprehend.

When people think about politics, they are thinking about symbols much more than
the "realities" to which these symbols are related. While the words “White House” referentially identifies a particular building, its condensational meaning is far more important in most cases. Most of us have not been to the White House, so when we encounter the symbol its importance is shaped by what hopes, fears, and associations it produces. In Murray Edelman’s words, politics is a "passing parade of abstract symbols" 1964. The symbolic rendering of politics is the cognitive reality that individuals experience. When someone expresses an opinion about the President, or their member of Congress, or a bill in the Senate, or a Supreme Court case, they are usually speaking about a symbolic condensation of that thing. Few citizens personally watch the President go about his job, or have a thorough understanding of the workings of the Senate finance committee, or know how the Environmental Protection Agency transforms legislation into enforceable regulation, but these symbols can still evoke powerful reactions that guide our attitudes and behavior.

We should not assume that politics is only symbolic for the poorly informed or disinterested. The federal government is too complex for anyone to fully grasp without boiling much of it down into digestible symbols. Even federal employees and politicians who are experts in their chosen areas often know little about other essential components of the political system. Someone who has spent a life learning the intricacies of the legislative process often knows relatively little about the inner-workings of the Supreme Court or the CIA. Edelman argued that political elites use symbols to think about politics just as much as everyone else Edelman (1964). Legislators almost never read the entire bill they are voting upon, relying instead on staffers to summarize its critical elements. There is a tendency to see symbolic politics as the fall back of the ignorant and apathetic, but this is not the case. Even the most knowledgeable citizens still have limited time and limited capacity to comprehend complex systems, so the entities we interact with must be symbolically rendered.

Modern political operatives know that politics is fundamentally symbolic. Frank Luntz, the political wordsmith behind the “death tax” phrase, certainly understands the symbolic nature of politics. While Luntz does not describe his job specifically in
symbolic terms, his bestselling book on the craft of political communication Words that Work 2007 is an account of what makes for good symbolic political appeals, and what doesn’t. The tag line of the book, “It’s not What You Say, It’s What People Hear,” underscores the importance of condensational meaning. The received meaning of what political actors say is determined by the symbolic resources in the minds of the audience. The explicit arguments and literal definition of the words being used matter much less than the symbolic reactions they evoke.

When trying the rally support behind a politician, party, or policy the real effect of political communication is determined by the symbolic attachments people have to the words being used. For example, when advising Republicans on how to describe the evils of government, Luntz recommends attacking “Washington” rather than “government.” He points out that most people have direct experience of local governments doing good things in their lives, so using the symbol “government” calls those positive experiences to mind. On the other hand, “Washington” is remote and vaguely threatening, something to be treated with suspicion. If your goal is to associate a particular bill with the negative symbols surrounding federal government, referring to “Washington” does a much better job. In another example, the “Estate Tax” does not seem like a personal problem for most of us because estates are something that rich people have to worry about. “Death Tax,” on the other hand, is a symbol with personal resonance. We’re all going to die and most people don’t like taxes, so it’s not surprising that polls showed much greater opposition to the “Death Tax” than to the “Estate Tax.” The craft of framing a political issue is all about shaping which symbols people attach to the question. Findings that framing affects how people feel about policy questions point to the fact that symbolic meaning is essential to how we think and act politically.

Symbols Shape Policy Attitudes

Political scientists have found a great deal of evidence that specific policy views are shaped by our attachments to political symbols. Citizens’ orientation toward abstract political
symbols are often more stable than their individual policy views. Moreover, there is good
evidence that people’s attitudes about specific policies are rooted in deeper symbolic
commitments.

One of the first conclusions that came from systematic work on public opinion was that
citizens’ commitment to abstract symbols are often more durable and stable than their
views on specific issues. Partisan identification attracted the most attention in the early
years of public opinion work because it appeared to be one of the only truly stable elements
of most people’s political orientation Campbell et al. (1960). Several scholars argue that
partisan identification’s durability in the face of fluctuating policy views is a function of
childhood socialization. Before we develop views on most specific policy questions, we are
socialized by our parents to share their core orientation toward the political world, which
is symbolically codified into a partisan identification. Because we become attached to
partisan symbols so early in life, these commitments tend to be very difficult to change and
can influence the specific policy views we later develop Converse (1964); Searing and Lind
(1973); Converse and Markus (1979); Marcus (1982). David Sears’ “symbolic politics”
theory is based in exactly this logic; symbolic attachments are built early in life and
become the driving force behind attitudes we subsequently develop about particular policy
questions Sears (1975, 1983). The importance of abstract symbols in political cognition
is supported by work on how children articulate their views. Even before they develop
attitudes on most specific issues, children can articulate their orientation toward more
abstract political symbols Greenstein (1965); Harding and Chein (1969); Hess and Torney
(1967); Katz (1976); Simmons and Rosenberg (1971); Tudor (1971). While subsequent
work has challenged whether our attachments to abstract symbols are really more stable
than individual policy views Krosnick (1991), it is clear that symbolic commitments are
powerful components of political thinking.

Work on symbolic politics has also uncovered evidence that individual policy attitudes
are often more firmly rooted in symbolic attachments than in material self-interest. Sym-

bolic attachments are not merely names given to cleavages of material interest; they are
organizing commitments in themselves that often trump pure self-interest Sears and Speer
White opposition to racial bussing policies were found to be based more in symbolic attachments (racial prejudice and conservatism) than in material interest (whether the person is question had children that were likely to be bussed). The importance of symbolic commitments is not restricted to the question of race; they shape specific policy views on a wide range of federal policy. Citizens’ commitment to abstract symbols like partisan identification and ideological inclination were found to be more systematically related to their views on unemployment, national health insurance, and law and order policy than the likely material impacts of policy choices on their personal lives Sears and Allen (1980); Lau and Heldman (2009). Over and over again, we find people adopting policy views that are not merely extensions of naked self-interest, but rather are shaped by their commitment to deeper political symbols.

Partisan and ideological identification are not the only important political symbols. Abstract political values also serve as organizing principles that shape individual policy attitudes. Values can be seen as an individual’s understanding of the desirable ends of human life Rokeach (1973), and research suggests that there is a great deal of structure to value attachments. Even though individuals are generally committed to a variety of potentially contradictory values (e.g. most people believe that both individual liberty and equality are important), many people reveal transitive rank-orderings of different symbolic values. When asked to rank values from most important to least important, many people reveal consistent rank-orders across questions that ask them to compare different subsets of values Jacoby (2006). The importance we place of different symbolic values structures our attitudes on a wide range of specific policy issues. There is good scholarly evidence that people’s attachment to core values shape their attitudes about specific policy questions Rokeach (1973); Feldman (2003); Kuklinski (2001). Actors who disagree on most specific issues generally also disagree on which symbolic ideals we should pursue through public policy. People who value egalitarianism are apt to view most federal policies in a different light than those who cherish economic liberty. Again, attachment to abstract symbols shapes how we think about specific political questions.

The literature on framing reinforces the importance of symbolic values in shaping
political conceptions. While there is no single definition of framing, it is essentially the effort to influence which considerations spring first to mind when people think about a particular issue (see Chong & Druckman 2007 for review). The literature on framing in political science has found that issue attitudes often hinge on how people see the core dilemma to be resolved. A basic example is the distinction between thinking about the costs of a social program like welfare, versus the danger to society of unaddressed poverty. Which consideration leaps to mind first will influence an individual’s attitude toward social support programs. Most studies on framing have found that changing the primary considerations people use to think about an issue has a marked impact on their attitudes about what government ought to do Chong (1996); Entman (1993); Jones (1994); Kinder and Sanders (1993); Riker (1986); Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991); Zaller (1992); Kuklinski and Rich (2000); Jacoby (2000).

All of these bodies of literature lead to the conclusion that symbols are part of the substance of politics. Symbols are not mere “superstructure” built on top of material interest, nor are abstract symbols disconnected from concrete policy choices. Symbols are at the core of what we are debating in politics. Our political worldview is constructed in symbolic terms from the very beginning and symbols continue to evoke passionate commitment throughout our lives. The wealth of evidence that symbols structure political thinking raises another question - How do these symbols acquire meaning? This is where communication and language become vitally important. Language is the mechanism through which symbolic meanings are generated and negotiated. The next section discusses why the symbolic character of modern democratic politics requires us to look carefully at how language itself structures political action.

**Language Shapes the Meaning of Symbols**

Symbols would not be politically important if their meaning were not socially negotiated. Purely personal symbols may help individuals to organize their conceptual world, but if they carry no shared meaning they do not systematically influence political attitudes
or behavior. “It is the process of different individuals’ attributing meaning to the same objects that makes social communication possible. It is, in essence, what language is all about” Cobb and Elder (1983). Thus, we must seriously consider how the use of words gives form to symbols. Language plays an indispensable role in giving structure and substance to our symbolic maps of the world. Even more strongly, the meaning of words in language determines a great deal about how your personal symbolic systems are organized. Words are the labels we give to symbolic attachments and by representing symbols in language we can enter into discussion about what those symbols mean. By permitting us to discuss the meaning of symbols, language serves as the mechanism through which symbols can develop shared meaning that, in turn, is what makes symbols political.

By definition, words are symbols whose meaning is not inherent in the sounds and characters that make them up. The word “tree” could be a symbol for anything, but it is given meaning through how we deploy the symbol as part of a system of meaning. Words do not exhaust the range of politically relevant symbols, but they are the building blocks that allow us to conceptualize how symbols fit together and how more complex symbols should be described. The central point is that communication forces us to learn and employ a complex system of symbols and that, in using this symbolic system on a daily basis, language provides structure to our symbolic rendering of the world. Purely visual symbols, or symbols with purely personal relevance need not be linked together in a systematic and replicable way. Language, on the other hand, forces us to engage with what other people think words mean and how these symbols fit together into a larger system of meaning.

No Word is an Island: Communication Creates Structures of Symbolic Meaning

Linguistic symbols only have meaning within a system of symbols. The meaning of a word is defined by how it is connected to other words, which is taken to be true of symbols more broadly. The purely semiotic view of symbols defines each symbol in terms
it relationships to all of the other symbols in a person’s communicative context. In other words, the meaning of a symbol is defined by how it relates to other symbols. This is why semiotics treats the entire system as a whole, because none of the constituent parts can be defined in isolation and they all define each other. Even without adopting the purely semiotic view, the meaning of words is largely defined by how they relate to other concepts and the range of other associations that they evoke. No word is an island, even the word “island.”

To understand most written or verbal communication, we must have a working understanding of how a diverse range of words fit together to communicate ideas. Human language processing requires the use of more rules, conventions, and subtle distinctions than any computer program. One of the central findings in the field of cognitive linguistics is that most of our understanding and use of language is driven by unconscious processes. “Most of our thought is unconscious - not subconscious in the Freudian sense of being repressed, but simply in that we are not aware of it. We think and talk at too fast a rate and at too deep a level to have conscious awareness and control over everything we say” Lakoff (1996). We produce and consume words far too rapidly to consciously select and interpret each one. We can think about what we need to say next while still talking about the last thought. We can often tell when an idea has been poorly stated, and choose different words that more accurately communicate what we mean to say. All of this requires a complex understanding of how words fit together into a system of meaning that is shared across people.

Communicating forces us to clarify the relationships between symbols. If we use the wrong word to communicate a particular idea, our audience will not understand what we mean to say. As Mark Twain said, “there are no synonyms. A flood is not a deluge.” Choosing the words to use at a particular juncture forces us to make subtle distinctions between similar, but distinct, symbols. Should we refer to a door or an entrance, taxes or levies, citizens or voters, honesty or forthrightness, fight or struggle, and so on. There is nothing like communication for forcing the clarification of symbolic relationships. While there is plenty of room for innovation, vagueness, and mistakes, using
language forces us to develop finely tuned distinctions between what different symbols mean, and how they relate to each other. Moreover, these relationships must exist in the minds of our audience. We are compelled to subconsciously rely upon the commonly understood symbolic relationships that allow us to communicate.

**Shared Meaning Constructs our Symbolic World View**

Effective communication forces us to negotiate a world of shared symbolic meaning. Someone could have a highly structured system of symbols that allows them to act in the world, but if that system is completely disconnected from the symbolic systems that other people use, those symbols could not facilitate communication. This observation is simple enough, but it has far-reaching consequences and is central to why symbols can organize collective political action. Shared meaning is the foundation of all social behavior. “The loss of a common language is the loss of community and the destruction of a common world” Ball and Hanson (1989). Shared meaning does not imply agreement on what symbols should mean, or which symbols should be the most important, but it does imply that different people understand the conceptual linkages that a symbol generally carries.

The communal nature of language is part of how words themselves construct and organize our understanding of the world. Words as symbols provide structures for understanding the world that we do not have to invent for ourselves. Learning to communicate provides us with discrete symbols whose connections with each other have evolved out of millennia of human effort to understand the world. Instead of inventing a system of symbols out of whole cloth, we learn a system of symbols through interacting with each other. Language is essential to how symbols can serve the first cognitive need that Cobb and Elder identified, the need for psychic economy 1983. The shared meaning that a word or phrase carries provides a built-in structure for simplifying and organizing the world. Words as symbols contain the shared meaning we have invested in elements of experience (e.g. a building, a party, violence, faith, etc.) and that socially negotiated set of associations provides a cognitive shortcut that informs our understanding of what those things are when we encounter them.
This is not merely convenient; it is a requirement. We cannot disregard the structure of symbols that comprise language and invent our own unless we are willing to give up on communicating with other people. Given that need, the structure of our symbolic system is largely defined by the very symbols that we use. “The social and political world is conceptually constituted, or more precisely, pre-constituted. According to this constitutive view of language, who we are and what we are, how we arrange and classify and think about the world-and how we act in it-are deeply delimited by the argumentative and rhetorical resources of our language” Ball and Hanson (1989). The shared meaning of words shapes our very perception of the world.

Take the “tree” example again. Our understanding of what “trees” is is shaped by the meaning the term has developed socially. Without this shared meaning, we may not even recognize a tree as such when we encounter one in the world. Trees come in many different types, and are composed of distinct elements, and are related to our experience in a host of ways. A tree in the world creates a huge amount of perceptual data that must be organized and placed in context. However, through sustained observation and communication, the word “tree” has become a symbol for common characteristics that unite trees all over the world, and distinguish them from other objects we encounter. The symbol “tree” also serves as a repository of knowledge about trees. We now know that trees make oxygen, even though few of us really understand the chemical process involved. This change in definition was not based on direct perceptual observation, but did change how we conceptualize trees. Words are not neutral symbols that we use to communicate; they come with received implications that guide how we describe the world to ourselves.

**Words Become Symbols of Group Membership**

The meaning of symbols is also shaped by who uses them. The condensational meaning a symbol captures what that symbol is associated with, which includes who is using it. The condensational meaning of a symbol is very similar to the connotative meaning of a word. While words have literal definitions (called their denotations), their meaning goes well beyond what exists in dictionaries. The connotative meaning of a word is the set of
associations that it evokes in a listener that are not part of its literal definition. Often, the connotative feeling a word evokes is largely a function of who has used the term in recent memory. Certain words become characteristic of how particular social or political groups communicate, and thereby become symbols of those groups. This is part of how symbols can serve as markers of identity that distinguish between social groups.

Take the word “liberal” as an example. As a set of sounds and characters, the word has no inherent meaning. However, the term has been a central symbol in the organization of political competition for centuries, serving as a call to arms for proponents and opponents alike. Moreover, the meaning of the term has changed radically as it has come to summarize very different sets of symbolic relationships and very different political perspectives than it once did. At the outset, a liberal was someone who opposed the role of religion in politics and who viewed individual liberty as the proper foundation of the social order. Using the term liberal referenced the ideas of Bentham, Locke, and Mill and the broader political movement that sought to demolish religious and feudal hierarchies as the anchors of political life. The word liberal was a code word for rational humanism, for a faith in the powers of the individual, and a rejection of permanent social hierarchy. Later, once the industrial revolution matured, and as old authorities lost out to capitalist interests, the term liberal was increasingly claimed by proponents of free-market ideology. As the church and aristocracy ceased to be their main antagonists, liberals became primarily focused on the economic realm and keeping government out of market affairs. While the intellectual structure of classic liberals was not abandoned, the broader philosophical enterprise receded into the background and economic liberty became the central focus. Of course, today’s liberal looks nothing like the liberal of the 19th century. The term “liberal” is now taken to summarize a worldview that sees the market, not government, as the chief threat to liberty. For liberals, individual liberty must be protected by the government, not from the government. The word “liberal” is now attached to a belief in interdependence as the fundamental human condition, with a focus on the failures of free market capitalism and a concern for what individuals owe each other.
Without going into extensive depth about how these transformations of meaning occurred, this historical narrative underscores how the meaning of words is contingent upon how they are used, and by whom. The meaning of the symbol “liberal” has shifted, in part, because it has been adopted by different actors over time to describe their understanding of the social world. Over the past thirty years, “liberal” has increasingly become a pejorative term. Where liberals once proudly claimed the mantle, it has become a term of abuse, an epithet, the “l-word.” To a large extent, this shift in meaning resulted from a change in who uses the term. As the symbol “liberal” was increasingly used by conservatives to attack liberals, more than by liberals to describe themselves, it has taken on a new set of associations. Today liberals are most apt to call themselves “progressives” because the old symbol now carries negative connotative meaning.

I maintain that people are quite adept at recognizing when someone emphasizes the same symbols that they do. Even if subconsciously, we are able to discern when someone is speaking about the world in the way we would. The reactions someone’s language evokes, whether consciously recognized or felt emotionally, registers our subtle understanding of whether their cognitive map of the world matches our own. Shared understanding implies shared experience, not perfectly, but reliably. If someone associates symbols as we do, chooses the same words, and puts these linguistic symbols together in the same way we would, they have probably moved in the same communicative circles and had many of the same experiences that we have. Regional dialects are an easy example of how the words we use tell a story about who we are. The same idea will be communicated in different ways depending on whom you are speaking to and where. Given that most of our language processing is unconscious, and given that we must recognize and employ a host of rules and associations to communicate, it would be surprising if our cognitive processes were not registering a great deal of information unconsciously about whether the person we are interacting with shares our symbolic understanding of reality.
Language Organizes Collective Action

Collective action is impossible without language. The process of investing shared meaning in utterances or written symbols allows us to relate our experience of the world to the other people we meet. “Symbols are essential to the processes of social organization and vital to the operations of the polity. They structure social communications and define the stakes of social action. They provide the vehicles through which political demands are articulated and serve as the objects around which mobilization and counter-mobilization occur” Cobb and Elder (1983). The importance of symbols to political attitude and behavior implies that language itself is essential to the structure of collective action. In this section, I will outline a few of the ways that language itself plays a role in organizing the political system. This will not be an exhaustive list. The intention is to identify a few testable implications of the claim that language is a fundamental institution in modern mass democracy.

Communities in Speech: Political Movements and Shared Symbolic Meaning

Political movements are organized around symbolic concepts. Material interest alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the emergence of a new political movement. Individual material need can be experienced, but it cannot be communicated without symbols that carry shared meaning. Coming to see that one’s experience is connected to that of others requires that we use symbols that other people invest with the same meaning that we do. Powerful symbols are indispensable to organizing social effort toward change in a number of ways.

Symbols are essential for political mobilization. “Symbols serve as a rallying point for the mobilization of support for demands and provide a catalyst for the organization of a political movement. The solidarity of a mobilized group will depend heavily upon the extent to which unifying symbols capture the fears, anxieties, and frustrations of its adherents” Cobb and Elder (1983). First, people have to be attracted by the symbolism
a nascent movement espouses. Mobilizing groups of people into a movement requires getting emotional buy-in, a passionate commitment to change. Often the particulars of what needs changing are vague at best, but the symbols used must be personally evocative to committed activists. Symbols also serve to knit movements together. Inventing new symbols or investing old symbols with new meaning helps to clarify what the movement means to its members. Shared symbolic meaning comes from continued interaction and communication, which is precisely what being part of a movement entails. The act of being in movements creates shared symbolic understandings that help define who movement members are. Symbols are essential to defining group memberships, so the creation of shared symbolic meaning is essential to creating an identity for the movement and its members.

Symbols sustain movements over time. Being an agent for change is usually a frustrating enterprise. By definition, the status quo is distasteful in some way, and you live in a world that either disagrees with you, or simply doesn’t care. In a political system that makes substantial change difficult, movements must find the energy to sustain themselves if they hope to influence public policy. Political movements need to keep activists on board and must replace those that turn their attention elsewhere. This makes symbolically loaded words an essential resource for sustaining political action. To have any hope of changing policy, movements must rely upon words that evoke powerful associations and occupy key locations within peoples’ conceptual understandings of the world.

Shared symbols also facilitate clear communication. When people interact with each other on a sustained basis they tend to develop clear symbolic shorthands that have very similar meanings to everyone involved. This is true with families, at work, and in politics. Coordinating effort toward the same goal requires developing symbols with very specific shared meanings. Often, this involves working out the definitions of specific words as they will be used by the movement. Negotiating the meaning of important ideas, words, and symbols helps movement members communicate effectively with one another, which ultimately allows them to work more efficiently with each other. Successful movements must, at some point, clarify what they want if they hope to influence policy, and the
working out of shared symbolic meaning is part of how that occurs.

These are only a few of the ways in which symbols play a role in organizing social energy for change. The requirements of collective action cause social movements to develop distinctive symbols. Creating the symbolic conditions for collectively pursuing social change is fundamental to the success and failure of movements. The next section discusses how symbolic negotiation becomes essential to the construction and maintenance of political coalitions and the two dominant American parties in particular.

**Symbolism and Negotiating Party Coalitions**

Symbolic negotiation is as important to building political coalitions as settling on particular policy stances. Where movements can be united by specific goals and specific symbolic meaning, universalizing coalitions have a different challenge. Cross-cleavage coalitions have to find ways of generating support among different groups of citizens from different political movements. This is precisely the challenge our system presents for major political parties. Running a successful presidential campaign, and winning a majority of the seats in Congress, requires diverse bases of support. Movements and activists make symbolic demands of the parties that can be just as important as their policy desires. Treating symbols as part of the organizational structure of democratic politics implies that large-scale political parties are built through negotiating which symbols will be highlighted in addition to which specific policy changes will be advanced.

First, using the cherished symbols of a movement is essential to connecting with members of that movement. By appealing to symbols that a particular group has invested with meaning, political elites can signal that they are committed to the values and perspective of that movement. Edelman argues that symbolic assurances are often more important to generating support for political elites than actual legislative results 1964. Using language and imagery that is symbolically evocative to a certain group communicates an understanding of their identity as a political collective. Citizens are more apt to see political leaders in a favorable light, and to at least believe that they understand what leaders are saying, if elites speak in a way that matches the symbolic structure they use to interpret
the world.

Second, symbolic confrontations are often central to what divides movements and groups of people. Many issues that do not have a direct impact on the distribution of material resources evoke strident differences of opinion. “Government is unavoidably involved in the social allocation of prestige, the affirmation of values, and the legitimization of lifestyles. To ignore conflict over these matters, even though they may not involve direct of immediate allocation of material resources, is to ignore a major and important part of political life” Cobb and Elder (1983). Studying the American temperance movement, Joseph Gusfield argued that, more than material competition, the temperance movement was about whose values would be given the status of official sanction Gusfield (1963). The rise of the social agenda in contemporary politics is fundamentally about symbolic confrontations over what counts as the American way. A wealth of evidence shows that these symbolic battles often engage citizens deeply and can have profound impacts on partisan affiliation Carmines and Stimson (1980, 1989). Activists and movements do not just want their policies put forward, they want political elites to describe the world in their terms. Making a pro-gay statement, even if it is in no way followed up by legislative action, is to take a stance on a symbolic conflict that is deeply emotional, and that stance will be noticed.

Finally, word choice can have an impact on the perceptions of voters who are not particularly active in politics. Like everyone else, party elites must work with the linguistic resources available to them. If we think about the diffuse structure of socially understood symbolic meaning as part of the institutional environment in which parties act, their language should reflect the location within that structure that they are striving to reach. If party elites are to communicate effectively, they must recognize that the meaning of the words they use is contingent upon what is in the minds of their audience. As Frank Luntz says, “it’s not what you say, it’s what people hear” 2007. Knowing this, party elites cannot choose their words out of a hat; they must think about what connections their words will call to the minds of different voters.
If this argument is correct, word choice should have a major impact what the symbols “Democrat” and “Republican” mean. Parties are symbols with both referential and condensational meaning. As referents, these terms are labels for real people, resources, and choices. However, the party labels are also importantly condensational symbols for everything that we understand the parties to be. I contend that the words the parties use to describe themselves and each other are essential to the condensational meaning that we invest in them. This returns to the contextual and interrelated nature of meaning in language discussed above. When we encounter the names of the parties, or their logos, or salient members, our understanding of these symbols is determined by how these symbols are connected to other linguistic symbols that we use to understand and describe the world.

Word choice should be one mechanism through which we evaluate whether the value systems espoused by political leaders matches our own. Research has shown that people rank-order the importance of different values in their minds and will consistently rank the same values highly regardless of what other values serve as the points of comparison. Just like everyone else, party leaders have to choose which values to emphasize and which will take a back seat. In doing so, political leaders are making choices about whose value systems to emulate and whose to disregard. I contend that party coalitions are built, in part, through choosing the value systems that organize their discussion of specific policies.

**Broadening Coalitions and Homogenizing Language**

Seeing language and shared meaning as part of the institutional architecture of political parties also implies that broader coalitions will use more diffuse language than specific movements. As parties seek to bring more groups, interests, and worldviews under their umbrella, the more different systems of meaning they must capture in their language. Where particular movements or social groups can develop specific systems of shared meaning that tie their members together, and distinguish them from others, parties in the United States must appeal to many different communities of meaning if they are to be electorally successful. As the size and diversity of the American electorate has grown over
the years, parties must reach out linguistically in more directions at once. “The larger and more diverse a political movement’s constituency, the more vague and imprecise its unifying symbols and rallying cries will be” Aberbach and Walker (1970). This statement applies just as well to political parties as to individual movements. As political collectives incorporate more diverse supporters, they must deal with more diverse symbolic maps that need to be reflected in the language used to communicate.

I contend that this linguistic requirement is part of why Democrats and Republicans in the contemporary context often can be difficult to tell apart. Particularly in presidential election, both parties are striving to appeal to diverse interests with different linguistic structures undergirding their communication. Since the 19th century, politics has become far more inclusive and diffuse. The days of hegemonic party bosses are gone and so are the days where material patronage determined most political allegiances. As women won the right to vote, as labor movements mobilized the working classes into a political force, as the franchise became an actual reality for minorities, and as the media environment made political discussion genuinely national, the parties have been forced to appeal to more of the symbolic systems of meaning that exist in American society. In the 19th century, political discourse was an elite phenomenon constrained to literate circles. Now, politicians know that their words can be widely disseminated to a diverse audience. Ten-dollar words are largely forsaken for simple terms that carry meaning for virtually everyone. We even see some politicians sprinkling Spanish phrases into their speech in an effort to reach out to another community of meaning. If the resources available in language are part of the institutional constraints that political actors much negotiate, there should be evidence that modern parties use language in a more diffuse way than they did in pervious eras. One implication of this is that observable differences in language between the two parties should be dramatically smaller than under older party systems. As both parties diversify their symbolic appeals, their speech should have more in common than it once did.
Conclusion

This chapter outlines the core elements of how we have thought about symbols in politics and articulates specific claims that will be tested in the remaining chapters. The simple fact is that we have much to learn about how symbolic politics works. We have a host of normative and qualitative theory to draw from, but very little empirical knowledge. Murray Edelman is probably the best-known source of thought on symbols in political science, but his work was fundamentally qualitative and not particularly scientific. Edelman published piece after piece that contain extensive discussions of how politics is symbolic in nature, but almost nothing that would count as tests of these claims. Cobb and Elder’s book, *The Political Uses of Symbols*, makes many of the arguments about how symbols shape politics that guide this project, but it also contains very little rigorous analysis of the claims they were making. Cobb and Elder’s work has occasioned some subsequent analysis Davis (1995); Sapiro and Soss (1999), but these projects were generally limited to specific issues over limited time horizons. Overall, it is clear that our field has only scratched the surface of how symbols organize political beliefs, choices, and outcomes. The quantity of claims about how symbols and language shape politics so far outpaces the amount of hard evidence that it is difficult to know what arguments are accurate and which are fiction. The remaining sections outline the specific questions that will be addressed in the empirical chapters that follow.
Chapter 3

Data and Methods

Seeing Text as Data

Content analysis has been around in political science for some time. However, when content analysis required human coding, time costs and concerns about validity severely limited its scope. Over the last five years, political scientists have started borrowing computer-aided content analysis tools (hereafter referred to as CATA) and using them to examine political texts. The advances made to date are exciting but, I believe, represent only the tip of the iceberg. This project is part of the ongoing effort to illustrate the empirical and theoretical benefits of studying political text in a rigorous way.

CATA tools are increasingly appealing because digitized text is becoming much easier to come by. In 2000, the Library of Congress initiated the Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program, a $100 million dollar effort to “save America’s cultural and intellectual heritage in digital formats” LOC (2002). The BBC has begun making its entire radio and television archive, that largest of its kind in the world, available via the internet BBC (2003). The Congressional Record from 1994 on is now available online in its entirety. LexisNexis and other repositories of media coverage are also rapidly expanding. The consequence of these efforts is a growing ocean of data waiting to be explored. In the Congressional Record, party platforms, editorials, web-logs, news coverage, sermons, autobiographies, interest group publications, social movement literature, personal correspondence, and even art, we find a record of how Americans have made sense of their
Types of Computer-Aided Content Analysis

Computer aided text analysis (CATA) is nothing new (for general reviews see Krippendorf (2004); Popping (2000); Cousins and McIntosh (2005). One well known article in political science to used CATA tools to determine the authorship of disputed Federalist papers several decades ago Mosteller and Wallace (1964). The CATA programs currently in use in political science mostly focus on two specific questions. 1) What is the ideological location expressed in a given text? 2) What topic or type of speech does a particular text fall into? Both dilemmas have occasioned several programming solutions, none of which are perfect. The challenge currently facing us is to pick the methods that are best suited to specific theoretical questions. This section reviews several CATA tools recently developed by political scientists with an eye to their relative appeal for this project.

Topic and Category Identification Programs

Topic categorization works by using particular elements of language (e.g. words, word stems, strings or words, and parts of speech) as predictors of which category a particular document falls into. The essential insight is that certain words or phrases are markers of when a particular topic is being discussed or how a given texts compares to known samples of language. The raw text is transformed into numerical data by using a computer program to count the occurrence of each specific feature of language in the sample being analyzed. In this approach, each document receives a vector of counts for each feature appearing in the entire sample. The following programs mostly differ in how they use these word-count matrices to categorize texts.

Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA)

Latent Symantic Analysis (LSA) was first pioneered in cognitive psychology and is rooted in the idea that the human brain uses processes similar to factor analysis to decode the
meaning of communication Landauer and Dumais (1997) (for a general introduction to LAS Landauer, Foltz and Laham (1998). The general insight is that a given word’s meaning is a function of the contexts in which it routinely appears, and a passage’s meaning is determined by the words that appear in it. This family of models differs in the number and type of assumptions they need to function, but they are all use word-counts to uncover the latent dimensional structure of texts being analyzed. In a topic categorization set-up, dimensions capture clusters of words that appear in a particular context but not others. LSA models estimate the dimensional structure of language without any input from the researcher, thereby obviating the need for a pre-set topic coding scheme. It is important to note that LSA models make no use of word order, syntactic relationships, or morphology Simon and Xenos (2004). Beyond the cognitive theory of meaning cited above, these models are appealing because they generally produce sensible results.

Simon and Xenos reintroduced the idea of factor analyzing word-frequency matrices into political science. They conducted exploratory factor analysis to identify groups of words used to discuss partial-birth abortion. The dimensional structure that Simon and Xenos uncovered was generally consistent with a hand-coding of texts, evidence that examining word usage captures much of the same information that a human researcher would identify by reading. The major objection to their method is that explanatory factor analysis assumes that observations are independent of one another. Rules of grammar, however loosely followed, imply that many words are not structurally independent of one another. That said, the success of their demonstration implies that this violated assumption may not always be deadly.

Most LSA models are variants of basic factor analysis, but amended so as to avoid violations of form like the one just discussed. Quinn, Monroe, and their co-authors use a multinomial mixture model to identify the topics of congressional speeches from the 105th-108th Congresses 2006. The authors settled on 42 topics (dimensions) after running the model for higher and lower order solutions. It should be noted that LSA models generally function best for high-dimensional solutions, usually in the 50-1500 dimension range Landauer, Foltz and Laham (1998). The fact that Quinn et al’s model is optimized
at 42 topics is evidence of congressional speech being more highly organized than many other types of language. For any Douglas Adams fans, a 42-topic solution also hints that Monroe and company are courting deeper questions than they recognize.

One major advantage of Quinn et al’s model is that it can incorporate a time parameter, which allows their model to capture the changing relationship between words and topics over time. This is an important advantage because language is a dynamically evolving entity. When words start appearing in new contexts, these models capture those changes in contextual meaning. The major limitation of LSA models is that they require very large bodies of text. Quinn and his colleagues analyzed every word uttered in Congress during the years studied. Their results are more generalizable than those based on more specific samples of text, but collecting, archiving, and preprocessing the entire Congressional Record is a massive undertaking. LSA methods, therefore, may not be feasible for researchers with less time, fewer graduate student assistants, or where the availability of relevant text is limited.

**Support Vector Machines**

Support Vector Machines (SVM’s) are another family of models designed to sort text into categories of interest. These models identify words that are characteristic of specific categories within a “training” sample and then use those discriminating words to sort texts into the same categories. These models have been used in the private sector to distinguish good versus bad customer product reviews Dave, Lawrence and Pennock (2003) and to sort viewer comments on movies Pang, Lee and Vaithyanathan (2002) (or a comprehensive discussion SVM’s Vapnik (1982); Cortes and Vapnik (1995); Vapnik (1999)). SVM’s have produced similar or superior results to alternative methods of identifying categories in text 1999; 2005.

Hillard, Purpura, and Wilkerson used SVM’s to categorize the 380,000 bills introduced in the 80th-105th Congresses 2007 based on the words appearing in the title. They found that the SVM program successfully replicated how those same bills were manually coded by the Congressional Bills Project, and with much less effort. Once again, analyzing word
usage captures many of the same patterns that human readers identify.

A few characteristics of SVM models warrant specific mention. First, the program reports the discriminatory power of each word used. This allows researchers to trace the change over time in which words distinguish ideologies or topical categories from one another. While not as rigorously dynamic as LSA models, this still provides some leverage on how the meaning of specific words evolves. Second, the success of the Congressional Bills Project experiment indicates that SVM’s may be capable of working with extremely short segments of text. This is useful because long texts with lots of words may not always be easily collected. Third, SVM’s appear to work well in both high and low dimensional contexts. This is a strength, but also an indication that the dimensionality of the results is largely determined by which categories the researcher chooses to analyze and the selection or training samples. Finally, while SVM’s clearly require less massive bodies of text than Monroe and Quinn’s method, good results still require sizable training samples.

Non-Parametric Categorization

Gary King, Daniel Hopkins, and their research team has been exploring ways of categorizing political text in ways that avoids what they see as key problems in how CATA methods are currently being implemented in political science Hopkins and King (2007).

First, they argue that we should change the benchmark for CATA categorization success. “Accurate estimates of these document category proportions has not been the goal of most work in the classification literature, which has focused instead on increasing the accuracy of individual document classification. Unfortunately, methods tuned to maximize the percent of documents correctly classified can still produce substantial biases in the aggregate proportion of documents within each category” Hopkins and King (2007). The focus on percent of individual documents accurately classified is a holdover from computational linguistics and may be a misleading standard for social scientists who are using these estimates to model aggregate behavior. To resolve this problem, King and Hopkins produce estimates of document mis-categorization, and use those to amend the aggregate measures of relative topic frequency.
Hopkins and King also point out that using words to predict categories violates the data generation process we are attempting to model. In the real world, authors and speakers know what they are talking about at the outset, and choose language accordingly. Both LSA models and SVM’s functional form implies that words precede categories, the equivalent of asserting that members of Congress only discover what they were talking about after they’ve finished speaking. In addition, estimating a document’s category as a function of its speech elements requires parametric assumptions that are almost never met by textual data. For these reasons, Hopkins and King, propose modeling language profiles (the vector of count data for each document) as a consequence of unobserved categories, rather than their cause. They argue that their approach is also less sensitive to differences in language between training samples and populations of interest.

Hopkins and King demonstrate their method by categorizing the sentiment of weblogs toward the major presidential candidates for 2008. They collected all blog postings between February 1st and 5th 2007 that mention any of the candidates and sort them into categories ranging from extremely negative to extremely positive. “The idea is to create a daily opinion poll that summarizes the views of people who join the national conversation to express an opinion” (2007). They chose their sample to capture the days immediately preceding and following John Kerry’s botched ”joke” about dropping out of high school being a direct road to service in Iraq. Hopkins and King show that their method captures a massive spike in negative sentiment in the wake of Kerry’s gaffe. The success of their method is even more impressive given the consensus in the literature that sentiment categorization is even more difficult for CATA tools than topic sorting Pang, Lee and Vaithyanathan (2002).

**Estimating Location Along Specific Dimensions**

As soon as CATA tools started emerging in political science, we started trying to use language to measure ideology. Of course, political scientists have been trying to do the same thing by hand for years so it’s not a novel conceptual leap. There are, essentially, two methods of extracting measures of ideological location from political text. First,
scaling algorithms similar to the NOMINATE procedure have been used, replacing vote data with word count data. Second, Wordscores, a program developed by members of the European Party Manifestos Project, seeks to estimate a text’s ideological location without using scaling techniques.

Monroe and Maeda used scaling methods to study the ideological content of congressional speeches Monroe and Maeda (2004). They used essentially the same algorithm developed by Poole and Rosenthal (1991) to study the ideological content of Senatorial speech in the 106th Congress. Monroe and Maeda generate word-count matrices such that each Senator receives vector counts for each of the unique words that were used during the session. By excluding words that were neither extremely rare nor common (similar to excluding near unanimous votes) the complexity of the estimation problem becomes similar to roll-call analysis. Like NOMINATE, two dimensions account for the majority of the variance in the model. The first cluster of words substantively comports with the traditional left-right continuum while the second appears to be a dimension of discursive formalism. First-dimension legislator estimates based on speech generally mirror NOMINATE ideal-point estimates, albeit with some marked irregularities. Like the LSA approach outlined above, the need for large amounts of text makes this approach unreasonable for many applications.

While I am fascinated by many of the CATA methods outlined to this point, none appear in this dissertation. Mostly, the barrier has been having sufficient amounts of text to use. Most of the researchers doing computational content analysis have deep backgrounds in computer engineering, or have collaborators who do. Not having ever written a line of code before starting this project, I collected all of the texts used in this dissertation by hand. The next two sections review the techniques used in this dissertation.
Chapter 4: Estimating Dimensions of Attitude on Specific Issues

Chapter 4 uses Wordscores to measure where members of Congress stand in debates over specific policy measures. Ken Benoit, Michael Laver, and Will Lowe Laver and Garry (2000); Laver and Benoit (2002); Lowe (2008) designed Wordscores to capture the ideological location of political parties based on the language used in party electoral manifestos. The Manifesto Research Group has been hand-coding platform content for years and the authors of Wordscores conceived it as a way of automating the process. They also intended the tool for use in other contexts, which is precisely what is done here. I hope to show that Wordscores is useful, in part, because it allows us to examine whether particular debates revolve along ideological lines or not.

Wordscores is appealing for several reasons. First, it is free and easily available. Wordscores runs in STATA and the code can be downloaded at http://www.wordscores.com/. The Wordscores website also contains directions for using the program and examples of the Stata input codes and report windows. Second, Wordscores is conceptually straightforward. The program estimates the relative location of a particular "object" text along a specified dimension by comparing its word usage to those of "reference" texts whose location is exogenously established. First, the reference texts are assigned values by the researcher that reflect where they stand along a dimension of interest. Second, the program estimates where each word stands along the specified dimension based on which of the reference texts use the word most often, creating scores for each term used in the reference texts. The program then counts all of the words used in object texts and attaches the scores just produced for each word. By tallying the word scores for each word used in an object text, the program creates a raw estimate of the text’s location along the dimension created in the first step. In essence, the researcher sets the dimension by choosing texts and assigning them scores (e.g. iconically liberal texts at one end and characteristically conservative texts at the other) and then the program reports where the language of other texts falls on that dimension.
A technical complication arises because frequently used words such as "the" and "tax" receive neutral scores in the initial step. The texts being analyzed appear more moderate than they actually are because the neutral score of commonly used words pulls the text's average toward the median. To correct for this problem, Wordscores reports a transformed score for each object text. The transformation procedure written into the original program transforms the raw scores by imposing the same variance as the reference texts. Martin and Vanberg proposed an alternative transformation routine that is less sensitive to which reference texts are selected Martin and Vanberg (2006). This project uses the Martin-Vanberg transformation but, since American research usually deals with two political parties and clearly defined pro and con positions, either approach is defensible.

Wordscores has been used in several contexts before and other scholars have found it to produce meaningful results. The authors of the Wordscores program have demonstrated that it generates estimates of ideology that comport with expert survey placements of European political parties Laver and Garry (2000); Laver, Benoit and Garry (2003). Judicial scholars have also demonstrated that Wordscores does a reasonable job of placing Supreme Count Justices relative to one another McGuire et al. (N.d.). In addition, Bertelli and Grose (2006) showed that a consistent pattern applied for speeches and votes on impeaching President Clinton.

Wordscores is not the most flexible or subtle CATA tool but, in certain contexts, its simplicity is a virtue. The program is agnostic as to why individual words appear or precisely what they mean to the audience. Therefore, its estimates do not rely on a specific linguistic or psychological theory of meaning. Wordscores also makes no parametric assumptions about the distribution of words and is not meant to model a specific data generation process. While these features limit the amount of information the program can extract from text, they alleviate many concerns about whether the textual data being analyzed is suited to the model underlying other CATA tools. In addition, the absence of parametric or modeling assumptions limits the amount of text needed to run Wordscores. Monroe and Maeda’s scaling algorithm is more sensitive, but the number of parameters it must estimate requires massive bodies of text.
Chapters 6 and 7: Measuring Polarization and Change in National Platform Language

Chapters 6 and 7 take a broader and longer view. Both chapters examine dynamics in language used in the Democratic and Republican national platforms from 1856 to 2004. Chapter 6 examines changes in platform language from one election to the next. First, I measure the stability of each party’s language by measuring the similarity of their language to what they published in the previous electoral cycle. Second, I measured the degree of imitation in each party’s platform, operationalized as the similarity of each party’s platform to their opponents’ platform or four years earlier. Chapter 7 examines signals of polarization contained in the language used Democratic and Republican platforms from each election cycle. In all of these cases, I used Salton’s cosine statistic Salton and McGill (1987) to measure the similarity of the two texts being compared.

The cosine measure is commonly used in computer-aided content analysis because it is better suited to word usage data than Pearson’s- r Leydesdorff (2005); Leydesdorff and Egghe (2009). Salton’s measure takes vectors of data for two objects we wish to compare (X and Y), and finds the cosine of the angle between the two vectors. The objects are specific platforms and the attributes are word occurrences. In an n-dimensional space, where n=the number of unique words used, we can treat each document as a vector in this space. The number of times a text uses a given word defines its coordinate on that dimension, and from these coordinates a vector representation of the text’s location within n-space can be generated. The distance between the two text vectors indicates their similarity, and the cosine of the angle between these two vectors is a widely-used measure of the distance between them. Formally, the cosine similarity of texts x and y, where i=each unique word, is defined as:

\[
\text{Cosine}_{(x,y)} = \frac{\sum x_i y_i}{\sqrt{\sum x_i^2} \sqrt{\sum y_i^2}}
\]  

(3.1)

The cosine measure ranges from zero to one. As the angle between these two vectors
approaches zero, the cosine of the angle goes to one. Thus, the cosine estimate goes to one as texts emphasize words to the same degree. The first key advantage of Salton’s cosine over Pearson’s-\(r\) has to do with the placement of the origin against which particular values are compared. Pearson’s-\(r\) normalizes each vector of attributes around its arithmetic mean, in this case the average number of times each word is used in a given document. The cosine measure creates a vector space where the origin for each word is zero. As a consequence, when either of the texts does not use a given term, that term does not influence the resulting measure. Mathematically, one can see that if either \(x_i\) or \(y_i\) in equation 3.1 equals zero, that element will drop out of the resulting estimate. On the other hand, the number of zeros in a given vector does influence its arithmetic mean which anchors the correlation coefficient Jones and Furnas (1987). In practical terms this is important because we are often comparing texts that do not use many of the words in the dataset, and don’t want the resulting estimates of similarity to be driven by the zeros in the data. For example, neither of the 1860 platforms use the word “nuclear,” but that is clearly not evidence of similarity, just that nuclear power and weapons had not been invented. This also establishes a natural threshold for which words are important enough to use as indicators of platform similarity, since important words should show up in both parties’ language. In reality, when a word is a prominent part of election discourse, both parties use it, and the key question is whether they are using it to the same extent.

Secondly, the cosine measure also facilitates comparing documents of different lengths. The cosine of the angle between two vectors is insensitive to the length of those vectors, only their location in \(n\)-space. Thus the cosine measure captures the degree to which two texts are emphasizing the same terms, regardless of how long the respective platforms are. Because we are interested in the distance between the texts, not whether one is longer than the other, the cosine measure is a more suitable measure of similarity. In addition to the cosine’s inherent resistance to differences in document length, I standardized the word count data by the length of the respective documents. The number of times each word was used was divided by the total number of words in the document. As such, I am explicitly measuring the similarity of each word’s salience in the Democratic and
Combining Theory-Driven vs. Data-Driven Methods

All content analysis methods must contend with the challenge of deciding what to look for. This question occasions two tendencies, or types, of CATA methods, what Simon and Xeon call "theory-driven" and "data-driven" (2004). In theory-driven approaches, the categories or dimensions of interest are determined a priori by the researcher. In purely data-driven methods, the researcher plays no role in determining which categories or dimensions are identified. It should be noted, however, that even where the categories or dimensions are not explicitly determined, choosing which model to use still influences the identified dimensional structure.

Of the methods being reviewed here, latent semantic analysis is the most heavily data-driven. Monroe and Maeda’s ideal-point estimation (2004) and Quinn et al’s topic identification (2006) models both fall within this general approach. All of the other programs must first be told what to look for by the researcher. In reality, all of the CATA methods are significantly more data-driven than hand-coded content analysis. In none of these modern methods does the researcher determine which words are indicative of particular categories or ideal points. Modern CATA methods allow us to treat the connection between categories or ideal points and words probabilistically and generally; we need not definitively assign words to categories or limit our attention to only those words researchers identify as important.

There is nothing inherently better about either data-driven or theory-driven methods. They both suffer from inferential drawbacks that cannot be overcome. On the data driven side, we must still substantively interpret the dimensions or categories identified by the model. The familiar debate over what to call the NOMINATE first dimension emerges whenever we allow the model to determine the dimensional structure of the data. On the flip side, theory-driven results are less externally valid. Theory-driven content analysis focuses on what the researcher wants to study, so results from different coding schemes
are difficult to compare and it is more difficult to be sure that the dominant features of
the data have been captured.

This dissertation incorporates both data-driven and theory-driven components. I
wanted to avoid imposing too many prior expectations on the data as would be done
in a purely theory-driven approach, but also wanted the analysis to speak to specific the-
oretical questions. In each case, I made some theoretically-driven decisions about how the
texts were analyzed, but then allowed the data to drive the estimates being generated.

**Wordscores: Choosing a Dimension and Letting the Words do the Rest**

Wordscores allows the researcher to define the dimension of interest a priori for theoretical
reasons, but then allows the data to determine texts’ location along that dimension.
First, reference texts are selected and assigned a score by the researcher. In so doing,
the researcher makes a theoretically based decision about what dimension to analyze and
what the end points of that dimension are. Wordscores then assigns a value to each
word used in the reference texts that reflect whether that word is used more by texts at
one end of the specified dimension or the other. At this point, Wordscores become more
data-driven. Once the dimension is determined by establishing the scores of the reference
text, Wordscores identifies which words are associated with one end of the dimension,
which words characterize texts from the other end without any additional human input.
Contrast this to conventional hand-coding methods where the researcher determines which
dimension to analyze and where each element of language stands along that dimension.
For example, the Manifesto Research Group’s coding scheme defines which issues reflect a
conservative perspective and which issues are characteristically liberal. Issues are selected
for theoretically-driven reasons, not based on an explicit analysis of whether issues that
are taken to be liberal are actually emphasized more by liberal parties or not. Conversely,
once the dimension is set in Wordscores by determining the scores of the reference texts,
the data determines where each word falls empirically. Words that are used equally by
all of the reference texts receive a score at the center of the estimated dimension and only those words that are actually associated with a particular location along that dimension receive discriminating scores. Once each word is assigned a score in this way, the location of texts we want to score is calculated based on whether it uses language associated with one end of the dimension or the other.

A concrete example helps to flesh out how the process incorporates both theory-driven and data-driven components. The inventors of Wordscores were interested in the ideological content of party platforms, so they used estimates of ideological location derived from existing sources to identify the location of texts that are used as reference texts Laver, Benoit and Garry (2003). They used party platforms from 1992 as reference texts and assigned scores of the ideological location of British parties based on expert surveys to these texts. These scores were arranged to create a dimension with liberal texts at the low end of the scale and more conservative texts at the high end. The Labor Party platform of 1992 was assigned a score of 5.35, the Liberal Party’s platform received a 8.21, and the Conservative Party platform a 17.21. By analyzing the words used in the 1992 platforms, Wordscores identified words like “unemployment,” “women,” and “minorities” as being more liberal because they were used more often by the liberal texts. On the other hand, words like “drugs,” “corporation,” and “inheritance” were identified as more conservative terms. Based on the scores assigned to each individual word, Wordscores then estimated the location of each party’s 1997 platform based on the balance of liberal and conservative terms that were used. The Labor Party’s platform received a score of 9.17, the Liberal Party’s platform a score of 5.00, and the Conservative Party’s platform a score of 17.18.

In Chapter 4, I am interested in how symbols characterize particular positions within specific policy debates. The texts to be scored are congressional speeches delivered during floor debate over repealing the Estate Tax and China’s Most-Favored Nation trade status. First, I wanted to test whether these debates were stable over time with the same words being used by proponents of the measures over several successive years and different words being used by their opponents. Each of these issues came to a floor vote in several successive years. As such, I used earlier debate as the reference texts to identify which
symbols were associated with the two sides of each issue. Texts favoring the bill under consideration were assigned a score of 1 and those opposing it a 0. This sets the dimension to be estimated as the pro-con attitude reflected in word choice, rather than ideology more broadly, northern vs. southern speech, urban vs. rural language, or other potentially interesting dimensions. Second, I want to know whether particular symbols are used to defend particular positions in congressional debate as are used to articulate the same stance in other forms of elite discourse. To accomplish this, newspaper Op-Ed pieces and Interest Groups’ position papers that took a position on repealing the Estate Tax were collected and used as reference texts. These external reference texts were assigned scores of 0 and 1 in the same way just discussed. In both cases, I wanted to identify the specific dimension in language that is connected with a specific policy issue and test whether that dimension reliably sorts texts that have not been assigned scores a priori. As will be shown, results demonstrate that these dimensions in speech are reliably connected with how members of Congress actually voted. Once the dimension of attitude is determined, Wordscores can identify symbols that are associated with different positions that allow it to dependably infer where members of Congress stand along that dimension based on how they defend their views.

Selecting Important Symbols but Not Particular Dimensions in Platform Discourse

Chapters 6 and 7 combine theory-driven and data-driven components in a different way. In these two chapters, I focused on particular types of symbols, but allowed the dimensional structure of the language to be undefined. This section outlines and defends the analytical methods used in Chapters 6 and 7.

The theory-driven component of the approach used in Chapters 6 and 7 consisted of selecting specific words to analyze from the nearly 19,000 unique words that have been used in national platforms over the past 150 years. My central purpose in choosing which words to analyze was to isolate two types of politically important symbols. First, I selected
words that refer to a specific policy question. These are still symbols but they have specific denotational meaning. Second, I selected the important abstract values whose meaning is more extensively connotative. The theory chapter discusses why abstract values are important political symbols that deserve particular attention. If the theoretical perspective behind this project is correct, and concrete political choices are rooted in symbolic attachments that shape political thinking, it is important to isolate these symbols and test whether their use is systematically tied to how the parties behave. Particularly in Chapter 7, where patterns in platform symbolism is used to predict subsequent governing behavior, I wanted to test whether abstract values contain reliable signals about how the parties will govern over the coming years. In addition, by selecting specific policy words as another list, it is possible to compare these measures to the estimates based on abstract values.

Before selecting words for either list, I ranked all of the words used by how often they appeared in the entire dataset (all platforms from 1856-2004). All of the words that were used for either list were among the 7000 most frequently used terms. The full dataset has almost 19,000 terms, but the top 7000 words include all of the terms that are used more than a few times. Because a word that is not used in either of the texts does not influence the cosine estimate, these measures would not change substantially by including extremely rare words. The next two sections discuss how these lists of words were created and includes tables that identify all of the words that were included in each list.

Selecting Specific Policy Words

First, I selected words that refer to a specific issue, interest, policy, or federal agency. The goal was to measure whether the parties change their stated policy agenda from one election to the next (Chapter 6) and whether they are focusing on different elements of federal policy within a given election cycle (Chapter 7). Tables 3.1 and 3.2 list all of the words that were selected for these purposes.

To make the estimates crisply capture similarity in stated policy emphasis, only words that refer to a specific problem, policy, group, or agency were selected. Words that
can refer to different policy areas depending on how they were used were excluded from the list. For example, the word “security” was not included because it could refer to social security, national security, or security as an abstract ideal. On the other hand “securities” was included because it specifically references a particular fiscal entity. While this choice means that some words with important policy implications were excluded, this was preferable to muddying the waters by including terms that may refer to the same thing, but may not.

In addition to capturing which policy areas were being emphasized broadly, I also wanted to capture differences in how specific issues were framed. Whether differences in framing reflect honest disagreements or strategic efforts to frame specific issues in different ways, the goal was to capture relevant differences in which sub-topics the platforms were addressing. For example, “crimes,” “police,” “habeas,” and “narcotics” all fall within the general topic of criminal justice, but they also refer to different elements of the broad area. Since focusing on crime and drugs are related, but not identical, points of emphasis this list can leverage when platforms are addressing the same broad topic in dissimilar ways.

I also included words that identify a specific social group or interest. Again, I do not contend that these words are purely referential symbols, but these terms do refer to specific groups in the political world. Moreover, naming groups expresses a concern for that group’s interests, as does focusing on their policy priorities. When a party champions the interests of the elderly by name, they are sending a similar signal as when they emphasize the importance of protecting retirement security.

**Focusing on Abstract Values in Platform Discourse**

Chapter 2 outlined why abstract values are a particularly interesting type of linguistic symbol. Values often evoke powerful symbolic reactions for both political elites and everyday citizens alike. Rokeach’s work has shown that many people have highly organized value systems that organize how they think about specific policy choices. More specifically, I want to test the argument laid out in the theory Chapter that values are essential to
the creation and maintenance of partisan coalitions. Testing this claim requires isolating these potent symbols from the rest of platform language. In Chapter 7, I will test whether differences between the abstract values used in the Democratic and Republican platforms predict polarization in congressional voting. The selection of words to populate a list of core values was driven by several standards.

First, I wanted words that are as purely condensational symbols as possible. While the list of policy words was created using words that have important referential components, here I wanted to focus on the other end of this spectrum. As such, many symbols that are partially abstract, but also have important referential components, were not selected. The meanings of symbols like “government,” “parties,” “Reagan,” and “communism” are clearly partially a question of connotation, but these terms to referentially identify real things in the world. None of the words selected for this project identify specific objects in the world, making their meaning more thoroughly contingent upon the connotative associations they evoke.

Second, I selected words that satisfy Rokeach’s notion of core values, defined as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” 1973. One of the contributions of this study is to expand the study of core values into another type of data, and to test whether the use of these ideas is systematically tied to other choices political actors make. Most of the work on core values has been done through surveys, so it is important to examine whether there is a discernable structure to these beliefs that is not a product of how surveys are organized. Moreover, Rokeach’s work did not focus on elite attitudes and whether their attachment to abstract values is connected to how they govern. Showing that there is a structure to value commitments is important, but showing that these attachments also shape how elites govern is an even more powerful demonstration that these are important symbols that organize political behavior.

While most of the words included in this list fit well with Rokeach’s definition of core values, some terms deviate from that definition. First, some of the terms, like “evil,”
“oppression,” “discrimination,” and “coercion,” refer to negative end-states that we want to avoid rather than pursue. These terms are the linguistic opposites of Rokeach’s values, so I believe that they essentially match what his definition is meant to capture. Second, I included some terms that, while not explicitly statements about the desirable ends of human life, are univalent symbols that serve similar purposes in political discourse. Words like “God,” “founders,” “civic,” “privacy,” and “duty” are not values in the narrow sense, but they are symbols that indicate an orientation that social life should adopt. Privacy is more of a condition than a value, but in contemporary American politics this idea is clearly linked to values like freedom and liberty that do fit into Rokeach’s rubric.

Finally, in refining this list of terms, I chose to exclude a number of words that are used primarily for critique. Initially terms like “fraud,” “injurious,” “misrepresentation,” “recklessness,” “threaten,” and “unethical” were included because they represent the inverse of some of Rokeach’s positive values. However, upon further reflection, it seemed likely that the use of these terms would be primarily driven by whether the party in question controlled federal government or whether it was in the minority. Since I wanted to capture meaningful differences in how the party elites conceptualize the social world, not just whether they happen to occupy the White House or control Congress, including these terms would capture dynamics that are not the primary concern. My suspicions were verified when I reran the analysis conducted in Chapter 7 excluding these terms. The connection between differences in platform values and congressional polarization is even more pronounced if these critical words are excluded from the analysis. While I will not linger on this point, it is evidence in itself that core values are important organizing symbols. Focusing exclusively on abstract values and excluding symbols that largely reflect who controls the apparatus of state produces cleaner estimates of differences in how party elites think about the world.

To date, I am not aware of any other CATA applications in political science the explicitly isolate abstract values for examination. Tables 3.3 and 3.4 list all of the words that were selected as abstract values. By using a data-driven analysis method, but using theory to select what parts of language are being examined, I hope to demonstrate that
we can rigorously capture the signals contained in symbols whose definition is difficult to pin down.

Taking the Road Less Analyzed-By

Most of the projects that analyze platform content have sought to measure the party’s stated location along the liberal-conservative ideological dimension Budg (2001); Ginsberg (1972). The Manifesto Research Group method starts with selecting policy pledges that are essentially liberal or conservative in nature (e.g. pro-military=conservative and pro-welfare=liberal). An estimate of the ideological message contained in a platform is derived from the balance of liberal and conservative promises being made. While this approach makes intuitive sense, it is not particularly well-suited to analyzing word usage over 150 years of political history. Traditional hand-coding approaches are based on extensive a priori assumptions, assumptions that do not generally hold for platform word-usage.

First, platforms cover a large range of issues, not all of which have ideological overtones. Protecting the rights of the disabled, campaign reform, and transportation infrastructure all receive substantial attention in party platforms, but it’s not clear whether these are liberal or conservative issues. The Manifesto Research Group uses a small subset of their full range of categories to create their measure of platform ideology because most of the issues addressed do not carry obvious ideological messages. Complicating matters even more, many issues are ideological at some times but not across the entire period being analyzed here. Education policy has not always animated partisan disagreements as it currently does; environmental policy, racial policy, gay rights, and abortion have become ideological concerns today, but they were not always so. Other issues, like tariffs, were once deeply ideological but are less clearly organized along ideological lines today. Defining stances on these issues as left-leaning or right-leaning because of their place in contemporary politics, would risk mis-characterizing how they functioned as issues in decades past.
This problem is even more pronounced in the realm of abstract values. Equality is seen as a predominantly liberal concern in modern politics, while individual liberty is a more conservative value, but these terms have not always carried these ideological connotations. Liberty and equality at least have dictionary definitions that make them seem plausibly related to the left-right ideological dimension, but what about a concept like freedom? During the last Bush administration, the word freedom was regularly deployed to justify aggressive foreign relations, creating a new cabinet post on internal security, and privatizing social security. But several decades ago freedom was deeply woven into the civil rights, the anti-war, and the women’s rights movements where it was used to advocate for reforms that were anything but conservative. Regardless of which policies truly serve the interests of freedom, the ideological connotations of the word freedom are clearly context dependent. The same holds for other important political values like progress, honor, faith, justice, or exploitation; the signals these concepts send about ideological stance change depending on who has been using them in recent political memory.

Finally, allowing the data to determine where important differences exist still captures ideological distinctions when they are salient in platform language. When Republicans focus more on the evils of taxation than Democrats, or when Democrats highlight the ideal of equality more than Republicans, these distinctions will still emerge without deciding a priori what these signals mean ideologically. If the majority of campaign discourse is organized along ideological lines, measuring differences in word emphasis will still reveal the presence of these disagreements. On balance, the dangers of erroneously defining symbols as liberal or conservative, and the risk of ignoring important disagreements that are not purely ideological, overwhelm the benefits of the a priori approach for this project.

These conceptual arguments need not convince the reader by themselves. In wrestling with how platform word-usage should be analyzed, I tried several methods, including applying the Manifesto Research Group method to word-count data. The more one examines platform language, the less sense it makes to force the data into a low-dimensional space or to focus only on left-right ideology. But don’t take my word for it. The next section
reviews evidence that platform word-usage is highly organized along many lines that have little connection to left-right ideology. The final section reviews the largely disappointing results of using the Manifesto Research group approach, a failure that underscores the need for alternative techniques.

**Many Important Dimensions in Platform Language**

Before settling on the Cosine estimate for Chapter 6 and 7, I experimented with using Correspondence Analysis to examine the party platforms. Correspondence Analysis is an exploratory dimensional scaling routine that has been used to examine textual data. A central reason for running this analysis was to discover whether a consistent ideological dimension of language separated the two parties over time. If the dominant patterns in platform language are ideological, Correspondence Analysis should easily identify consistent inter-party differences. On the other hand, if ideology is only one of many patterns in the data, exploratory factor analysis should report the presence of other salient structures of variance. While the method is exploratory, we have a good sense what we’re looking for. For instance, one would expect ideological differences to have increased over the past 20 years as partisans have polarized more deeply and on more issues. Most measures of polarization show increasing ideological differences between the two parties since the 1970’s and, if the dominant structure in platform language is ideology, factor analysis should pick up on that pattern. To maximize the potential of finding consistent ideological differences in party language, I limited the analysis to platforms from 1948 on. Many of the core ideological antagonisms have been consistently present since WWII (e.g. size of government), so focusing on recent platforms gives ideological differences the best chance of emerging from the data.

Figures 3.1 through 3.6 report estimates of platform location along the six most important dimensions identified by Correspondence Analysis. Most of these dimensions are difficult to interpret substantively but the presence of well-organized empirical patterns in the data point to the presence of more structure than ideological differences could capture. Moreover, most of these dimensions look nothing like what we would expect to
see in a measure of party ideology, further evidence that ideological differences are being overwhelmed by other types of variance.

Figure 3.1: Correspondence Analysis 1st Dimension Platform Location: 1948-2004

The first dimension that Correspondence Analysis extracted is, more or less, time. Figure 3.1 shows where the two parties’ platforms fell on this dimension from 1948 to 2004. Clearly, this dimension captures the change in language that is present in both parties’ platforms over the last half-century. The Democratic platform of 2004 is much more similar to the Republican counterpart from the same year than it is with Democratic platforms from 10 or twenty years earlier. This fact holds true for the Cosine estimates that are used in Chapters 6 and 7. As a general rule, the Democratic and Republican platforms from the same election have more in common with each other than with their own platform from other elections. This finding is reinforced by most of the dimensions shown below and many of the others that were not included.

The fourth dimension identified in this exercise is the only one that bears any resemblance to left-right ideology as we understand it. From the end of the Second World War to the early 1970’s, the parties were relatively close to each other and they have become
Figure 3.2: Correspondence Analysis 2nd Dimension Platform Location: 1948-2004

Figure 3.3: Correspondence Analysis 3rd Dimension Platform Location: 1948-2004
more distinct over the following 30 years. This is one of the only dimensions that show consistent differences between the two parties, and the only dimension where the differences are pronounced across the entire period. The fact that Correspondence Analysis did identify a pattern that vaguely resembles ideology indicates that the tool does pick up on consistent inter-party variance, where it exists. If nothing resembling ideology had emerged from this exploration of the data, it simply could be due to using the wrong tool. However, this dimension indicates that Correspondence does identify consistent differences between Democrats and Republicans language where they are present. Thus we have even more confidence that these are not the only, or even most important, patterns in the data.

Figures 3.5 and 3.6 show the dimensional scores for the fifth- and sixth-most important Correspondence Analysis dimensions. These are included to reinforce the points made already: multiple distinct patterns in the data and a great deal of similarity between the two parties. Regardless of the substantive interpretability of these mathematical dimensions, it is striking how often the two parties change in the same ways over time.
Figure 3.5: Correspondence Analysis 5th Dimension Platform Location: 1948-2004

Whatever evolutions in substance or tone have happened over the last fifty years, the two parties have changed their language in many of the same ways.

I am not arguing that ideology is meaningless or irrelevant; it is clearly important. However, when we analyze party language, ideological differences capture a limited amount of the systematic variance in the data. If we insist on forcing these data onto a single dimension, we ignore much of what is going on. Even in a best case time-period, stable inter-party differences share the field with many other systematic patterns in how the parties articulate themselves. If the scope of analysis is broadened to include the last 150 years of political history, there are no inter-party differences that persist for the entire period. The final section pushes this case one step farther by reporting a failed attempt to measure ideological location from platform language in the way that is commonly done in political science.
Limitations of Traditional Approach to Measuring Platform Ideology

The Manifesto Research Group has conducted the most sustained effort to measure the ideological content of party platforms Budge et al. (2001). The only major differences between what the Manifesto Research Group does and the analysis conducted here is that the Manifesto Research Group focuses on sentence-level policy emphasis and this project examines word-usage. This section first reviews their approach to measuring platform ideology and then reports the results of an effort to replicate their approach.

Because parties so rarely adopt clearly divergent positions in their national platforms, scholars have looked elsewhere for signals of partisan differences. The “salience” theory of party competition developed by Robertson 1976 argues that ideological differences are communicated through emphasizing different issues, not through outright counter-argumentation. On this account, liberal parties will emphasize more left-leaning issues
and conservative parties will focus on more right-leaning policies, even if they are de-
fending most of the same stances within those issues. Instead of searching for where
parties adopt polar-opposite positions, they measure the balance of attention paid to
characteristically liberal or conservative issues. This is specifically operationalized as the
total percentage of sentences devoted to identified liberal issues minus the percentage of
sentences that address conservative concerns. The Manifesto Research Group’s coding
procedure is fundamentally \textit{a priori}. The dimension was selected in advance and the
researchers decided whether specific promises reflect a liberal or conservative orientation.
The data only enter once the scheme is deployed.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.7.png}
\caption{Liberalness of Platform Promises: 1948-2004}
\end{figure}

Figure 3.7 shows the estimates of ideological location produced by the Manifesto Re-
search Group. This approach clearly does capture systematic and consistent differences
between the two parties. Moreover, the shift by both parties in a conservative direction
over the last 20 years is substantively sensible. The Manifesto Research Group’s approach
is not without merit, but their method does not extend well into the murky terrain of
word-usage.
The Manifesto Research Group method was replicated step-by-step using word-usage data. First, words were selected that could plausibly be assumed to be either liberal or conservative. These list are not reported, but several attempts were made to select words that have clear ideological overtones. Once these lists were populated, the cumulative attention devoted to each group was calculated for each document. The final measure of ideological location was given by subtracting the total salience of conservative words from the total salience of liberal terms. This technique was applied to party platforms and nomination acceptance speeches from 1940 to 2004.

Figure 3.8: Liberalness of Platform Language: 1940-2004

First, the results of applying the Manifesto Research Group’s \textit{a priori} method to the platform word-usage. Figure 3.8 reports the estimates of ideological location for each party’s platform from 1940 to 2004. The effort does not produce completely senseless results. Beginning in the early 1970’s, consistent divisions emerge that only disappear in 2004. Still, these data are much more noisy than is desirable. The two parties cross over each other in several elections and the estimates of the Republican party oscillate significantly from 1940 to 1980. For reasons already discussed, it is clear that we cannot
produce crisp estimates of ideological location by deciding \textit{a priori} what words are liberal and conservative.

Figure 3.9: Liberalness of Acceptance Language: 1940-2004

Applying the Manifesto Research Group method to word-usage in nomination acceptance speeches also fails to produce satisfying results. Here, there appear to be very little differences in ideological tone between the Democratic and Republican nominees in most election cycles. Once again, we see the two parties moving together over time, but few sustained differences between them. The trend toward more conservative content is present here, as was found in the original Manifesto Research Group data and the preceding analysis of platform word-usage, so there is a consistent pattern that is plausibly ideological.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Existing methods of analyzing language in political science can only take us so far. First, we need to rethink the importance of ideology in how politicians articulate themselves. Language is a dynamically complex phenomenon and we cannot boil it down to a single
dimension without losing a huge amount of what is happening. Secondly, we need to allow the data to tell us where important patterns exist. Particularly when studying language over a long time period, we cannot simply assume that liberty is a conservative word, or that education is a liberal issue, or that putting more cops on the beat is a conservative concern. The ideological or partisan meaning of symbols depends on how they have been used, so we cannot assume that a given word carries the same associations over time. In the dynamic world of political rhetoric, symbols are often appropriated, become broadly salient following events, make for good copy in new media, or disappear altogether. Therefore, it is wise to give the data room to settle the question of what counts as liberal or conservative content.

This is not an argument against studying ideology, or against using theory to design our measures. The conventional wisdom in computer-aided content analysis is to expose the data to different analytical techniques become each method has strengths and limitations. Along the way to settling on the techniques used in the subsequent chapters, a great deal of experimenting took place. The results presented in this chapter are only a small fraction of the failed or partially successful efforts made during this project. The arguments against radically reducing the dimensionality of political language, and against focusing on left-right ideology alone, are born of experience trying to do both. While these remain important goals, we need to be realistic about the prospects of success and what is being left out.

This chapter reviews why the traditional mixture of data and empiricism is ill-suited to word-count data, but does so with an eye for how these two sides of good measurement can interact productively. Chapter 4 chooses a specific dimension but allows the meaning of individual words within that space to be defined by the data. Chapters 6 and 7 impose no dimensional assumptions, but theoretically-informed choices are made about which symbols to analyze. Computer-Aided Content Analysis is still new to our discipline and this chapter records the struggle to address specific theoretical questions while not imposing unreasonable expectations on the world.
Appendix: Selected Policy and Value Words
Table 3.1: Selected Policy Words 1

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<td>unjustly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radical</td>
<td>stabilization</td>
<td>unselfish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rational</td>
<td>steadfast</td>
<td>usefulness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>realistic</td>
<td>subjugation</td>
<td>usurped</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reasonable</td>
<td>subordination</td>
<td>valor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reliable</td>
<td>subserviency</td>
<td>vigilance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4

Language, Philosophy, and Strategy in Washington Policy Discourse

Introduction

This chapter studies congressional debate on two specific issues within a constrained time frame. While the final two empirical chapters study campaign symbolism over a long time span, and do not focus on specific issues, it is important to test whether the theoretical perspective guiding this project is a useful guide to how members of Congress use symbols to defend their stances on specific measures. The two issues, selected for reasons that will be discussed below, are repeal of the Estate Tax and China’s trade status. This chapter will not pursue a single theoretical question throughout, as is done in the final two empirical chapters, but instead gets this project off the ground by testing a number of related implications of the theoretical perspective laid out previously. Three central issues will be addressed. First, this chapter demonstrates that elites’ use of symbols identifies where they stand on important issues. Second, this chapter demonstrates that symbolism is often stable over time and across discursive contexts. Finally, this chapter provides an initial look into how strategic considerations shape the symbols that elites use.

There is very little rigorous work on the symbolic content of congressional debate. Some work has been done on why Representatives make symbolic speeches Mayhew (1974); Hill and Hurley (2002), but these studies do not focus on the substance of what
representatives are saying. Political science has hardly touched the actual content of congressional discourse. Given the paucity of rigorous work on how representatives’ language is connected to their votes, and on how strategic forces influence the way members of Congress articulate themselves, this chapter provides initial tests of some central questions that need answering.

**Floor Debate as Symbolic Performance**

We call the speeches that precede a vote in Congress a “debate,” but that’s not what’s really going on. By the time a final roll call vote occurs, party whips know where most representatives stand and undecided members are rarely swayed by something said at the 11th hour. There is some back and forth during debate, particularly in the Senate, but most of the comments made immediately before a vote are pre-written speeches. These speeches are symbolic acts. Most of the real deliberation where differences of opinion are negotiated and policy compromises are hashed out occur off-camera. Floor debates are tips of discursive icebergs whose real mass lies below the water line where congressional staffers, interest group activists, lobbyists, and Representatives negotiate the details of policy. So who cares what Representatives say on the grandstand? If these speeches are symbolic performances, why do they matter?

First of all, these speeches matter to the people giving them. Significant portions of this chapter are devoted to how strategic pressures shape the symbols that elites use, but we should not forget that these are real political actors who often care deeply about what is being discussed. One of the central goals of this dissertation is to demonstrate that language gives us a window into the symbolic structures that guide political thinking, even the symbols used by elected politicians. If this contention is correct, even symbolic speeches like these should provide some traction on where Representatives agree with one another and where particularly deep disagreements exist.

Most citizens don’t watch or read these speeches personally, but Representatives’ statements are being monitored. For most issues, a host of interested players keep close watch
over what members of Congress are saying. A particular feature of how the Congressional Record is created, which deserves to be noted anyway, underscores how worried elected politicians are about being held accountable for what they during floor debate. The words that are recorded in the Congressional Record were not necessarily said on the floor of Congress and some words that were uttered don’t appear in the Record. Congressional staffers edit their members’ statements before the Record is published. This may make the speeches less honest but, in some ways, it makes them more reliable indicators of how elected politicians want to present themselves. Members of Congress clearly believe that the language they use during floor debate matters or they would never waste the valuable staff hours to have it prettied up. Since most people don’t spend their days watching C-SPAN, interest groups and professional activists are the most direct audience.

In the theory chapter, I argued that political movements and interest groups often want to see issues discussed in their terms, in addition to having specific policy goals in mind. Movement leaders can use legislators’ statements to applaud or condemn them to the groups’ broader membership. Interest groups work to publicize member comments that they find particularly compelling or repugnant. Recognizing that congressional speech is essentially symbolic, it is important to assess whether there is evidence that members of Congress are consciously shaping their language to please interest and activist groups. If activists and interest groups want members to use their chosen symbols, the content of congressional speech should be shaped by what these groups want to hear. This claim will be indirectly tested here by comparing the symbols used in congressional address to those circulating in interest group and newspaper opinion circles.

Some debates are purely symbolic, meaning they produce no change in policy but do take up time on the congressional schedule. The houses of Congress often vote on and debate bills that, for one reason or another, have no immediate chance of becoming law. The primary purpose of speeches such as these is to highlight symbolic differences between the parties. Some votes are scheduled to force a discussion, usually one that puts the minority party in an uncomfortable position. The Estate Tax issue falls perfectly into this category, as will be discussed at more length below. Our understanding of
how symbolic discussion can be used as a weapon is still relatively limited and has not been the topic of much empirical work. Part of the purpose of this chapter is to show how symbolic speech can be used for strategic purposes and how elites respond to the strategic constraints they face.

Speeches given during floor debate are perfect objects of study for this dissertation because they are so clearly symbolic. Examining how the content of symbolic speech reveals policy attitudes, how it is tied into broader discussions of public policy, and how it is structured by strategic considerations is essential to recognizing the import of symbolic utterance. This chapter challenges the idea that symbolic equals meaningless by examining how reliable, rational, and strategic symbolic address can be.

**Expectations**

First, this chapter tests whether language reveals symbolic attachments that are connected to how members of Congress vote. One benefit of studying speeches delivered during floor debate is that we know how each speaker voted, and thus, his or her attitude about the measure being discussed. Later chapters will examine party language across the range of issues raised in national platforms, so it will be more difficult to tie chosen symbols to specific policy attitudes. Moreover, because national platforms are written collectively, and it can be difficult to know where language was favored by party elites broadly rather than by a specific faction or candidate, it is important to begin with an analysis of how the symbols used by individual speakers are connected to their stances on specific issues.

Second, this chapter tests whether stable patterns in language exist over a number of successive years. If using language forces us to clarify and organize how symbols fit together, and what they mean to others, the language used to discuss specific issues should be relatively stable within particular moments in time. Sustained discussion should clarify which symbols and arguments go with the different positions. This expectation is tested by using congressional speech from one year as the baseline for measuring the attitudes reflected in subsequent debates.
Third, this chapter provides more evidence that political discourse is a high-dimensional phenomenon and that left-right ideology does not account for all of the meaningful variance in how language is used. The issue of China’s trade status was chosen because it did not fall along traditional ideological lines. If my contention is correct, and there are stable symbolic attachments other than left-right ideology that organize political beliefs, there should be identifiable dimensions of language that exist around issues that do not animate ideological commitments. Showing that Wordscores can use language to estimate legislator attitudes on an issue that did not fall along traditional ideological lines is another indication that we should not think about political symbolism in a unidimensional way.

Fourth, this chapter examines whether the symbolism of congressional debate mirrors the symbols being deployed in the broader elite discourse. The Theory chapter addresses the importance of symbols to interest groups and interested constituencies. Symbols can convey an understanding of what a group wants, above and beyond the specific arguments that are being made. Moreover, some interest groups and activists are committed to the symbolic battle itself; they often believe that how issues are discussed and considered is just as important as specific outcomes. If this is true, we should expect legislators to use the cherished symbols of the interest groups that will look kindly on their votes. To test this expectation, I compare the language used on the floor of Congress to what interest groups and newspaper opinion writers said about repealing the Estate Tax. If legislators are using the same symbols to make the same arguments as were being prosecuted in the broader elites discourse, Wordscores should be able to identify words that characterize each side of the broader debate and use them to measure the attitude of the legislators who rose to speak about their votes. This expectation is straightforward enough, but has rarely been subjected to quantitative analysis. Elected politicians usually love preaching to choir, but we are only starting to examine how they use symbols to appeal to particular groups of interest. If there is any work that uses word-count data to examine the similarity of legislative speech to interest-group publications or newspaper editorials, I am not aware of it.
Finally, this chapter gives a glimpse into how language and symbols can be used strategically. The Estate Tax issue was chosen, in part, because it put Democrats on the defensive but was not similarly uncomfortable for the Republican majority in the House. The repeated votes over repealing the Estate Tax fit perfectly into Mayhew’s notion of position-taking 1974. The Senate and White House were never going to make this bill law, so the primary purpose of repeatedly introducing it in the House was to force the Democrats to defend an unpopular position. Public opinion was largely against the “Death Tax,” but it was not something that liberal Democrats could easily abandon. Attitudes about the Estate Tax do largely break down along the left-right ideological dimension, but in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s Democrats were wary about looking like the tax-and-spend liberals that Republicans were painting them to be. Therefore, Democrats should have been looking for a way to escape the rhetorical trap by borrowing Republican symbolism and deemphasizing characteristically Democratic symbols. There are two specific expectations that will be addressed in the final empirical sections. First, if Republicans were comfortable with portraying the Estate Tax as an ideological issue and the Democrats wanted to avoid this, we should expect the ideological differences between Republican Representatives to emerge in how they discussed the Estate Tax while ideological differences within the Democratic camp should have been muddied. Second, if Republicans succeeded in shifting the terms of the debate, Democrats should have deemphasized liberal symbols and borrowed heavily from conservative symbolism.

**Selected Issues**

This chapter largely focuses on the debate over repealing the Estate Tax. This issue remains an ideological flashpoint, a question that pits liberals and conservatives against one another. It has been a salient issue for many years, particularly among partisan activists. At the time of the debates studied here, the Estate Tax received substantial media attention and was a hot topic of discussion within the interest group community. This issue is also appealing because it was highlighted by Republicans for strategic reasons, at least in part. The issue of eliminating the Estate Tax stands as a quintessentially
Republican issue. When it was raised in 2001, it encapsulated the main line of Republican argument that had served so well from the 1980s: the desire to provide voters tax relief. This particular manifestation, often framed as a ”Death Tax” that would reach into the grave to rob citizens of their legacy, worked especially well as a popular issue for the new millennium. Voters were against it and favored its elimination. Working splendidly as an electoral issue, and at the center of the GOP’s self-definition, this issue stands as a clear-cut instance when we might expect the party leadership to shape the agenda to maximize the party’s leverage.

This chapter also examines debate over China’s trade status. Each year between 1995 and 2001, the issue came to the House floor, in slightly different guises, to repeat what was essentially the same debate. Should the US give China ”Most Favored Nation” status for trade, thus engaging it, or should it refrain from doing so in reaction to China’s palpable human rights abuses and the growing bilateral trade imbalance? In each case, the pro-trade forces prevailed. China’s trade status was not an issue that fell along the contemporary partisan-ideological debate. Conservative Republicans like Tom Tancredo joined Nancy Pelosi and other liberal Democrats in opposing first President Clinton and then President Bush’s yearly decision to continue developing trade relations with China. Thus, this issue was appealing because it was a salient concern that did not break along ideological lines.

**Different Opinions, Different Symbols**

It is important to verify that Representatives on opposing sides of a policy debate use systematically different language in making their arguments. First, success provides initial validation that the approach used throughout this dissertation has merit. If disagreements over important matters of policy produce are shaped by differences in how leaders organize the world symbolically, we should see evidence of this in congressional debate. Wordscores should be able to identify where representatives stood based on the words they used to defend their position. Given the inherent noise in textual data, and given that
some representatives are under more pressure to moderate their language than others, I
would not expect Wordscores to perfectly sort representatives into opposing camps. How-
ever, if word-choice is systematically tied to belief, Wordscores estimates should broadly
distinguish between representatives who voted in favor of these measures and those who
were opposed.

Second, by using the first in a series of debates to score subsequent floor speeches, we
can see whether differences in the symbols used by the two sides of the issue are stable over
time. An underlying argument in this dissertation is that patterns in language emerge
out of sustained discussion. As issues are contested and political groups settle on the
symbols they prefer to use in making their arguments, debate should reflect the fact that
certain symbols have become characteristic of particular stances. Since both of the issues
were salient (at least within politically attentive circles) and had been contested for years
before these debates took place, there should have been persistent linguistic distinctions
that separated the proponents and opponents of policy change.

Third, this section examines whether stable symbolic differences are present in both a
highly ideological issue and one that does not animate ideological commitments. I have
argued that we should not conceptualize political discourse in low-dimensional terms
alone. Ideology is undoubtedly essential to how political discourse is organized, but there
are dimensions of belief and argument that are not organized along ideological lines. The
issue of China’s trade status was chosen because congressional voting did not break along
ideological lines. If my argument is correct, there should still have been stable patterns
in the symbols that Representatives used that identified where they stood on the issue.

Figure 4.1 shows that Wordscores estimates can discern a Representative’s position on
the Estate Tax using his or her words alone. These scores were produced by using pro- and
anti-Estate Tax language from the floor debate in 2001 to score the speeches made in the
House in 2002, 2003, and 2005. The upper density plot shows the distribution of scores for
Representatives that supported eliminating the Estate Tax and the bottom density plot
that for defenders of the levee. The reference texts used here were assigned a score of 1 for
speech in favor of eliminating the Estate Tax and a score of 0 for language opposing the
elimination of the tax. Thus, we would expect to see legislators who oppose eliminating the tax receiving smaller speech scores while those in favor of the repeal measure should receive larger scores, which is precisely what figure 4.1 reveals. While there is some overlap in the tails, this figure clearly shows that even without knowing the specific substance of their arguments, we can make informed judgments about where a Representative stands on an issue from the symbols he or she uses. The majority of scores for legislators who support eliminating the Estate Tax were above .5 on the scale constructed here while the bulk of scores for legislators who opposed the measure were below .5. This is one demonstration that differences in perspective are reflected in linguistic choices, and that these differences can be stable over time. While we certainly know that actors with different positions tend to make different arguments, it is striking that these distinctions are systematic enough to organize debate such that a computer can reliably guess where an actor stands based on how his or her language compares to the history of debate on an issue. This is not to say that there were no changes in the arguments or emphasis made by the two sides during this period, but it does show that many of the linguistic cues of
where representatives stood were consistent over these years.

Figure 4.2: Distribution of Wordscores Estimates for Pro and Anti MFN Status

Figure 4.2 shows the same conditional density plots for speech scores on China’s Most-Favored Nation trade status. Here the pro- and anti-trade speeches from 1998 were used to score speeches from 1999 and 2001. The reference text of language in favor of re-authorizing China’s Most-Favored Nation status received a score of 1 while the opposing text received a score of 0. Once again, representatives on one side of the issue use systematically different language than their opponents. The upper density plot shows the distribution of Wordscores estimates for those in favor of renewing China’s Most-Favored Nation trade status and the lower plot the distribution of scores for speeches opposing China being given good trade relation status. Just as expected, speeches in favor of the measure generally received larger estimated scores than those opposing the bill. This demonstrates that even for an issue that did not fall along partisan lines, differences of opinion are reflected in language. Just as with the Estate Tax case, most scores for legislator who supported extending China’s Most-Favored Nation status were above .5 while opponents fell below .5. The debate over China’s trade status had been a
prominent issue in federal politics for over a decade by the time the speeches analyzed here occurred, and in that time the pro-trade and anti-trade sides had developed characteristic linguistic approaches when articulating their positions. While it is difficult to say precisely when the debate over trade with China became so well structured, or whether the two sides substantially altered their language in previous years, it is clear that the use of language in 1999 and 2001 mirrored the linguistic differences that were present in 1998.

Later sections will more systematically test the connection between these speech estimates and actual voting, but this section provides some basic face validity for using word-counts to measure differences in belief. This section does provide some initial confidence that positions on prominent policy issues are systematically connected to the symbols that political actors highlight. Moreover, these patterns can be relatively stable within a particular political era. If we know which words were attached to specific positions in recent debates, actors chosen language is very informative about where they stand. An actor’s language can tell us where what they think even if we don’t know the precise substance of their arguments. Wordscores does not understand the logical arguments that speakers are making and can still reliably infer where they stand based on the symbols that are being emphasized.

**Issue-Specific Dimensions in Speech: Closer to the Point that Broad Ideological Tendencies**

The previous section provided visual evidence that Wordscores can broadly discern speeches in favor of a given bill from those in opposition. This section pushes the analysis by testing whether speech scores can reliably predict voting behavior. To be clear, I am not claiming that speech causes votes. Rather the purpose is to more rigorously test whether the differences in symbol-usage captured by Wordscores are good indicators of each legislator’s attitude.

To gain even more confidence that the symbols used in congressional speech are reliable indicators of policy attitude, I also include each legislator’s DW-NOMINATE 1st-dimension
ideal point score as a predictor of how they voted on the Estate Tax. First, this sets up a more difficult test for the Wordscores estimates because legislators’ NOMINATE scores were strongly associated with how they voted on repealing the Estate Tax. In 2002, 2003, and 2005, legislator ideal-point estimates on the NOMINATE 1st dimension are correlated with votes on the Estate Tax at the .87 level, indicating that this vote largely comported with legislators’ broader voting patterns. Finding that Wordscores estimates are still significantly predictive of votes on the Estate Tax when we control for their broader voting records is even more evidence that language contains unique and reliable information about where political actors stand on specific issues. This also provides another test of the claim that studying speech allows us to identify dimensions of attitude that are specific to the issue at hand. While a legislator’s voting record can indicate a general tendency in their liberal or conservative disposition, there should be some differences between these general tendencies an how they saw this specific issue. Again, the point is not that left-right ideology is irrelevant, but that studying linguistic symbols provides leverage on issue-specific dispositions that shape how legislators behave.

Table 4.1 contains the results of a logistic regression where votes on repeal of the Estate Tax in 2002, 2003, and 2005 were modeled as a function of legislator speech scores produced using the 2001 legislative debate as the reference texts and their broader ideological leanings as captured by their DW-NOMINATE ideal point estimate. As some of the representatives spoke more than once in a given year, or gave speeches in more than one of the years studied, robust standard errors were used because their observations cannot be seen as entirely independent. The data in table 4.1 are a further demonstration that members’ language reveals a great deal about their beliefs. The speech scores were scaled such that larger values should indicate stronger support for the bill eliminating the Estate Tax, so the significant and positive relationship in this model is as expected. NOMINATE scores are scaled with larger values indicating a more conservative voting record, so the positive relationship with supporting repeal of the Estate Tax is also as expected. Moreover, table 4.1 demonstrates that speech carries unique information about the attitudes of legislators about particular bills that is not captured by their broader ideological voting
Table 4.1: Predicting Vote for Repealing the Estate Tax based on Member Ideology and Language used in Floor Speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Coefficient (robust s.e.)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Repeal Language</td>
<td>16.43** (3.65)</td>
<td>13,700,000.00** (50,000,000.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatism</td>
<td>7.66** (2.65)</td>
<td>2123.00** (5632.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 dummy</td>
<td>1.79 (1.49)</td>
<td>5.97 (8.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005 dummy</td>
<td>3.24* (1.30)</td>
<td>25.63* (33.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−10.78** (2.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudo-$r^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=173
Clusters (Member) = 108
*=p<.05; **=p<.01
Note: Unit of analysis is each Representative’s vote on repealing the Estate Tax in 2003, 2003, and 2005. Dependent variable coded: 1 = member voted for repeal, 0 = member voted against repeal. Data limited to those Representatives who gave a speech during floor debate. Language score created using previous legislative speech to anchor wordscores analysis of later debates: higher scores indicate that members’ language was similar to previous speeches that opposed the Estate Tax. Conservatism captured by DW-nominate 1st dimension estimate: higher values indicate more conservative voting record.

patterns. Even for an issue that fell quite cleanly along ideological lines, language captures differences of opinion that are specific to the issue at hand. Wordscores appears to be capturing a dimension in speech that, while related to legislator ideology, is also more proximate to this issue.

Table 4.2 shows that speech scores are also good predictors of voting behavior in the debate over China’s Most-Favored Nation trade status. Here the observations are speeches and votes in 1999 and 2001 using congressional debate from 1998 as the reference texts. Larger speech estimates should indicate greater support for good trade relations with China, which is borne out by these data. Because this issue did not fall along ideological or partisan lines, legislators’ NOMINATE scores have been dropped from this analysis. Once again, these results support the expectation that attitudes about specific issues translate into consistent symbolic choices. Regardless of whether an issue falls along ideological
Table 4.2: Predicting Vote for Granting China Most-Favored Nation Trade Status a Function of Language and Member Ideology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Coefficient (robust s.e.)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio (robust s.e.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Trade Language</td>
<td>11.80** (2.22)</td>
<td>132,971.00** (296,055.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Conservatism</td>
<td>-.14 (.61)</td>
<td>.87 (.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 dummy</td>
<td>.25 (.45)</td>
<td>1.23 (.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-5.52** (1.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudo-r²</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=146
Clusters (Member) = 102
**=p<.01

Note: Unit of analysis is each Representative’s vote on granting Most-Favored-Nation trade status to China in 1999 and 2001. Dependent variable coded: 1 = member voted to extend most-favored-nation trade status, 0 = member voted against most-favored-nation trade status. Data limited to those Representatives who gave a speech during floor debate. Language score created using previous legislative speech to anchor wordscores analysis of later debates: higher scores indicate that members’ language was similar to previous speeches that opposed the Estate Tax. Conservatism captured by DW-NOMINATE 1st dimension estimate: higher values indicate more conservative voting record.

lines or not, the language elites use to defend their positions provide a good basis for inferring where they stand. Overall, this section provides even more concrete evidence that language is a window into the attitudes of political actors. The next section will show that these patterns in language are also present in discourse that occurs outside of Congress.

Consistent Symbolism Across Elite Discourse

This section tests whether the symbols legislators use are consistent with how issues are discussed outside of Congress. The language used by elected representatives does not emerge out of a vacuum; it is informed by the broader democratic discourse over political issues. If political movements develop cherished symbols and they dearly want representatives to describe the world in those terms, we should see members of Congress
using symbols that are prominent in the language of think tanks and other opinion leaders that share their views.

Two sources of argument over the Estate Tax were compiled to test whether the same linguistic cues of attitude we find in congressional speech can also be identified in broader debate circles. The first was taken from opinion pieces that either attacked or defended the Estate Tax in the pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. The second source of reference texts is the public releases of interest groups and think tanks who were active on the issue. These texts were taken from interest groups’ web sites (from 2001-2005) and, as such, reflect their public arguments on the issue. See the appendix for a more detailed discussion of the texts used here.

This section also provides evidence that elected Representatives are sensitive to the symbolic demands of groups that care about the issue they are debating. While both of the external sets of reference texts come from elite circles, think tank and interest group releases are more deeply imbedded in the policy sphere of Congress and are written by activists who are usually more focused on a limited number of issues than most op-ed writers. The think tanks that published pieces used here as reference texts maintain an active presence in Washington DC. Their staffs are in direct contact with representatives who take an interest in their cherished issues and they keep track of which members support their positions and which are antagonistic to their goals. By comparison, fewer op-ed writers live in Washington DC and they spend less of their time in direct contact with members of Congress and congressional staffers. This is not to say that op-ed writers are disconnected from the legislative process, but they are usually less focused on a specific issue and their paychecks are not based on securing policy outcomes. Think tanks and interest groups go farther out of their way to supply language to friendly legislators than do members of the media. Think tanks are more issue-focused and, if my argument is correct, care deeply about how issues are discussed in addition to the specific policies that are crafted. It is not uncommon for legislators to crib arguments directly from prominent think tank releases and use the symbols that supportive interest groups will find appealing because they know that these activist communities are paying close
attention. Moreover, op-ed writers are usually communicating to a broader audience, so their language should be less clearly targeted at the activist communities that are already committed to a particular stance. For these reasons, I expect to find a stronger correspondence between symbolism in interest group papers and speech on the floor of Congress than exists between op-ed writing and legislative debate.

![Figure 4.3](image_url)

**Figure 4.3: Comparison of Speech Estimates Using 2001 Congressional Debate, Interest Group Publications, and Newspaper Opinion Pieces as Reference Texts**

Figure 4.3 provides visual evidence that congressional speech reflects how the Estate Tax was discussed by interested parties outside of Congress. Just as was done with the reference texts taken from previous floor debate, Op-Ed and interest group texts that supported eliminating the Estate Tax were scored as 1 while those opposing the repeal received a 0. The estimates of legislator attitude toward the Estate Tax produced using interest group and Op-Ed materials largely match those produced using previous
legislative debate as the reference texts. Because the estimates of where legislators in 2002, 2003, and 2005 are consistent across all three sets of reference text, the texts taken from outside Congress clearly employed many of the same words to defend their chosen position as did members of Congress in 2001. Wherever the Estate Tax was being discussed within the policy elite, actors who defended the levy were making appealing to many of the same symbols while their opponents were emphasizing different considerations and symbols. Even on this initial inspection, it is clear that policy debate over a prominent issue was structured in similar ways across these discursive contexts.

Table 4.3: Pair-Wise Correlations of Language Scores Anchored in Previous Legislative Debate, Interest Group Papers, and Newspaper Opinion Pieces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Reference</th>
<th>Correlation with Internal Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest Group Language</td>
<td>.77**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Op-Ed Language</td>
<td>.65**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** = p < .01

Note: Unit of analysis is the estimate of attitude on the Estate Tax for each speech delivered during House debate in 2002, 2003, and 2005. First row reports the correlation between scores anchored in previous legislative debate and interest group papers that took a stance on the issue. Second row reports the correlation between scores anchored in previous legislative debate and those using newspaper op-ed pieces as the reference texts.

Table 4.3 tests the claim that symbolism in legislative debate more closely resembles interest group publications than in Op-Ed writing. Figure 4.3 provided some visual indication that this may be the case and these correlations make the case even more clear. Op-Ed writers used much of the same language as members of Congress who share their views, but there is even more consistency between interest group publications and legislative speech. This is only one issue within a particular time so these results cannot be generalized too broadly, but this does comport with the theoretical expectations of this project. When political actors are in constant contact with one another, and repeatedly discuss the same dilemmas, they develop patterns of speech and argument that clearly signal where they stand in the debate. The social and evolutionary nature of language leads me to expect that the closer the proximity, and the more sustained the engagement,
the more systematic these patterns should become. I would expect, but cannot test here, that as we expand the population of discourse the patterns in language would become more diverse. Regardless, it appears that elected representatives are particularly sensitive to the symbolic demands of the activist communities that share their views.

Table 4.4: Predicting Votes on Repeal of the Estate Tax Using Scores Based on External Reference Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Congressional Reference coefficients (s.e.)</th>
<th>Interest Group Reference coefficients (s.e.)</th>
<th>Op-Ed Reference coefficients (s.e.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Repeal Language</td>
<td>16.43**</td>
<td>14.99**</td>
<td>11.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.65)</td>
<td>(5.10)</td>
<td>(5.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Conservatism</td>
<td>7.66**</td>
<td>7.85**</td>
<td>8.53**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.65)</td>
<td>(1.95)</td>
<td>(1.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 dummy</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>−.53</td>
<td>−.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.49)</td>
<td>(1.48)</td>
<td>(1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005 dummy</td>
<td>3.24*</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.31)</td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−10.78**</td>
<td>−7.08**</td>
<td>−6.54*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.07)</td>
<td>(2.61)</td>
<td>(3.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudo-$r^2$</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=173
Clusters (Member) = 108
**=p<.01 *=p<.05

Note: Unit of analysis is each Representative’s vote on repealing the Estate Tax in 2003, 2003, and 2005. Dependent variable coded: 1 = member voted for repeal, 0 = member voted against repeal. Data limited to those Representatives who gave a speech during floor debate. Language scores based on three difference sources of reference-text language. Language score in first column anchored in previous legislative debate, second column based on interest group position papers, and final column anchored in newspaper op-ed pieces. In all cases, larger language score indicate word usage was more similar to reference texts that favored repealing the estate tax. Conservatism captured by DW-NOMINATE 1st dimension estimate: higher values indicate more conservative voting record.

Table 4.4 extends this analysis by testing whether speech scores derived using external reference texts predict actual votes. Each column contains the results of the same logistic regression used in the previous section, where votes on repeal of the Estate Tax are modeled as a function of attitude scores derived from legislators’ use of language in floor debate and their NOMINATE 1st dimension scores. The first column contains the same results presented in table 4.1, which used previous congressional debate as the reference...
texts. The second column contains uses speech score estimates using interest group publications as the reference text and the final column the results for using newspaper opinion pieces as the reference material.

First off, all three sources of reference material capture patterns in word usage that, when applied to current debate, produce good estimates of where legislators come down on repealing the Estate Tax. Even controlling for the predictive power of ideology, all three sets of speech scores emerge as significant explanatory variables and they all work in the anticipated direction. This provides more evidence that actors who took a position on the Estate Tax appealed to many of the same symbols, whether they were members of Congress speaking on the floor of the House, employees of interest groups and think tanks, or filling newspaper opinion pages.

Secondly, table 4.4 contains some additional evidence that patterns in language are the most strongly established within well-defined discursive circles and becomes more diffuse as the domain of conversation expands. Using previous legislative debate as the reference texts produces estimates that explain more of the variance in actual votes than either of the other sets of estimates, as indicated by the higher pseudo $r^2$. The patterns of distinctive language captured in interest group publications follows close behind with the scores produced using Op-Eds explaining the least variance. While the pseudo $r^2$'s is an imperfect measure of model fit, the ratio of coefficient size and standard error for the speech scores based on external reference texts contain a similar hint. Scores based on interest group publications have a stronger relationship with actual votes than do those based on Op-Ed pieces. Table 4.3 showed that scores based on interest group reference texts were more closely related to those using previous legislative debate than were those based on Op-Ed language. Table 4.4 shows that scores based on interest group language also provide a slightly better basis for evaluating the signal of attitude contained in how legislators speak during floor debate. Taken together, this indicates that legislators are particularly concerned with how their words will be viewed by the interest group community in Washington DC.

The inventors of the Wordscores program warn that using reference texts taken from a
different discursive context can damage or bias results, but this section demonstrates that patterns in symbolism bridge modes of communication. Speeches during congressional debate are subject to limitations that do not constrain interest group staffers, and are often addressing a different audience than newspaper opinion writers, but it is clear that consistent linguistic choices distinguish proponents and opponents of major issues in all three discursive venues. On a theoretical level, this indicates that political discourse on prominent issues can be extremely well structured and stable over time. The repeated drama of political discourse produces agreement within camps about which arguments are the most important, which focal points the most strategically advantageous, and which symbols deserve the most attention. Actors who defend different positions distinguish themselves through the words they use systematically and consistently. It is likely that politically attentive actors also recognize when elected representatives are using their cherished symbols and when they are not.

The focus to this point has been on how the symbols that elites use to discuss a particular issue provide reliable cues about where they stand. However, symbolism is also strategic. It would be naive to assume that legislators are only using symbols that reflect their true beliefs. The final empirical sections will shift to examining how strategic pressures shaped the symbols that representatives used. There has been some work on the strategic forces that cause legislators to make symbolic speeches, but much less work on how strategic concerns shape the actual content of what they say.

**Strategic Pressure and Symbolic Behavior**

We naturally assume that elites use symbols strategically. Symbolic behavior has been part of the political science scholarship on Congress from the beginning of the field. Mayhew’s notion of “position-taking” 1974, describes the desire of representatives to highlight their stance on issues of interest to their constituency regardless of whether actual policy action is forthcoming. On Mayhew’s account, the pressure to get reelected prompts
legislators into symbolic performance, just as public opinion constrains their policy production. Hill and Hurley have shown that legislators facing reelection are more prone to deliver “empathy” speeches, where they identify with the plight of a specific interest or social group. Hill and Hurley also found that the frequency of other types of symbolic speechmaking is shaped by the electoral pressures facing different incumbents. That said, there is very little empirical work that focuses on how strategic considerations shape the symbolic content of political speech. This section treats language as the dependent variable with an eye for how strategic considerations influenced the symbols they used.

Direct Electoral Pressure?

Drawing directly on Mayhew, we would expect electoral pressures to influence the symbolic content of legislative speech. In the simplest formulation, one would expect the ideological leanings of a representatives’ district to influence the content of their speech about the Estate Tax. Representatives from more conservative districts should be more ardently opposed to the Estate Tax and should use the symbols associated with that position more thoroughly. However, one could also contend that representatives’ choice of language reflects their own ideological leanings, and is only indirectly related to the ideological leaning of their constituents. Of course, the reality likely exists between crude pandering and honest philosophy. The balance of each is probably dependent on a variety of factors that are specific to each issue and vote, but we can at least see how these expectations are borne out in the case of the Estate Tax.

Here Wordscores estimates for Representatives’ expressed attitude about the Estate Tax were regressed on the Democratic vote share for his or her district in the next election and their own ideological voting record as captured by DW-NOMINATE 1st dimension ideal-point estimates. The dependent variable is scaled such that higher numbers would indicate more clear support for eliminating the Estate Tax. More specifically, higher scores indicate a greater proportion of all words used were found in previous legislative attacks on the tax. Of course, it would be more ideal to have district-level data on public opinion about the Estate Tax and an exogenous measure of the representative’s attitude.
Table 4.5: **Predicting Amount of Pro-Repeal Language Used in Debates on the Estate Tax based on District and Representative Ideology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>District Ideology</th>
<th>District and Member Ideology coefficients (s.e.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Conservatism</td>
<td>.65** (.05)</td>
<td>.09 (.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Conservatism</td>
<td></td>
<td>.30** (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 dummy</td>
<td>.02 (.02)</td>
<td>.01 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005 dummy</td>
<td>.05 (.03)</td>
<td>.03 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.83** (.03)</td>
<td>.56** (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$r^2$</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=171  
Clusters (Member) = 106  
**=p<.01  

Note: Unit of analysis is the Wordscores estimate for each speech made on repealing the Estate Tax in 2003, 2003, and 2005. Speech scores calculated using the legislative debate from 2001 as the reference text. Larger language scores indicate word usage was more similar to reference texts that favored repealing the estate tax. Member conservatism captured by DW-NOMINATE 1st dimension estimate: higher values indicate more conservative voting record. District conservatism is the percentage of general election votes cast for the Republican candidate for Congress in that district.

on the measure, but I do not believe that such data exist. The results presented in Table 4.5 show that language used to discuss the Estate Tax did vary with district ideology, but that no independent influence is found once the legislators’ own ideological leanings are also included. Column 1 is as Mayhew would expect, members from districts that vote more heavily for the Democratic candidate used more of the symbols that characterized support for the Estate Tax. However, in Column 2 each member’s NOMINATE score is included, which washes out the statistical importance of district ideology. The direction of the relationship between district ideology and speech score remains in the expected direction, but ceases to be significant. Again, the predictors used here are imperfect proxies for district and member ideology, but this test does not immediately prove that legislators are crassly strategic.
While this simple test was inconclusive, strategic pressures may be influencing the language representatives used in more subtle ways. The Estate Tax debates did not happen in a vacuum. The next section examines whether the Republican leadership successfully put the Democrats on the symbolic defensive and the final section reviews evidence that the Republicans succeeded in shifting the debate in a conservative direction.

Setting an Ideological Trap

The Estate Tax debate was chosen, in part, because it fits Mayhew’s definition of position-taking extremely well Mayhew (1974). The Estate Tax was never in any serious danger. The Democratically-controlled Senate was never going to repeal the Estate Tax and the Republicans in the House knew it. Nevertheless, the Republican leadership of the House scheduled votes on repealing the Estate Tax for several years running. The purpose of these votes, and attending debates, was to put the Democrats on the wrong side of an issue. The Republican leadership wanted to highlight a case where the Democratic party-line was out of step with public opinion. However, the strategic game went deeper, into the symbolic content of tax discourse. One of Frank Luntz’s most recognizable contributions to political discourse was the “Death Tax” label that Republicans applied to the Estate Tax. Luntz had found in focus groups that Americans reacted negatively to something called the “Death Tax” but were more favorably disposed toward “Estate Tax.” This rhetorical move was part of the larger symbolic effort to demonize the federal taxation. The Republican leadership wanted to force Democrats to defend an unpopular stance and, in the process, to shift the terms of debate over the correct size of government. This is a clear example of the majority party using control of the agenda to force votes that work in their long-term electoral favor, as is commonly expected in the literature on legislative behavior Aldrich and Rhode (2000); Cox and McCubbins (1993); Clubb, Flanagan and Zingale (1980). This section and the next examine how this strategic play influenced the language that Representatives used. If Representatives’ symbolism is shaped by the strategic context, there should be evidence that the Republican leadership’s move in this case put the Democrats in an uncomfortable symbolic position.
This section looks more carefully at the connection between legislators’ ideological tendencies and the language they used to defend their votes on the Estate Tax. In a balanced rhetorical field, we would expect the Estate Tax to break down along ideological lines, with conservative legislators the most clearly opposed to the measure and liberals being its most ardent defenders. However, this was not an even fight. The Republican leadership knew that Democratic representatives could not easily abandon the Estate Tax because liberal activists and voters supported the levy. On the other hand, dogmatically defending the Estate Tax risked playing into Republican strategy of portraying Democrats as “tax-and-spend” liberals. In this unbalanced strategic context, Republicans’ ideological commitments should have translated more cleanly into how they defended their votes than was the case for Democrats. As Democrats defended the Estate Tax, they should have sought to symbolically dissociate liberal ideology from a particularly unpopular liberal position.

Table 4.6: Predicting Word-Usage with Member Ideology Conditional on Party and Vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Democrats Opposing Repeal</th>
<th>Republicans Supporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficients (s.e.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Conservatism</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( r^2 )</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clusters (Member)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**=p<.01

Note: Unit of analysis is the Wordscores estimate for each speech made on repealing the Estate Tax in 2003, 2003, and 2005. Speech scores calculated using the legislative debate from 2001 as the reference text. Larger language scores indicate word usage was more similar to reference texts that favored repealing the estate tax. Member conservatism captured by DW-NOMINATE 1st dimension estimate: higher values indicate more conservative voting record.

One implication of this claim is that Democrats’ ideological stances should be less clearly visible in how they defended their views than was true for their Republican counterparts. While Republicans wanted to associate their broader policy priorities with their opposition to the Estate Tax, Democrats were looking for ways to mask the ideological
underpinnings of this vote. The results presented in Table 4.6 reflect precisely what is expected. A strong connection between dw-nominate scores and Wordscores estimates on the Estate Tax has been shown already, but a major portion of the covariance is between Democratic supporters of the Estate Tax and its Republican critics. Here, the focus is on variance within the two sides of the issue. On the Republican side (Column 2), ideological differences are positively and significantly associated with their measured attitude on the Estate Tax. Speeches delivered by Republicans with conservative voting records were more clearly identified by Wordscores as being opposed to the Estate Tax. This is indirect evidence that the discourse surrounding the Estate Tax drew on ideological differences between Republicans that influenced their voting records more broadly. Moderate Republicans opposed the Estate Tax, but they did not use all of the same arguments or symbols as did their more radical colleagues. On the other side of the aisle, the story is quite different. Column 1 shows that ideological differences between Democratic defenders of the Estate Tax were completely unrelated to how they spoke during floor debate. The symbols used to defend the Estate Tax do not differentiate between moderate Democrats and more liberal members. Again, this is indirect evidence, but it does fit with our received understanding of how strategic pressures shaped the Estate Tax debate. The Estate Tax was ideologically advantageous to Republicans, and their language reflects differences in attitude that should be present when an issue is falling along ideological lines. The last thing Democrats wanted was for this to become an ideological mandate, and their language shows no signs of ideological structure.

Shifting the Debate

This section tests whether Republicans succeeded in shifting the Estate Tax debate in a conservative direction. The expectation here is that Democratic supporters of the Estate Tax should have borrowed conservative symbols in an effort to make their stance appear less rooted in liberal ideology. Because public opinion was against the Estate Tax, and Democrats did not want their support for the bill to make the public critical of liberalism more broadly, they should have used conservative symbols in an effort to
cast their votes in a different light. On the other side, Republicans should have used recognizable conservative symbols throughout and shouldn’t have borrowed many liberal symbols. This claim is evaluated by comparing the language used to debate the Estate Tax with the language used in the two parties’ national platforms.

First, I empirically identified which words were used more commonly in the Democratic platform of 2000 than in the Republican platform from the same year. All of the words in each document were counted and then those counts were standardized by the length of each platform, producing two vectors of percentages for each word used. Then the attention to each word in the Democratic platform was subtracted from the attention it received in the Republican platform. This produces a measure of discernment that identifies which words received the most disproportionate emphasis in each party’s platform. Second, counts for each word were summed for all congressional speeches on the Estate Tax. The same transformation procedure was applied, yielding standardized measures of how much attention each side of the issue devoted to each word. Finally, as was done with the platforms, the difference in attention between supporters and opponents of the Estate Tax was taken, producing the same measure that identifies which words were more prevalent among supporters of the tax and its critics. With these two discernment measures in hand for each word, it is possible to identify how word-usage in the congressional debate over the Estate Tax compares to what the parties were emphasizing in their platforms from the same time.

If the expectation previously laid out is correct, Democratic supporters of the Estate Tax should have borrowed more symbols that were prevalent in Republican platforms than the other way around. In addition, Democrats should have used fewer of the symbols that were highlighted in their own platforms than did the Republicans. If Republicans succeeded in using public opinion as a weapon, Democrats should have borrowed symbols from Republicans and should have used fewer Democratic symbols while Republicans critique of the Estate Tax should have been more consistent with how they discuss policy broadly.

The results presented in table 4.7 reflect precisely what we would expect to see for
Table 4.7: Both Sides Using More Republican Symbols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Words Emphasized More in Own Platform</th>
<th>Number of Words Emphasized More in Opponent’s Platform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Supporters</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Opponents</td>
<td>949</td>
<td>721</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a debate where Democrats were pressured to mute their ideological inclinations while Republicans wanted to put their ideological commitments on display. The first column reports the number of words that were emphasized by each side of the Estate Tax debate that also received more attention in the respective party’s platform. Here we see that Republicans used substantially more words that were prominent in their own platform than did Democrats. Republicans were turning to identifiable conservative symbols more often than Democrats were invoking characteristically liberal symbols. In the second Column, we see the number of words that borrowed from the other party’s campaign language. Here we see that Democrats borrowed more words from the Republicans than the Republicans did from the Democrats, a complementary mirror of what is in the first column. Moreover, supporters of the Estate Tax used more Republican than Democratic symbols, even though they were all Democrats. On the other side, opponents of the Estate Tax used substantially more Republican symbols than Democratic symbols, evidence of greater consistency between their party’s campaign discourse and how they defended their votes on the Estate Tax. Altogether, these date reflect what we would expect to see if Democrats were searching for non-liberal symbols to use in defense of a bill while Republicans were happily appealing to conservative symbols.

Before concluding, it is helpful to actually look at a sample of words being used in an ideologically consistent way and those being borrowed from the other side. To this point the data have been abstract and quantitative, so it’s worth taking a look at a samples of the language being used on both sides to provide some qualitative foundation for the preceding results.

The big symbol that everyone remembers from the Estate Tax debate is right there
Table 4.8: Ideologically Consistent Symbols in the Estate Tax Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Republican Words Used to Oppose the Estate Tax</th>
<th>Democratic Words Used to Support the Estate Tax</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>death</td>
<td>security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>business</td>
<td>responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tax</td>
<td>cut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family</td>
<td>medicare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unfair</td>
<td>debt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>farm</td>
<td>wealthiest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>land</td>
<td>fiscal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life</td>
<td>benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taxes</td>
<td>cuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owners</td>
<td>deficits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government</td>
<td>education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owned</td>
<td>prescription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taxed</td>
<td>Americans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>property</td>
<td>seniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employees</td>
<td>drug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>savings</td>
<td>public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>economic</td>
<td>pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minority</td>
<td>richest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>surplus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>growth</td>
<td>baby</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Death,” the single most memorable symbol from this debate, can be empirically identified as the strongest linguistic cue of opposition to taxing inheritance. In itself, this supports the claim that studying language gives us a reliable way of capturing the important symbols that are being used to construct the meaning. It is interesting that “death” was also used more commonly in the Republican platform, making it an ideologically consistent symbol to apply to this issue. The Republican concern about “taxes” is also clearly on display. Serving as one of the Republican party’s most prevalent symbols for “government” overreach, they focus more on taxes in their platform and used the symbol more extensively in this debate. Also present in this list is another of Frank Luntz’s contributions to symbolic discourse. On Luntz’s advice, Republicans emphasize “Washington” as a symbol of remote and dangerous power. Altogether, this list shows that opponents of the Estate Tax were bringing recognizably Republican symbols to the fore in this debate.
On the Democratic side, we see a concern for “cut”s to programs, symbolically prominent programs like “Medicare” that are in danger, a concern for equality voiced through ensuring that the “wealthiest” and “richest” Americans pay their fare share, and commentary on how the Clinton “surplus” had turned into a “deficit” under the Republicans. Some of these may be more referential symbols than others, but they are still symbols. Doing away with the Estate Tax would not have ended Medicare, but Medicare is a popular program that serves as a wonderful symbol of the broader range of federal programs that were being undermined by Republican tax cuts. Education was being used in a similarly symbolic way, as a reminder of the costs of cutting taxes on the wealthy. While Republicans were trying to wrap the Estate Tax in a deathly veil of big government, the Democrats were trying to remind everyone of the symbolic threats posed by such a move.

Table 4.9: Borrowed Symbols in the Estate Tax Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic Words Used to Oppose the Estate Tax</th>
<th>Republican Words Used to Support the Estate Tax</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>businesses</td>
<td>relief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jobs</td>
<td>social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small</td>
<td>country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrong</td>
<td>majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>american</td>
<td>gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work</td>
<td>budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard</td>
<td>terrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generation</td>
<td>reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dream</td>
<td>deficit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>families</td>
<td>capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community</td>
<td>health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>survive</td>
<td>responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>job</td>
<td>irresponsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black</td>
<td>problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>economy</td>
<td>trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recommit</td>
<td>effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fact</td>
<td>liability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labor</td>
<td>individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forced</td>
<td>benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children</td>
<td>individual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both sides of this debate also invoked symbols that were more prominent in the other party’s campaign discourse, but the substantive meaning of the symbols that Democrats
were borrowing is clearer to see. During the debate, Democrats wanted to portray themselves as stewards of the nation’s finances, the party that takes the “deficit” seriously. Throughout the debate, Democrats accused Republicans of being “irresponsible” for failing to live up to their professed concern for the “budget.” The Democrats even went so far as to claim that repealing the Estate Tax would take money away from the fight against “terrorism.” These are excellent examples of Democrats searching for a way out of the rhetorical trap set by the Republican leadership. The Democrats were intentionally borrowing conservative symbols, hoping to underscore the dangers of repealing the Estate Tax to people who respond strongly to Republican symbolism. On the Republican side, there is not such a clear choice present in their use of liberal symbols. As was just seen, they borrowed fewer symbols than did the Democrats and there is not as clear an effort to co-opt central lines of argument from the other side.

Taken altogether, it appears that the Republican leadership succeeded in putting the Democrats off balance and shifting the terms of the debate in a conservative direction. This is only one issue, so I can’t say how often this happens or if it usually has the same imprint as was found in this case, but it is striking how well language reveals the strategic nature of symbolic utterance. We know that politicians are strategic in what they say and this section shows that their use of symbols indicates when the rhetorical field is imbalanced.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses several related questions and they all deserve more attention than was possible here. However, given the inchoate nature of quantitative discourse analysis and our limited empirical grasp of how symbols operate in congressional debate, the effort must start somewhere. As this chapter examines only two issues, the results are more indications that proofs. That said, these results support several key elements of the theoretical perspective being tested in this project.
First, differences of opinion are accompanied by distinctive symbolism and these differences can be stable over time. Knowing the symbols that were used the two sides of a disagreement in one year allows us to infer where legislators stand in subsequent years from the symbols they use. There appears to be a great deal of consistency over time in how legislators who agree with one another speak about their stance. At this point, I can only speculate on how this consistency in language comes about. Members of Congress and their staff spend lots of time muddling over how this or that position should be defended. Through sustained discussion, members who agree with one another identify the symbols that best capture their beliefs and the symbols that will make their position appealing to everyone else. I suspect that participants in these conversations become sensitive to how different positions are defended symbolically. In other words, I would expect policy implications of important symbols to be understood by interested parties.

Second, this chapter supports the notion that elected representatives are sensitive to the symbols that resonate with political movements and interest groups. The consistency in language between think thank reports, newspaper editorials, and congressional speech indicates that representatives are attentive to how their speech will be viewed by groups outside of Congress. With the current data, it is not possible to say how much of this symbolic consistency is because these actors simply think about policy in the same way and how much is conscious pandering. Regardless of the specific linkages, this chapter clearly demonstrates that elected leaders use the same symbols as the political movements with whom they agree. When legislators advance a cause, they use symbols that will resonate with constituents that support the move.

Third, other strategic considerations clearly shape the symbols that elites use. We naturally assume that elected politicians are strategic in their use of language, but there has not been much serious work on how this plays out in the actual content of symbolic speech. In this case, the interplay between public opinion, ideology, and agenda control appears to have created an imbalanced symbolic competition. Where representatives defend a position that is unpopular, we would expect them to symbolically dissociate that
stance from their broader voting record. The majority party also succeeded in shifting the terms of the debate onto their native symbolic ground. The Democrats borrowed core Republican symbols as they sought to defend the Estate Tax in non-liberal ways. Again, future work will be required to assess when this is possible and what strategies the minority party has available. This may be an isolated case, but it seems more likely that the Estate Tax is more of a good example than an exception to the norm.

**Appendix**

**Object Texts**

All of the legislative speeches that play a role in this analysis, either as object or reference texts, were taken from the Congressional Record Main Page, maintained by the Governmental Publishing Office (http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html). This web page contains the entirety of the Congressional Record in searchable text format going back to 1995. Collecting texts from this site was a tedious, but not exceptionally time consuming, enterprise. Each time a representative rose to address the body, their remarks were saved as individual plain text (.txt) files. The texts being content analyzed for this case are speeches given on the floor of the House of Representative immediately before the measure at issue was voted upon. In both issues, most of the speeches were scored multiple times using different reference texts.

The disadvantage of collecting congressional texts in this way is that it may prove prohibitive for projects whose scope is much more broad. However, its advantage here is that I ended up reading many of the speeches, and visually scanning the rest. For more extensive studies, an automated method of capturing web content becomes necessary.

**Trade with China**

The House of Representatives considered and rejected a motion to halt the President’s decision to re-authorize Most Favored Nation or Normal Trade Relations status to China
each year between 1995 and 2001. I selected the debates from 1999 and 2001 for analysis because they were the most extensive and because control of the executive switched parties in the interim. In 1999, the bill halting good trade relations with China was House Joint Resolution (HJ Res) 57, and in 2001, HJ Res 50. In those two years 72 speeches supporting the measure to halt good trade relations with China were given and 76 speeches against. These speeches range in length from a few sentences to over 2000 words, but most fell in the 300- to 400-word range.

**Estate Tax Repeal**

The House of Representatives voted to permanently repeal the Estate Tax several times in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Each time the measure died in the still-Democratically-controlled Senate. For this project, the House debates 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2005 were collected. In all, 236 individual speeches were analyzed, representing the universe of floor debate on these bills in the years identified. When the 2001 debate was used to create reference texts, 175 speeches remain from the subsequent debates. Because control over the floor is split evenly between the pro and anti forces, the two groups of texts are of roughly equal aggregate size, as are the number speeches made on each side. Most speeches in the House ranged between 300 and 500 words with a few outliers to each side.

**Reference Texts**

The remaining sections discuss the collection of reference texts for the Wordscores program. The next two sections identify the reference texts that were created from congressional debate. Next, the reference texts from think tank papers on repealing the Estate Tax are reviewed. Finally, the newspaper opinion pieces that served as reference texts on the Estate Tax are outlined.

**Congressional Speech on Trade with China from 1998**

I used the legislative debate over trade policy with China from 1998 to create two master texts of pro- and anti-measure language. Wordscores was not initially designed with the
intention of using a set of texts from one point in time to score object texts from later periods. However, we saw this as one way to test the notion that patterns of word usage persist over time in congressional speech. In addition, Wordscores does tend to work better the more similar object texts are to reference texts. In 1998, 42 speeches were given opposing continued good trade relations with China and 55 supporting it. The two reference texts were 29,263 and 25,198 words long respectively.

Congressional Speech on Repealing the Estate Tax from 2001

The House debate over permanent repeal of the estate tax from April 2001 was used, collapsed into two reference texts in the same way. These aggregated documents were then used to score subsequent Congressional debates. The pro-tax master text comprises thirty seven individual speeches and is 16,422 words long. The anti-tax reference text is 14,437 words long and includes thirty-three individual legislators' remarks.

Think Tank Releases

Think tanks reference material on the estate tax was taken from several organizations and compiled into two master sets of pro and con language. All of the texts can be found on the web and were first released between 1996 and 2006. While it is difficult to be certain that the texts selected are a perfectly unbiased sample, the goal was to create reference texts that dutifully reflect what think tanks were saying while Congress was debating repeal of the estate tax. On the pro-tax side, pieces from the Americans for a Fair Estate Tax, the Brookings Institute, Call to Renewal (a progressive religious collective), Common Dreams, Citizens for Tax Justice, Friends of the Earth, and Independent Sector were used. Releases from the American Council for Capital Formation, the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the National Federation of Independent Business, and the National Taxpayers’ Union comprised the anti death tax master text.

Two standards guided text collection: prominence and comprehensiveness. First, we wanted to include material from think tanks that are prominent players in the estate tax debate. Happily, web-accessibility and prominence are related. The larger a piece's
web-footprint the more easily it can be found by anyone interested in the estate tax. Similarly, the leading think tanks have the resources to develop and maintain a web-presence, some even paying Google to be listed as "sponsored sources." In addition to organizations that were particularly active in the estate tax issue, we collected material from the leading think tanks in D.C. We wanted to do this because some think tanks, like Cato, the Heritage Foundation, or the Brookings Institute, have become indelible parts of the liberal and conservative landscape and we know that Representatives frequently parrot arguments handcrafted by these prominent institutions. We used Grooseclose and Milyo’s (20xx) research on which think tanks are most often quoted in Congress to guide this process. If a think tank is frequently cited by members of congress generally, we have reason to believe that its argument about the estate tax was known to those who spoke on the House floor.

We also wanted to be as comprehensive in our sample of Think Tank language on the issue. To do this, we made an effort to include material from a diversity of think tanks on each side, pulling texts from organizations with different underlying goals. For instance, the National Taxpayer’s Union is opposed to taxation of every sort while the National Federation of Independent Business places a higher priority on the specific effect of the estate tax on small businesses. Similar differences of emphasis exist on the pro estate tax side. It should be noted, however, that most Think Tank writing used every available argument to make its case. The result is a database of texts that, as much as could be achieved, represents a dutiful sample of the arguments and words used by think tanks during the years in which we collected congressional speech.

It is also important to note that the Think Tank texts sampled for this project were mostly press releases and talking points, rather than longer analytical reports. This was done because the focus here is on how the interest groups and think tanks on the two sides of this issue attempted to frame the debate. Their analytical reports are longer, and filled with more data, but the press releases are primarily exercises in strategic discourse. The organizations sampled are trying both to affect policy making in D.C. and to shape how the issue is discussed. Press releases, open letters to congress, and published talking
points are focused more on argument more than the discovery of new information, which is why they are likely to be the closest match for congressional speech.

The initial master texts compiled were quite disproportionate in length. The pro-tax text was 15,345 words long and the anti-tax text 23,032 words. These are the lists used to generate the legislator speech scores reported in this analysis. While the Wordscores program adjusts the weights it attaches to each word by the relative lengths of the reference texts, the significant difference in size of the pro and con texts is still a concern. To test whether the disproportionality noted here was biasing the results, a second anti-tax master text was created from a sub-sample of the interest group material originally used. The resulting text was 18,544 words long, much closer to the pro-tax master text. The House speeches from 2001 were then re-scored. The scores produced by the second combination of reference texts were correlated with the original think tank referenced scores at the .960 level, adding confidence that difference in size of the first master texts is not of significant concern.

Newspaper Opinion Pieces

The sample of newspaper opinion writing on the estate tax was taken from three outlets; the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. These three publications were selected as proxies for national media opinion writing because they represent, respectively, the widely regarded American newspaper of record, the leading national economic daily, and the leading Beltway newspaper with a traditional focus on federal politics. A Boolean LexisNexis search was conducted for each newspaper searching for "death tax" or "estate tax." All opinion writing on the death tax published between 1999 and 2002, be they staff op-ed pieces, letters to the editor, or columnist editorials, were included in the sample. During this time, forty-seven anti-estate tax articles appeared in the three newspapers, compared to fifty articles supporting its continued use. These numbers are a bit misleading because more than half of the published material was short letter-to-the-editor segments. When compiled into two master reference texts, the pro-tax text is 17,942 words long and the anti-tax text 22,952 words.
The papers sampled were not all agnostic about the estate tax, and the view of their editorial staffs clearly informed how much space they allocated to either side of the debate. The New York Times published many more pieces opposing repeal and the Wall Street Journal almost never ran pieces doing so. Of the three, the Washington Post reflected the best mix of pro- and anti-repeal writing.
Chapter 5

National Platforms in American History

Why Study Platforms?

Party platforms often receive slight regard. Many commentators doubt the veracity and usefulness of platform statements. Lord James Bryce called platforms “a mixture of denunciation, declamation, and conciliation” Weisbord (1964). Along the same lines, Ostrogorski said that “the platform, which is supposed to be the party’s profession of faith and its program of action is only a farce, the biggest farce of all of the acts of this great parliament of the party” 1922. Even presidential candidates can be dismissive of platforms. Barry Goldwater who saw platforms as “at best...a packet of misinformation and lies” 1966 wanted his party to publish a 250-word statement of principles instead of the longer enunciation of positions that they eventually produced. Then there is the fact that most voters never read the parties’ platforms. Even engaged partisans are usually innocent of the particular stances in their party’s platform. New York Times writer William White commented that “not often have so many men worked with so many words that are read and remembered by so few” White (1952). For all of the attention they receive in the modern press, it is tempting to suppose that platforms matter only to those poor fools who lost days of their lives in writing them.
Why Platforms are Important

First, platforms actually do make reliable policy promises. Contrary to the prevalently skeptical view on national platforms, parties in the United States usually do make good faith efforts to enact most of their platform pledges Bradley (1969); Pomper (1980); Monroe (1983). In most cases, parties follow up specific platform promises with real legislative action. Beyond their explicit stances, the amount of attention that parties devote to specific questions reflects the importance of that issue. When a policy becomes more salient in the parties’ platforms, the agency responsible for managing that area of policy generally receives a larger proportion of federal expenditures in subsequent fiscal years Budge and Hofferbert (1990); King et al. (1993). This is not to say that every promise in every national platform has been followed by policy action but, in general, the individual planks do provide a reasonable indication of what the parties intend to do. In a study of the Democratic and Republican platforms from 1948 to 1968, Gerald Pomper found that most statements addressed specific policy questions, and did so in clear and specific terms 1967. Pomper found that platforms devote the most attention to future policy questions and relatively little space to pure rhetoric. On this basis, Pomper concludes that platforms can rationally inform citizens’ voting decisions. While I maintain that statements Pomper would have counted as purely rhetorical actually do carry reliable information, his work does substantiate the importance of platforms as statements of party policy.

Second, platforms reflect the rise and fall of issues, ideals, and concerns within the American polity more broadly. Woodrow Wilson claimed that “the platform is meant to show what the nation is thinking about, what it wishes corrected, and what it desires to see attained that is new and constructive and intended for its long future” Cummings (1966). Because platforms are intended to help parties win elections, both parties are under intense pressure to address the concerns of the electorate. As will be seen in the next chapter, both parties tend to focus on the same issues in each election cycle. While parties will tend to avoid issues that threaten their coalitions, they do follow what the
public wants to see addressed. When inflation spikes, or unemployment grows, or war
looms, or monetary policy is disputed, the platforms of both parties reflect what is on the
mind of the American electorate.

Third, platforms provide a window into the deliberations that make the parties what
they are. Parties take platform stances and wording seriously, and the resulting prose
reveals a great deal about the internal dynamics of party politics. Platforms signal the
relative strength of factions within a party, show what constituencies a party is most
actively courting, and indicate which ideals are most dear. Even if nobody outside of
the convention reads the platforms, these documents still reflect what party leaders are
thinking. As such, I will not treat platforms as an independent force in their own right,
but as proxies for how the parties conceptualize federal policy and how they will present
their views to the electorate.

How Platforms are Written

Platforms are drafted by a selected committee, reported to the convention as a whole, and
then the assembled delegates then vote on its adoption. The aim of most platform com-
mittees is to write a document that can easily garner broad support from the convention
attendees. As such, platforms often skirt issues that animate tensions within the party
faithful. While conflicts over platform stances do break out, as will be discussed below,
both parties tend to avoid issues, like slavery or civil rights, that are likely to spark open
debate. As a result, most platform disputes are resolved in the drafting committee before
reaching the floor of the convention.

Both parties have changed the constitution of their platform committees in recent
decades. As part of the broader convention reform effort that followed the debacle of 1968,
the Democrats expanded the size of the platform committee in 1972 and made membership
proportional to the size of the different state delegations. Democrats wanted to resolve
confrontations somewhere other than the convention floor and these reforms were efforts
to achieve just that. Subsequently, Republicans have also adopted similar reforms to their
platform writing process. On the one hand, this process does expand the range of people who have a direct impact on the platform, but it has also meant that many committee members are more ceremonial than contributing. Going to a proportional committee membership, instead of the old system where each state received the same number of committee slots, has meant that platform committees have become more representative of the parties’ primary voters. This was also intentionally done to decrease the potential for conflict between the convention floor delegates and the writers of the platform committee.

At the same time the parties were expanding the size of the full platform committees, they also began creating selected subcommittees to draft the initial version of the platforms. The final platform adopted by the convention is usually very similar to the initial platform draft produced by the drafting subcommittee, evidence that the same factions that control the entire platform committee are also in the driver’s seat when the initial draft is crafted.

The emergence of drafting subcommittees coincided with the parties getting an earlier start on writing the platforms. The parties have always started devising their platforms in advance of the conventions but this preliminary phase has become more extensive in recent decades. Beginning in 1960, both parties made it an explicit priority to have a platform ready to go before the convention began, even if this goal has not always been realized Chester (1977). The chairs of the respective platform committees are generally designated several months before the convention, and begin organizing a staff and doing preliminary research at that time.

This fact is connected to the shift in how conventions figure into the nominating process, and the emergence of more candidate-centered presidential elections. Given that each party’s nominee is usually known well in advance of the convention, those candidates can exert more influence over the platform drafting process than when candidates were actually chosen at the convention. In 1992, for example, Clinton staffs and supporters formed the dominant block in both the drafting subcommittee and the entire platform committee Maisel (1994). While the Clinton forces entertained debate on several issues, it was clear that Clinton’s wishes for the platform would be largely realized. It has become
common for both parties to grant the presumptive nominee a great deal of influence over what platforms say and, as such, the strategic focus has shifted more toward the demands of the general electorate and away from pleasing the convention delegates. This does not mean that factional battles within the party are irrelevant to how the platforms are written, but platforms are now more aimed at the general electorate than at pleasing convention delegates.

**Platform Fights**

When the platform committee cannot agree on the wording or stance of a particular plank, the general practice is to include the language favored by the majority of the committee, while dissenting members of the committee submit a substitute “minority” plank for a floor vote. Reporting a minority plank requires the support of a significant portion of the platform committee, so these planks usually address important issues that divide factions within the party elite. Virtually all of the alternative planks in American history have been voted down on the convention floor, and few even came close to passing. However, platform fights are often important moments in intra-party conflict over prominent issues. In some cases, platform fights have had a major impact on whom the party ultimately selected as its presidential candidate or caused some delegates to bolt from the convention.

Conflict over platform planks often deepens lines of division within the party, sometimes splintering the party elite. In 1860, the Democratic drafting committee submitted a minority report that asserted that the Supreme Court should resolve the legality of slavery in the territories. On a vote of 165 to 138, the convention accepted the plank in favor of the default plank that argued that no federal authority could determine the status of slavery in the territories. Following the vote, forty-five delegates walked out of the convention. The bolters were largely southern and included a majority of the delegations from Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Texas, South Carolina, and Louisiana. As a consequence of this walkout, frontrunner nominee Stephen Douglas was unable to amass the needed two-thirds majority of all potential delegates, which forced the party to reconvene
two months later to select a candidate. Douglas ultimately received the nomination, but the prolonged struggle that surrounded the slavery plank clearly reflected the divisions that would soon precipitate the Civil War.

In some cases, a major sea change in party policy has been reflected in a conflict over the relevant platform plank. In 1896, the Democratic Party accepted a minority plank favoring the unlimited coinage of silver over the original plank that maintained the party’s long-standing commitment to the gold standard. This vote followed William James Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold” speech where he blasted Democratic incumbent president Grover Cleveland for clinging to the gold standard. The lopsided vote that approved the minority plank reflected a broad shift among the party delegates that eventually gave Bryan the nomination. At the beginning of the convention, Bryan was not a prominent candidate for the presidential nomination. However, his incendiary speech resonated with the anti-gold delegates and Bryan became one of the frontrunners for the nomination, which he eventually secured. The shift in Democratic attitude on the monetary policy was not caused by Bryan’s speech, but his passionate defense of the newly ascendant position propelled him into the spotlight and helped redefine the Democratic party-line on currency policy.

Platform fights are noteworthy events, but they are also exceptions to the norm. Most disputes over policy and wording are worked out in the privacy of the drafting committee and not on the convention floor. Still, the cases in which platform planks have been openly and hotly contested on the convention floor point to the importance of platforms. Party elites and activists clearly care deeply about what their platform says, which is part of why platforms are an important window into the internal negotiations and contests that shape the party-line.
The Evolution of Party Platforms

National platforms have changed a great deal over the past century and a half. Where they began as brief documents that addressed a limited number of issues, today’s platforms address a large number of issues and interests. Figure 5.1 shows the length of the Democratic and Republican platforms in each election year from 1856 to 2004. While there is no single factor that explains why contemporary platforms are more extensive than their earlier counterparts, several of the most important transformations in American democracy have changed how platforms are written and what they say.

![Platform Length: 1856-2004](image)

Figure 5.1: Platform Length: 1856-2004

First, the content and style of party platforms reflect the growth of the American electorate. Throughout the 1800’s, platforms focused on the issues of concern to white male voting population, like monetary and trade policy. Women’s suffrage was virtually nonexistent in platforms from the 1800’s and received only modest attention in the first two decades of the 20th century. Likewise, neither major party crafted substantial planks on minority, religious, or ethnic rights before World War II. The Communist Party’s platform
of 1928 made the most serious defense of minority rights in any platform to that point.
The Republican Party opposed slavery and supported reconstruction in the 19th century, but this stance did extend to minority rights generally. The Democratic Party first included a plank opposing discrimination in 1948. It is not an accident that both parties’ platforms started to grow in length at precisely the same time that civil rights became a prominent political issue in national politics. Following the Voting Rights act of 1965, both parties have expressed a concern for the plight of minorities, even if many of these pledges were short on specifics and legislative follow-through. Previously, when the major parties discussed the condition of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, they were usually attacking rather than defending them. For example, both parties opposed Chinese immigration in the 1870’s and 1880’s. While citing economic concerns, these planks were openly xenophobic. Today, ardent immigration opponents are careful not to openly portray themselves as anti-Hispanic, focusing instead on job competition and the rule of law. Today’s platforms articulate a concern for the interests of American Indians, blacks, Latinos, women, and so on. As the size of the American electorate has grown, and the number of politically important social groups has proliferated, both parties have extended the range of groups and interests they claim to defend in their platforms.

Second, platform content reflects the growth of the federal agenda. First with the New Deal, then with the rise of social issues during the 1960’s and 1970’s, the scope of federal policy now encompasses a huge range of issues that were not on the political radar for much of American history. As the federal government has taken on more responsibilities, the parties have expanded the list of issues they address in their platforms. Today’s platforms regularly discuss issues like education, transportation, environmental concerns, civil liberties, health care, retirement security, sexuality, urban planning, and parental rights that were rarely mentioned in previous eras.

The growth of the national platforms is linked to the expansion of issues on which there is a general consensus within the American polity. Both parties go on at length about the need for good roads and harbors, the importance quality public education, and protecting the elderly. Many of the hot-button issues in modern politics, like abortion, gay rights,
and school prayer, receive extremely limited discussion in either party’s platform. While platforms of the 19th century devoted most of their attention to the few central issues that divided the two parties, contemporary platforms often read like shopping lists of goods that Americans expect the federal government to deliver. As voters have accepted that the federal government should be active in more policy areas, and as consensus has emerged about what some of the goals should be, the national platforms have reflected these transformed expectations.

Finally, platforms reflect the evolving nature of presidential campaigns, particularly the changing role of nominating conventions. Where nominating conventions were once deliberative bodies that chose the parties’ candidates, they have become more akin to pep rallies in the modern era. “For over a century, national conventions remained the purview of the select few who attended the meetings and reveled in the enthusiasm” Panagopoulos (2007). Platforms of the 19th century were written almost exclusively by, of, and for the party elites. Like candidate selection, platform writing was driven by machine politics. Until recently platforms were usually written before the party’s candidate was chosen, preventing him from playing a major role in its drafting. In contrast, the results of state primary elections now determine the parties’ nominees well in advance of the conventions. The emergence of candidate-centered presidential elections that followed this change in electoral procedure has made the party’s presumptive nominee much more important in the platform writing process. As a consequence, the platforms have become more oriented toward the general electorate than was once the case. Presidential nominees now concern themselves with shaping a platform that will not be a liability in the general election where they were previously forced to accept planks that were written before they became the party’s candidate. Looking again at figure 5.1, it is striking that platforms became substantially longer in the 1970’s when the parties started requiring convention delegates to vote in accordance with the results of their state’s primary election. Knowing that they will face the general electorate, the parties’ nominees pay more attention to the demands of the broader polity than was the case previously.
More Policy Promises and Less Value Talk

Platforms have not only become longer, they have shifted their emphasis away from abstract values and toward specific policy questions. Figure 5.2 shows the gradual increase in mention of specific policy words as a proportion of all words in the platforms. The growth of the federal agenda and the expansion of the electorate have forced the parties to cover more policy ground in their quadrennial platforms. This did not happen all at once, but has been a consistent trend over the past 150 years. It is noteworthy that this trend has continued even in years when one party or the other published much shorter platforms than their opponents. The Democratic platform of 1932 was a fraction of the length of its Republican counterpart, but the proportion of specific policy words was roughly equivalent. The same holds for 1988 when the Democratic platform was only one-tenth the length of the Republican document, and in subsequent years as the Republicans have continued to publish longer platforms.

![Figure 5.2: Percent Policy Words: 1856-2004](image)

The increase in attention to specific policies has been mirrored by a decline in the
emphasis on abstract values. Between the end of the Civil War and the Great Depression, the focus on abstract values in both parties’ platforms tended to decline. This was not a monotonic trend, but still clearly visible over the long run. There was a temporary resurgence in abstract value language during WWII and it immediate aftermath when the parties’ were focused on the collective war effort. Subsequently, abstract values once again declined and have never reached levels that were common in the 19th century. This long-term trend lends some credence to the claim that contemporary American parties are less ideological than their European counterparts. Similarly, this fits with the historical wisdom that contemporary parties are much less doctrinaire than their counterparts of previous eras. Where the post-Civil War era was dominated by deep philosophical divisions over what the federal government had a right to do, there is much less attention to core values in contemporary politics. This does not mean that values are irrelevant in today’s political world, but it does hint that the parties are not as deeply concerned with ideals as they once were.

![Figure 5.3: Percent of Symbolic Words: 1856-2004](image)

**Figure 5.3: Percent of Symbolic Words: 1856-2004**
Debating Issues and Philosophy in National Platforms

Parties in the United States did not always write election platforms. The parties and factions that defined the first fifty years of American democracy did not publish platforms like those we see today. The absence of early platforms is largely explained by the fact that nominating conventions had not become conventional. The first nominating conventions took place in the 1830’s, and here we also find the ancestors of the modern national platform. During the 1830’s, it was common for a party’s selected nominee to deliver an address to the people. According to Samuel Gammon, addresses to the people “differed essentially from the present-day platform, first in being solely a justification, or sort of apologia for, the actions of the bodies from which they issued; second, in dwelling almost entirely upon the errors and evils of the opponents’ policy, with little or nothing said to their own constructive program” 1922. In 1844 the Democrats and Whigs both published platforms, and the practice has been a fixture of the nominating process ever since. While still short by contemporary standards, the platforms of the 1840’s did articulate specific policy stances, not just vitriol aimed at the opposition.

Sectional Politics and Debates over Federal Authority

Between 1852 and 1856, the Whig party disintegrated, leaving the newly formed Republican Party as the only serious challenge to the Democrats. While the Whigs fielded a presidential candidate in 1856, the campaign was a death march. The elections of 1856 and 1860 were dominated by the slavery issue. The Republican platform of 1856 was written almost entirely by northern delegates and opposed the extension of slavery into the territories, Kansas in particular. Nearly one-third of the 1856 Democratic platform was devoted to slavery, where they advocated for leaving the issue up to the respective states and territories. While the Republicans maintained their stance that slavery should be forbidden in the territories in 1860, tensions within the Democratic Party reached a boiling point over the issue. As discussed above, the Democratic platform of 1860 asserted that the Supreme Court should resolve the slavery issue. Accepting this plank over
a southern alternative that opposed federal meddling in territorial policy caused many of the southern delegates to bolt from the convention.

The division over slavery in the 1850’s laid the groundwork for a broader philosophical divide between Democrats and Republicans that would last for more than half of a century. In defending the right of states and territories to determine the slavery question, the Democratic Party adopted an anti-federal orientation that came to organize their political perspective more broadly. On the other hand, the Republican Party’s opposition to slavery meant that it supported the authority of the federal government over the states in the most salient issue of the day. The federal vs. state authority division was also visible in the parties’ stances on infrastructure improvements in 1856 and 1860. The Republican platforms advocated for building a cross-country railroad and for the federal government to play a role in harbor improvements. The Democratic Party’s platforms opposed the federal government being involved in internal improvements on similar grounds that undergirded their stance of slavery. Following the Civil War, the two parties’ platforms were divided over the reconstruction effort, with similar arguments about states’ rights and federal authority being prosecuted. By 1880, the Republican platform openly called for the exercise of federal authority as a broad dictum. “The constitution of the United States is a supreme law, not a mere contract. Out of the confederated states it made a sovereign nation. Some powers are denied to the Nation, while others are denied to the states; but the boundary between the powers delegated and those reserved is to be determined by the National and not by the State tribunal.” Contrast this with the Democratic Party’s platform the same year that declared “opposition to centralization and to the dangerous spirit of encroachment which tend to consolidate the powers of all departments into one, and thus to create, whatever the form of government, a real despotism.” Clearly, what had begun as a debate over a particular policy had escalated into a broad philosophical difference of worldview that shaped how the two parties spoke about policy generally.

Starting in 1876, trade policy also emerged as a major issue that would divide the parties for several elections. Republicans generally supported levying a tariff on foreign imports. The Republicans initially focused on the need to raise funds to pay off Civil
War debt, but this was soon expanded into a protectionist argument that tariffs were needed to aid American industry. Democrats generally opposed tariffs, or at least only supported using them to pay for Civil War debt. While there were philosophical elements of this debate, it also arose from the Democrats and Republicans having different bases of support. The largely agrarian South had become solidly Democratic following the Civil War, while the Republican Party’s core support was in the industrial north and certain areas of the Midwest. Trade policy mapped onto this division because the agrarian economy relied upon exports to Europe while the manufacturing sector saw European goods as competitors. Assuming that levying tariffs on imports would cause America’s trading partners to reciprocate, agrarian Democrats wanted to limit import duties as much as possible. Knowing that the Southern farmers were lost to them anyway, Republicans increasingly supported using tariffs to protect American industry. This division would persist well into the 20th century, although it ceased to be a dominant issue by the later 1800’s.

Monetary policy was the other major issue of the later 19th century. Whether the United States should stick with gold as the only legal tender or should coin in silver as well did not cleanly divide the two parties, but it did evoke passionate disagreements that cut across party lines. The currency issue was not at the forefront in the election of 1884, but by 1888 it had become much more prominent. Republicans emphasized the importance of bi-metalism in their 1888 platform and accused the incumbent Democrat Grover Cleveland of attempting to “demonize silver.” In 1892, the Republicans continued to advocate for both gold and silver coinage, but this time the Democratic platform staked out a similar position. The currency question did profoundly shape the election of 1896, and saw the parties reverse their stances from 1888. The Republican platform opposed the coinage of silver, except by international agreement. On the Democratic side, the currency issue played a major role in determining the party’s candidate for President. The party was internally split with most of the northeastern delegates supporting gold as the only currency with midwestern and southern delegates in favor of bi-metalism. This division produced a floor debate over the party’s currency plank. During this debate,
William Bryan delivered his “Cross of Gold” speech advocating for silver coinage. While Bryan had not entered the convention as a Presidential frontrunner, his speech resonated with the larger pro-silver faction of the convention. The floor vote approved the plank calling for silver currency and Bryan rode his newfound prominence to the nomination. As discussed above, this is one of the most striking cases in American history where deliberation over platform content had a major influence over the course of the entire election.

The Progressive Era

The turn of the century and the advent of the progressive movement changed the electoral landscape and shifted the attention of the party platforms. It also marked the decline of the deep divisions over domestic issues that dominated that latter half of the 19th century. Starting in 1900, both parties came out against monopolies and trust-busting became a priority for both the Roosevelt and Taft administrations. Similarly, both parties tended to support Prohibition, even if 1928 Democratic candidate Alfred Smith argued that the 18th Amendment should ultimately be repealed. The deep policy and philosophical divisions that had persisted from the Civil War through the turn of the century softened. Democrats and Republicans were not in perfect harmony, but their platforms from this period clearly indicate that they had more in common than had for decades.

The most important political evolution of the early 20th century did not originate in either of the two major parties. The progressive movement grew out of a growing dissatisfaction with party-machine politics and the power of elites in both parties. This movement first codified itself as a party in the 1924 election. Comprised of liberals and representatives of organized labor, the Progressive Party advocated for electoral reform, tax reform, court reform, and resolving important policy issues by popular referenda. All of these reforms were aimed at breaking the stranglehold of party bosses in both of the major parties. While the Progressive Party was short-lived, the movement it represented had a profound impact on American democracy. Many of the fundamental institutional features of our political system, like primary elections, non-partisan judicial elections, and
ballot initiatives emerged in the progressive era.

During the progressive era, party bosses found their main antagonists in the progressive movement, not the other party. The real division was between the authority of both parties’ elites and the social forces seeking to end machine-politics. While both parties ultimately came to support progressive reforms, the initial energy behind the movement was independent from either major party. This story is a common one in American politics. Major reforms are often ignored or opposed by the two major parties until a meaningful third party emerges, a tendency that remains to this day.

**The New Deal: Federal Power Reconsidered**

The relative detente between Democrats and Republicans ended with the Great Depression and the New Deal. We continue to live with ideological divisions that were born during this period, but some of these philosophical debates took time to develop. Interestingly, the policy innovations that Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration produced were not clearly articulated in the Democratic platform of 1932. Little in the explicit policy content of the 1932 platforms foretold how federal governance would change or foretold the emergence of a new structure to partisan divisions. Both parties advocated for some form of unemployment relief, reducing federal spending, balancing the budget, and reforming agricultural policy. By 1936, much had changed. The Republican platform did not reject every element of the New Deal out of hand, but did stake out a broad opposition to where the Roosevelt administration was taking federal policy.

The most profound shift in rhetoric and thinking that occurred at the time was the switch in which party raised the states’ rights banner and which held out for federal authority. In attacking Roosevelt’s policies the Republican platform of 1936 claimed that “The New Deal Administration constantly seeks to usurp the rights reserved to the States and to the people.” In a striking reversal of rhetoric from the 1800’s, the Republican platform proclaimed that “the welfare of American men and women and the future of our youth are at stake. We dedicate ourselves to the preservation of their political liberty, their individual opportunity and their character as free citizens, which today for the first
time are threatened by the Government itself.” The Republican Party eventually dropped its opposition to most of the specific New Deal policies, but the philosophical perspective that came to characterize the Republican Party at the time remains with us. Where Democrats had been the party of states’ rights, under Roosevelt they lost their suspicion of federal authority. A brief resurgence of the old Democratic attachment to states’ rights occurred in their 1952 platform as the party attempted to assuage southern concerns over Truman’s civil rights initiatives, but this was short-lived. The Republican Party, the party of Lincoln and reconstruction, emerged from the New Deal with a newfound skepticism about federal government.

The onset of World War II shifted America’s focus abroad and with it went the attention of both parties’ platforms. The 1944 platforms were largely focused on winning the war and what should be done subsequently to stabilize the world. Even in the immediate post-war period, partisan rancor remained muted. The Republican platform of 1948 was remarkably positive for a party out of power, “the failures of the Truman administration were dismissed in a short paragraph” *National Party Conventions 1831-2000* (2001).

**Expanding Consensus on Many Domestic Issues**

The debate over federal authority and the proper role of government in social life has remained with us, but has also tended to become less specific. Where the Republican party of the 1930’s and 1940’s openly rejected specific elements of the New Deal, they have subsequently come to accept most of the specific programs. Following several losing efforts, it became clear that Americans supported most of the specific New Deal policies. The emerging consensus that government should play a broader role in managing the economy has been reflected in both parties’ platforms. Both parties regularly support unemployment relief, some governmental role in providing affordable health care, ensuring retirement security, protecting the environment, ending discrimination, and supporting quality public education.

However, this does not mean that the two parties see eye to eye on what the federal government should do. The Republican Party continues to be more philosophically
opposed to big government than the Democrats, even while agreeing on many specific policies. The debate over the size and authority of the federal government in earlier eras (e.g. the post Civil War period) was tied to the specific and explicit disagreements over central elements of federal policy at the time. Today’s parties often try to draw philosophical distinctions without staking out radically different policy stances.

**Opposing Discrimination in the Platforms**

With differing degrees of emphasis and policy specificity, both parties have placed themselves on the side of racial equality in every election year from 1948 on. Previously, Republicans were the only party to expressly support the rights of African-Americans in their platforms. However, both parties opposed Chinese immigration in the platforms from the later 19th century, often using xenophobic language in doing so. The central point is that opposition to discrimination was anything but the norm it has become in modern platforms.

Following President Truman’s lead, the 1948 Democratic platform made a clear promise to pursue racial equality for the first time in the party’s history. Of course, the Republican Party had opposed racial discrimination in its platforms for decades, so the real change came from the Democratic side. The adoption of the civil rights plank deepened the rift within the party over race. This shift in stated policy caused some southern Democrats to form a third party, the States’ Rights Democrats, that fielded a separate candidate for President in 1948. While this did not prevent Truman from being reelected, the fight over the civil rights plank made the election a narrow-run thing that could have gone the other way. In 1952 and 1956, both parties repeated their previous support for civil rights while remaining relatively moderate on the issue. The 1950’s Republicans continued to be more specific about what should be done to address the problem. Both of the 1960 platforms were more racially progressive than their fifties counterparts, and both Nixon and Kennedy advocated for civil rights legislation in their campaigns.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, coupled with the Goldwater and Nixon candidacies, changed the partisan implications of racial politics, but this did not cause
either party to adopt explicitly anti civil rights positions in their platforms. Barry Goldwater’s brand of conservatism was serious about small government. He voted against the Civil Rights Act because it represented a substantial extension of governmental power. However, in the racially charged atmosphere of 1964, to be anti federal government also meant to be anti civil rights. Five of the six states that Goldwater won were in the deep south, with several of these states going overwhelming in his favor Carmines and Stimson (1989a). After 1964, President Johnson continued to push civil rights legislation through and, by 1968, Republican candidate Richard Nixon made a strategic decision to woo southern votes by emphasizing the Republican party’s small government perspective. All told, the 1960’s witnessed a sea change in partisan politics surrounding race, but little of this was clearly visible in the platforms explicit statements about civil rights. Both parties continued to claim they supported racial equality, but the Republican opposition to big federal government came to have racial connotations. While this period initiated a realignment of partisan attachments, particularly in the South, neither party has explicitly gone back on its support for civil rights in subsequent elections. Each year, both parties proudly proclaim themselves to be protectors of the American dream for everyone regardless of race.

Starting in 1944, both parties have also regularly supported gender equality. The 1940 Republican platform favored passage of an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, and Democrats followed suit in 1944. The Democratic platform backed off this stance somewhat in 1960, calling for equal rights legislation but not a Constitutional amendment. By 1972, the Democratic platform had returned to unqualifiedly supporting an Equal Rights Amendment, which was mirrored in the Republican document. 1980 marked the last year that both parties supported amending the Constitution to protect women’s rights. Reagan opposed making gender equality a Constitutional issue and, by 1984, the party had dropped its support for an Equal Rights Amendment. Both parties still claim to support the cause of women’s rights, but they no longer support using the Constitution to do so.

Also present in virtually every modern platform is an explicit support for religious
freedom. This may seem like an obvious stance by contemporary standards, but it was not always so. The Republican platform of 1888 explicitly attacked the Mormon Church as a “menace to free institutions too dangerous to be long suffered” in its plank opposing polygamy. In the contemporary political scene, it is difficult to imagine either party explicitly singling out a religious order for condemnation, even if some of their language has religious undertones.

All told, it is clear that both parties wish to present themselves as tolerant of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity and both parties want to be seen as pro-women. While there are a host of cultural and political dynamics that have produced this consensus, it is an important departure from previous eras. As women, blacks, immigrants, and religious groups have organized themselves into potent political forces, neither party wants to be seen as openly discriminatory. Parties of the 18th century could win elections without a single vote from minorities or women but today’s parties must stretch their tents over more ground.

**New Division Over Cultural Issues**

Abortion became a platform issue in 1976, following the Roe vs. Wade decision of 1973. The Republican platform supported a constitutional amendment to “restore protection of the right to life of unborn children.” This stance was adopted over the explicit objections of many convention delegates who did not think that abortion should be addressed in their platform. The Republican platform of 1980 explicitly recognized the differences of opinion within the party over the abortion issue, but nevertheless reaffirmed its support for a constitutional amendment banning abortion. The 1980 Democratic platform, on the other hand, unequivocally supported a women’s right to choose, saying “the Democratic party recognizes reproductive freedom as a fundamental human right.” From that year on, the two parties have adopted divergent positions on abortion in their platforms.

While not as consistent as the division over abortion, the rise of the cultural agenda has influenced platform content in a number of other areas. The Republican Party has supported prayer in school in a number of modern platforms, even if the Democrats do
not openly oppose it. The Democratic Party has increasingly championed the rights of homosexuals while the Republican party opposes same-sex marriage and has opposed same-sex couples being able to adopt children. While these issues have made it into the party platforms, it would be mistaken to assume that platforms have become primarily concerned with divisive cultural dilemmas. Abortion planks are generally brief and most of the other cultural issues received even less attention. Compared with laundry list of social programs that both parties claim to support, the cultural debates of the last quarter-century have taken a back seat in the parties’ platforms. This does not make these distinctions irrelevant, but it does point to the fact that both parties are forced to walk a tight rope between pleasing their more radical bases without becoming extremists in the eyes of the general electorate.

Symbolic Politics and Platform Content

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a qualitative grounding for the empirical work that will be conducted in final two empirical chapters. In both chapters, I will be taking a broad view of platform language, rather than focusing on specific issues or specific institutional changes. Even so, I argue that platform language reflects many of the most important evolutions in the American political system that have occurred over the past 150 years. This chapter outlines the data-generating process that creates platform language and how that process reflects the changing character of electoral politics in the United States. In this final section, I will outline why we should expect platform language to reveal both the honest strategic attachments of the party elites and their strategic efforts to woo voters.

Platform Language Reveals Symbolic Attachments of Party Elites

I will treat platforms language, in part, as a proxy for the symbolic commitments of the party elites. One reason that platforms are an appealing object of study is that they reveal how the party elites think about public policy. Platforms are very consciously
constructed, but they are also earnest arguments made by people who care about politics. The preceding discussion highlights the importance of platform content to the party elites, even if these documents are not widely read. Platforms reflect the policy attitudes of the dominant groups within each party’s coalition. The deliberative process the produces platforms makes the resulting document a telling window into the interests that make the parties what they are. While we know that platform pledges are good indicators of where the party elites stand on specific issues, there has been little analysis of whether the language used in platforms reflects the lines of thought that organize those positions. I contend that platform language provides a window into the symbols that organize how the party elites think about specific policy questions. While specific stances and language are both shaped by strategic considerations, I expect language to contain more reliable cues about the symbols that organize partisan thinking than the explicit stances they adopt.

Earnest symbolic attachments will be expressed through the language that party elites choose to use. As discussed in the Theory Chapter, cognitive linguistics has repeatedly found that language production and interpretation is largely unconscious Lakoff (1996). When we write or speak, and when we read or listen, most of the rules that allow us to produce or interpret language are applied without our being consciously aware that we are using them. Just like everyone else, party elites have well-developed patterns of thought that reveal themselves when they communicate. If anything, political sophisticates will have more highly routinized ways of speaking about politics than causal political observers. Anyone who sits on a platform writing committee has been around politics for a while and has discussed most of the salient issues many times. Even platform writers who are very conscious about how their stances and language will be interpreted still rely on too many shared definitions, rules of grammar, and popular turns of phrase to be consciously aware of everything they are doing. Platform writers can consciously consider the strategic implications of each explicit position they adopt, but it is much more challenging to apply this strategic calculus to each word, idea, or symbol that is used along the way.
Platform Language as Symbolic Representation

Even if platform language reveals the subconscious symbolic attachments that organize how party elites conceptualize the political world, these are still strategic documents that are shaped by the desire to win elections. Just as parties think about how explicit promises will influence their electoral prospects, party leaders consider how their symbolism will play with the electorate. Political wordsmiths like Frank Luntz make careers out of finding ways to communicate that make their candidates and positions symbolically appealing and that put their opponents in a bad light. Platform language responds to the symbolic tastes of the electorate and the symbolic demands of specific activist groups. When platform writers decide how much attention to devote to different policy questions, how particular issues should be framed, and which abstract values to invoke, they will consider how their language will fit into the symbolic systems in the minds of their audience.

Political science has shown that the policy stances adopted in party platforms respond to the attitudes of the electorate. We know that both parties highlight where their stances reflect popular tastes and tend to deemphasize positions that are out of step with popular attitudes Pomper (1972). However, the attention lavished on explicit stances has not extended to the symbolic content of platform language. Because I contend that party elites are conscious about the symbolic meaning their language conveys, evidence of this should be present in the words they use. Chapter 6 will report evidence that both parties’ platform language tends to change at the same times, and in many of the same ways. When one party shifts their attention to specific issues, and when they start appealing to different abstract values, their opponents tend to follow suit. While this is not a direct test of the claim that platform language reflects the symbolic demands of the electorate, it does indicate that both parties must rely upon many of the same symbolic resources in voters’ minds.
Strategy and Honesty in Promises and Language

One difficulty that cannot be easily overcome in the study of platform language is discerning honesty from strategy. Without actually being present for the deliberations that occur within platform committees, it is virtually impossible to tell which words and symbols reflect the real symbolic attachments in the minds of platform writers from those that are consciously selected to make their case more appealing. In some ways, this distinction is a false dichotomy. Party elites are constantly striving to find the symbolic appeals that will resonate with the general electorate and with particular sectors of society. Through repeated use, symbols that were initially deployed for strategic reasons can become systematic components of political thought. On the other hand, we often use symbols that make intuitive sense to us and, upon discovering that they resonate with our audience, will more consciously emphasize them subsequently. I hope to explore this distinction in future work, but it is not possible to do so in a thorough fashion here. One would need language that was not created for electoral purposes to identify symbolic attachments that are not strategic as a basis of comparison for the party speech that is generated when strategic considerations are paramount.

That said, I maintain that word-choice reveals more honest commitments than do explicit promises. As discussed above, parties can be thoroughly strategic in their choice of which positions to adopt, but cannot apply the same strategic calculus to every word they use to communicate. Particularly in the modern era when political elites can measure the specific policy priorities of the electorate, parties know a great deal about the strategic implications of most potential stances. However, it is much more difficult to generate reliable data on which symbols, ideas, and values that the electorate wants to see. Language is not purely earnest, nor are promises nakedly strategic, but I expect the ration of honesty to strategy to be higher for patterns in language than in the specific stances parties adopt.

In the final chapter, I will test this claim by using platform promises and language to predict levels of partisan polarization in subsequent congressional voting. Chapter 7 shows
that differences in language are more telling predictors of congressional polarization than are differences in what the parties actually promise to do. In addition, I will test whether differences in the use of abstract values reveal differences in symbolic worldview that shape how the parties govern. The final empirical chapter demonstrates that abstract values provide more reliable information about partisan polarization than anything previously measured in political science. When the parties appeal to different abstract values in their campaign documents, these distinct symbolic commitments also reveal themselves when members of Congress vote on specific policies. Chapter 6 provides strong evidence that differences in language often tell us more about the symbolic commitments of political elites than the individual positions they highlight, that symbolic commitments inform concrete policy choices, and that abstract values are particularly important symbols that organize political thinking.
Chapter 6

We’re Pro Things You Like: Both Parties Responding to the Same Symbolic Demands

Introduction

All of the scholarship on party platforms assumes that they are strategic documents. We know that legislative behavior is systematically influenced by constituent demands and, if this is true of what elites do in office, we expect it to be even more true of what they say on the campaign trail. Political science has focused its attention on how strategic considerations put different pressures on electoral winners and losers. This theoretical focus has resulted in an under-appreciation of how often the two major parties respond to the same demands.

This chapter examines how the parties change the symbols they use in their platforms from one election to the next. Most of the theoretical work on how party platforms change over time has focused on short-run strategic considerations, with a particular emphasis on how losing an election influences a party’s behavior the next time around. A common expectation in this vein is that losing parties will emulate what the winner pledged in the previous election while the winners stand firm on the stances and arguments that got them elected. Against this expectation, I argue that both parties are attentive to the
symbolic demands of the electorate and, in an effort to please the same symbolic audience, will emphasize many of the same symbols. As a consequence, the symbols used by both parties will tend to either remain stable or change substantially in the same inter-election periods. When an issue becomes more salient in one party’s campaign appeals, the same change will usually be reflected in the other party’s language. When one party starts invoking a different set of symbolic ideals, the other party is likely to do the same. This chapter tests predictions from spatial theory about how short-run strategy should affect the symbols used in national platforms and finds that these expectations are generally not met.

Many of the strategic pressures that cause the parties to change the symbols they use influence both parties in similar ways. Rather than focusing on how strategic considerations influence the in-party and out-party in different ways, or focusing on short-run strategic responses to prior outcomes, changes in campaign symbolism are better understood by recognizing that both parties exist in the same communicative milieu and respond to the same signals about what the electorate wants to hear.

**Accommodation Theory**

Anthony Downs’ spatial theory of politics has been the organizing paradigm for much of the existing work on national platforms 1957. Downs’ prediction that, in a two party system, parties will converge on the median point of a distribution of voters’ preferences has been particularly important for work on party platforms in the United States. According to this strategic logic, a losing party’s optimal strategy in the following election is to locate as close to the previous winners as possible. The winning party, on the other hand, is under less pressure to change because their position has already proven itself viable.

While Downs’ model appeared to describe party behavior in the 1950’s, it has come under increasing scrutiny as the parties have become more polarized over the past thirty years. Downs’ convergence prediction assumes that voters’ preferences are distributed
along a single dimension, that voters are informed about where the parties stand, and that parties know what voters want. While these assumptions are necessary to produce an equilibrium, they are often out of step with political reality. Much of the formal work on campaign behavior over the past twenty years has focused on how relaxing these assumptions undermines the convergence expectation.

Rebecca Morton argues that platforms will only converge when the two parties are well-informed about voters’ attitudes and, failing this, their ideological commitments will cause them to diverge 1993. Since it is not easy to reliably measure how uncertain party elites are about voters’ preferences, this prediction is difficult to test. Still, there is little doubt that the quality of information about voters’ preferences varies across elections. Relaxing the uni-dimensional assumption also undermines the convergence expectation and formal modelers have found that in a multi-dimensional issue space there is no "ideal" strategy for parties to adopt Hammond and Humes (1993). The assumption of uni-dimensionality is highly problematic when applied to platform promises and language. While we can identify some issues and promises as being organized along a dominant ideological dimension, many of the issues raised in national platforms are not so well-behaved.

Empirically, work on platform promises has found little evidence that parties always accommodate to the winner’s previous position. Using promises as the unit of analysis, Finegold and Swift found no evidence that losing parties always moderate in the way that accommodation theory predicts 2001. Finegold and Swift’s research also found no evidence that parties adopt the ideal strategy predicted by the ”directional” variant of spatial theory. This conclusion is also supported by comparative work on party platforms. Using the data on promises generated by the Manifesto Research Group, Ian Budge shows that parties adopt a variety of strategic responses to losing an election 1994. Losing parties sometimes shift closer to the winning party’s position, but sometimes they choose to stay on message. Overall, there is no solid evidence that parties respond in the same way election results. The next section discusses why parties use of symbols does not always follow the pattern predicted by accommodation theory.
Why Losing Parties Don’t Always Accommodate

Accommodation theory rests on an underlying assumption that is out of step with political reality. If we predict that a losing party will moderate its behavior in the next election, we assume that losing parties always take the same lesson from past outcomes. However, many factors shape how electoral outcomes change campaign messages. Since these factors are not constant across elections, it is extremely unlikely that superficially similar electoral outcomes will be viewed in the same light. Two elections may have identical vote shares but, because other factors are not the same, can have a different impact on how the parties change their promises and language the next time they go before the voters.

First, it is not always clear what election results mean. Political elites and commentators can reasonably disagree about how to interpret previous electoral outcomes, and these discussions often preoccupy the political arena for some time after an election. For example, some Republicans have taken the result of the 2008 election as a signal that they need to become less doctrinaire while others have asserted that the problem was really that the Republican party had not been ideological enough. Democrats faced a similar conundrum after the elections of 2002 and 2004. Was the wise move to start acting more like Republicans, to continue emphasizing traditional Democratic stances, or to craft a completely new message? Changes in rhetorical approach are dependent on what party leaders decide the last election meant and, as such, we should not expect the same vote share to occasion the same response in each case.

In addition to uncertainty, intra-party politics can also cause parties to react in different ways to electoral outcomes. The aftermath of a losing election often witnesses a factional battle over the future of the party in question. Part of the current debate within Republican circles is clearly rooted in deeper disagreements over what the Republican Party ought to stand for. The question of which strategy would be the most electorally advantageous frequently animates tensions within the party over what its core commitments ought to be. Elections to leadership positions within the party, both in Congress and non-legislative party positions, often fall along factional lines that predated the last
election. Debates over what lessons to draw from the previous election are often proxy competitions between rival factions of the party leadership. What a party does four years later is often just as much a function of who won these internal contests as it is driven by simple strategic considerations. Because the structure of intra-party conflict is not constant across elections, the response a losing party chooses is dependent on whether its leadership remains intact or is substantially transformed.

A third reason that we should not expect electoral signals to have the same impact on party behavior in each case is that parties must make inter-related decisions on how to change their approach on many different issues at the same time. The accommodation prediction works best in a single-dimension world where the space for maneuver is well-defined. Again, this does not reflect the reality that party leaders face. Part of the uncertainty about how past outcomes should be interpreted arises from the fact that it is not always clear which aspects of a party’s program the electorate was rejecting. Was it a party’s stance on taxes, or its position on some salient social issues, or a failure to couch its specific stances in appealing symbolic language that accounted for its failure? Should the party retain most of its prior commitments but highlight a new issue, or set of issues, or change the dimensions of competition? Is it advisable to move closer to the opposition on some issues while making the differences on others more striking? It is often difficult or impossible to objectively answer these questions, deepening the uncertainty that surrounds which strategy will be the most effective next time. In addition, intra-party competition over what the party should stand for in the future is often driven by pre-existing debates over which positions should be modified, which accented, and how the vision of the party should be described. The complexity of the policy space effectively compounds both of the preceding reasons that parties do not respond in the same way every time to a win or loss at the polls.

Finally, expectations play a significant role in whether a party abandons its promises and language. In many elections, one side is heavily favored from the outset (i.e. a ruling party during wartime or the opposition during an economic downturn). When the conditions favor one party from the outset, an electoral loss may not be interpreted as
a wholesale rejection of the losing party’s platform. Political science work on campaign promises has found that the content of national platforms has, at best, a marginal impact on a party’s vote share Alvarez and Nagler (1995, 1998); Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler (2000); ?. Savvy elites know that some elections were all but determined before the campaign even got underway and their appeals only have influenced voting at the margins.

This is hardly an exhaustive list of the factors that influence whether an election result sets off a major change in party language, or not. The central point is that Downs’ model of campaign behavior fails to capture the complexity of the political environment and, because of this, simple expectations about how parties respond to electoral outcomes do not account for very much of what causes parties to change their discursive approach. Expecting losing parties to imitate their opponents may make intuitive sense, but this response depends on a host of factors that are not part of the accommodation model.

**Both Parties’ Symbols Reflect Changing Electoral Demands**

Accommodation theory implies that losing parties are under more pressure to use different symbols than the party that won the previous election. While I do not dispute that this is often true, focusing on the strategic differences between the in-party and the out-party ignores the tendency for *both* parties to respond in kind to the same demands. Both parties are constantly searching for the most resonant and compelling symbols to use and, in trying to please the same audience, they often settle on the same symbols.

There are a number of reasons to expect that both parties will shift their attention to new issues, and will turn to new symbols that capture those issues, at the same times. Major events often cause both parties to shift their attention in tandem. The outbreak of war, steep economic declines, social unrest at home tied to specific issues, landmark Supreme Court decisions, and other game-changing events often cause both parties to shift their attention to the newly salient symbols and away from older ones. Shocks of this sort, whether entirely exogenous or partially endogenous to the political system, cause many
of the major innovations in political discourse throughout American history. When the public becomes more concerned with particular issues (i.e. medical insurance and care in the 1990’s) both parties are pressured to address these symbols or appear out of touch with the electorate. The strength of issue-focused interest groups can influence both parties in similar ways. When a group gains membership and attention, both parties will strive to use symbols that appeal to those ascendant groups. The rise of the environmental lobby, or the American Association for Retired Persons, or groups advocating for the rights of the disabled, caused both major parties to use more of these groups’ cherished symbols in their campaign appeals.

Strategic forces also cause both parties to change the abstract values they use in similar ways over time. Even in the mushy world of abstract values, both parties will change the symbols they use at the same times and in many of the same ways. First, certain empirical conditions make some abstract values more relevant and others less so. If the nation is faced with external threat, ideas like security and power are more readily relevant than ideals like equality and progress that tend to be attached to more domestic concerns. Second, styles or argumentation come and go, and with them certain symbolic concepts will come into or go out of vogue. For example, the concept of liberty was a mainstay of platform discourse in the later 19th century while freedom has become more common in the contemporary scene. Changes of this sort can be related to shifts in what the government is expected to do, but they are also rooted in styles of argumentation that characterize particular historical periods. Because Democratic and Republican elites are well-versed in the symbolic tastes of the time, the abstract values they use should respond to many of the same symbolic demands.

For these reasons, I argue that strategic forces should cause both parties to change their language from one election to the next in very similar ways. By focusing on why the out-party and the in-party should respond differently, we tend to lose sight of how much commonality exists in how they change their symbolic appeals. Indeed, several of the projects that test for accommodation-type behavior only focused on what the losing party did, which prevents us from measuring how much of the losing party’s change was
mirrored by the winners of the last election. Instead of focusing on how previous electoral outcomes exert differential pressures on the two parties, we should devote more attention to the dominant forces that cause both parties’ language to change.

Measuring Stability and Imitation in Platform Symbolism

This chapter examines four measures of inter-election change from 1860 to 2004. The first distinction is between intra-party stability and the degree of inter-party imitation from one election to the next. Stability in platform symbolism is operationalized as the similarity of the current platform to the symbols used in the same party’s platform from the previous electoral cycle. Imitation is measured as the similarity of one party’s platform to the symbols the opposing party used four years earlier. In both cases, the cosine similarity statistic discussed in the Chapter 3 is used to measure the similarity of the current document to the previous platforms.

The second distinction is between value symbols and policy-specific symbols. As discussed in the Methods Chapter, I isolated lists of terms that are either abstract values or policy-specific symbols. These two distinctions create four time series of symbolic change: the stability of value symbols, the stability of policy-specific symbols, the imitation of value symbols, and the imitation of policy-specific symbols.

Increased Stability in Platform Symbolism

This section takes a first look at how the in-party and out-party change their language from one election to the next. If accommodation theory is correct, the out-party’s language should change more extensively than the in-party’s language. Accommodation theory also implies that the out-party should imitate the winners’ previous language more completely than the winners imitate the previous losers. On the other hand, if my argument is correct and the same environmental forces cause the discourse of both parties to change,
or to remain stable, the in-party and the out-party should revise their language to similar degrees.

![Graph showing stability of policy symbols]

**Figure 6.1: Stability of Policy Symbols: 1860-2004**

Figures 6.1 and 6.2 show the similarity of the in-party and out-party language to their own platform from the previous election, first in terms of which policies they highlight and second in which abstract values are emphasized. These figures provide the first indication that campaign language does not respond to electoral outcomes in the way predicted by accommodation theory. Accommodation theory expects the behavior of the in-party and the out-party to be negatively related (the more the previous winners are pressured to remain unchanged, the more the losers must innovate), or at the very least that out-parties should be systematically less stable than the previous winners. This pattern is anything but dominant in these data. Losing parties rarely change more radically than do the winners. In some elections the losers of the previous election are actually more stable than the previous winners. Against accommodation theory, and consistent with my argument, the dominant pattern is that both parties change their language to similar degrees in most elections. When one party sees a need to revise their symbolic approach,
The most striking trend in both policy and value symbolism has been a general increase in stability from the 19th century to the present. Both parties have been extremely stable since the Second World War while, in previous eras, platform symbolism was usually less consistent. In the previous chapter, I discussed how party platforms have come to address a wider range of issues and constituent groups. Platforms of the 1800’s focused on relatively few issues and, therefore, reflect the rise and fall of issues and values that were central to each specific election. By contrast, modern parties address a long list of issues in every election year and do so in value terms aimed at more diverse constituencies. With the maturation of the political system, the parties retain more of their symbolism from one election to the next.

In policy terms, the list of issues which both parties regularly address has expanded since the 1800’s and early 1900’s. As a larger range of issues came to be seen as legitimate objects of federal policy, both parties expanded the list of issues they raise in their platforms. Moreover, many of these issues are not contentious, or at least the differences

Figure 6.2: Stability of Value Symbols: 1860-2004
between the parties are not obvious in their campaign language. Both parties now devote extensive attention to the rights of the disabled, to the importance of maintaining effective transportation systems, to the needs of small businesses, and to the importance of supporting public education. Issues that deeply divide the parties (e.g. abortion) receive extremely limited attention compared to the range of issues on which the parties appear to be in agreement. Conversely, platforms of the 19th century addressed a much smaller range of issues and more of that attention went to issues on which the parties vehemently disagreed. Given this historical trajectory, it makes perfectly good sense that both parties would highlight more of the same policy symbols from one election to the next than was true in previous eras.

Both parties have also become more consistent in the abstract values they emphasize. There are likely a number of important shifts that account for this change. First, as the number of politically important constituent groups has grown, both parties are forced to reach out symbolically to a larger number of organized interests. The more groups that must be appeased, the less fluctuation we should see in the abstract values used in the platforms. Second, as the dominant media has shifted from newspapers to radio to television to the Internet, the discursive environment has become more immediate and national. In this modern context, both parties have more data available to them about the values that resonate with the electorate. The emergence of focus groups and survey method have also given the parties new tools for assessing which abstract values produce the desired symbolic response from their audience.

**Growing Inter-Party Symbolic Imitation**

This section examines the complement of the previous section, or how much of their opponent’s previous language appears in a party’s platform. In this case, accommodation theory would expect the out-party to imitate the previous winner’s symbolism extensively while the in-party should not copy the losers. Against this expectation, I do not expect there to be much difference between the in-party and the out-party. If both parties respond
to the changing symbolic demands, there should not be much discernable difference in symbolic imitation that is rooted in who won the previous election.

Figures 6.3 and 6.4 show the similarity of the in-party’s language to what the previous losers used in the last election and the similarity of the out-party’s language to that of the previous winners. Again, the patterns predicted by accommodation theory do not appear. There are roughly the same number of cases in which the in-party did more imitating than the previous losers as there are when the out-party copied their opponents more extensively. Also, these figures reflect the same growth of stability in symbolism that emerged in the previous two figures. Since WWII, the language of both parties has been quite similar to what their opponents used in the previous election, more evidence that political discourse in the United States has become more routinized and predictable in recent decades.
Democratic and Republican Attention to Specific Issues Move Together

While the focus of this chapter is on aggregate change in platform symbolism, it is helpful to look more closely at a few specific examples. If my contention that both parties respond in similar ways to stimuli from the political environment is correct, the amount of attention the parties pay to specific issues should move together over time. Regardless of what specific stances the parties are adopting, which are usually quite similar anyhow, emphasis is an important signal that is considered carefully by party elites. As such, attention to issues should fluctuate in tandem if parties are responding to the same cues.

To test whether this expectation is met, I constructed lists of words that captured attention to major policy issues. To organize this effort, I used the Policy Agendas Project main categories as the rubric for defining issue topics. Words were selected that, by their very use, indicate attention to the issue in question. To keep these measures as distinct as possible, only words that clearly evinced attention to a specific Policy Agendas Project
category were used. For example, words such as “agribusiness,” “farmers,” “ranching,” “corn,” “poultry,” and “wool” were selected as indicators of attention to agriculture. In the case of macroeconomics, only “economic,” “economically,” “economics,” “economies,” “economists,” “economy,” and “macroeconomics” were used. I then created an aggregate measure of attention to each issue by summing the salience of all of words selected as indicators of that topic.

Figure 6.5: Attention to Macroeconomics: 1856-2004

Figure 6.5 shows the measured level of attention to macroeconomics in national platforms from 1856 to 2004. The first pattern that emerges is the increasing attention both parties pay to the economy. Starting around the New Deal, both parties regularly devote more attention to economic goings-on than they had previously. First with the Democratic Party, and followed soon by the Republicans, platform symbolism reflects the increased role of the federal government in managing national economic fortunes. We also see the economic crisis of the late 1970’s and 1980’s reflected in the platform language as both parties devoted more attention to economic concerns than any year since the Civil War. There are differences between the parties that may be important, but the dominant
pattern is one of similarity.

Figure 6.6: Attention to Agriculture: 1856-2004

While macroeconomics has become generally more salient in national platforms, other issues reached their heyday of importance in previous periods and have fallen off subsequently. Figure 6.6 shows the attention paid to agriculture which, once again, shows both parties changing their emphasis in tandem. Consistent with my claim that exogenous shocks drive many of the important changes over time, agriculture received more attention from both parties during and immediately following the Great Depression than at any other time. First with the drought and collapse of crop prices that drove many Midwestern farmers into Hoovervilles, and then while discussing possible solutions to the problem, both parties responded to a real crisis in the world by devoting a great deal of platform space to the needs of American agriculture.

Some issues are salient features of electoral politics in some eras and recede into the background in others. During some periods, civil rights and civil liberties have been salient features of national politics, while in other periods they have been less visible on the surface. Figure 6.7 shows that the salience of civil rights and liberties fluctuating from
Figure 6.7: Attention to Civil Rights and Civil Liberties: 1856-2004

year to year, both parties attention to these issues move together over the longer view.

Figure 6.8: Attention to Environmental Issues: 1856-2004
Finally, figure 6.8 shows that when an issue emerges onto the federal agenda, both parties pick up on this and address it in roughly equal measure. Before the 1950’s, environmental regulation was not sufficiently salient to draw attention in campaign discourse. Starting in 1952, environmental concerns emerged and have remained as a topic of discussion ever since. Again there are probably cases where the differences between the parties are important, but figure 6.8 demonstrates that the similarities are even more striking. In most elections, Democrats have not devoted substantially more discussion to environmental issues than have Republicans and in a few years Republicans have actually devoted more attention to the subject.

These figures largely support the case being made here; parties are strategically pressured to emphasize issues to similar degrees and to change their emphasis at the same times. While only some issues have been reported, these are not exceptions to the norm. Even if there are strategic reasons that parties emphasize issues to different degrees, it is clear that this takes place against a backdrop of manifest similarity. The major changes in issue emphasis appear to be driven by the same stimuli that make certain issues essential and others more peripheral.

**Correlating Democratic and Republican Behavior**

This section moves back to examining aggregate changes in platform symbolism. If accommodation theory is correct, the two parties should not adjust their language to similar degrees. The amount of adjustment should either be negatively correlated (the in-party being pressured to remain stable while the out-party must innovate) or, at the very least, the behavior of the two parties should be unrelated.

Table 6.1 compares the similarity of Democratic and Republican symbolism in each election year to the symbols used by the two parties in the previous election cycle. The first column reports the correlation of Democratic and Republican change in policy symbols and the second column reports the correlation of changes in value symbolism. While the lack of existing work on party word-use makes it difficult to compare these coefficients
Table 6.1: Correlating Democratic and Republican Symbolic Stability, Imitation, and Similarity to the Same Previous Platform (1860-2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlating Value Policy Symbols</th>
<th>Symbols</th>
<th>Policy Symbols</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intra-Party Stability</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.77**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-Party Imitation</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity to Last Democratic Platform</td>
<td>.79**</td>
<td>.80**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity to Last Republican Platform</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>.80**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=37

**=p<.01

Note: Data presented here are correlations between cosine estimates produced for the Democratic and Republican platforms of the same year. Unit of analysis is cosine estimate of a given Democratic or Republican platform’s similarity to the language used in one of the platforms from the previous election cycle. The first row reports the extent to which stability in one party’s platform correlates with stability in the other party. The second row reports the correlation of intra-party imitation, or how similar each party’s platform was to their opponent’s platform from four years earlier. The last two rows correlate the Democratic and Republican platforms’ similarity to the same preceding document.

to other cases, these data do provide more evidence that Democratic and Republican symbolism changes to similar degrees from one election to the next.

The first row correlates the stability in Democratic symbolism with the stability in Republican symbolism. Consistent with my expectation, stability in Democratic and Republican symbolism is strongly correlated over time. The constellation of forces that cause the parties to change their language between presidential elections, or to remain relatively stable, clearly influence the behavior of both parties. When the Democrats change which policies they favor, or the abstract values they emphasize, Republicans usually revise their symbols as well. When one party uses most of the same language as it did in the previous election, the other is likely to be symbolically stable. By itself, this does not mean that Democratic and Republican symbolism is changing in the same ways, but it does imply that the stability of Democratic and Republican language responds to many of the same environmental and linguistic influences.

The second row reports the correlations between the Democratic platform’s similarity to the previous Republican platform and the Republican platform’s similarity to the previous Democratic document. Again, there is a substantial amount of similarity between Democratic and Republican behavior. The fact that levels of inter-party imitation also
move together is an even stronger indication that both parties’ language is responding
to many of the same influences. When the Democratic party adopts a great deal of
the language previously used by the Republican party, Republican language is also quite
similar to that used previously in the Democratic platform.

The last two rows report the correlations between Democratic and Republican simi-
larity to the same previous platform (i.e. current Democratic and Republican platforms
to the previous Democratic platform). The fact that these correlations are even stronger
than the previous two sets is another indication that both parties change their symbolic
approach in similar ways. When the two parties sit down to write their current platforms,
they appear to view past symbolism in a similar light. When the Democrats think it ad-
visable to emphasize the same symbols that they did last time, Republicans also emulate
the symbols that Democrats used in the previous election. The same holds for how both
parties view the success of the symbols previously used in the Republican platform.

In itself, the strong similarity between how Democrats and Republicans change their
symbolic approach runs against the expectations of accommodation theory. The next sev-
eral sections will explicitly test whether the types of responsiveness to electoral outcomes
predicted by the accommodation theory are present in these data.

**Few Differences in Stability between Winning and Losing Parties**

As a first attempt to find evidence of responsiveness to electoral outcomes, I conducted
difference of means tests on symbolic stability and imitation conditional on whether the
party in question won or lost the previous presidential election. If accommodation theory
is correct, the in-party’s symbolism should be significantly more stable than the party
that lost the previous presidential election. Second, accommodation theory predicts that
last election’s losers should imitate the winner’s previous platform more extensively than
the winners borrow from the previous losers.

The first two rows of table 6.2 report the mean level of stability in platform language.
Table 6.2: Difference in Stability and Imitation between Winners and Losers of Previous Presidential Election (1860-2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>In-Party Mean</th>
<th>Out-Party Mean</th>
<th>P-value of Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value Stability</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Stability</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Imitation</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Imitation</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=37

Significant level of one-tailed test

Note: Unit of analysis is the cosine estimate of a given Democratic or Republican platform’s similarity to the language used in one of the platforms from the previous election cycle. The first two rows report the average similarity of each party’s language to their own previous platform, first within value symbols and second within policy-specific symbols. The final two rows contain the average similarity of each party’s platform to their opponent’s language from the last election. The first column of data contains the average cosine similarity for these comparisons for the party that won the previous presidential election and the second column shows the same for the party that lost the last presidential race.

The first column contains the difference of means in abstract values and second column the same for policy symbols. In these rows, there is some very modest evidence that winning parties are more stable than losing parties. While the mean level of stability for winners is slightly higher than for the previous losers, the difference is small and only passes significance at the .1 level. It appears that accommodation theory may capture some of what produces symbolic stability, but the effect is marginal at best.

The last two rows show the amount of symbolic imitation, or the level of similarity to the opponent’s previous platform. In the case of imitation, there is no evidence that parties behave as accommodation theory predicts. In the realm of abstract values, it is not possible to statistically distinguish the winners of the previous election from the losers. For policy imitation, the difference is actually in the wrong direction, although the difference cannot be distinguished from zero. Accommodation theory tends to focus most heavily on how losing parties adjust their behavior to match that of the winning party, which makes the last two rows even stronger evidence against the theory.
Levels Stability and Imitation Not Driven by Previous Presidential Vote Share

Having demonstrated that there are minimal on-average differences between the symbolic behavior of winning and losing parties, this section tests whether there is evidence in the continuous case that supports accommodation theory. If accommodation theory is accurate, two patterns should emerge in these data. First, a strong electoral showing should cause parties to retain more of their symbols and a poor performance should cause parties to revise their symbolism more extensively. Therefore, vote share in the previous election should be positively associated with symbolic stability. Second, the inverse should hold for imitation of the opposition’s previous language. Parties that garner a high proportion of the vote should not be pressured to imitate their opponents while parties that did poorly should adopt the opposition’s symbolic posture. Therefore, the level of symbolic imitation should be negatively associated with vote share in the previous election.

Table 6.3: Predicting Symbolic Stability with Previous Presidential Vote Share

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Policy Stability</th>
<th>Value Stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficients</td>
<td>(s.e.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Party Vote(t-1)</td>
<td>.13 (.32)</td>
<td>.06 (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Vote(t-1)</td>
<td>.43 (.29)</td>
<td>.10 (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.59** (.16)</td>
<td>.45** (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.53** (.14)</td>
<td>.51** (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted (r^2)</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[N=74\]

**\(=p<.01\)

Note: Unit of analysis is a party’s linguistic stability and their performance in the previous presidential election. Thus, there are two observations per election, one for Democrats and one for Republicans. The dependent variable is the similarity of a party’s platform to the language used in their previous platform. The dependent variable in the first two columns of results is the similarity within policy-specific symbols. The dependent variable in the last two columns is each party’s stability within policy-specific symbols. The independent variables are vote shares for each party from the previous election, first the two-party vote share and second the overall share of the presidential vote.
Table 6.3 reports the results of using a party’s vote share to predict how stable their language will be the next time around. Because it is important to give accommodation theory every chance to succeed, I used both 2-party vote share and percentage of the popular vote as predictors. At the very least, the sign of the election-based predictors is in the direction expected by accommodation theory; larger vote shares should create more symbolic stability. However, none of the vote share coefficients emerge as significant. In addition, the adjusted $r^2$’s indicate that virtually none of the variance in stability is explained by previous vote share. Once again, there does not appear to be a systematic relationship between electoral success and symbolic stability.

Table 6.4: Predicting Imitation of Opponent’s Last Platform with Previous Presidential Vote Share

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Policy Imitation</th>
<th>Value Imitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Party Vote</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>−.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t_{l-1}$</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Vote</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>−.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t_{l-1}$</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
<td>(.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $r^2$</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=74

**=p<.01

Note: Unit of analysis is a party’s linguistic imitation and their performance in the previous presidential election. Thus, there are two observations per election, one for Democrats and one for Republicans. The dependent variable is the similarity of a party’s platform to the language used by their opponents in the previous election. The dependent variable in the first two columns of results is the similarity of each party’s platform to their opponent’s previous platform within policy-specific symbols. The dependent variable in the last two columns is each party’s imitation of policy-specific symbols. The independent variables are vote shares for each party from the previous election, first the two-party vote share and second the overall share of the presidential vote.

Table 6.4 reports the results of using previous election outcomes to predict the level of symbolic imitation. Once again, accommodation theory does not appear to capture what causes a party to imitate its opponents or not. For value imitation (third and fourth columns), the sign of the electoral coefficients is in the expected direction with stronger electoral performance being negatively associated with imitation. However, these coefficients are not significantly different from zero. In the case of policy symbol imitation
Levels of Stability and Imitation not Driven by Congressional Elections

This section examines whether congressional elections send a signal to symbolically persist or imitate in the subsequent election. There are a number of reasons that a party may not look on the presidential race as a representative signal about how its symbols are faring with the public, but could still respond to congressional results in the way predicted by accommodation theory. First, an individual presidential candidate can capture the public’s support even if the party is less appealing broadly. The inverse may also be true. For example, Bill Clinton won two elections during a time when many Democrats in Congress were struggling mightily at the polls. For forty years the Democrats largely controlled Congress but frequently lost the Presidency. Second, the public’s support for sitting presidents is shaped by the condition of the national economy in a way that is much less pronounced for the public’s attitudes about Congress. As such, presidential elections are often affected by fluctuations in the economy more deeply than are congressional races. Knowing this, party leaders may believe that their candidate’s performance in the presidential election was driven by the condition of the economy and, as such, their symbolism was not the key factor.

Table 6.5 uses past House election results to predict stability in platform symbolism. The independent variable in each case is the percentage of all votes that a party’s candidates received. As with presidential vote share, accommodation theory predicts that a stronger showing in recent elections should create more symbolic stability. The first and third columns use the election results from the off-year House election while the second
Table 6.5: Predicting Symbolic Stability with Previous House Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Policy Stability</th>
<th>Value Stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficients (s.e.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Vote Share (Congress$_{t-1}$)</td>
<td>.62 (.38)</td>
<td>.85 (.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Vote Share (Congress$_{t-2}$)</td>
<td>.73* (.31)</td>
<td>.58 (.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.44* (.18)</td>
<td>.39* (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $r^2$</td>
<td>.03 .08 .02 .00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=54

* = p < .05

Note: Unit of analysis is a party’s linguistic stability and their performance in recent congressional elections. Thus, there are two observations per election, one for Democrats and one for Republicans. The dependent variable is the similarity of a party’s platform to the language used in their previous platform. The dependent variable in the first two columns of results is the similarity within policy-specific symbols. The dependent variable in the last two columns is each party’s stability within policy-specific symbols. The independent variable is the percentage of votes each party received for all House races from the previous congressional elections, first the off-year congressional election and second the congressional races from the previous presidential election year.

and fourth columns use the party’s vote share in House elections from the previous presidential election year. The best evidence in support of accommodation theory is in the second column where it appears that vote share in the House elections four years earlier creates more stability in the policy symbols that a party highlights. Even given that this is the strongest indication of a connection between electoral outcomes and stability in platform symbolism, the model remains a poor fit to the data indicating that most of the movements in party language remain unexplained. Elsewhere in the table, the story remains the same; stability in platform symbolism is not driven by performance in recent elections.

Table 6.6 tests whether a party’s tendency to copy its opponent’s previous language is driven by recent House election outcomes. Again, accommodation theory expects that poorly performing parties should be more inclined to borrow from their opponents, which implies that a negative relationship should exist between imitation and electoral outcomes. Like the previous sections, these results provide no support for accommodation theory. The coefficient signs for House vote share is the opposite of what accommodation theory
Table 6.6: Predicting Imitation of Opponent’s Last Platform with Previous House Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Policy Imitation coefficients</th>
<th>Value Imitation coefficients (s.e.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House Vote Share (Congress_{t-1})</td>
<td>.41 (.35)</td>
<td>.73 (.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Vote Share (Congress_{t-2})</td>
<td>.51 (.29)</td>
<td>.54 (.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.51** (.17)</td>
<td>.46** (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $r^2$</td>
<td>.00 (.04)</td>
<td>.02 (.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=54
**=p<.01

Note: Unit of analysis is a party’s linguistic similarity to their opponent’s last platform and their performance in recent congressional elections. Thus, there are two observations per election, one for Democrats and one for Republicans. The dependent variable is the similarity of a party’s platform to the language in their opponent’s platform of four years earlier. The dependent variable in the first two columns of results is the level of imitation within policy-specific symbols. The dependent variable in the last two columns is the level of imitation within policy-specific symbols. The independent variable is the percentage of votes each party received for all House races from the previous congressional elections, first the off-year congressional election and second the congressional races from the previous presidential election year.

This section examines whether change in platform symbolism hinges on the balance of power in Congress, rather than on electoral vote shares. It is possible that changes in the makeup of party elites is the mechanism by which electoral results translate into changes in campaign symbolism. First, the committees that write the platforms are drawn from the existing party leadership, so stability in the personnel who make up the writing committee could have a discernable impact on how the document is written. Change in congressional seat share could also be a signal, distinct from vote shares, that the party elite uses to gauge how their symbols are faring with the electorate. Significant turnover in congressional seats often indicates broader shifts in partisan fortunes. There may also be a hinge-point aspect of this relationship. Parties may not ring the alarm bell at a
modest shift in vote share, but could take immediate notice when substantial numbers of congressional incumbents are replaced.

Table 6.7: Predicting Stability and Imitation of Value Symbols with 4-Year Change in each Party’s Seat Share in the House of Representatives (1860-2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Value Stability</th>
<th>Value Imitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficients</td>
<td>(s.e.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∆ House Seat Share</td>
<td>−.15 (.17)</td>
<td>.02 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.56** (.02)</td>
<td>.49** (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $r^2$</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=74

**=p<.01

Note: Unit of analysis is a party’s value similarity to either their own or their opponent’s last platform and the change in that party’s seat share in the House of Representatives over the past 4-years. The dependent variable in the first column of results is the similarity of each party’s value symbolism to the values emphasized in their own previous platform. The dependent variable in the last column is the similarity of each party’s platform to the values emphasized by their opponent’s last platform.

The independent variable in table 6.7 is the four-year change in House seat share from the Congress that sat before the previous presidential election to that sitting when the current election occurs. As such, these differences capture the institutional consequences of the last two congressional elections. The dependent variable in the first column is the level of stability in value symbolism and the dependent variable in the second model is the amount of imitation of value symbols. Accommodation theory predicts that symbolic stability should be positively related with change in seat share, and imitation should be negatively related to change in seat share. Both in the case of stability and imitation, the sign of the coefficient for change in seat share is in the opposite direction as that predicted by accommodation theory. In addition, both models explain virtually none of the variance in symbolic behavior.

Table 6.8 reports the same two models predicting stability and imitation within policy-specific symbolism. Just as for changes in abstract values, accommodation theory receives no support here. Neither of these models explains any of the variance in symbolic behavior and the sign for the independent variable is in the wrong direction. Once again, the forces
Table 6.8: Predicting Stability and Imitation of Policy-Specific Symbols with 4-Year Change in each Party’s Seat Share in the House of Representatives (1860-2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Policy Stability Coefficients (s.e.)</th>
<th>Policy Imitation Coefficients (s.e.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Δ House Seat Share</td>
<td>−.18 (−.18)</td>
<td>.03 (−.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.66** (.02)</td>
<td>.63** (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $r^2$</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=74

*p = p < .05 ** = p < .01

Note: Unit of analysis is the similarity of policy-specific symbols to either their own or their opponent’s last platform and the change in that party’s seat share in the House of Representatives over the past 4-years. The dependent variable in the first column of results is the similarity of each party’s policy symbolism to the values emphasized in their own previous platform. The dependent variable in the last column is the similarity of each party’s platform to the policy symbols emphasized by their opponent’s last platform.

that cause parties to alter their symbolic appeals do not appear to be rooted in short-term electoral outcomes.

Change in Stability and Imitation not Driven by Previous Electoral Results

Until now, the dependent variables have been the level of stability and imitation in platform symbolism. However, there are important reasons to go a step deeper and examine changes in stability and imitation, instead of their absolute levels. Theoretically, the behavior of a party in the current election should be compared to its behavior in the previous election if we want to know whether previous outcomes changed how they behaved. A party that had been extremely stable may deviate from its previous language but still appear to be more stable than in periods when its language is changing regularly from election to election. Therefore, it makes sense to root the measures of stability and imitation in what the party did in the previous election, standardizing current behavior against recent history.
The empirical reality of these data compounds the need to examine changes in, rather than just levels of, stability and imitation in platform symbolism. As shown in the first section of these results, elite campaign language has become generally more consistent since the Civil War, particularly since the 1950’s. Platform language from the 19th century was not very consistent across elections while modern platforms are much more stable. Because a great deal of the variance in stability and imitation is connected to this long-term trend toward more consistent elite language, it is important to ensure that short-term effects predicted by accommodation theory are not simply being numerically overwhelmed in the level data.

Table 6.9: Change in Symbolic Stability as a Function of Previous Electoral Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Δ Policy Stability</th>
<th>Δ Value Stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficients (s.e.)</td>
<td>coefficients (s.e.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Vote_{t-1}</td>
<td>.20 (.18)</td>
<td>.14 (.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Year Congressional Vote</td>
<td>.26 (.28)</td>
<td>-.16 (.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.08 (.10)</td>
<td>-.11 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted r^2</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 72 54 72 54

*=p<.05

Note: Unit of analysis is the change in symbolic stability and each party’s performance in recent elections. The dependent variable in the first two columns of results is the change in policy-specific symbolic stability for each party, or the similarity of a party’s current platform to their own previous platform minus the similarity of their previous platform to their platform of eight years earlier. The dependent variable in the last two columns is the same change measure within value symbolism. The independent variable in the first and third columns of results is the party’s two-party vote share in the previous presidential election. The independent variable in the second and fourth columns of results is the party’s vote share in all House races from the off-year congressional election.

The dependent variable in table 6.9 is the change in symbolic stability from one election to the next. In other words, this variable is the similarity of the current platform to the previous platform minus the similarity of the previous platform to the platform of eight years earlier. Just as with levels of stability, accommodation theory predicts that strong electoral showings should cause a party to be more stable and poor results should cause a party to deviate from its previous symbolic appeals. The independent variable in the first
and third columns is the party’s share of the two-party vote in the previous presidential election. The independent variable in the second and fourth columns is the party’s share of the congressional votes cast in the off-year election between presidential races. Once again, there is little support for accommodation theory to be found. Neither of the electoral variables emerge as significant predictors of change in symbolic stability, which holds both for policy and value symbols. In addition, these models explain virtually none of the variance in the dependent variable.

Table 6.10: Change in Symbolic Imitation as a Function of Previous Electoral Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Δ Policy Imitation</th>
<th>Δ Value Imitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficients (s.e.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Vote$_{t−1}$</td>
<td>.12 (-.26)</td>
<td>-.22 (.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Year Congressional Vote</td>
<td>.39 (.32)</td>
<td>.34 (.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.05 (.13)</td>
<td>-.17 (.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjusted $r^2$  
N 72 54 72 54

*=p<.05

Note: Unit of analysis is the change in symbolic imitation and each party’s performance in recent elections. The dependent variable in the first two columns of results is the change in policy-specific symbolic imitation for each party, or the similarity of their current platform to their opponent’s previous platform minus the similarity of their previous platform to their opponent’s platform of eight years earlier. The dependent variable in the last two columns is the same change measure within value symbolism. The independent variable in the first and third columns of results is the party’s two-party vote share in the previous presidential election. The independent variable in the second and fourth columns of results is the party’s vote share in all House races from the off-year congressional election.

Table 6.10 reports the same regressions, this time treating change in imitation as the dependent variable. Just as with change in stability, recent electoral results do not predict whether a party will be more or less inclined to imitate its opponents than it was in the previous election.

The results of this section bolster the conclusion that fluctuations in symbolism are not primarily driven by recent electoral results. Parties that do well are no more likely to be symbolically stable than they were in the previous election and parties that do poorly are no more inclined to imitate their opponents. Even after removing the long-term trend
toward consistency in campaign discourse there is no evidence that parties respond to election results in the short-term ways predicted by accommodation theory.

Symbolic Stability and Imitation Driven by the Same Forces

The last several sections have repeatedly demonstrated that fluctuations in platform symbolism are not systematically tied to electoral outcomes in the ways predicted by accommodation theory. I contend that the absence of short-term strategic responsiveness of the type predicted by conventional theory can be explained if both parties are responding to the same symbolic demands. While short-term strategic maneuvering certainly takes place, most of the major innovations in elite symbolism can be found in the words of both parties.

If my argument is correct, stability and imitation should be driven by the same forces. When the political environment causes elites to change their symbolic appeals, parties should use language that is different from their own previous language and the language of their opponents. Conversely, if the political environment remains relatively unchanged from one election to the next, a party’s platform should retain the symbols they used four years earlier and the symbols used in their opponent’s last platform. Accommodation theory leads to very different expectations about how intra-party stability and inter-party imitation should be related. From an accommodation perspective, a party that is pressured to imitate its opponent is also pressured to abandon its earlier symbols, so stability and imitation should be uncorrelated, or even negatively related.

If my argument is correct, and most of the important changes in elite symbolism register in the language of both parties, a party’s similarity to its opponent’s previous language should be a strong predictor of how similar that party is to its own previous language. To go a step further, I expect that the similarity of a party’s current language to its opponent’s previous platform to be a stronger predictor of how stable its own language has been than the lagged level of stability from the previous election. If imitation
and stability are driven by the same factors, they should have more in common with one another than stability from the current period has with stability from the previous presidential cycle. In other words, consistency in a party’s symbolism from the previous election should tell us something about whether we are living in an era of stability or flux generally, but the commonalities between a party’s current platform and what their opponent published four years earlier should tell us even more about how discourse has evolved since the last election.

Table 6.11: Stability as a Function of Imitation and Past Stability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Policy Stability</th>
<th>Value Stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>.83** (.07)</td>
<td>.46** (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability_{t-1}</td>
<td>.41** (.10)</td>
<td>.39** (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.13** (.05)</td>
<td>.11** (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $r^2$</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = p < .05 ** = p < .01

Note: Unit of analysis is a party’s linguistic stability from one election to the next. Thus, there are two observations per election, one for Democrats and one for Republicans. The dependent variable is the similarity of a party’s platform to the language used in their previous platform. The dependent variable in the first two columns of results is the similarity within policy-specific symbols. The dependent variable in the last two columns is each party’s stability within value symbols. The first independent variable is the similarity of each party’s platforms to their opponent’s platform from the previous election. The second independent variable is the similarity of a party’s platform of four years earlier to the platform they published eight years previous, or the dependent variable lagged one election.

The dependent variable in table 6.11 is the similarity of a party’s current symbolism to its own previous platform. The first independent variable is the current similarity of the party’s platform to their opponent’s previous platform. The second independent variable is the similarity of a party’s platform of four years earlier to the platform they published eight years previous, or the dependent variable lagged one election.

First of all, these models demonstrate that the negative relationship between stability and imitation expected by accommodation theory is entirely inaccurate. The first and third columns use the current level of inter-party imitation to predict intra-party stability and find a highly significant and positive relationship, where accommodation theory would
predict a negative association. Moreover, imitation explains a substantial proportion of the variance in stability, both in policy and value symbolism. This provides strong evidence in favor of my argument that stability and flux in elite symbolism registers in the language of both parties at the same time. When the political environment causes a party to use new symbols, those symbols will also be dissimilar to what its opponents used previously. When a party’s symbolism is stable, those symbols will also reflect what appeared in its opponent’s previous platform.

The second and fourth columns extend the analysis by including the lagged level of stability from the previous election as another predictor of stability in the current election. One reason for doing this is the long-term trends in stability discussed earlier. If there are general tendencies toward stability or change that maintain over a series of elections, we want to disentangle these from the unique information about how consistent elite discourse has been over the last four years. Just as my argument predicts, current levels of stability are more strongly associated with a party’s tendency to emulate their opponent’s previous symbolism than it is with how stable they were in the last election. Both predictors are significant, and in the expected direction, but the coefficients for imitation are stronger. Adding the lagged value of stability improves the fit of these models over the models in columns one and three, but difference is not massive.

These results indicate that there are both short-run and long-run forces that influence stability in elite discourse. Knowing how stable a party’s symbolism was in the previous election does provide some information about how stable it is likely to be in the current election. However, a party’s tendency to emphasize symbols used by its opponents previously is an even more telling indicator of whether elite discourse has changed over the past four years. In other words, the signals that cause a party to retain its symbolic appeals will also cause them the retain much of the opponent’s previous language. Moreover, the fact that levels of imitation are better predictors of stability than the lagged level of stability run entirely counter to what accommodation theory expects.
Conclusion

This chapter is centrally concerned with how much commonality exists in campaign symbolism. Because formal theory has often focused so much on how the political system should produce dissimilar responses to electoral results, we risk ignoring how often the two parties respond in the same way to changes in the political environment. While the two parties clearly face a different set of challenges following each election, the major innovations in symbolism are not connected to these distinctions. In Presidential elections, both parties must court the same clientele, causing them to change in similar ways as the political environment evolves. While this point has not gone unnoticed in the field, work on platform behavior continues to be organized by the spatial thinking pioneered by Downs. I am not arguing that spatial theory has no bearing on campaign discourse, but this chapter demonstrates that accommodation theory cannot account for much of what causes elites to change their symbolic appeals.
Chapter 7

Symbolic Disagreements and Congressional Polarization

Introduction

It is virtually an article of faith that we should not trust what campaigning politicians say. We tend to see campaign appeals as cunning rhetoric, lies, manipulation, or just hot air. Both Chapters 4 and 6 presented evidence that political elites craft their symbols to appeal to constituents. This chapter returns to the connection between symbolism and governance. The central question is whether symbolic differences shape concrete disagreements over policy. I maintain that party-line voting in Congress is shaped by differences in how partisans conceptualize the world. While symbols, and particularly abstract values, are often seen as “mom and apple pie” fluff, they provide a window into how political actors think about the world. This chapter demonstrates that campaigning politicians usually reveal more about their disagreements through the symbols they use than through the explicit policy stances they adopt.

Elites may be strategic in their use of language, but it does not follow that symbols are meaningless. In the Theory Chapter, I argued that symbols are central to what distinguishes parties from one another. As Murray Edelman put it, “so intimately integrated are language and thought, so completely and subtly do they shape and signal each other, that
language can be utilized as a sensitive empirical indicator of values and of social, organi-
izational, and status identifications” 1960. Edelman largely sees language as a mechanism
elites use to reinforce their own authority, but his work also underscores the meaningful
role language plays in organizing political conflict.

Judging by platform promises from the last half-century, Democrats and Republicans
have similar policy goals. However, their language reveals deeper disagreements over
what policies and abstract preferences deserve the most attention. Explicit divisions over
individual policies are clearly important, but these distinctions do not exhaust what is
being debated. Previous work on party platforms has ignored much of the substance of
public debate and, in so doing, has prevented us from fully capturing what is at stake.
This chapter tests whether differences in campaign symbolism, and particularly differences
in the abstract values being highlighted, predict levels of party-line voting in the post-
election Congress. The strength of this connection is compared to the best measures of
polarization based on platform promises. Results show that symbolic differences are
far better predictors of subsequent party-line voting than anything based on explicit
stances. Moreover, abstract values provide the best indication of how polarized the next
Congress will be. All of this supports the notion that symbols structure and signal political
disagreements. It matters what the parties say they will do, but their arguments about
how and why are often more revealing.

Specific Promises do not Capture the Whole Debate

Parties in the United States usually strive to realize their platform promises Bradley
(1969); Pomper (1980); Monroe (1983). In most cases, parties follow-up specific platform
pledges with real legislative action. In addition to their explicit platform stances, the
amount of attention that parties devote to specific issues are good indications of where
their priorities lie. When the parties increase their attention to an issue in their national
platforms, the agency responsible for managing that area of policy is likely to receive more
funding in subsequent years Budge and Hofferbert (1990); King et al. (1993).
It is reassuring that both parties generally substantiate their platform promises with legislation, but the true extent of elite polarization is not accurately reflected in how often the parties adopt explicitly divergent platform planks. The central reason for this phenomenon is that both parties devote most of their attention to issues where there is a clearly popular position with the electorate. Many issues are functionally univalent, meaning that one stance is broadly popular while the other is an electoral liability Riker (1993); Stokes (1966). Barry Goldwater’s candidacy was a case study in the dangers of touting one’s radical policy views. Goldwater’s militant perspective on foreign relations was honest, but it also was well outside what the electorate was interested in pursuing. Because platforms are fundamentally strategic documents designed to help parties win elections, they rarely highlight positions that are out of step with public opinion. Gerald Pomper found that as public opinion nears consensus on an issue, platform stances more explicitly align with public tastes 1967, a finding which has been reinforced subsequently by Monroe 1983. In contemporary American platforms, both parties argue for lower taxes, both champion quality public education, both support a strong military, and both claim to be tough on crime. The most divisive issues in the contemporary scene receive little attention in either party’s national platform. Both parties regularly devote long paragraphs to the importance of good harbors and highways while their abortion stances are boiled down to a few sentences. Platform planks are generally honest declarations of policy intentions, but the platform writers also avoid issues where the party-line is distasteful to the broader electorate. As a consequence, the parties rarely adopt unambiguously divergent stances in their platforms.

To be clear, I am not arguing that polarization is unrelated to how often the parties make clearly different pledges. Differences in position and emphasis are meaningful signals of how deeply the parties disagree. However, differences in explicit promises are only one component of the debate. More subtle disagreements about what the federal government should be doing, and why, are revealed through the symbols that parties use.
Abstract Values Shape Political Coalitions

I argued in the Theory Chapter that abstract values are essential to building and maintaining political coalitions. Values are defined here as individuals’ understandings of the desirable ends of human life Rokeach (1973). In this chapter, I will use “values” and “ideals” interchangeably because both terms capture the importance of core orientations in political cognition. There is good scholarly evidence that attachments to core values (e.g. egalitarianism, security, personal liberty) shape peoples’ attitudes about specific policy questions Rokeach (1973); Feldman (2003); Kuklinski (2001). Actors who disagree on most specific issues also usually disagree over the ideals that public policy should pursue. For example, people who value egalitarianism highly tend to see most policies in a different light than those who cherish economic liberty.

This fact underscores the importance of language in shaping the structure of political competition. If groups of like-minded voters and voting coalitions in Congress are driven by the same core values, language is helping to organize and sustain these clusters of belief. Abstract concepts allow us to articulate arguments about how our views on a wide range of issues fit together into a coherent political perspective. Political coalitions often bridge cleavages of material interest, but are highly organized around symbolic themes. Because language is the medium through which symbolic ideals are given meaning, we must view language as an essential part of the architecture of politics. Without language, there would be no means by which political competition could be organized around anything but naked interest. Language is not incidental window-dressing; it is at the core of how distinct political perspectives come into being and how political coalitions are maintained.

Like other types of coalitions, parties use symbolic values to defend specific positions and to link their different stances together. The act of invoking symbolic ideals allows the parties to debate what federal policy is meant to achieve in terms of general philosophical principles. While elites regularly use symbolic appeals to misdirect attention and mask their true intentions, they also communicate a great deal about themselves through the values they invoke. Elites and activists have real attachments to particular abstract
values and these commitments shape their discussions of policy, both consciously and unconsciously. It is easy to point out where a representative’s or party’s legislative behavior is out of step with core values they profess to defend, but it is a mistake to then assume that value statements are meaningless.

Abstract Values are Essential Signals of Polarization in Campaign Discourse

As discussed above, parties rarely highlight their most radical intentions during presidential elections. While individual policy pledges do not reflect the extent of partisan polarization, I maintain that partisan coalitions are rooted in deeper disagreements over what federal policy should achieve. Moreover, there are good reasons to expect parties to use the realm of symbolic ideals to prosecute their deeper disagreements more readily than through adopting wildly different policy stances.

Symbolic appeals can be used to energize and connect with a party’s base without drawing too much attention to radical positions that please the party faithful. Extremist or unpopular positions can be easily identified, publicized, and used as weapons by the other party. Most symbolic appeals are difficult to assail in the same way; accusing one’s opposition of being more concerned with justice than freedom is a much harder sell. Because the Democratic Party faithful have different symbolic priorities than their Republican counterparts, the respective party leaders will use different symbolic appeals to energize their activist bases. By invoking cherished ideals, leaders can connect with their core supporters without having to highlight positions that, while popular with the base, are electoral liabilities with the broader electorate. Committed partisans are apt to recognize the ideological implications of the symbolic values partisan elites are emphasizing. Evidence shows that people with higher levels of political sophistication tend to have more strongly rank-ordered value priorities Jacoby (2006). Given that partisan activists are more politically engaged than the average population, they are more likely to notice and care whether their party’s campaign language reflects their values. Even
while adopting relatively moderate policy positions, party leaders can use loaded symbolic concepts to reassure their supporters that they have not strayed off the farm.

Formal theory on platform behavior also indicates that symbolic language would carry more genuine signals of partisan polarization than differences in specific promises. One of the explanations for why parties fail to fully converge as Downs’ original model predicts 1957, is that party elites and activists have views that are generally more extreme than the average population. Because elites tend to have extreme views, and because they need to please more radical bases, parties resist fully converging on the median voter Wittman (1977, 1983). The critical point for this project is that convergence appears to be tempered by the amount of information party elites have about the distribution of voter attitudes. Formal and experimental work indicates that when parties have better information about public preferences, they will converge on the median position more completely Calvert (1985); Morton (1993). Given the nature of polling data, parties usually have better information about voters’ attitudes on specific issues than they do about the rank-ordering of symbolic values in the electorate. There is more polling on particular issues, and polls are generally better at measuring attitudes on specific policy questions than they are at capturing the structure of value-thought that animates those beliefs. Therefore, formal theory predicts that parties will converge more completely in their explicit stances than in their use of abstract values.

The literature on platform behavior has not devoted serious attention to whether values expressed on the campaign trail shape subsequent congressional voting. The lion’s share of content analysis on national platforms has focused exclusively on specific policy stances, which removes a major component of what parties are actually debating. The focus on explicit promises implicitly assumes that symbolic language is not meaningful, or that we can ignore it because what really matters is what parties promise to do. This is a mistake. Parties are not just debating specific policy positions. Policy debates are often rooted in the symbols that organize how members of the two parties think about the political world. Given the intense pressure forcing parties to emphasize their more moderate policy stances during presidential elections, I believe that symbolic values play
an essential role in communicating the nature of the partisan divide. Differences between which symbolic values Democrats and Republicans emphasize are part of the debate, and we miss these differences by focusing on explicit promises alone.

Values Inform Policy Emphasis and Issue Framing

The conceptual differences revealed in the parties’ use of abstract values should also inform how they talk about individual policies. This section outlines why disagreements over which ideals deserve the most reverence should also inform nuanced differences in which policy themes are addressed and how the parties frame individual issues.

Parties can advocate the same general course of action but have very different priorities within the broader issue. While both contemporary parties claim to support quality public education, Democrats tend to focus on class size and equality where Republicans highlight parental rights and supporting traditional morality in the classroom. Democrats and Republicans may devote similar attention to education policy but, in focusing on different elements of the issue, the parties are engaging in a more nuanced debate over what should be done. Likewise, both parties can support a strong military but make different arguments about how that military prowess ought to be used. Measuring directional differences in position, or emphasis devoted to broad issue areas, can miss disagreements that are essential to the partisan divide.

Parties with different symbolic commitments struggle over how to frame particular policy questions. While there is no single definition of framing, it is essentially the effort to influence which considerations spring first to mind when people think about a particular issue Chong and Druckman (2007). The political science literature on framing shows that issue attitudes often hinge on how people see the core dilemma to be resolved. A basic example is the distinction between thinking about the costs of a social program like welfare, versus the danger to society of unaddressed poverty. The considerations that leap to mind often shape peoples’ attitudes toward social support programs. Most studies on framing have found that changing the primary considerations people use to think about an issue has a marked impact on their attitudes about what government
ought to do Chong (1996); Entman (1993); Jones (1994); Kinder and Sanders (1993); Riker (1986); Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991); Zaller (1992); Kuklinski and Rich (2000). Because platforms are part of an ongoing struggle to shape how the public thinks through individual issues, parties that are committed to different abstract values should also frame specific policy questions in dissimilar ways.

Expectations for this Chapter

If abstract values shape political coalitions, differences in the values that parties emphasize should predict levels of party-line voting in the subsequent Congress. When parties appeal to different ideals on the campaign trail, it should signal fundamental disagreements over the purpose of public policy. If my argument is correct, parties that tack their sails to different values should regularly find themselves on opposing sides of legislative votes. On the other hand, if parties cherish the same values, they should agree on individual policies more often. To be clear, campaign language is used here to capture differences in the symbolic attachments that shape how the parties govern. If value-symbols shape political coalitions, differences in how the parties defend their views should reveal essential disagreements that influence how the parties behave in Congress.

This chapter will test whether differences in the symbols that parties use capture partisan polarization more effectively than differences in what they actually promise to do. If the theory developed here is correct, and congressional coalitions form around arguments over which ideals should guide federal policy, differences in the parties’ use of symbolic language should predict party-line voting in the post-election Congress more clearly than parties’ explicit promises. Disagreements over the core values that policy must pursue should also inform which policies the parties highlight, and how they frame specific issues. However, if congressional coalitions are shaped by the ideals that party elites are committed to, I expect to find that differences in the parties’ value language should be more closely associated with congressional polarization than differences in their explicit policy agendas.
Conventional Approach to Measuring Polarization in Campaign Promises

As discussed in the Chapter 3, the Manifesto Research Group has conducted the largest effort to measure the ideological location of parties based on their platform promises Budge et al. (2001). However, their method fails to capture polarization in the United States. The Manifesto Research Group’s method does capture important information about how both parties move left or right over time, but do not accurately reflect the degree of difference between the parties. As will be shown below, the Manifesto Research Group data do not produce estimates of polarization that predict party-line voting in the U.S. Congress. The pattern reported in Chapter 3 supports the claim that parties do not reveal the true depth of their disagreements in their explicit stances because they are sensitive to what the electorate wants to hear. When the American electorate moves in a conservative direction, both parties start emphasizing more conservative issues; when voters adopt a more liberal frame of mind, both parties follow suit Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002). Because I wanted to create the best test possible of whether symbols are reliable indicators of polarization, it was necessary to search elsewhere for data that captures differences in the promises that parties make in their platforms.

This chapter devotes more attention to Benjamin Ginsberg’s effort to capture polarization in platform pledges 1972; 1976. Ginsberg wanted to capture two kinds of policy disagreement in his coding scheme. First, he wanted to measure how often the parties adopt opposing positions on the same policy area. Second, Ginsberg’s coding scheme captures the extent to which the parties are focusing on different policies (akin to the Manifesto Research Group’s method). Ginsberg’s coding scheme starts with seven policy areas that the parties are likely to address in their platforms (capitalism, internal sovereignty, redistribution, international cooperation, universalism, labor, and ruralism). Then he recorded whether each paragraph advocated a positive and/or negative stance for each of the issue areas (e.g. pro-universalism and/or anti-universalism). A paragraph could then receive a maximum of 14 scores if it advocated both positive and negative
positions on all seven issues, but in practice most paragraphs made between zero and three clear policy statements. Next, Ginsberg summed the scores for all paragraphs to produce aggregate scores for the entire platform. To facilitate comparing documents of different length, these counts were weighted by the number of paragraphs in the document, producing a measure of the percentage of paragraphs in a given platform that made a clear statement on one side or the other of each issue. These data were used to measure the directional disagreements (pro vs. con) within each issue area and which issues the parties emphasize. The final measure used by Ginsberg is the product of the two types of policy disagreement.

Ginsberg’s data are appealing because they cover a long historical period (1844-1968), whereas the Manifestos Research Group data only cover the post-WWII era (1948 on). The longer historical time provides a better test of the theory developed here, particularly given that many of the important fluctuations in polarization in American history took place before 1950.

Measuring Polarization in Platform Symbolism

This chapter will examine polarization in two related elements of platform symbolism. First, I measure the similarity between the abstract values highlighted in the Democratic and Republican platforms in each election year from 1856 to 2004. Second, the similarity in policy-specific symbols is measured over the same time period. Where the previous chapter measured the degree of stability or imitation from one election year to the next, this chapter uses the same cosine measure to estimate polarization between the parties in the same election cycle. For a thorough discussion of the cosine measure, and lists of words that were used to capture polarization in abstract values and policy-specific symbols, refer back to the Chapter 3.

In the Theory and Methods chapters, I argued that left-right ideology cannot capture all, or even most, of the important symbolic dimensions that are present in political discourse. Most of the projects that analyze platform content have explicitly sought to measure the party’s stated location along the liberal-conservative ideological dimension
Budge (2001); Ginsberg (1972). While this approach has some merit, and at least the Ginsberg data does have some ability to predict party-line voting in Congress, the drawbacks of focusing on the left-right ideological dimension outweigh the benefits for this project. For a thorough discussion of the conceptual challenges inherent in measuring left-right ideology over 150 years, and the unsatisfactory results of attempting to use the Manifesto Research Group approach using word-count data, refer back to Chapter 3.

**Qualitatively Validating Measures of Symbolic Polarization**

This section takes a first look at these data to see if they reasonably comport with what we would expect to find in a measure of party polarization. From the roll-call record, we know that party-line voting is much less common in today’s politics than it was in the 19th century. The marked, if not steady, decline of party-voting between the late 19th century and the 1970’s was one of the central pieces of evidence cited to support the *party decline* thesis Brady, Cooper and Hurley (1979); Collie (1984); Hurley and Wilson (1989). Levels of intra-party cohesion have declined for both parties, a smaller proportion of all votes now fall along party lines, and ”universal” votes (votes on which nearly all representatives voted in the same way) have became more commonplace Collie (1988). From the end of the Civil War through the stock market crash of 1929, levels of party-line voting declined somewhat. Following the first years of the New Deal through the 1960’s, party-line voting continued to become less common. Party-voting reached its historical low-point in the 91st Congress (1969-70) but has become more common again subsequently Bond and Fleisher (2000); Fleisher and Bond (2004). Like Mark Twain, reports of the parties’ death were grossly exaggerated. Congressional polarization has rebounded in the last three decades but, at least in the case of party-line voting, has not reached pre-WWII levels. If platform symbolism captures disagreements that help shape congressional voting coalitions, we should see differences in platform word-usage reflecting what is known about how the parties behave in Congress.
Figure 7.1 shows the degree of polarization revealed in the policy-specific symbols used in the two parties’ national platforms. To make these data work in the same direction as polarization, the cosine estimates were re-scaled so that larger values indicate greater differences between the parties and smaller values denote more similar documents. The cosine measure is bounded between 0 (no similarity) and 1 (perfect similarity), so the original values were subtracted from 1, such that a .8 becomes a .2 on this scale.

The long-term trend in these data reveal that, like party-voting in Congress, differences in policy symbols are not as pervasive as they once were. The contemporary parties apportion their attention to specific policy issues in far more similar ways than did their counterparts of the 19th century. Since the Great Depression, only a few years have rivaled levels of polarization registered before 1920. Even then, platforms that are highly polarized by modern standards are still rather moderate when compared to documents from the 19th century.

Many of the fluctuations within this trend also comport with what scholars of parties and polarization would expect. The differences between the parties declined markedly,
if not steadily, between the end of the Civil War and 1920. With the onset of the New Deal, the parties polarized somewhat but only until 1952. During the 1950’s and 1960’s, the era of “me-tooism” in American politics, the parties published platforms that were more similar than at any other point in American history. The only marked exception is 1964, the year in which Barry Goldwater won the Republican nomination by pursuing a decidedly more conservative agenda than his immediate predecessors, so even this exception makes substantive sense. Finally, there are some indications that Democrats and Republicans have polarized discursively since the 1970’s. Starting in 1980 with Reagan’s first candidacy and reaching a contemporary high point in 2000, larger differences in the policy priorities of the two parties once again emerge.

Figure 7.2: Polarization in Value Symbols: 1856-2004

Figure 7.2 shows the same measure of polarization within values symbolism. The parties’ use of abstract values shows the same long-term convergence that took place within policy discourse and congressional voting. Parties are not only discussing more of the same policies, they are also emphasizing more of the same values as they defend their positions. Today’s parties have real ideological differences, but their use of ideals is not
wildly different. The symbolic differences that were commonplace in the 19th century and immediately following the Great Depression appear to have dissipated in the modern era. While value and policy discourse move together in the long run, there are not identical. Indeed, comparing figures 7.1 and 7.2 reveals some visual evidence that value symbols are often more indicative of how polarized the parties are than their policy language.

The most striking example involves the watershed election of 1932. Value polarization rose much more dramatically and immediately following the stock market crash of 1929 than did differences in policy-specific symbolism. Most of the specific policies that would constitute the New Deal were not clearly articulated by the Democratic platform in 1932 and the parties’ policy language was not dramatically more different than in 1928. In value terms, on the other hand, Democratic and Republican language diverged distinctly in 1932 and by 1936 they were more discursively polarized than in any subsequent year. This indicates that, as Democrats and Republicans forged a new terrain of party competition, it was initially reflected more clearly in how they used symbolic ideals than in which policies they emphasized.

Finally, the fall and reemergence of polarization since WWII is also clearly present in value language. The low-ebb of polarization during the 1950’s and 1960’s translated into fewer value distinctions between the parties’ platforms than at any other point in history. Starting in the early 1970’s, when party-line voting began to rebound, the parties’ use of value symbolism polarized visibly. The contemporary high point in disagreement over abstract ideals was in 1996, which makes very good sense. Following the Republican take-over of Congress in 1994 and with Newt Gingrich leading the conservative charge, the platforms of 1996 indicate that substantial philosophical arguments had once again become central to the partisan divide. All in all, these data reflect much of what we would expect to find in a measure of party differences over the last 150 years.
Congressional Voting and Campaign Appeals

This section tests whether the signals of polarization contained in platform symbolism are connected to how frequently the parties oppose one another on roll-call votes in the House of Representatives. Again, I am not claiming that platform symbolism causes congressional divisions in itself, but rather that platform language captures conceptual differences that shape congressional coalitions. If symbols help organize congressional coalitions, and if abstract values capture meaningful differences in partisan thinking, these linguistic distinctions should be reliably associated with how the parties voted in Congress. Moreover, if my argument that language reveals structures of symbolic belief that cannot be inferred from the specific promises that parties are making, differences in language should explain subsequent congressional polarization above and beyond what we could guess based on the parties’ explicit policy pledges.

This section starts by showing that symbolic distinctions are more strongly connected to legislative polarization than differences in the specific promises being made. Next, the quality of the connection is tested by controlling for previous levels of partisan voting in the House, demonstrating that language carries novel information about how the party elites think that could not simply be inferred by knowing how the last House voted. Finally, because there are both long- and short-term trends in party-voting and discursive polarization, an error-correction model is used to demonstrate that these relationships are not merely the result of comparing series with long-term trends.

Platform Promises vs. Platform Words

If word usage captures meaningful arguments that shape legislative coalitions, differences in platform language should reflect the degree of partisan polarization in the legislative process. Second, if differences in language reveal symbolic disagreements that are not visible on a superficial reading of platform promises, I expect to find that differences in word choice will more accurately predict the level of party-line voting in the post-election House of Representatives than differences in the actual promises.
Table 7.1: Correlating Polarization in Platform Promises, Polarization in Policy-Specific Symbols, and Polarization in Abstract Values with Party-Voting in the House of Representatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform Polarization</th>
<th>% Party Votes in Pre-Election House</th>
<th>% Party Votes in Post-Election House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Positions (Ginsberg)</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Positions (MRG)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy-Specific Symbols</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Symbols</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.69**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**=p<.01

Note: Data are pair-wise correlations between party-line voting in the House of Representatives and polarization in platform content. The unit of analysis is the campaign-year for all measures of platform polarization. For review of Ginsberg position polarization see 1972. Ginsberg data cover years 1868-1968. Manifesto Research Group (MRG) measure of polarization was produced by taking the difference between Democratic and Republican ideological location, as outlined by Ian Budge 2001. MRG data cover years 1948-2004. Policy-specific and value polarization given by measuring the cosine similarity between the Democratic and Republican platforms of the same year, and subtracting that value from one. Party votes are the percentage of all votes where a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republican for each two-year Congress.

Table 7.1 shows that focusing on word-usage produces estimates of polarization that meet or exceed the information we have previously gleaned from explicit stances. All of the data presented here are correlations between platform polarization (of whatever type) and party-line voting in the Congresses sitting before and after a presidential election. “Party Votes” are votes on which at least 50% of Democrats and 50% of Republicans vote in opposite ways on a particular roll-call, and the measure used here are the proportion of all votes in a given Congress that fell along partisan lines in this way. For example, if a two-year House cast 100 votes, and 35 of these fell along party lines, the score for that Congress would be .35. Because the Ginsberg data only runs up through 1968, the correlations for the language-based estimates were also computed using only those years. On the other hand, the Manifesto Research Group data run from 1948-2004, so that correlation is based on those years only.

These data support the argument that looking beyond policy promises reveals more about what the parties are actually debating. Moreover, differences in language appear to be more forward-looking and reveal more about how coalitional lines will be drawn in the next Congress. In the first column, polarization in platform content is correlated with
rates of party-line voting in the Congress that was sitting when the presidential election took place. First off, it is clear that the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) approach fails to capture cues of polarization that reflect what is going on in Congress. No statistically significant connection exists between polarization as measured by the MRG and legislative polarization in either the pre-election or post-election House. The Ginsberg data fare much better, particularly as honest reflections of the level of polarization in the House when the platforms are written. Focusing on policy stances accounts for roughly the same amount of variance in pre-election party-voting in the House. It is in anticipating the future that symbolic differences emerge as particularly revealing. Both polarization in policy-specific symbols and within abstract values are much better predictors of future legislative polarization than are differences in explicit policy stance.

The claim is not that promises are irrelevant, just that the parties’ choice of symbolism captures more of the substance of partisan thinking that inform how the parties will vote in Congress. The Ginsberg data provide useful indications of polarization, but both of the language-derived measures are better indications of how common party-line voting will be in the next House. Finally, these results are the first indications that value polarization provides the best basis for predicting party-voting in the subsequent House. Differences in the values emphasized by the two parties contain better signals of conceptual differences than what is captured by differences in the policy-specific symbols that the parties emphasize. If coalitional voting is based on differences in which ideals the party elites care about, this connection between language and voting is precisely what we would expect to see.

Table 7.2 tests the claim that promises are less informative about how deeply polarized the parties are than symbolic distinctions. The dependent variable in each of these models is the level or party-voting in the House that convened following the presidential election. Again, this is not meant to imply that platform content causes congressional behavior in itself, but that conceptual disagreements that shape legislative behavior translate more clearly into symbolic differences than into divergent platform promises. Platform promises are related to congressional behavior, but we learn significantly more about
Table 7.2: Predicting Party-Voting in the Post-Election House with Polarization in Platform Symbolism and Polarization in Policy Positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Coefficients (s.e)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Position Polarization (Ginsberg)</td>
<td>1.64* .64 .64 (.82) (.79) (.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy-Specific Symbolic Polarization</td>
<td>.45** (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Polarization</td>
<td>.50** (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.54** .41** .31** (.04) (.05) (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$r^2$</td>
<td>.14 .32 .40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=26

* = p < .05 ** = p < .01

Note: The unit of analysis is the campaign year for all measures of platform polarization. The dependent variable is the percentage of all votes where a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republican for the two-year Congress following a presidential election. The data on polarization in policy positions is taken from Benjamin Ginsberg1972. Ginsberg data cover years 1868-1968. Policy-specific and value polarization given by measuring the cosine similarity between the Democratic and Republican platforms of the same year, and subtracting that value from one.

what divides the parties by attending to how they defend these stances. Controlling for symbolic distinctions, the differences in which policies are being defended cease to be significant predictors of legislative behavior. The $r^2$’s also indicate that tapping into symbolic disagreements improves our ability to predict party-line voting. These results demonstrate that focusing on specific promises alone is a big mistake. We can learn something about partisan antagonisms by looking at explicit differences in policy stance, but once we consider the cues of polarization captured in the symbols that parties are using, the specific policy differences do not contribute very much information. Finally, value polarization again emerges as the best predictor of future congressional behavior. Comparing columns 2 and 3, the coefficient for polarization in value symbolism is larger than that for policy-specific symbols, and the model that includes value polarization explains more of the variance in party-voting. Once again, it appears that partisan voting in Congress is rooted in philosophical differences that can only be accessed by examining which values the parties are emphasizing.
Platform Language Reveals Information Not Reflected in Previous Congressional Behavior

This section tests whether analyzing platform polarization tells us anything that cannot be gleaned from how the previous House behaved. If the use of symbols captures conceptual disagreements that will inform future congressional behavior, the parties’ use of language in Presidential elections should reveal changes in polarization that were not fully present in the pre-election Congress. When disagreements over which core values should drive federal policy deepen, or when the parties focus on different policy symbols, these differences should indicate that increased legislative polarization is on the way. If symbolism is not powerfully connected to policy disagreements, the only thing that should predict how the parties will behave is how they voted in the previous Congress.

Table 7.3: Predicting Post-Election Party-Voting with Polarization in Platform Word-Usage while Controlling for Previous Levels of Congressional Polarization (1868-2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Coefficients (s.e.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previous House Polarization</td>
<td>.69** (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.43** (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.39** (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization in Policy Symbols</td>
<td>.53** (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.35** (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization in Value Symbols</td>
<td>.54** (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.38** (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.17* (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.40** (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.31** (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.20** (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.16** (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$r^2$</td>
<td>.38 .40 .46 .50 .54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=35
*=p<.05 **=p<.01

Note: The unit of analysis is the campaign year for all measures of platform polarization. The dependent variable is the percentage of all votes where a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republican for the two-year Congress following a presidential election. Previous House polarization is the percentage of party votes in the Congress sitting when the presidential election took place. Policy-specific and value polarization given by measuring the cosine similarity between the Democratic and Republican platforms of the same year, and subtracting that value from one.

In all of the models reported in Table 7.3, the dependent variable is the rate of party-voting in the House sitting after a presidential election. In the first column, the rate of
party-voting in the previous House is used to predict the current value, which provides a baseline for evaluating the relationships found in the other models. Columns 2 and 3 use platform polarization expressed through policy and value symbolism as predictors of post-election party-voting. The Ginsberg data are not presented here. Once the lagged rate of party-voting is controlled for, differences in explicit positions contain no new information. The relationships for the measures of polarization developed here work in the expected direction and are highly significant. Impressively, symbolic polarization from the campaign provides as much or more information about post-election party-voting as we get from knowing the rate of party-voting in the pre-election House. Far from being meaningless, campaign symbolism reveals disagreements that are at least as closely connected to future congressional voting as the structure in the most recent Congress.

Columns 4 and 5 use value and policy symbolism to predict post-election polarization, controlling for pre-election behavior. This tests whether platform language tells us anything we couldn’t infer by simply looking at how the last Congress behaved. These last two models are even stronger indications that patterns in campaign speech reveal reliable and novel information about how the parties intend to govern in the coming years. Including a lagged dependent variable as a predictor also helps to control for the long-term trends in both campaign symbolism and congressional voting. Both measures of symbolic polarization remain significant predictors of post-election congressional behavior, and including these measures of polarization improves the fit of the models. It is worth noting that, since platform polarization is also correlated with pre-election congressional voting, there is substantial multicolinearity in the predictors of these models. Given the presence of multicolinearity, and a relatively small sample size, the fact that the symbolic distinctions still emerge as significant is even more impressive. Finally, differences in the ideals that Democrats and Republicans emphasize emerge, once again, as the best linguistic cue of future polarization. The coefficients for value polarization are modestly stronger and the models that use value symbols explain slightly more of the variance in congressional voting. Again, this supports the claim that voting coalitions in the post-election House are shaped by party elites’ commitments to different abstract values.
Modeling Short and Long Term Connection Between Polarized Discourse and Polarized Voting

Because there are likely to be both short-term and long-term relationships between campaign discourse and party-voting, I used a single-stage error-correction model (ECM) to examine the connection. The ECM is also a conservative test, particularly in small datasets, which assuages concerns that discourse and congressional voting are only spuriously related. Because ECM’s predict change in the dependent variable with lagged and change values for the independent variables, these findings are not just the product or regressing one trending series on another.

Table 7.4: Short and Long-Run Dynamic Equilibrium between Symbolic Polarization and Party-Line Voting (1872-2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Policy Symbols</th>
<th>Value Symbols</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficients (s.e)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Error Correction Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party-Votes$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>-.74** (.18)</td>
<td>-.66** (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Short-Term Effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta$ Symbolic Polarization$_{t}$</td>
<td>.39* (.16)</td>
<td>.56** (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Long-Term Effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Polarization$_{t-1}$</td>
<td>.39* (.17)</td>
<td>.29* (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.29** (.08)</td>
<td>.24** (.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$r^2$                     |                           |                        |
|                         | .33                      | .45                    |

N=34
* = p<.05 ** = p<.01

Note: The unit of analysis is the campaign year for all measures of platform polarization. The dependent variable is the change in percent party-line votes, or percentage of all votes where a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republican for the two-year Congress following a presidential election minus the percentage of party-line votes from the congress that convened following the previous presidential election. Party-Votes$_{t-1}$ is the percentage of votes that fell along party-line in the Congress that sat after the previous presidential election. Policy-specific and value polarization given by measuring the cosine similarity between the Democratic and Republican platforms of the same year, and subtracting that value from one. $\Delta$ Symbolic Polarization is the level of polarization in policy word-usage in a given election year minus the same from four year earlier. Symbol Polarization$_{t-1}$ is the extent of symbolic differences between the Democratic and Republican platforms from the previous election.
The results reported in Table 7.4 indicate that there are both long-run and short-run relationships between party-line voting in Congress and polarization in platform symbolism (both policy-specific and value symbols). First, focusing on the short-run effects, we see that increasingly distinctive symbols translate into more party-voting right away. Moving from zero to one on the measure of symbolic polarization (or from perfect similarity to perfect dissimilarity) causes a significant increase in party-voting in the next Congress. The effect is stronger for increasing value differences than for increasing polarization in policy-specific symbols; completely polarized value content would translate into 56% more party-line votes compared to when the parties emphasize identical values, while the same polarization in policy-specific symbols is expected to produce 40% more party-line votes.

However, the relationship between platform and legislative polarization also extends over a longer time horizon. If the parties suddenly went from using all the same symbols to using none of the same symbols, we would expect the leaders in Congress to keep edging away from each other over the several Congresses following the shock, over and above the immediate shock captured by the short-run effects. Interestingly, the long-term effect for policy-symbol polarization is larger than the effect of increased value distinctions. In other words, when the parties start emphasizing different values, expect party-voting to increase right away and to do so more dramatically than if they start emphasizing different policies. On the other hand, parties that focus on different policies are laying out different intentions that will shape how they vote over the next few Congresses more dramatically than when they are focusing on different abstract values.

Finally, the error correction coefficient indicates that most of the effect of increased platform polarization translates into party-line voting within a few elections. Roughly 75% of the long-run effect of increased policy-symbol polarization is realized in party-voting by the time the next presidential election rolls around, compared to roughly 65% for value polarization.

This final section raises some interesting questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed here. Why does policy polarization have smaller short-term effects than value
polarization, but larger consequences over the long-term? I will resist post-ante theorizing on this point, but it is worth investigating in future work. Nevertheless, this section clearly demonstrates a powerful and durable connection between polarization in platform symbolism and party-line voting in Congress. The effects found in this chapter are not merely accidental correlations between trending time-series; there is a complex relationship between what parties say and how they vote that stands up to a very conservative test.

**Conclusion**

The results of this chapter support the theory that symbolic disagreements shape political coalitions. The structure of competition revealed in congressional voting is closely tied to differences in which symbols the two parties highlight. The parties’ use of symbols reveals philosophical disagreements what will shape future congressional coalitions that are not captured by the explicit policy promises that parties are making. The fact that value differences repeatedly emerged as the strongest predictors of legislative polarization provides even more support for the importance of abstract symbolism. If specific positions were all that organized political coalitions, we would expect explicit campaign stances to be the most closely tied to legislative behavior, and symbolic ideals to be relatively disconnected from how the parties behave in Congress. The results presented in this chapter indicate that cleavages in congressional voting are rooted in conceptual disagreements that are expressed in the symbols that elites use to defend their views.

This chapter indicates that we need to recalibrate our thinking about where meaningful disagreements are prosecuted in campaign discourse. While there is a tendency to see symbolic appeals in campaign language as just “Mom and apple pie” filler, the results presented here show that legislative divisions are also rooted in deeper conceptual debates over which values federal policy should pursue. If voting coalitions in Congress were not informed by divisions over which ideals should orient federal policy, there would be no
Figure 7.3: Polarization in Abstract Values and Party-Line Voting: 1856-2004

connection between how parties articulate their views and how they actually govern. Figure 7.3 shows party-voting along with the measure of value polarization used throughout this chapter. Clearly, there is a strong and durable relationship between differences in value symbolism and legislative polarization. While this chapter does not uncover all of the intermediary linkages between differences in campaign symbolism and congressional polarization, the findings support the theory that value judgments, and the language that codifies them, shape political coalitions. It is clear that elites’ arguments about why prefigures their concrete choices about what, when, and to whom.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

Bringing Language to Mainstream Political Science

Human consciousness is entering unprecedented waters. Our past is defined by a lack of information; now, we have more data than we know what to do with. In this environment, we must rely on automated processes to parse the massive amount of data that exists a few keystrokes away. Ten years ago, computerized content analysis tools were mostly limited to institutions with lots of resources and lots of text to manage, like corporations or libraries. We now find ourselves swimming in an ocean of texts that are, more or less, accessible to everyone. As people submit more of their thoughts, ideas, and ramblings to the Internet, we increasingly use computerized content analysis tools to manage this information. Internet search engines have become the most widely used research tools, making word-usage the entry point into the resources of human knowledge. The National Security Agency relies on automated content analysis to identify communication that threatens the United States. I recently came across a website that reports the most widely used words in the twitter-verse in real time (a fascinating glimpse into what is on the collective mind). Facebook recently deployed an application that allows users to report the most commonly used words in their recent status updates. Wordclouds have become popular content as we have more accessible bodies of text that want summarizing. The list gets longer every day.

All of this is changing the political game. Major addresses and debates are now
followed by news stories reporting what themes, people, or ideas were being discussed, all captured through word-counts. Political activists use text searches to identify papers and sources that are relevant to their areas of interest. Congressional offices are now deluged by masses of digital communication and are increasingly automating how they sort and respond to these messages. In this way, the signals that leaders hear will be increasingly mediated by the content analysis tools they use to digest the messages they receive. Elected leaders have always tried to use words that resonate with their audience and, as they receive more information about what language their constituents use, expect politicians to mine that data more and more explicitly.

Digitized communication also permits political organizing on an unprecedented scale. The globalization of information makes something as diffuse and dispersed as the anti-globalization movement possible. Written text still serves as the core mode of communication in this new organizational setting. Leaders and activists spend more time interacting with each other through text than in person. With more channels of communication opening, and with the pace of communication much accelerated, the sustained exchange that builds shared meaning can now include larger groups than ever before. Language has always organized how information moves, but in today’s world it is becoming even more central to how people digest information, how they form collective identities, how they formulate demands, and how they lobby leaders.

The central point of this project is that we cannot understand democracy without seriously considering how language facilitates and structures political action. Everything that has surfaced since political scientists started analyzing word-count indicates that language is a fundamental political institution and deserves more central billing in our discipline.

Central Conclusions of this Study

This project raises more questions than it answers, but it provides footholds in terrain that is virtually unexplored. The effort throughout has been to show that we now have
tools for getting at theoretically important questions that have previously eluded us. The following sections will outline the central conclusions that emerge from this work with an eye for where future work is needed.

**How we Speak is how We Govern**

To talk in a particular way is to think about politics from a particular vantage point. Routinized patterns of speech reinforce ways of seeing the political world that, in turn, shape the choices we make. When Democrats and Republicans launch into another round of tax debates, their different priorities (both policy and conceptual) are built into how they describe the dilemma. When disagreements are most stark, there we often find opposing sides talking past one another most distinctly.

Both chapters 4 and 7 show that when members of Congress disagree with one another, they also talk about policy is distinct ways. Divisions in language reveal conceptual disagreements, whether on a particular bill or over the entire federal agenda. This relationship is not limited to Congress; when op-ed writers and think tank activists weigh in, we see many of the same linguistic lines of disagreement being drawn. If we expanded the field of view even further, I would expect to find linguistic differences forming along most of the coalitional fault lines in the broader electorate. We have much to learn about how language and policy-making shape each other, but this project shows that examining this relationship is worth the effort. Whether language is shaping goals or goals determine language is probably context dependent, but the strong connection between the language we use and the choices we make cannot be denied.

**Elites Respond to Symbolic Demands**

Political science has already shown that elites respond to symbolic demands. What is striking is that this responsiveness goes well beyond taking a symbolic stance or mixing in a few buzz words. Representatives debating bills in Congress systematically emphasize the same arguments, icons, and ideals as the activist communities they want to take notice.
Some of this consistency arises from genuinely sharing a symbolic outlook on the world, but much of it is clearly responsive. Chapter 6 showed that both parties change their language in many of the same ways over time, as one would expect if they are courting the same audience. Most politicians know that “it’s not what you say, it’s what people hear”. While there is much to learn about how leaders recognize symbolic demands, it is clear that they must work with the rubrics that constituents provide. Understanding representation requires a better grasp on how symbols mediate the relationship between elected leaders and everyone else.

**Abstract Values Matter**

This project indicates that abstract values shape how we think about policy and how political coalitions are maintained. In the last chapter, abstract values were shown to be the best indicators of future polarization in Congress. More work will be required to fully unpack the mechanisms that produce this connection. I maintain that abstract values help form lines of political disagreement, both within Congress and the electorate. Clinging to the same ideals, and investing them with similar meaning, is part of how political collectives form. Particularly when cleavages stretch across many diverse issues, abstract values are critical to those divisions. How could we explain why liberals and conservatives disagree on taxes, foreign relations, abortion, homosexuality, education, health care, and gun control without values serving as conceptual anchors? Activists and leaders talk about abstract values all the time and we would do well to pay heed. Values do not create political groups by themselves, but this project demonstrates that divisions over policy are deeply connected to disagreements over which values deserve the most reverence.

**Rethinking Symbolic Politics**

In closing, I want to say a few words for symbolic politics. Symbolic politics is not a unique or inferior type of politics. We often labor under the misconception that symbolic
politics is the reserve of the ignorant and the corrupt. Murray Edelman saw symbolic politics as a charade, as a play elites use to fool everyone into believing in a system designed to keep them down. Many studies treat symbolic and policy representation as distinct and antagonistic types of politics. When we find voters’ attitudes about issues or leaders being rooted in symbolic attachments more than in material self-interest, we tend to cry foul. In normal political discussion, we usually blame symbols for choices we find objectionable. Liberals decry symbols that cause poor people to vote Republican, and conservatives during the 2008 election raged that Obama was all symbols and no substance. By assuming that symbolic politics is bad politics, we ignore how informative and productive symbols can be.

Symbols do not work on the gullible alone. We all must rely on symbols to simplify the complexities of modern politics into something we can digest and comprehend. We constantly rely on symbols, and how they fit together into systems of meaning, to interpret new political information and to communicate with each other about what is going on. Political sophisticates use symbols to organize the political landscape just as much as disinterested voters, maybe more so. One of the central findings of this project is that symbols can be rationally useful. We tend to think that responding to symbols is to be duped, but this project shows that symbols often provide better bases for judging politicians’ intentions than the literal statements they are making. This implies that responding to symbolic signals is often more rational than responding to the literal meaning of what leaders say.

Symbolic politics does not always produce terrible choices. Elites do use symbols to reinforce their own authority, but so do groups trying to change the status quo. Any time marginalized groups have used the democratic process to secure more resources or protections, symbols have been indispensable to the effort. The “I have a Dream” speech is not a policy brief, but it did crystallize a movement in the way that no policy report ever could. All of the important movements in American history were united through shared symbols, relying on them to sustain the effort for change and to give identity to their struggles. Symbols are often the only resources that disempowered groups have
at their disposal. When groups have few financial or institutional advantages, symbolic confrontation provides one of the only venues in which they can hope to challenge the dominant order. The genius of King’s language is his ability to use symbols that Americans had invested with meaning to frame the struggle for civil rights. The symbols of the Civil Rights movement tapped into how Americans think of themselves, connecting the plight of minorities to the hopes and aspirations that we all share. Without powerful symbols, our factories would still be full of children, women would not vote, patronage would determine most political allegiances, and democracy itself would not exist.

A more productive and interesting science of symbolic politics begins with recognizing that symbols can serve all kinds of ends. Sometimes symbols serve to distract our attention from the facts, but they can also focus attention precisely where it is needed. Symbols can undermine good judgment, but they can also help societies govern themselves more justly. The real question about symbolic politics is why symbols sometimes take societies toward disaster while, at other times, they open the way for a better future.

**Bringing Language to Mainstream Political Science**

Human consciousness is entering unprecedented waters. Our past is defined by a lack of information; now, we have more data than we know what to do with. In this environment, we must rely on automated processes to parse the massive amount of data that exists a few keystrokes away. Ten years ago, computerized content analysis tools were mostly limited to institutions with lots of resources and lots of text to manage, like corporations or libraries. We now find ourselves swimming in an ocean of texts that are, more or less, accessible to everyone. As people submit more of their thoughts, ideas, and ramblings to the Internet, we increasingly use computerized content analysis tools to manage this information. Internet search engines have become the most widely-used research tools, making word-usage the entry point into the resources of human knowledge. The National Security Agency relies on automated content analysis to identify communication that threatens the United States. I recently came across a website that reports the most
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followed by news stories reporting what themes, people, or ideas were being discussed,
all captured through word-counts. Political activists use text searches to identify papers
and sources that are relevant to their areas of interest. Congressional offices are now
deluged by masses of digital communication and are increasingly automating how they
sort and respond to these messages. In this way, the signals that leaders hear will be
increasingly mediated by the content analysis tools they use to digest the messages they
receive. Elected leaders have always tried to use words that resonate with their audience
and, as they receive more information about what language their constituents use, expect
politicians to mine that data more and more explicitly.

Digitized communication also permits political organizing on an unprecedented scale.
The globalization of information makes something as diffuse and dispersed as the anti-
globalization movement possible. Written text still serves as the core mode of communica-
tion in this new organizational setting. Leaders and activists spend more time interacting
with each other through text than in person. With more channels of communication
opening, and with the pace of communication much accelerated, the sustained exchange
that builds shared meaning can now include larger groups than ever before. Language
has always organized how information moves, but in today’s world it is becoming even
more central to how people digest information, how they form collective identities, how
they formulate demands, and how they lobby leaders.

The central point of this project is that we cannot understand democracy without
seriously considering how language facilitates and structures political action. Everything
that has surfaced since political scientists started analyzing word-count indicates that
language is a fundamental political institution and deserves more central billing in our
Central Conclusions of this Study

This project raises more questions than it answers, but it provides footholds in terrain that is virtually unexplored. The effort throughout has been to show that we now have tools for getting at theoretically important questions that have previously eluded us. The following sections will outline the central conclusions that emerge from this work with an eye for where future work is needed.

How we Speak is how We Govern

To talk in a particular way is to think about politics from a particular vantage point. Routinize patterns of speech reinforce ways of seeing the political world that, in turn, shape the choices we make. When Democrats and Republicans launch into another round of tax debates, their different priorities (both policy and conceptual) are built into how they describe the dilemma. When disagreements are most stark, there we often find opposing sides talking past one another most distinctly.

Both chapters 4 and 7 show that when members of Congress disagree with one another, they also talk about policy is distinct ways. Divisions in language reveal conceptual disagreements, whether on a particular bill or over the entire federal agenda. This relationship is not limited to Congress; when op-ed writers and think tank activists weigh in, we see many of the same linguistic lines of disagreement being drawn. If we expanded the field of view even further, I would expect to find linguistic differences forming along most of the coalitional fault lines in the broader electorate. We have much to learn about how language and policy making shape each other, but this project shows that examining this relationship is worth the effort. Whether language is shaping goals or goals determine language is probably context dependent, but the strong connection between the language we use and the choices we make cannot be denied.
Elites Respond to Symbolic Demands

Political science has already shown that elites respond to symbolic demands. What is striking is that this responsiveness goes well beyond taking a symbolic stance or mixing in a few buzz words. Representatives debating bills in Congress systematically emphasize the same arguments, icons, and ideals as the activist communities they want to take notice. Some of this consistency arises from genuinely sharing a symbolic outlook on the world, but much of it is clearly responsive. Chapter 6 showed that both parties change their language in many of the same ways over time, as one would expect if they are courting the same audience. Most politicians know that “its not what you say, its what people hear”. While there is much to learn about how leaders recognize symbolic demands, it is clear that they must work with the rubrics that constituents provide. Understanding representation requires a better grasp on how symbols mediate the relationship between elected leaders and everyone else.

Abstract Values Matter

This project indicates that abstract values shape how we think about policy and how political coalitions are maintained. In the last chapter, abstract values were shown to be the best indicators of future polarization in Congress. More work will be required to fully unpack the mechanisms that produce this connection. I maintain that abstract values help form lines of political disagreement, both within Congress and the electorate. Clinging to the same ideals, and investing them with similar meaning, is part of how political collectives form. Particularly when cleavages stretch across many diverse issues, abstract values are critical to those divisions. How could we explain why liberals and conservatives disagree on taxes, foreign relations, abortion, homosexuality, education, health care, and gun control without values serving as conceptual anchors? Activists and leaders talk about abstract values all the time and we would do well to pay heed. Values do not create political groups by themselves, but this project demonstrates that divisions over policy are deeply connected to disagreements over which values deserve the most
Rethinking Symbolic Politics

In closing, I want to say a few words for symbolic politics. Symbolic politics is not a unique or inferior type of politics. We often labor under the misconception that symbolic politics is the reserve of the ignorant and the corrupt. Murray Edelman saw symbolic politics as a charade, as a play elites use to fool everyone into believing in a system designed to keep them down. Many studies treat symbolic and policy representation as distinct and antagonistic types of politics. When we find voters’ attitudes about issues or leaders being rooted in symbolic attachments more than in material self-interest, we tend to cry foul. In normal political discussion, we usually blame symbols for choices we find objectionable. Liberals decry symbols that cause poor people to vote Republican and conservatives during the 2008 election raged that Obama was all symbols and no substance. By assuming that symbolic politics is bad politics, we ignore how informative and productive symbols can be.

Symbols do not work on the gullible alone. We all must rely on symbols to simplify the complexities of modern politics into something we can digest and comprehend. We constantly rely on symbols, and how they fit together into systems of meaning, to interpret new political information and to communicate with each other about what is going on. Political sophisticates use symbols to organize the political landscape just as much as disinterested voters, maybe more so. One of the central findings of this project is that symbols can be rationally useful. We tend to think that responding to symbols is to be duped, but this project shows that symbols often provide better bases for judging politicians’ intentions than the literal statements they are making. This implies that responding to symbolic signals is often more rational than responding to the literal meaning of what leaders say.

Symbolic politics does not always produce terrible choices. Elites do use symbols to reinforce their own authority, but so do groups trying to change the status quo. Any
time marginalized groups have used the democratic process to secure more resources or protections, symbols have been indispensable to the effort. The “I have a Dream” speech is not a policy brief, but it did crystallize a movement in the way that no policy report ever could. All of the important movements in American history were united through shared symbols, relying on them to sustain the effort for change and to give identity to their struggles. Symbols are often the only resources that disempowered groups have at their disposal. When groups have few financial or institutional advantages, symbolic confrontation provides one of the only venues in which they can hope to challenge the dominant order. The genius of King’s language is his ability to use symbols that Americans had invested with meaning to frame the struggle for civil rights. The symbols of the civil rights movement tapped into how Americans think of themselves, connecting the plight of minorities to the hopes and aspirations that we all share. Without powerful symbols, our factories would still be full of children, women would not vote, patronage would determine most political allegiances, and democracy itself would not exist.

A more productive and interesting science of symbolic politics begins with recognizing that symbols can serve all kinds of ends. Sometimes symbols serve to distract our attention from the facts, but they can also focus attention precisely where it is needed. Symbols can undermine good judgement, but they can also help societies govern themselves more justly. The real question about symbolic politics is why symbols sometimes take societies toward disaster while, at others, they open the way for a better future.


Panagopoulos, Costas. 2007. Rewiring Politics: Presidential Nominating Conventions in the Media Age. Louisiana State University Press.


