TALKING PAST ONE ANOTHER: TRENDS IN REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC ELITE RHETORIC

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— WORKING PAPER —

The Republican and Democratic parties differ in their goals, governing styles, and rhetoric. Republicans prioritize fidelity to ideology while Democrats promote policies for their diverse coalition of constituencies. But, how longstanding are these differences? Are they stable over time or did they emerge from the more recent era of polarization? This working paper examines how elite rhetoric from both parties has changed over time and explores the implications of these trends. We rely on original content analyses of party platforms and presidential nomination acceptance speeches from 1948 – 2008 to assess this asymmetry between Democratic and Republican rhetoric over time and across issues.

INTRODUCTION

Many theories of governance in American politics assume symmetry between the Republican and Democratic parties. The Democratic Party and the “Grand Old Party” (GOP) are often treated as mirror images of one another. However, the Republican and Democratic parties differ considerably in their goals, governing styles, and rhetoric. Indeed, both parties are oftentimes accused of “talking past one another.”

Republicans emphasize a limited size and role for government. The GOP’s universal appeals are for an ideologically congruent constituency that prefers a commitment to principles over compromise. In turn, Republican elite rhetoric is generally comprised of references to ideology, values, and American imagery. Democrats, however, appeal to the various social and interest groups that make up its party coalition by addressing those groups’ diverse set of issue concerns. Democratic elite discourse, therefore, generally comprises mentions of these social and interest groups with policy overtures directed at these constituencies. Put another way, liberals can be seen as a faction within the Democratic Party, while conservatives largely comprise the Republican Party.

Both parties appeal to voters’ “enduring orientations toward politics” (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), just in different ways. The Republican Party tries to tap into voters’ attitudes or

1 This working paper is a by-product of Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins’ larger project and forthcoming manuscript entitled, Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats. Financial support for their project was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (www.hewlett.org). More information about this project can be found at www.mattg.org. Project data, codebooks, and reliability statistics will be made available at www.mattg.org in the near future. For this working paper, please address correspondence to Marty P. Jordan, Department of Political Science, Michigan State University, 303 S. Kedzie Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824; e-mail: marty.jordan@gmail.com.
beliefs about how government should or should not address societal problems, while the Democratic Party tries to connect to voters by referencing social demographics (e.g., economic class, race, gender, or age), issue concerns, and policy solutions.

Importantly, we are not arguing that these party differences are eternal and absolute. Rather, these differences reflect tendencies. It is not that Republicans never (or even rarely) mention social or interest groups or advocate for a particular policy. Nor is it that Democrats never (or even rarely) make ideological statements or use values and imagery to frame their views. However, we expect these broad party differences to bear out in the aggregate and over time.

Both older and more recent political science research has offered evidence of these party differences. For example, Freeman’s (1986) study of convention delegates, organizations, and rules reveals divergent party cultures. Freeman found that the Democratic Party’s caucuses are organized around core constituencies; caucus members have frequently proposed reforms to ensure that group members mirror the Party’s demographics. Meanwhile, Republican Party conventions were organized around ideological factions or specific candidates. Additionally, B. Dan Wood (2009) examined presidential papers for trends in liberal or conservative rhetoric. He observed that Democratic presidents used liberal discourse when discussing economic and social issues, while Republican presidential rhetoric focused on the size and scope of government.

Rhodes and Johnson (2014) have also uncovered party differences in presidential campaign advertising. The authors found that Barack Obama’s 2008 ads were much more likely to mention social groups than John McCain’s ads. Rhodes and Johnson’s (2015) subsequent work suggests that Democrats make appeals to class and economic inequality more frequently than Republicans. Grossmann and Hopkins (2015a; Forthcoming) present the most comprehensive collection of evidence to-date that the parties differ in their goals, governing styles, and rhetoric.

Building on the notion of party asymmetry, this working paper examines how elite rhetoric from both parties has changed over time and explores the implications of these trends. It is no secret that American politics is in an era of increasing ideological polarization between the political parties, arguably at the highest level since the end of Reconstruction (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Given this environment, it seems only apropos to inquire and investigate the role polarization may play in contributing to party asymmetry. For example, are these party differences longstanding or did they emerge over time in tandem with polarization? Has polarization forced political parties and elites to adopt more ideologically-consistent language? Has Republican rhetoric become more conservative as Democratic discourse has become more liberal? And has the trend of asymmetry—i.e., Republicans invoking principles and American imagery while Democrats emphasize social groups and public policies—increasingly solidified as the ideological fissure between the parties has widened? Ultimately, has political elite rhetoric evolved or remained static over time?

To try to answer these questions, we rely on original content analyses of party platforms and presidential nomination acceptance speeches from 1948 – 2012 to assess this divergence between Democratic and Republican rhetoric over time and across issues. We find that both parties’ rhetoric regularly references ideology, social and interest groups, policies, and American imagery. Even so, the data and analyses reveal a clear trend: Republicans prioritize ideology and symbolism while Democrats emphasize social groups and policy.
Moreover, these dissimilarities do not appear to be an artifact of an increasingly polarized political environment. Rather, this trend of asymmetry has been longstanding and relatively stable since the 1940s and 1950s. Perhaps the most interesting take away from this evidence is that Republican ideological and policy statements have increasingly moved to the right over time, meanwhile Democrats have used more conservative language while maintaining consistently liberal policy positions. Put another way, Republican elite speech has become more ideologically-congruent, while Democratic elite rhetoric pays lip service to the notion of a smaller public sector while proposing policies expanding the role and size of government.

We also find that party asymmetry is even starker when looking at statements explicitly discussing social, economic, or foreign affairs. Although Democratic nods to social and interest groups (especially references to class, race, age, and gender) and policies are generally more frequent than Republican mentions across all issues, Republicans invoke ideology more regularly than Democrats on social and economic issues, and American imagery much more often on foreign affairs.

In sum, these party differences in political rhetoric are real and have largely been present since, at least, the 1940s and 1950s. Republican elite invocations of ideology and policy ideas have increasingly moved to the right, while Democratic elites’ tone has become more conservative while still offering consistently liberal policy proscriptions. These results offer further evidence that party asymmetry has important implications for our theories of American politics.

**DATA AND METHODS**

To explore this potential party asymmetry in political elite rhetoric, we relied on an original content analysis of party platforms (“platforms”) and presidential nomination acceptance speeches (“speeches”) at party conventions post-World War II. We chose to examine platforms and speeches because 1) these texts represent firm statements by the parties defining their core beliefs and outlining their policy goals, 2) the analysis builds on similar research efforts (e.g., Comparative Manifesto Project; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015a, Forthcoming), and 3) both datasets were readily accessible.

The platforms data were compiled in quasi-sentence format and coded for policy topic using the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) categorization by Christina Wolbrecht. Of the thirty thousand quasi-sentences for Republican and Democratic platforms from 1948 – 2008, a random sample of 2,000 statements (about 6.6% of the population, 55.5% Republican statements and 44.5% Democratic statements) was drawn. The sample of platform sentences were hand coded for the quantity and type of political ideology, social and interest group, policy, imagery, and source mentions. The data, codebook, and reliability statistics will be made available in the near future at www.mattg.org.

The presidential nomination acceptance speeches were obtained from The American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara. They were formatted into paragraph

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2 The random sample of party platforms mirrors the distribution of the population of party platforms, where 55.19% are Republican quasi-sentences and 44.81% are Democratic quasi-sentences. Average word count for Republican quasi-sentences is 21.70 words and 22.20 words for Democratic quasi-sentences.

3 Source mentions are not analyzed in this working paper since both platforms and speeches rarely included mentions of sources, references, or citations. This infrequency held across political parties, time, and issue areas.
statements and also coded for issue area using the PAP's categorization. Of the three thousand paragraphs for Republican and Democratic speeches at their party conventions from 1948 – 2012, a random sample of 1,000 statements (about 32% of the population, 54.8% Republican statements and 45.2% Democratic statements) was drawn. These statements were also hand coded for the number and content of ideological, social and interest groups, policy, imagery, and source mentions. The data, codebook, and reliability statistics will be made available in the near future at www.mattg.org.

Table 1 provides the sample size by decade (1948 – 2008) for the platform quasi-sentences and speech paragraphs that were coded for the quantity and type of political ideology, social and interest group, policy, American imagery, and source content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1940s-1950s</th>
<th>1960s</th>
<th>1970s</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Platforms</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeches</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>938</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table reports the n sample size for political party platform quasi-sentences and presidential candidate nomination acceptance speech paragraphs (1948 – 2008) by decade that were coded for the quantity and type of political ideology, social and interest group, policy, American imagery, and source content.

Undergraduate and graduate student coders were tasked with reading the randomly selected observations of platform quasi-sentences and speeches paragraphs and assessing explicit or implicit: 1) ideological words or statements, 2) mentions of voting constituencies, 3) proposals or critiques of specific policies as well as nods to social problems or general policy goals, 4) use of American imagery, and 5) references to different sources. Coders relied on an extensive (although not exhaustive) list of example rhetoric, created from the 2004 American National Election Study (ANES) survey categorizing respondents' open-ended statements of likes and dislikes regarding the political parties and candidates. This example rhetoric was also supplemented with additional instances found after doing a preliminary rhetoric analysis of platforms and speeches. See Table 1 for examples of possible ideological, social and interest groups, policy, American imagery, and source rhetoric that coders assessed.

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4 The random sample of presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches matches the distribution of the population of nomination speeches from 1948 – 2012, where 53.91% are Republican paragraphs and 46.09% are Democratic paragraphs. The average word count for Republican paragraphs is 40.70 words, while it is 43.51 words for Democratic paragraphs.

5 Again, as mentioned in footnote 3, source mentions are not analyzed in this working paper since both platforms and speeches rarely included mentions of sources, references, or citations. These low rates held across political parties, time, and issue areas.

6 The observation sample size by decade for each party is relatively small. Sample size for the party platform data ranges between 60 and 300 observations per party per decade, and 40 and 100 observations per party per decade for the nomination speech data. Differences in sample size by party per decade, however, are minute. Each sample is roughly comprised of an equal number of observations from both parties per decade.

7 Due to the small number of observations from 1948, we combine 1948 observations with those from the 1950s for the decade group 1940s-1950s.

8 To make commensurate comparisons between the platform and speech corpuses, only those 938 statements in the random 1,000 observation sub-sample from 1948 – 2008 (i.e., excluding observations from 2012) are analyzed here. Including the speech observations from 2012 does not alter the findings; rather they reinforce the conclusions drawn here.
Table 2—Rhetoric Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IDEOLOGY</th>
<th>Examples of Possible Rhetoric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for more (less) government activity, supports social programs, maintain social order or rule of law, favor property rights, government takes too much, socialistic, anti-communist, extreme, moderate, (too) liberal, (too) conservative, progressive, ideological right or left, take steps to ensure equality, everyone should have things equally or have equal chance, some people don’t deserve what they are given, believes in people working hard to get ahead, pro-generosity, in favor of separation of church and state, for religious activity in politics or government, defend Constitution or founding principles, do not compromise on principles, compromise to get things done, efficient/businesslike administration, inefficient/wasteful, too much red tape/bureaucratic, (un)patriotic, principles of government, hawkish or dove-like military and foreign policy approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL AND INTEREST GROUPS</td>
<td>middle class, working people, poor people, unions, big business, corporate, rich, wealthy individuals, Wall Street, upper classes, white collar, farmers, rural people, blacks, people on welfare, senior citizens, young people, students, hippies, women, veterans, racial or ethnic minorities, civil servants, gays or lesbians, whites, Hispanics, Latinos, factory workers, blue collar workers, Native Americans, police, immigrants, law enforcement, teachers, soldiers, interest groups, lobbyists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLICY</td>
<td>economy, taxes, welfare, food stamps, Social Security, unemployment, education, housing, Medicare, Medicaid, health care, prescription drugs, monetary policy, research, inflation, programs to aid farmers, law and order, civil rights, affirmative action, right to work laws, strikes, public utilities, energy, environment, help for veterans, public morality, drugs, abortion, birth control, gun control, urban problems, nuclear power, immigration, gay rights, space program, school prayer, day care, campaign finance, defense spending, strong military, foreign aid, war, terrorism, Mideast, China, Russia, European Union, Israel, Iran, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, India, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, foreign trade, amnesty, security, nuclear proliferation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGERY</td>
<td>Lincoln, Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton, bald eagle, American flag, Constitution, Boston Tea Party, World War II, Vietnam, fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, American dream, market patriotism, America is greatest country in the world, America is home of the brave, positive comparisons with other countries, negative comparisons with other countries, claim about religious or Christian heritage, importance of values, courage, patriotism, threat to American way of life, threat to America as we know it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCES</td>
<td>personal anecdote, philosophical text, historical figure, government official, media report, interest group study, think tank report, academic research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These examples of ideological, social and interest groups, policy, American imagery, and source mentions were taken from the 2004 American National Election Study (ANES) survey where respondents’ shared likes and dislikes about the political parties and candidates. The list of examples was also supplemented with a preliminary analysis of rhetoric from party platforms and presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches.

If a bifurcation between the parties exists—whereby Republicans prioritize fidelity to ideology while Democrats promote policies for their diverse coalition of constituencies—we may find evidence of this in elite political discourse dating back to the end of the Second World War or emerging over time. We examine these potential differences by decade, spanning from 1948 – 2008, and issue area.


**TIME TREND ANALYSIS**

**IDEOLOGICAL RHETORIC:**

Examining rhetorical trends for platforms and speeches across decades, both parties make ideological references at a relatively high rate. In fact, 42.2% of Republican and 33.5% of Democratic platform sentences contain an ideological mention. Similarly, 39.6% of Republican and 34.1% of Democratic speeches’ paragraphs tip their hat to ideology or political principles. Since 1948, between 37% - 60% of Republican and between 29% - 46% of Democratic sentences or paragraphs contained ideological mentions in each decade (see Graph 1 and Graph 2). Of particular note is the consistency of ideological mentions across the decades, especially when examining party platforms.

Although ideological mentions are common, the Republican Party and Republican presidential candidates reference ideology and political principles more frequently than the Democratic Party and candidates. Except for the 1970s, Republican Party platforms made between 5 – 15 percentage points more ideological mentions than Democratic Party platforms. The convergence in ideological statements between the parties in the 1970s is possibly explained by the less ideological candidacy and presidency of Richard Nixon and the more principle-laden candidacy of George McGovern.

This trend of more ideological comments from Republicans generally holds for the speeches too. Republican presidential candidates have tended to make between 14 – 24 percentage points more ideological statements in their speeches than their Democratic counterparts. Although the quantity of ideological statements by presidential nominees in the 1940s-1950s, 1970s, and 2000s appears to be similar for both parties, the rates are starkly different for the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s.

![Graph 1: Party Platforms - Ideological / Principle Mentions by Party](graph.png)

*Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 2,000 quasi-sentences from all political party platforms from 1948 - 2008. Quasi-sentences were assessed for the number of ideological or political principle mentions. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.*

6
Beyond the sheer number of mentions, the ideological direction of these principled comments is also of interest. Of course, ideological statements made by Republicans are overwhelmingly conservative (see Graph 3 and Graph 4) while ideological comments made by Democrats are predominantly liberal (see Graph 5 and Graph 6). But, both Republican and Democratic ideological rhetoric has increasingly moved to the right over time. Platforms reflect this increase: ideological statements by the GOP shifted from 69.7% conservative in the 1940s-1950s to 82.4% conservative in the 2000s, while Democratic rhetoric moved from 0% to 16.2% in the conservative direction over the same time period (with a particularly high spike of 42.9% during the 1990s).

Likewise, convention speeches have increasingly included more conservative language by both parties. Republican ideological mentions went from 20% conservative in the 1940s-1950s to 65.2% conservative by the 2000s. And less than 5% of Democratic speeches’ ideological comments were coded conservative in the 1940s-1950s, while 22.6% were coded conservative in the 2000s.

The proportion of liberal statements reflects the reverse of this trend (see Graph 5 and Graph 6). Liberal ideological comments in Democratic platforms and speeches have declined from 88.5% and 66.7% in the 1940-1950s to 48.5% and 43.4% in the 2000s, respectively. The small proportion of Republican ideological mentions that were left leaning have also tapered off over time. Now, less than 7% of GOP platforms and 13% of Republican speeches contain liberal ideological statements, both down from 20% in the 1940s-1950s.
Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 2,000 quasi-sentences from all political party platforms from 1948 - 2008. Quasi-sentences were assessed for the number of ideological or political principle mentions that were conservative in nature. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the \( p < .05 \) level.

Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 paragraphs from all presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches at party conventions from 1948 - 2008. Paragraphs were assessed for the number of ideological or political principle mentions that were conservative in nature. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the \( p < .05 \) level.

Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 2,000 quasi-sentences from all political party platforms from 1948 - 2008. Quasi-sentences were assessed for the number of ideological or political principle mentions that were liberal in nature. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the \( p < .05 \) level.
The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 paragraphs from all presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches at party conventions from 1948 - 2008. Paragraphs were assessed for the number of ideological or political principle mentions that were liberal in nature. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.

**SOCIAL AND INTEREST GROUP RHETORIC:**

While the GOP makes more ideological mentions, Democrats reference social and interest groups more often (see Graph 7 and Graph 8). Although, mentions of social and interest groups are quite common for both parties. Between 24 – 36% of Democratic platform sentences and 5 – 40% of Democratic speech paragraphs contain a nod to or critique of a particular constituency. Meanwhile, between 15 – 25% of Republican platform statements and 9 – 33% of Republican speech statements include a positive or negative mention of social and interest groups. Yet, aside from the 1960s and 1980s for platforms and the 1940s-1950s and 1960s for speeches, Democratic mentions of social and interest groups outpace Republican mentions by 6 – 20 percentage points.

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9 The sharp decline in social and interest group mentions by Democrats and Republicans in the 1960 presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches merits further inquiry. This drop may be the result of fewer mentions of a particular voting bloc, specific strategies by both parties to decrease appeals to particular groups, or sampling error.
Beyond a difference in the quantity of group mentions, the parties also vary in the type of groups they target. Democrats tend to appeal more specifically to groups comprised of particular demographics, including social class (e.g., middle class, factory workers, poor, rich), age (e.g., seniors, students, young voters), race (e.g., blacks, Latinos, immigrants), and women. Republicans, however, target interest groups (e.g., small businesses, entrepreneurs, law enforcement) and make partisan mentions (e.g., rallying other Republicans, or criticizing Democrats as a whole).

Of course, Democrats do mention interest groups (e.g., unions, teachers, criticize lobbyists / special interests) at times, just as Republicans make appeals on age (e.g., seniors), class (e.g., middle class, wealthy, poor), and race (e.g., immigrants, blacks). But Democrats have almost consistently appealed to core demographic groups—middle class, poor, blacks, Latinos, immigrants, seniors, students, and women—at a higher rate than Republicans (see Graph 9 and Graph 10). In the aggregate, Democrats reference demographic groups between 4 – 6 percentage points more often than Republican mentions of class, race, age, and gender.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) Aggregate Democratic / Republican platform demographic group mentions: 14.3% / 8.4%; aggregate Democratic / Republican speech demographic group mentions: 12.4% / 8.2%.
Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 paragraphs from all presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches at party conventions from 1948 - 2008. Paragraphs were assessed for the number of mentions of specific demographic groups, including references to class, race, age, and gender. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the \( p < .05 \) level.

Interestingly, two groups that are frequently mentioned by both parties include veterans and farmers, although Republicans have a slight edge in referencing both groups. Appeals to these groups oftentimes appear to be more about invoking American symbolism and imagery than securing support from a particular constituency.

Moreover, variation in group mentions exists between platforms and speeches for both parties. For example, while Republican platforms make consistent references to class, Republican speeches make fewer income-based appeals. Similarly, while Republican platforms mention women (and women’s issues), this group has made few appearances in Republican speeches. Likewise, GOP mentions of or attacks on interest groups and partisans in speeches have dwarfed their appearance in platforms. Democratic presidential candidates, however, slightly downplay demographic group mentions of class, race, and women during convention speeches, despite their notable prominence in Democratic platforms. And Democratic speeches make greater appeals to partisans and farmers than these groups respective appearance in the platforms. Only group mentions of age and interest groups seem to be relatively consistent across both corpuses.

**PUBLIC POLICY RHETORIC:**

Both Democratic and Republican elites frequently mention public policy by proposing or critiquing new policies, supporting or criticizing past policies, referencing a societal problem in need of correction, or putting forth a general policy goal. Indeed, between 65 – 80% of platform sentences contain a policy reference while 21 – 87% of speech paragraphs tip their hat to public policy (see Graph 11 and Graph 12). While the trend for policy mentions in platforms has remained relatively stable across time, both parties have increasingly used national convention speeches to comment on public policy. Indeed, there has been a pronounced and sustained increase in policy mentions since the 1980s (perhaps as a result of or exacerbated by polarization).

Despite both parties habitually referencing policy, Democratic rhetoric has an edge over Republican rhetoric in both party platforms and nomination speeches. In fact, aggregate Democratic platform and speech policy mentions are roughly 8 percentage points higher than Republican policy mentions.
for both corpuses.\textsuperscript{11} Over time, except for a couple of decades, Democrats highlighted societal problems and policy solutions at a higher rate than Republicans. However, the asymmetry between the parties’ policy mentions has become particularly stark since the 1990s: Democrats have made anywhere between 14 – 25 percentage points more policy mentions than Republicans since the 1990s. Democrats have emerged as the party of policy.\textsuperscript{12}

![Graph 11: Party Platforms - Policy Mentions by Party](image)

*Graph 11: Party Platforms - Policy Mentions by Party*

Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 2,000 quasi-sentences from all political party platforms from 1948 - 2008. Quasi-sentences were assessed for the number of policy mentions, including proposals or critiques of new and past policies, references of societal problems that need attention, or broad policy goals. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.

![Graph 12: Nomination Speeches - Policy Mentions by Party](image)

*Graph 12: Nomination Speeches - Policy Mentions by Party*

Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 paragraphs from all presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches at party conventions from 1948 - 2008. Paragraphs were assessed for the number of policy mentions, including proposals or critiques of new and past policies, references of societal problems that need attention, or broad policy goals. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the ideological direction and trend of Republican and Democratic policy proposals and policy critiques (see Graphs 13, 14, 15, 16). It is worth mentioning

\textsuperscript{11} Democratic / Republican platform policy mentions: 73% / 65%; Democratic / Republican speech policy mentions: 36% / 28%. Importantly, we might expect a higher rate of policy mentions, especially new policy proposals, by Democrats since proposed policy changes are more likely to be liberal than conservative. New policy ideas usually expand the size and scope of government; less frequently do new proposals advocate policy retrenchment or maintaining the status quo (Grossmann and Hopkins 2015b).

\textsuperscript{12} Although not shown graphically here, Democrats also have a slight advantage in suggesting new specific policy proposals. This difference is especially noteworthy in Democratic nomination speeches.
that we are talking about a small portion of policy mentions; most policy mentions are not new ideas or critiques of new ideas. Platform new policy proposals and critiques constituted about a third (33.4%) of all policy mentions, while they only accounted for a quarter (24.1%) of all policy mentions in the acceptance speeches. Nonetheless, all specific new policy suggestions or critiques of proposed new policies were coded for their ideological direction (i.e., conservative, moderate, liberal) depending on their call to restrict, maintain, or expand the role and size of government. While a surprising proportion of Republican policy ideas and criticisms from the 1940s – 1960s were liberal, the GOP’s policy proposals since the 1980s have moved solidly to the right. Juxtapose this trend with Democratic policy rhetoric in both platforms and speeches, and we see that Democrats have consistently put forward liberal policies since the 1940s.

Indeed, Republican platform policy statements moved from being 7% conservative in the 1940s to 50% conservative by the 2000s. Meanwhile, Democratic platform policy statements have been consistently liberal (between 70 and 79%) since the 1940s-1950s. In sum, the Democratic Party references public policy to a greater extent than the Republican Party, and Democrats have been dependably liberal in their policy proposals and opposition to new policies, while Republican policy ideas have gradually become more conservative post-World War II.

Graph 13: Party Platforms - Proportion of Conservative Policy Proposals / Critiques

Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 2,000 quasi-sentences from all political party platforms from 1948 - 2008. Quasi-sentences were assessed for the ideological direction of new policy proposals and criticisms of new policy proposals. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.

Graph 14: Nomination Speeches - Proportion of Conservative Policy Proposals / Critiques

Note: The graph illustrates data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 paragraphs from all presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches at party conventions from 1948 - 2008. Paragraphs were assessed for the ideological direction of new policy proposals and criticisms of new policy proposals. Bolded and italicized proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.
American Imagery Rhetoric:

The use of American imagery and symbolism—statements affirming the notion of American exceptionalism; highlighting possible threats to the US and the “American way of life”; pointing to American symbols (e.g., the Constitution, the flag) or historical figures (e.g., Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy); or invoking values and virtues (e.g., courage, patriotism, democracy)—appears to have become commonplace in political elite rhetoric. According to the data, both Republicans and Democrats rely on imagery to make a point (see Graph 17 and Graph 18). However, Republican platforms and speeches have generally included slightly more imagery mentions than Democratic platforms and presidential convention speeches. For example, 16% and 40% of Republican platforms and speeches, respectively, included imagery statements, whereas only 14% and 36% of Democratic platforms and speeches, respectively, appealed to American symbolism.
Beyond the sheer quantity of mentions, however, the parties diverge somewhat in the type of imagery invoked and across corpuses. Republicans have consistently used their platforms to principally warn of threats to America and “the American way,” as well as highlight the values and virtues that Americans should embody. They also use platforms to articulate America’s exceptionalism and invoke American symbols (e.g., Constitution, flag). However, Republican speeches spend more ink emphasizing America’s greatness and values, somewhat downplaying the threats to the country.

Democratic imagery rhetoric mostly parallels Republican use of imagery. The Democratic Party’s platform generally invokes threats to America, values and virtues, and America’s uniqueness. Democratic speeches, however, focus more on American values, followed by American exceptionalism, references to history or people, and finally dangers to the U.S.
ISSUE AREA DIFFERENCES

We also explored the frequency and types of reference (e.g., ideological, social and interest groups, policy) made when discussing social, economic, or foreign issues. Relying on the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) issue codes, we categorized policy areas into a social issues group (e.g., civil rights, education, health care, welfare), economic issues group (e.g., macroeconomics, banking, finance, transportation), and foreign issues group (e.g., war, foreign trade, international affairs).

Table 3 provides a typology of the PAP issue areas grouped into social, economic, and foreign categorizations, while Table 4 reports the proportion of platform and speech observations that were categorized as social, economic, foreign, or no / other issue areas.

### Table 3—PAP Issue Areas Grouped by Social, Economic, Foreign Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL ISSUES</th>
<th>ECONOMIC ISSUES</th>
<th>FOREIGN ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Civil Liberties (2)</td>
<td>-Macroeconomics (1)</td>
<td>-Defense (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Health (3)</td>
<td>-Agriculture (4)</td>
<td>-Foreign Trade (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Education (6)</td>
<td>-Labor and Employment (5)</td>
<td>-International Affairs and Foreign Aid (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Environment (7)</td>
<td>-Energy (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Immigration (9)</td>
<td>-Transportation (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Law, Crime, and Family Issues (12)</td>
<td>-Community Development and Housing Issues (14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Social Welfare (13)</td>
<td>-Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Space, Science, Technology &amp; Communication (17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table reports the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) issue codes and their corresponding numbers that were coded as social, economic, or foreign categories for an issue-area analysis of the content from political party platform and presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches (1948 – 2008).

### Table 4—Proportion of Observations by Issue Categorization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No / Other Issues</th>
<th>Social Issues</th>
<th>Economic Issues</th>
<th>Foreign Issues</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Platforms</td>
<td>13.65%</td>
<td>30.10%</td>
<td>29.30%</td>
<td>26.95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeches</td>
<td>66.80%</td>
<td>11.10%</td>
<td>12.20%</td>
<td>9.90%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table reports the proportion of observations of political party platform quasi-sentences and presidential candidate nomination acceptance speech paragraphs (1948 – 2008) that are categorized as social issues, economic issues, foreign issues, or no / other issue area. The No / Other Issues category contains observations where no issue area was coded (4.95% for platforms, 57.9% for speeches), other issues (i.e., non-social, economic, or foreign related) were coded (8.7% for platforms, 2% for speeches), or multiple issues were coded (0% for platforms, 6.7% for speeches).

On the whole, both Democrats and Republicans discuss domestic issues at a greater rate than foreign issues. However, Republicans have generally mentioned foreign issues more frequently than Democrats in their platforms and acceptance speeches. Arguably more curious than overall trends, however, is the difference in ideological, social and interest group, policy, imagery, and source comments between the parties by issue. While only a third of speech paragraphs were categorized as addressing a specific social, economic, or foreign issue, more than three-quarters of the platform quasi-sentences were classified as such. For those observations categorized into social, economic, and foreign issue areas, we find interesting variation in elite rhetoric content.

Looking at party platforms (see Table 5), we find that Republican manifestos contain 13 and 10 percentage points more ideological mentions on social and economic issues, respectively, than Democratic manifestos. However, when discussing foreign issues, Republican platforms are only
slightly more ideological (4 percentage points). Meanwhile, Democrats reference 14 percentage points more social and interest groups than Republicans when emphasizing economic issues, although the gap declines to only 3 percentage points when they focus on social issues. Interestingly, while Democratic platforms contain 8 and 11 percentage points higher policy mentions for social and foreign issues, respectively, their policy mentions for economic issues are on par with Republican policy mentions. That said, Democrats consistently put forward more specific policy proposals across all issue areas.

Both parties are relatively consistent in their usage of American imagery for social and economic issues, but not on foreign issues. Finally, Republican platforms include 8 percentage points more American symbolism than Democrats when discussing issues of war, international affairs, and foreign aid.

### Table 5—Content of Party Platforms by Issue Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social Issues</th>
<th>Economic Issues</th>
<th>Foreign Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological/Principle Mentions</td>
<td>.492</td>
<td>.363</td>
<td>.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social / Interest Group Mentions</td>
<td>.316</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td>.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Group Mentions</td>
<td>.173</td>
<td>.223</td>
<td>.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mentions</td>
<td>.708</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td>.761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific New Policy Proposals</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.311</td>
<td>.245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Imagery Mentions</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.117</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table reports data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 2,000 quasi-sentences from all political party platforms from 1948 - 2008. Quasi-sentences were assessed for the number of mentions of each type. The rates are for each type of mention for the quasi-sentences categorized as social issues, economic issues, and foreign issues, relying on Policy Agendas Project (PAP) issue codes. Bolded proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.

Turning to nomination acceptance speeches (see Table 6), the differences by issue largely parallel the findings for party platforms, although the divergence is oftentimes magnified. Republican speeches include a greater rate of ideological mentions than Democratic speeches for social, economic, and foreign issues by 24.5, 33, and 11.4 percentage points, respectively. Somewhat surprisingly, while Democrats reference social and interest groups more frequently than the GOP for social and foreign issues (15.3 and 5 percentage points, respectively), Republicans appear to outpace Democratic group mentions by 16.5 percentage points on economic issues. When factoring in only demographic group mentions (i.e., mentions of class, race, age, and gender) Democrats have a slight edge on social and economic issues; this suggests that most of the Republican group mentions on economic issues comprise references to interest groups and partisans.

During speeches, Democrats emerge as the clear leader in policy mentions, including specific policy proposals, across social, economic, and foreign issues (by a rate of 10 – 19 percentage points). Finally, Republicans invoke American imagery and symbolism more often than Democrats on social (7.7 points) and foreign (42.4 points) issues; although Democrat presidential candidates do rely on imagery 7.7 percentage points more frequently for economic issues than GOP candidates.
TABLE 6—CONTENT OF NOMINATION SPEECHES BY ISSUE AREA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Area</th>
<th>SOCIAL ISSUES</th>
<th>ECONOMIC ISSUES</th>
<th>FOREIGN ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological/Principle Mentions</td>
<td>.691</td>
<td>.646</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>.446</td>
<td>.316</td>
<td>.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social / Interest Group Mentions</td>
<td>.418</td>
<td>.569</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>.571</td>
<td>.404</td>
<td>.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Group Mentions</td>
<td>.291</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>.304</td>
<td>.175</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mentions</td>
<td>.636</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td>.567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>.786</td>
<td>.860</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific New Policy Proposals</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>.138</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>.393</td>
<td>.246</td>
<td>.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Imagery Mentions</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.246</td>
<td>.783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>.321</td>
<td>.246</td>
<td>.359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table reports data from an original content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 paragraphs from all presidential candidate nomination acceptance speeches at party conventions from 1948 - 2008. Paragraphs were assessed for the number of mentions of each type. The rates are for each type of mention for the paragraphs categorized as social issues, economic issues, and foreign issues, relying on Policy Agendas Project (PAP) issue codes. Bolded proportions are statistically distinguishable at the p < .05 level.

We also examined the frequency and content of platform and speech observations categorized as no- or other-issues. The No / Other Issues category includes observations where no issue area was coded (4.95% for platforms, 57.9% for speeches), other issues (i.e., non-social, economic, or foreign related)13 were coded (8.7% for platforms, 2% for speeches), or multiple issues were coded (0% for platforms, 6.7% for speeches). The party differences in rhetoric across content type and corpuses for these no- or other-issue observations were either minimal or mirror the aforementioned trends.

There are, however, two curious findings from an analysis of the uncategorized content. First, ideological comments by both parties are quite frequent: 53.4% of Republican and 47.2% of Democratic platform unclassified observations and 40.8% of Republican and 42.0% of Democratic speech non-issue observations invoke ideology. These rates are either slightly higher than or on par with ideological mentions for statements about social, economic, and foreign issues. Second, both parties color their non-issue specific statements with hues of American imagery. In fact, the frequency of invoking symbolism for both parties was higher than or comparable to imagery mentions for foreign issues, the issue category with the greatest occurrence of imagery statements for both parties.

These findings may be a result of the variation within the catch-all category of No / Other Issues which contains observations categorized as no issue area, other issue areas, or multiple issue areas. Or they may be a result of rhetorical tactics (i.e., “dressing up” the text) by both parties to appeal more broadly to the American public even when a specific issue area is not being discussed. Neither of these findings contradicts the evidence presented above, but they do demonstrate the extent to which Republican and Democratic elites employ political rhetoric.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data and above-detailed trends largely support the theory of asymmetric politics between the Republican and Democratic parties. Republican elite rhetoric has a propensity to invoke ideology and American imagery, while Democratic discourse emphasizes social and interest groups and

13 Examples of PAP issue areas included in the “Other” category (i.e., not social, economic, or foreign issues) include Government Operations (20), Public Lands and Water Management (21), State and Local Government Administration (23), or Other / Miscellaneous (29).
corresponding policies to address their diverse coalition’s priorities. Beyond these general trends, there are several additional insights of note.

First, these dissimilarities do not appear to be an artifact of an increasingly polarized political environment. Rather, this trend of asymmetry has been longstanding and relatively stable since the 1940s and 1950s.

Second, policy and ideological statements are commonly made by both parties, at least in their platforms and presidential nomination acceptance speeches. As expected, GOP policy and ideological mentions are largely conservative, while Democratic policy and principle mentions are predominately liberal. However, the trend analysis finds that Republicans began endorsing more public policies that matched their ideological discourse of a contracting government whereas Democrats adopted increasingly conservative ideological speech while maintaining consistently liberal policy positions. Put another way, Republican ideological and policy language has increasingly become more conservative over time, while Democrats have increasingly paid lip service to a smaller government while continuing to propose policies that expand the size and scope of government. This result may help resolve a persistent conundrum in political science: that American politics has simultaneously undergone both polarization and an overall shift in the conservative direction.

Third, although social and interest group and imagery mentions were coded less frequently than ideological or policy references, both were regularly invoked with variation in group type. Republicans tend to point to interest groups and partisans, whereas Democrats appeal to key demographic characteristics, including social class, race, age, and gender. Regarding the invocation of American imagery, Republicans oftentimes outpaced Democrats mentioning the threats posed to the country, American greatness, and American values, while Democrats emphasized values and virtues, the dangers facing America, and the country’s exceptionalism.

Finally, party bifurcation is even more apparent when examining statements that explicitly dealt with social, economic, or foreign issues. Republican discourse is especially ideological in nature on domestic—both social and economic—issues (between 10 - 33 percentage points more mentions), while only slightly more ideological than Democrats when discussing foreign affairs. And Republicans regularly invoke American imagery, especially when focusing on foreign issues. Turning to group mentions, Democratic rhetoric mostly includes more social and interest group (especially demographic group) mentions than Republicans on social, economic, and foreign issues. This difference does not hold, however, when Republicans tackle economic issues in acceptance speeches; they outpace Democratic social and interest group mentions by 16 points. Democrats also mention policies and policy proposals at a greater rate than Republicans (by 8 – 19 percentage points), although this difference is most pronounced on social and foreign issues in platforms, and social and economic issues in speeches.

This party asymmetry has important implications for theories of American politics and prior notions of a unidimensional party space. Acknowledging that the parties and their corresponding rhetoric are different may provide further clarification for existing theories of American politics (e.g., polarization, realignment, policy processes). Ultimately, admitting party divergence may also help parties and political elites to stop talking past one another.
REFERENCES


