

FROM AFFORDABLE CARE ACT TO “OBAMACARE”: POLITICAL PARTY AND FRAMING OF HEALTH CARE IN THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

- In the world of politics, language can be the difference between success and failure. Through language, we are able to communicate and understand one another, and it is important to critically analyze the language used by public figures in order to gain insight into their goals and attitudes. This study examines the language used by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential election. Specifically, the study explores the ways in which Romney and Obama utilized frames, or the mental structures that shape the way they see the world. A sample of each candidate's rhetoric and language was analyzed, using the topic of health care as a lens through which to study how both used language regarding health care policy. The frames chosen by Obama and Romney provide insight into each candidate's political party ideology, particularly with regard to the ways in which the language used by each reinforced (or negated) worldviews traditionally held by Democrats or Republicans, respectively. The results are discussed in terms of George Lakoff's family model of morality, which asserts that Democrats base values in government on a nurturant parent model of the family, while Republicans base values on a strict father model. Though Romney and Obama tended to use frames associated with their respective political party, examples of both family models were found in the rhetoric of both candidates, suggesting a moderate political ideology for each.

Introduction

- The language used by politicians can shed light on the underlying themes and ideologies of these important figures, and the effectiveness with which language is utilized determines who is successful in affecting public policy. Use of certain words and frames can greatly influence public opinion and government action.
- Purpose:
 - ▣ *The purpose of this study is to explore how the 2012 presidential candidates, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, framed the topic of health care during their respective campaigns. Health care is used as a lens through which rhetoric and framing of political ideologies are examined.*

Background/Literature Review

- Words are tools and symbols connected to a literal definition but also to broader values and ideologies. Words derive meaning from relationships to one another. Words are selected to promote a specific definition and version of reality (Burke, 1963)
- Specifically selected words are key to presenting the self and constructing identity – especially for public figures such as politicians (Goffman, 1955)
- These words form frames, or “mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (Lakoff, 2004). Frames are useful for politicians hoping to influence public opinion
- Politicians and other groups with influence in policy work to frame issues using specific, intentional language that is meant to gain support. These frames can be studied to understand motives, values, and broader ideologies.

Methods

- Cluster criticism (Burke, 1955; Foss, 1989):
 - ▣ Identify key terms in sample based on frequency or intensity
 - ▣ Find key terms in context and chart the terms clustered around keys
 - ▣ Analyze patterns in clustered terms
 - ▣ Use these patterns to determine speaker's motive utilizing evidence and data

- Sample
 - ▣ Three pieces of writing from Barack Obama and Mitt Romney
 - ▣ Purposive sampling to ensure common thematic elements (health care)
 - ▣ Specifically used opinion pieces written by the candidates themselves
 - ▣ As close as possible to the 2012 presidential elections

Results

Term	Romney	Obama
Bureaucracy	(4) “board of bureaucrats,” sidestep Congress, impose drastic cuts, unelected	(1) insurance-driven
<i>Conclusions/frames</i>	Imposition on personal freedoms	Bureaucracy is most dangerous in the private sector
Government	(19) federal, bankruptcy, cost, takeover	(0)
<i>Conclusions/frames</i>	Strongly charged themes of powerlessness, loss of freedom, and patriotism to play on reader’s fear	Avoiding the frame so it won’t be evoked at all
Democrat/Republican	<i>Democrat</i> (8) government, liberal, federal <i>Republican</i> (10) market, consumer driven, private	<i>Democrat</i> (0) <i>Republican</i> (2) “current nominee for President”
<i>Conclusions/frames</i>	Connects Democrats to large, federal programs There is a “fundamental” party divide	Health care is a bipartisan issue: “This isn’t about me. This isn’t about politics
Security/com	<i>Competition</i> (4) choice, lower cost,	<i>Competition</i> (1)

Analysis

- The differences in language of Romney and Obama can be analyzed in relation to their political party using Lakoff's (2002) family model
- Strict father
 - Conservative. Views the world as dangerous. Self-discipline, competition, and self-sufficiency are key. Obedience to legitimate authority figures is vital.
 - Romney
 - frames bureaucracy/government as an illegitimate authority figure, meaning universal health care is also illegitimate
 - Uses the terms Democrat and Republican many times together, implying a dichotomous, "us-vs-them" world view
- Nurturant parent
 - Liberal. Emphasizes empathy, fairness, communication, and respect
 - Obama
 - frames bureaucracy in the private health care industry as inefficient, which he believes can be changed by government health care
 - Avoids use of Democrat and Republican, perhaps to frame health care as a bipartisan issue and avoid evoking the frame of political disharmony
 - frames security as a result of wider, government health insurance while Romney frames competition and consumer protection as security.

Conclusions and further research

- Romney tended to frame discussion of health care in a strict father fashion, and Obama tended to frame using the nurturant parent model. Both used frames that could be applied in either model, which indicates that they want to appeal to a broad, centrist segment of the population to win election.
- Overall, this helps us better understand politicians and information we receive in order to analyze and think critically about issues that affect our government and daily lives.
- Further research:
 - ▣ Analyze the frames used when discussing other policy topics to better understand the ideology as a whole
 - ▣ Compare the language and framing used in campaigns to that of actual policy or how the newly elected president talks about policy to examine consistency and reliability.

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