

Citizen-Consumers Wanted: Revitalizing the American Dream in the Face of Economic Recessions, 1981–2012

GOKCEN COSKUNER-BALLI

This article brings the sociological theory of governmentality to bear on a longitudinal analysis of American presidential speeches to theorize the formation of the citizen-consumer subject. This 40-year historical analysis—which extends through four economic recessions and the presidential terms of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—illustrates the ways in which the national mythology of the American Dream has been linked to the political ideology of the state to create the citizen-consumer subject in the United States. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data demonstrates 1) the consistent emphasis on responsibility as a key moral value, albeit meshed with ideals of liberalism and libertarianism at different presidential periods; 2) that the presidents iteratively link the neoliberal political ideology and the national mythology of the American Dream through a sophisticated morality play myth, wherein they cast the citizen-consumer as a responsible moral hero on a journey to achieve the American Dream; and 3) that the presidents use three main dispositives—disciplinary, legal, and security—to craft the citizen-consumer subject in their response to economic recessions. These findings extend prior consumer research on consumer subjectivity, consumer moralism, marketplace mythology, and politics of consumption.

Keywords: citizen-consumer, American dream, neoliberalism, governmentality, consumer subjectivity

Our government is supporting homeownership because it is good for America; it is good for our families; it is good for our economy. One of the biggest hurdles to homeownership is getting money for a down payment. This administration has recognized that, and so today I'm honored to be here to sign a law that will help many low-income buyers to

overcome that hurdle and to achieve an important part of the American Dream.

—George W. Bush, Remarks on Signing the American Dream Downpayment Act, December 16, 2003

A growing middle class was the engine of our prosperity... This country offered you a basic bargain, a sense that your hard work would be rewarded with fair wages and decent benefits, the chance to buy a home, to save for retirement—and most of all, a chance to hand down a better life for your kids... For the past three decades, however, the engine began to stall... the bargain began to fray... It is time to return to policies that focus on the middle class, that build from the middle out, and turn away from the trickle-down policies of the past. It's not enough to get government out of the way; government

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Editors: Eileen Fischer and Linda L. Price

Associate Editor: Güliz Ger

Advance Access publication January 8, 2020

must act to strengthen the elements of the American Dream.

—Barack Obama, speech at Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois, December 4, 2013

President Bush's and President Obama's articulations of the American Dream myth showcase the role of presidential rhetoric, policies, laws, and regulations in shaping the cultural contexts for citizen-consumer subjectivities. While in traditional theorizations citizens and consumers are viewed as opposites—with citizens perceived as civic actors who are in a political relationship with government and assumed to embrace a larger public interest, and consumers as civically disengaged actors that are wasteful and concerned with satisfying private material desires—in the last few decades scholars have studied how citizenship and consumption are interlinked. Rather than two distinct entities, citizen and consumers are considered as “ever-shifting categories that sometimes overlapped, often were in tension, but always reflected the permeability of the political and economic spheres” Cohen (2003, 8–9). As Cohen (2003) documents, citizen-consumers of the New Deal and World War II eras, for example, expected the market to safeguard their rights and serve the “general good” while their participation in the economy ensured much-needed growth after the Great Depression and WWII. During the postwar era, a self-interested and consumption oriented citizen-consumer and national economy became aligned as economic recovery “depended on a dynamic mass consumption economy.”

The citizen-consumer subject has been central to how state laws and bills are proposed, how government policies are legitimated, how morals are constructed in the market, as well as how consumers' lives are organized, and their aspirations and dreams cast. How was the citizen-consumer created in the aftermath of the 1980s? How was the political ideology of neoliberalism put to effect to create distinct subject positions? What kinds of strategies were employed by the state to construct the citizen-consumer and toward what end? To address these questions, this article employs a historical analysis of the presidents' rhetorical and material strategies between 1981 and 2012, focusing on the presidential terms of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. It theorizes the formation of the citizen-consumer subject as a governmentality process that merges national myth and political ideology in a particular rendering of moral values toward addressing the economic and political goals of the state. The longitudinal analysis indicates that U.S. presidents used disciplinary, legal, and security dispositives to link the broader political ideology of neoliberalism, albeit meshed with ideals of liberalism and libertarianism at different presidential periods, to the national mythology of

the American Dream to structure the citizen-consumer subject position.

While previous consumer researchers have developed highly nuanced accounts of the macro shaping of institutional/cultural contexts of consumers (Holt 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008; Zhao and Belk 2008), and the construction of active (Karababa and Ger 2011), responsible (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), ethnic (Veresiu and Giesler 2018), Asian consumer subjectivities (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008), the contributions of the current study are threefold. First, the extant consumer research studying the cultural contexts of consumers has mainly focused on how more traditional market actors—such as brands, advertisers, and editors—cull from mythic resources, leaving the role of the nation state less explored. For example, Zhao and Belk (2008) examine how the advertisers link national symbols to new ideologies during China's ideological transition from communism to consumerism. They find that to appropriate a dominant consumerist ideology and promote consumption, advertisers adopt semiotic mechanisms to link old national symbols with new consumerist ideology. Thompson and Tian (2008)'s study presents yet another ideological account of how commercial mythmakers (e.g., advertisers, brands, other marketing agents) mobilize cultural myths toward resolving tensions and creating identity value for consumers. In their case, the authors study the representational strategies that magazine editors adopt to negate and efface the countermemories of racial and class divisions in the South. They find that these cultural mythmakers render particular meanings of the past and transform popular memories. Holt (2004) also notes the role of myths in offering identity value and proposes that brands tap into national myths to become iconic. Holt (2004, 48) specifically suggests that opportunities to create new versions of cultural myths occur when there is a shift in national ideology. During these times, brands with rich historical and cultural insights can deliver myths that not only repair the culture but even shape it, since they can “put existing cultural materials to new purposes in order to provoke audiences to think differently about themselves.” Moving the attention from symbolic strategies of commercial mythmakers to discursive and material strategies of political mythmakers, this research investigates the strategies American presidents use to mobilize the American Dream myth amidst economic recessions in the past 40 years. As the opening epigraphs by George W. Bush and Barack Obama indicate, the ways in which presidents have repeatedly linked their economic goals to the national mythology of the American Dream through economic recessions has important implications to an understanding of how a desired citizen-consumer subjectivity is cultivated.

Second, prior consumer research has investigated how consumers cull from mythic and ideological market resources in their moral identity projects, but accounts of macro articulations of cultural systems have been rare (Askegaard

and Linnet 2011; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Karababa and Ger 2011). Luedicke et al. (2011, 1028) propose that “consumers’ moralistic identity projects are articulated within the nexus of mythic structure, ideological tensions, and marketplace resources.” The authors’ analysis of the dynamics between Hummer adversaries and enthusiasts reveals the mythic and ideological tensions underlying this moralistic identity work, as consumers invoke contrasting sets of ideological meanings (e.g., American exceptionalism vs. a jeremiad against consumerism) to validate their consumption practices. In a study exploring how consumers think of their rights and responsibilities, Henry (2010) documents how political ideologies of libertarianism and liberalism, with differing emphasis on individual autonomy versus social equity and consumer sovereignty versus corporate dominance, color consumers’ moral judgments of self and others. He finds that the overarching moral view among consumers is a greater disdain than sympathy for individuals experiencing credit card debt. The prevailing ideology, Henry contends, has construed self-interested citizen-consumers as responsible for handling their own immediate micro-environments and has adopted a market logic in the evaluations of government policies. Discussing the formation of an active consumer subject in 16th- and 17th-century Ottoman society, Karababa and Ger’s (2011) study is another informative account of the formation of the moral consumer subject. As the views of Sufi Islam, Orthodox Islam, health, and pleasure conflicted on leisure consumption, the findings of the study show how the consumer subject resisted and changed the dominant view of the state and religion. While these studies document how consumers interpret mythic and ideological resources to form moral and active consumer subjects, they do not focus on how the nation state articulates these resources and toward what end. This study explores how the state merges national myth and political ideology in a particular rendering of moral values toward addressing economic and political goals.

Third, previous consumer research has paved the pathway to understanding how neoliberalism undergirds consumer subjectivities, but more can be learned from longitudinal accounts that document continuities and discontinuities in cultural contexts and governmentality strategies. Most notably, in their seminal article Giesler and Veresiu (2014) theorize the formation of the responsible consumer as a governmentality process. Through their ethnographic analysis of the World Economic Forum, the authors document a series of rhetorical and material strategies in which economic elites seek to shift responsibility from the state and corporations to individual agents as a way to manage social issues such as poverty or environmental problems. More recently, Veresiu and Giesler (2018) explore how neoliberal ideology and market logic act together to create the ethnic consumer subject in Canada. The neoliberal ideology celebrates a type of

multiculturalism that fetishizes and commoditizes the ethnic culture yet obstructs the inequalities. As the study details, politicians envision the ethnic consumer subject as a unifying Canadian identity wherein, they hope, the ethnic differences and possible tensions will be eased out through market solutions. The ethnic subject position is further institutionalized as market researchers exemplify (by creating measures and scales, and collecting and analyzing consumer data), retailers equip (by creating concrete market infrastructure), and indigenes and immigrants embody (by internalizing their ascribed roles). Research has also explored how the New Labour Party’s neoliberal agenda informed the citizen-consumer’s evaluation of state services in the United Kingdom (Clarke 2007; Livingstone and Lunt 2007). Clarke (2007) shows the government’s neoliberal approach, which applied a consumerist model by inviting citizens to examine social services from a consumer perspective focusing on ideals of choice and empowerment, left citizen-consumers feeling uncertain and ambivalent as to what they could expect from public services. The reform of public services in accordance with the neoliberal politics of the New Labour Party led also to ambivalence regarding how to define the interests of citizen-consumers, as exemplified in the case of communications regulation (Livingstone and Lunt 2007). These seminal studies are informative in theorizing the constitution of the consumer subject as a governmentality process whereby a network of institutional actors (the economic elites, politicians, market researchers, retailers) form consumer subjectivities to address social problems. They also show that, while seemingly empowering, neoliberal politics lead to consumer vulnerability and ambivalence. Yet the extant research does not directly address how national mythology is linked to neoliberalism to form the citizen-consumer subject. Likewise, it does not provide a longitudinal account of the governmentality process whereby one can observe continuities and discontinuities in the cultural contexts and strategies via which citizen-consumers are created.

To address these gaps, this article offers a historical analysis of presidents’ rhetorical and material strategies between 1981 and 2012, focusing on the presidential terms of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. I choose this period for the context of the study for several reasons. First, the 1980s saw a neoliberal turn globally and especially in the United States, underlying a major shift in the state’s role in the economic market (Harvey 2005; Lemke 2001). Neoliberal theory gained academic legitimacy as Hayek, an Austrian political philosopher who supported private property and the competitive market as central to free society, and Milton Friedman won the Nobel Prize in 1974 and 1976, respectively. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher was elected as prime minister in Britain and announced that Keynesianism must be abandoned in order to cure stagflation. At approximately the same time, U.S. Federal Reserve Bank Chairman Paul Volcker initiated a

drastic shift in U.S. monetary policy. The U.S. liberal democratic state's long-term commitment to the principles adopted by Roosevelt and his New Deal, which relied on government-regulated economy rather than laissez-faire philosophy to sail through the Great Depression of the 1930s, was abandoned in favor of neoliberal principles. Neoliberal economic policy was further embraced as a solution to revive the stagnant economy, followed with deregulations and tax cuts (see Harvey 2005 for a more detailed history of the neoliberal turn in the U.S.). This shift led in turn to the "internalization of the state—i.e., the acceptance on the part of the states of a new world-wide economic order, driven by global market forces, which they must help construct" (Leys 2001, 13). Therefore, by looking at this period, one can consider how the national myth of the American Dream and the new political ideology of neoliberalism intersect. Second, this time period also included a series of economic recessions, "points of discontinuity" (Giesler and Thompson 2016, 503), each of which threatened citizen-consumers' ability to experience the American Dream. Foucault (2003) suggests that neoliberal governmentality functions by producing the "economic state" and the "economization of society," which has replaced nation or social state. Foucault (2008, 241) elaborates, "neoliberal governmentality, in enacting this generalization of the 'enterprise' form, must escalate the economic model, the model of supply and demand, the investment-cost-profit model, to transform it into a model for social relations, a model for existence itself, a form of the relation the individual entertains towards himself, towards time, his environment, to the future, the group, the family." When economy is treated as an institution that produces legitimacy for the state, the disruptions potentially mark discontinuities in institutional practices as well as in consumer subjectivities and provoke theoretical interest regarding how governmentality practices may have been deployed to revitalize the national myth in times of cultural shifts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To study the formation of citizen-consumer subjectivities, I turn to the sociology of governmentality. *Governmentality* focuses on how fields of action are made possible and how the worldview and value and belief system around us is constructed (Althusser 1971; Eagleton 1991). One key concept in the analysis of governmentality is the dispositive (Deleuze 1998; Rabinow and Rose 2003; Raffnsøe, Gudman-Hoyer, and Thaning 2014). Foucault (1980, 194–5) defines the *dispositif* as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much

as the unsaid." In his lectures at the Collège de France from 1975 to 1979, Foucault introduce three basic modalities of dispositives: discipline, law, and security.

The first of these modalities, discipline, defines ideal models that should or must be followed. Discipline works by establishing a norm and creating models of ideal behavior. Thus, disciplinary normalization seeks to cause people to conform to the norm, using such means as training, reward, and punishment. Legal dispositives consist of codifying and prohibitive social technology, supported by sanctions and laws that must be respected by all citizens. The law establishes rules and actions that are permitted or forbidden, specifying guidelines about which actions are deemed appropriate or unwanted (Raffnsøe et al. 2014). Security dispositives, like disciplinary dispositives, are normalizing. While the disciplinary dispositive is concerned with normalizing individual bodies, subjugating anything outside the normal to its mechanism, the security dispositive is addressed at populations. Working as a bio-power rather than disciplinary power, the security dispositive aims to govern populations that are acted upon through various governmentality rationalities. Within the logic of security, normality becomes a statistical average that is deemed necessary for a society to function properly. Statistics such as adequate consumer confidence index, homeownership rates, and welfare participants are negotiated through economic calculation and reasoning that is shaped by a gamut of power relationships (Chaput and Hanan 2015).

Foucault explains the relationship between the three dispositives with the illustrative example of theft. The legal dispositive contains the codification of the law that prohibits and defines the type of punishment for theft. The disciplinary dispositive treats theft through moralization and correction as a "series of supervisions, checks, inspections, and varied controls" (Foucault 2007, 4). The dispositive of security, on the other hand, evaluates theft from an economic and statistical perspective, making calculations about what is optimal or what is an acceptable range for the society to function properly. The dispositive of security therefore considers questions such as: "How can we predict statistically the number of thefts at a given moment, in a given society, in a given town, in the town or in the country, in a given social stratum? [...] What is the comparative cost of the theft and its repression and what is more worthwhile: To tolerate a bit more theft or to tolerate a bit more repression?" (Foucault 2007, 6).

Foucault's notion of governmentality and dispositives offers a useful analytical lens to examine the relationship between citizen-consumer subjects and their institutional contexts (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Karababa and Ger 2011). This study will employ dispositives to investigate how fields of action are made possible and how the worldview and value and belief system around the

citizen-consumer subject are constructed (Althusser 1971; Eagleton 1991).

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

I adopted a process theorization approach (Giesler and Thompson 2016) to study the governmentality process by which the citizen-consumer subject has been formed over the last four decades. The primary data focused on the historical account of the process as portrayed in the American presidents’ speeches. Previous research in communications and political science has emphasized the role of presidential rhetoric in crafting American national identities and prevailing values (Dorsey and Harlow 2003; Slotkin 1994; Stuckey 2004). Notably, Slotkin (1994, 37) explores Theodore Roosevelt’s books and speeches, showing how Roosevelt appropriated the frontier myth around the beginning of the 20th century to craft a new ruling class whose skills and values reflected the lessons of both Indian warfare and frontier government—“vigorous and masterful people” who possessed “energy, resolution, manliness, self-reliance, and a capacity for self-help.” Dorsey and Harlow (2003) analyze Roosevelt’s discourse also to explain how he used the frontier myth to craft an immigrant identity in American culture. Stuckey, a communications scholar, posits in *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (2004) that presidents propagate cultural values and cultivate normative understandings of identities by relying on the prevalent ideologies of their times. Stuckey (2004, 7) asserts, “more than any other participant in the national conversation, the task of articulating the collective culture, like the responsibility for managing the collective action, belongs to the president.”

Building on this recognized connection between presidential rhetoric and national identities, I investigate the role of presidential speeches in constituting the position of citizen-consumers within the neoliberal institutional context. Like Kenneth Burke (1966), I view language as a symbolic action and, thus, approach presidential rhetoric in search of both the construction of key definitions and the consumer subjectivities that stem from these definitions. As Burke (1966, 45) stated, “Even if any terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology, it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent, it must function also as a deflection of reality.”

My primary dataset consists of speeches delivered by American presidents between 1981 and 2012. I compiled a selection of archival texts for analysis by consulting the American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara (www.presidency.ucsb.edu). Between 1981 and 2012, the National Bureau of Economic Research identifies four economic recessions: the 1980 and 1981–1982 “double-dip” recessions, the 1990–1991 recession, the 2001 recession, and the Great Recession of

TABLE 1

ECONOMIC RECESSIONS AND THEIR ECONOMIC IMPACT

Recession	GDP	Housing	Durables	Investment
1981–1982	(\$131.90)	(\$55.00)	(\$42.80)	(\$131.50)
1990–1991	(\$163.80)	(\$77.40)	(\$92.40)	(\$119.50)
2001	(\$31.20)	(\$12)	(\$30.40)	(\$23.40)
2007–2009	(\$1,342.70)	(\$392.30)	(\$202)	(\$579.60)

Source: Gjerstad and Smith (2010).

2007–2009, which correspond, respectively, to the presidential terms of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama (table 1). I compiled speeches that were broadcast to the nation to capture the rhetoric of presidents with the highest likelihood of reach, which included State of the Union speeches, radio addresses, and radio and TV interviews. I initially searched for speeches containing the keywords *consumer* and *consumption* to capture the rhetoric construction of the consumer subject. I then extended my search by adding the keywords of *home-ownership*, *buy*, and *shop* to include practices that are related to consumption and yet might not have been captured in the initial search. The initial search yielded 252 speeches and the additional search resulted in an additional 24, leading me to conclude that I have reached the saturation criterion for discontinuing data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Overall, I compiled a corpus of 276 speeches (n = Reagan 52, Clinton 74, Bush 86, Obama 64) amounting to 489 single-spaced pages of text.

To further catalog the state of the market and consumer evaluations of the market, I also collected surrogate data on the consumer confidence index (yearly averages between 1981 and 2012), key economic statistics (unemployment rate, housing prices, and GDP), and consumer satisfaction index based on a Gallup survey. Started in 1979, the Gallup survey provides a longitudinal poll on consumer responses to the question: “In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time?” The survey data was used to get a sense of the historical trend of citizen-consumers’ feelings and satisfaction throughout the economic recessions.

Data Analysis 1

I began by using open coding of each speech to identify an initial list of themes (Krippendorff 1980) and then moved on to axial coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008). During the axial coding stage, I identified both discursive and practical presidential actions, linking them to the specific political context and conditions, which I investigated extensively to inform my interpretations of the speech contents. I followed the historical approaches of Karababa and Ger (2011) and Giesler and Veresiu (2014) in seeking to uncover the state apparatuses that linked the national myth

of American Dream to the neoliberal ideology (Althusser 1971). Since Foucault (2007) proposes that a *dispositive* includes discourses, regulatory decisions, and laws at the discursive level, I investigated the myths and values to which the presidents referred in their rhetoric. At the material level, I focused on regulations, bills, and laws to identify the more material apparatuses. For the regulative practices, I first used the presidential speeches to identify the rhetorical framing of the regulatory actions. I then compiled the descriptions and content of the bills and laws from the U.S. Congress website (www.congress.gov) to get further detail regarding the bill or law of interest.

Data Analysis 2

Following this qualitative analysis of the values that the four presidents articulated, I performed quantitative analysis of the data. First, I wanted to see if the presidents put more emphasis on consumer subjectivity during times of economic recession. To test for this, I calculated the ratio of presidential speeches with the keyword *consumer* over the overall number of public speeches the president gave within a year. I also compiled the yearly consumer confidence index and ran a regression analysis to observe the relationship between the consumer confidence index and the presidents' emphasis on consumption.

Second, to explore the co-occurrence of concepts in relation to the concept of "consumer," I used Leximancer (www.leximancer.com), a software program that conducts content analysis by applying a machine learning technique. Leximancer learns what the main concepts in a text are and how they relate to each other, conducting a thematic analysis and a relational (or semantic) analysis of the text. As the software developers explain, Leximancer relies on a combination of statistical techniques (e.g., Bayesian statistics) to observe the occurrence of a word and connect it to the occurrence of a series of other words. Direct co-occurrences between concepts are extracted from the data, based on the strength of relations between them. Once a concept has been identified—in this case, "consumer," Leximancer builds a thesaurus of words that are closely related to it, thereby giving "consumer" its semantic or definitional content. The text is then displayed visually by means of a concept map that portrays the main concepts and their interrelationships. The more often two concepts appear together in the same sentence, the more likely they are to be linked together and will be displayed in the same cluster in the concept map (Rooney 2005). Within marketing, scholars have successfully used this tool to interpret consumer feedback on consumer-generated ads (Campbell et al. 2011) and to track the evolution of service-dominant logic research (Wilden et al. 2017).

Third, I conducted an automated quantitative content analysis of the presidential speeches using the computer program LIWC (Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth 2007). I

created a custom dictionary to observe how presidents' emphasis on keywords of *responsibility*, *American Dream*, *freedom*, *community*, *opportunity*, *fairness*, and *middle class* evolved over time. The computer program generated word counts per speech, providing an indication of the attention each president gave to the issue. I then conducted statistical analysis to compare the frequency of words across the four presidential terms. Since the data was not normally distributed, I used the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test to see whether there are significant differences among the four presidential terms (Humphreys and Wang 2018). I then applied the Mann-Whitney test to conduct pair comparisons between presidents.

FINDINGS

The so-called American Dream—a "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams 1931, 214)—has been a major source of identity and inspiration for the American lifestyle since the end of the 19th century. From its early establishment, the United States was celebrated as a country whose citizens had the opportunity and freedom to realize their dreams and ambitions through their own diligent efforts (Archer 2014).

In the aftermath of WWII, the American Dream increasingly became associated with consumerism as citizen-consumers were offered equality and economic strength through mass consumption (Cohen 2003). Consumerism became the glue that held together what "became known throughout the world after the war as the American way of life, a lifestyle which was based on the pursuit of happiness through the mass availability of a greater number of goods" (Lipietz 1992, 6). As Cohen's (2003, 237) historical analysis documents, the United States government had a major role in promoting the concept that "the general good was best served not by frugality or even moderation, but by individuals pursuing personal wants in a flourishing mass consumption marketplace," thereby also intertwining mass consumption with being a good citizen in what Cohen calls a "Consumers' Republic." Mass production and consumption were positioned as means for a better and more egalitarian life linked to a sense of national superiority over the communist Soviet Union. The home mortgages, credit and tax advantages, and new shopping centers of the Consumers' Republic did not necessarily lead to an egalitarian society; on the contrary, they reinforced ethnic, social class, and gender stratifications. Nonetheless, national myth remained a viable identity resource even for less affluent consumers (Cullen 2003; Hirsch 1996). Thus, leading up to the 1980s the American Dream as a major national identity myth, which was to a large extent tied to mass consumption, already existed in the market. My

TABLE 2
EMPHASIS OF CONCEPTS OVER TIME BY PRESIDENT

	Responsibility	American Dream	Freedom	Voluntarism	Community	Opportunity	Fairness	Middle class
Ronald Reagan	3.53	.62	18.55	.76	6.06	5.21	1.13	.04
Bill Clinton	4.68	2.78	7.88	.23	13.05	8.33	2.66	8.98
George W. Bush	5.67	3.69	14.06	.98	11.5	7	.49	2.23
Barack Obama	5.99	1.22	3.83	.01	6.58	2.36	3.16	11.83
Chi-square	5.261	5.429	31.907	18.246	6.367	17.692	11.65	38.166
Kruskal Wallis <i>p</i> -value	.154	.143	.00	.00	.10	.00	.01	.00
Effect size	.008	.009	.106	.056	.012	.054	.03	.129

Note.—The emphases reported represent the cumulative percentage of word mention per presidential period.

archival data demonstrate how the national mythology of American Dream and neoliberal ideology were linked to form the citizen-consumer subject after the 1980s.

The LIWC analysis shows that over the four-decade timeframe of the study, American presidents continuously and consistently praised responsibility as a key moral for the citizen-consumer subject. The Kruskal-Wallis test for the frequency of the words *responsibility* and *American Dream* are not statistically different across the four presidents, indicating a continuous pattern of emphasis over the 40-year analysis period. The Kruskal-Wallis test for the words *freedom*, *opportunity*, *fairness*, and *middle class*, on the other hand, are statistically significant (table 2). Further pair comparisons using the Mann-Whitney test show that Reagan emphasizes freedom more than any other president ($p < .00$), and voluntarism significantly more than Clinton ($p < .02$) and Obama ($p < .01$). Democrats Clinton and Obama emphasize fairness as a moral value and middle class significantly more than the Republican presidents, Reagan and Bush. These findings suggest that, akin to what Giesler and Veresiu (2014) observe, the neoliberal logic of shared responsibility remained a resilient narrative structure for the management of economic recessions. However, the findings also suggest that responsibility is not the sole moral value to support this narrative structure; rather, it is supplemented by other moral values such as freedom, voluntarism, opportunity, community, and fairness as a strategy of rendering individual subjects responsible. The responsible citizen-consumer went hand in hand with: freedom and voluntary organizations (Reagan); community orientation and equal market opportunities (Clinton); faith-based communities who took the share of responsibility from the government (Bush); and a fair market (Obama). Overall, while responsibility remained a common value, Republican presidents coupled it with libertarian ideology of individual autonomy, and Democrat presidents had a more liberal emphasis on social equality and fairness.

The quantitative analysis also reveals that the consumer subject was closely tied to the economic goals of the state. The regression analysis of the attention presidents give to the consumer in the aftermath of an economic recession

shows that the presidents put more attention on consumers in the aftermath of the economic recessions. The regression analysis between the consumer confidence index (dependent variable) and the ratio of presidential speeches with the keyword *consumer* over the overall number of public presidential speeches given within a year indicates that the presidents put more emphasis on the consumer in the aftermath of a recession, which is typically followed by a drop in the consumer confidence index (R-square = 34%, $F = 11.35$, $p < .00$). Figure 1 illustrates a visual summary of the regression analysis. The analysis shows that the ratio of presidential speeches with the keyword *consumer* went up for three of the economic recessions (1981, 1990, and 2008), but not the one in 2001.¹

The Leximancer analysis provides additional insight into the broader context within which consumer subjectivities are placed. The analysis portrays how the strength of relations between *consumer* and other keywords for each president indicates how the presidents linked the consumer to socioeconomic issues at the time. In Reagan's speeches, the concept of consumer is more closely linked to terms such as *economy* and *free*, in Clinton's speeches, it co-occurs with the terms *products* and *workers*; in George W. Bush's speeches, it is most likely to occur with the words *business* and *roles*; and in Obama's speeches, it is closely linked to *credit* and *finance*. (See table 3 for a list of the top five words and their likelihood to co-occur with *consumer* for each presidential period; see also the web appendix for a visual representation of the cluster of concepts that co-occur with the word *consumer*.)²

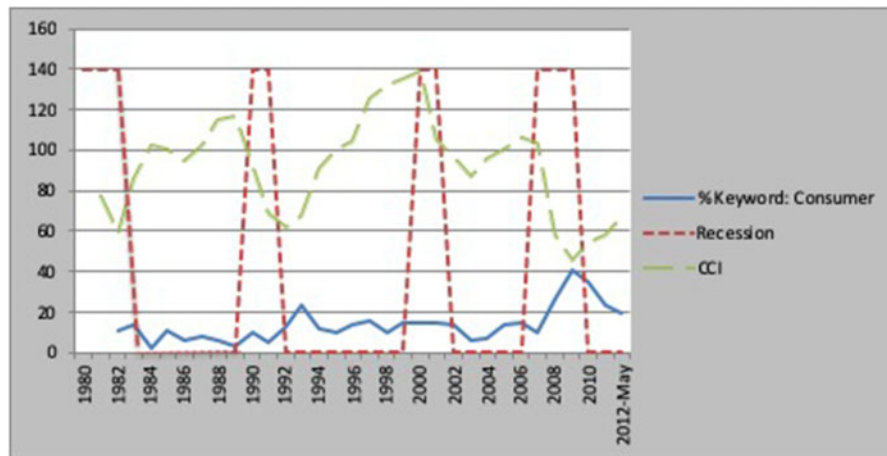
The qualitative analysis reveals three interrelated dispositives worked together to shape the citizen-consumer subject: disciplinary, legal, and security. The disciplinary

1 There might be a handful of factors for this exception. One, the nature of the 2001 recession was different than the other three. It was a shorter and milder recession that economists link to a slowdown of investment (Gjerstad and Smith 2010). Second, in the midst of the economic recession, the September 11 attacks occurred, resulting in a potential shift in emphasis in presidential speeches.

2 The likelihood score of 18%, computed as (# co-occurrences of *consumer* and *credit*) / (# occurrences of *consumer*), may be interpreted as saying that the concept of credit co-occurs with the concept of consumer 18% of the time.

FIGURE 1

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSUMER CONFIDENCE INDEX AND PRESIDENT SPEECHES WITH THE KEYWORD “CONSUMER”



NOTE.—The consumer confidence index is benchmarked to 1985 = 100. the change in consumer confidence index reflects the relative increase or decrease in consumers' evaluation of the economy.

TABLE 3

LEXIMANCER ANALYSIS—CO-OCCURRENCE WITH “CONSUMER” LIKELIHOOD SCORES BY PRESIDENT

Reagan			Clinton			George W. Bush			Obama		
	Count	Likelihood		Count	Likelihood		Count	Likelihood		Count	Likelihood
Economy	13	10%	Products	10	21%	Business	9	38%	Credit	11	18%
Week	5	8%	Workers	7	16%	Roles	6	38%	Sure	11	16%
Free	7	8%	Able	3	8%	Leaders	7	32%	Financial	30	16%
System	4	7%	Open	4	8%	Markets	7	25%	Rules	11	16%
Jobs	8	7%	Economy	13	7%	Marketplace	7	25%	Job	11	15%

dispositive mainly crafted a moral structure by casting the citizen-consumer subject as the moral protagonist on a journey to achieve the American Dream. The legal dispositive aimed to create the citizen-consumer subject as an active participant of the economy through tax and housing policies and market regulations. Finally, the dispositive of security aimed to manage active participation of citizen-consumers in the marketplace. To explore this process in greater empirical detail in the next section, I will present the analysis of each presidential term. (see [table 4](#) for a summary of the findings).

RONALD REAGAN, 1981–1988: THE RESPONSIBLE, VOLUNTARY, AND FREE CONSUMER

Already facing economic stagnation due to the 1973–1975 recession, as Reagan came into office the American Dream was shaken by the 1980 and 1981–1982 double-dip

recessions. Between 1978 and 1982, housing prices fell by 55.2%. During those four years, real GDP grew by 2.2%, or about .5% per year, considerably below the 3.8% average growth rate from 1947 to 1978 ([Gjerstad and Smith 2010](#)). The consumer confidence index dropped from the high 90s to 77.4 in 1981 and 59 in 1982. According to the Gallup satisfaction survey, the proportion of consumers satisfied with how things were going in the U.S. was 12% in July 1979, 19% in November 1979, and 17% in January 1981; it remained between 20% and 30% in the subsequent years but rose to 50% in 1984, toward the end of Reagan's first term (Gallup 2017).

As part of his project of revitalizing the American Dream, Reagan relied on legal, disciplinary, and security dispositives to transition to and legitimate neoliberal market ideology. According to Reagan, market failure was attributable to the Keynesian policies that the liberal democratic state had pursued in past decades. He maintained that the increased government spending promoted by Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal policies, which

TABLE 4
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

President analysis period	Economic recession	Dispositives		
		Disciplinary	Legal	Security
Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) <i>Republican</i>	1981	Morality play myth: “Big government” versus “American people” Moral values: Freedom, voluntarism	Economic Recovery Tax (1981); President’s Voluntary Action Rewards (1982)	Management of citizen-consumers to secure increased and entrepreneurial participation in the marketplace
Bill Clinton (1993–2001) <i>Democrat</i>	1990–1991	Morality play myth: “Wealthy Americans” versus the “middle class” Moral values: Community, responsibility, opportunity	The Omnibus Reconciliation Act (1993); Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (1996); National Homeownership Strategy (1995); New Markets and Community Renewal Act (2000)	Management of citizen-consumers to secure increased participation in the marketplace (reducing welfare, expanding markets, encouraging homeownership)
George W. Bush (2001–2009) <i>Republican</i>	2001	Morality play myth: “The evil-doers” versus “American consumers” Moral values: Compassionate conservatism, responsibility	National Homeowner month (2002); American Dream Downpayment Initiative (2003); Renewing the Dream tax credit (2005)	Management of citizen-consumers (especially minority groups) to secure active participation in the marketplace
Barack Obama (2009–2013) <i>Democrat</i>	2008	Morality play myth: “Wall Street” versus the “ordinary citizens” Moral values: Hope, resilience, fairness, shared responsibility	Troubled Asset Release Program (TARP) (2008); Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act (2010); Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) (2011)	Management of citizen-consumers to secure fair and uninterrupted participation in the marketplace

relied on government spending for economic growth and higher rates of employment, had to end so that the country could recover from stagflation. Reagan proposed an economic recovery plan that relied on government spending decreases, deregulation, and tax cuts.

Reagan’s disciplinary dispositive cast the American people as the moral protagonist who embraces the values of responsibility, freedom, and voluntarism. Reagan portrayed Americans as courageous dreamers held back by a big government that had been wasting their “hard-earned wages.” Against liberalism’s reliance on bureaucracy, Reagan argued that “government is the problem” and that ordinary Americans should be recognized as heroes. In his speeches, Reagan cast the citizen-consumer subject as the moral protagonist and big government as the antagonist (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010):

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.... “We the people,” this breed called Americans...we have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we are in a time when there are no heroes just don’t know where to look. You can see heroes every day going in and out of factory gates. Others, a handful in number, produce enough food to feed all of us and then the world beyond. You meet heroes across a counter—and they are on both sides of that counter.... It is time to reawaken this industrial giant, to get government back within its means, and to lighten our punitive tax burden. (*Inaugural address, January 20, 1981*)

As neoliberal logic would have it, Reagan emphasized that the exercise of free choice as a rational and responsible subject is the core moral quality (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Lemke 2001). As famously advocated by Milton Friedman, Nobel Prize-winning economist and a member of Reagan’s economic council, the new economic view held that markets not only could liberate humans but also worked most efficiently without top-down government intervention. Accordingly, it was best to abolish the government programs and give consumers the freedom to make their own, better decisions (Ackerman 1982). In his mythic narrations, Reagan openly eschewed top-down government interventions and regulations in favor of a self-governed citizen-consumer subject:

There’s only one way to shrink the size and cost of big government, and that is by eliminating agencies that are not needed and are getting in the way of a solution.... Now, we don’t need an Energy Department to solve our basic energy problem. As long as we let the forces of the marketplace work without undue interference, the ingenuity of consumers, business, producers, and inventors will do that for us... By eliminating the Department of Education less than two years after it was created, we can not only reduce the budget but ensure that local needs and preferences, rather than the wishes of Washington, determine the education of our children. (*National address on the Program for Economic Recovery, September 24, 1981*)

Such statements marked the start of what Shamir (2008) calls neoliberal responsibilization. Giesler and Veresiu (2014)

document this responsabilization process as the World Economic Forum (WEF) endorse the idea of financially literate consumers who, in the face of economic crises, are responsible for their own decision-making to secure their financial futures, as well as green consumers who, rather than relying on an energy department, take on active roles as environmental stewards themselves. Similar to WEF, Reagan's discourse transfers responsibility from the state to the citizen-consumer, calling on consumers to take matters of education and energy into their own hands.

For Reagan this transfer of responsibility to the citizen-consumers went hand in hand with another moral quality: voluntarism. Reagan praised voluntarism in addition to self-governance and individualism as a key moral value. In his moralizing narratives on voluntarism, Reagan drew from the national ideology of American exceptionalism—that is, “the collectively shared meanings and ideals that Americans invoke when they think of themselves as rightful citizens of the nation and feel a sense of common cause (and historical ties) with other Americans” (Luedicke et al. 2010, 1020). In the following vignette, Reagan portrayed voluntarism as setting Americans apart from Europeans, stressing a motif integral to American exceptionalism that has supported America's claim to superiority over European political and religious institutions:

Some years ago, when we were a young nation and our people began visiting the lands of their forefathers, these American tourists then were rather brash, unsophisticated by European standards, but blessed with a spirit of independence and pride. One such tourist, an elderly, small-town gentleman, and his wife were in Europe listening to a tour guide go on about the wonders of the volcano, Mount Etna. He spoke of the great heat that it generated, the power, the boiling lava, et cetera. Finally the old boy had had enough of it, turned to his wife, and said, “We've got a volunteer fire department at home that'd put that thing out in 15 minutes.” Well, he was typical of those Americans who helped build a neighbor's barn when it burned down. They built the West without an area redevelopment plan, and cities across the land without federal planning. I believe the spirit of voluntarism still lives in America.... The truth is we've let government take away many things we once considered were really ours to do voluntarily, out of the goodness of our hearts and a sense of community pride and neighborliness. (*Address on economic recovery, September 1981*)

The Reagan administration went further by undertaking initiatives that urged voluntarism. In 1982, Reagan established the President's Volunteer Action Awards to recognize individuals and organizations for exemplary voluntary actions within their communities (Adams 1987). The ideal of small government and the reduction of federal spending meant increased freedom, but also increased responsibility for the citizen-consumer subject. Those who embraced the

spirit of voluntarism and acted in their local communities to give back to fellow Americans were celebrated as free individuals and heroes of the marketplace who were no longer constrained by a big governmental bureaucracy.

Reagan's main legal dispositive aimed at revitalizing the American Dream was tax reduction. In 1981, Reagan signed the Economic Recovery Tax Act. In line with neoliberal techniques of government, which seek to intensify market relations and promote diverse forms of competition and entrepreneurial behavior (Foucault 2008; Weiskopf and Munro 2012), Reagan's aggressive tax reduction program aimed to increase investment and consumption. Among other provisions, it reduced the highest marginal tax rate for individuals from 70% to 50% and reduced other marginal tax rates by 23% over a three-year period (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-bill/4242>).

When introducing and advocating for his tax reduction bill, Reagan tapped into the myth of consumer freedom. The Leximancer analysis also supports how consumer subjectivity was semantically linked to freedom and free markets. In the following quotations, Reagan construed tax reduction as consumer liberation. In line with his moralizing strategy as well, his narrative appealed to the moral value of freedom:

Uncle Sam's bite on your paycheck will be smaller, leaving you more to spend and save as you see fit. (*Radio address on the federal budget and the Western alliance, May 29, 1982*)

These tax incentives must be preserved. They are essential to lasting economic recovery.

...Well, our loyalty lies with little taxpayers, not big tax spenders. What our critics really believe is that those in Washington know better how to spend your money than you, the people, do. But we're not going to let them do it, period. (*News conference, June 30, 1982*)

Reagan's security dispositif aimed to manage citizen-consumer populations and secure active and entrepreneurial participation in the market. His tax reduction policies were cast not only in the mythic formulation of consumer freedom but also in the ideological neoliberal framing of higher purchasing power and higher investments:

Today a working family earning \$25,000 has \$1,100 more in purchasing power than if tax and inflation rates were still at the 1980 levels. Real after-tax income increased 5% last year. And economic deregulation of key industries like transportation has offered more chances—or choices, I should say—to consumers and new changes—or chances—for entrepreneurs and protecting safety.... Hope is reborn for couples dreaming of owning homes and for risk takers with vision to create tomorrow's opportunities.... For a time we forgot the American Dream isn't one of making government bigger; it's keeping faith with the mighty spirit

of free people under God. (*State of the Union address, January 25, 1984*)

As the stagnation of the 1970s and economic recession in the 1980s disrupted economic growth, consumer confidence, and market outlooks, to revitalize the American Dream, President Reagan called for a new breed of citizen-consumer subjects who embraced the moral values of freedom and voluntarism. His morality play myth contrasted “big government” with “American people,” who, by embracing voluntarism and freedom, could achieve the American Dream and furthermore could be active and free participants in the market thanks to the tax cuts of the Reagan administration.

BILL CLINTON, 1993–2001: THE RESPONSIBLE, COMMUNITY-ORIENTED CITIZEN-CONSUMER WITH EQUAL MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

Clinton took office in 1993, after the 1990–1991 economic recession. Although compared to the other postwar economic recessions, the 1990–1991 one was milder, it was accompanied by a slow growth rate that continued after the recession. Over the course of the recession, housing prices fell by 34.8%, investment by 13.4%, and durable goods production by 12.8% (Gjerstad and Smith 2010). The consumer confidence index fell to 68.5 in 1991 and remained in the 60s through the next two years, until 1994 when it recovered to 90.4. According to the Gallup satisfaction survey, the proportion of consumers satisfied with how things were going in the U.S. was 28% in 1993, and gradually rose to 50% in 1998.

To revive the American Dream, Clinton, like Reagan, employed legal, disciplinary, and security dispositives. His disciplinary dispositive relied on structuring a morality play myth that cast wealthy Americans as the immoral antagonist and the middle class as the protagonist who, with Clinton’s changes in the neoliberal system, could achieve the American Dream again. Clinton’s disciplinary dispositive focused on a set of values—opportunity, responsibility, and community—to which he referred as the “new covenant.” This new covenant relied on reciprocal obligations between the citizen-consumer subject and the government, thereby creating a middle-ground alternative to both traditional liberalism with its emphasis on government solutions and the rugged individualism of Reagan’s minimalist state vision. In his first speech on this topic, Clinton stated, “We must go beyond the competing ideas of the old political establishment: beyond every man for himself on the one hand and the right for something for nothing on the other” (Speech at Georgetown University, November 20, 1991). The following passage illustrates how Clinton viewed the new covenant values and how he rhetorically linked his market policies to these values:

Now it’s time to finish the job and balance the budget, so that we don’t pass a mountain of debt on to our children and we free up more funds to be invested in our economy. But we need to do it in a way that reflects our core values: opportunity for all Americans to make the most of their own lives; responsibility—we all must do our part, no more something for nothing; and third, recognizing our community, our common obligations to preserve and strengthen our families, to do our duty to our parents, to fulfill our obligation to give our children the best future possible with good schools and good health care and safe streets and a clean environment; and finally, a determination to keep our nation the strongest in the world. (*Radio address, October 28, 1995*)

As Foucault (2003, 2007) explains, the dispositives work together. Secondary disciplinary effects of law have a better chance of succeeding if special disciplinary dispositives are established with the specific purpose of correcting the behavior of a particular social segment. Clinton’s framing of legal dispositives around his new covenant values becomes clear in his description of his landmark welfare reform act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996: “And we must continue to work to make welfare a second chance, not a way of life. Our welfare reform proposal will embrace two simple values: work and responsibility. Those who can work should do so” (Radio address, January 1, 1994). As Clinton envisioned, the responsible citizens who can move from “welfare rolls to payrolls” could “finance their college education and ultimately have more money in their pockets, they’ll spend more, they’ll boost the consumer economy” (president’s radio address, July 17, 1993, and interview with the Louisiana media, July 20, 1993).

Furthermore, Clinton married the disciplinary dispositive of community to the legal dispositive of the Community Investment Program. His administration created empowerment zones to spur local community planning and economic growth in distressed communities through tax incentives and federal investment. The act aimed to increase financial investment in urban and rural empowerment zones such as Detroit, Baltimore, and Atlanta (Meredith 1997). In addition, in 2000, Clinton approved the New Markets and Community Renewal initiatives, designed to encourage private equity investment in underserved communities (Lento 2001). These initiatives proposed new tax credits for community development entities that made loans and investments within low-income communities. Clinton stressed the potential of new markets in underserved areas such as Indian reservations and inner cities. His mantra of reciprocal obligations between citizens and their government was evidenced in these government-directed attempts to increase investment in needy communities. Clinton believed that it was the government’s responsibility to offer incentives encouraging private capital investment in such communities and that, with those incentives, the new markets would become attractive to private equity, which ultimately would serve

the overall community. Consider this excerpt from an interview with CNN:

CNN host: When you were speaking to the Native Americans in Pine Ridge, and one of the corporate business leaders looked out and saw the 7,000 people, he said, "I've always just seen Indian reservations"—which meant something—and then he said, "Now, I see two supermarkets. I see a car dealership. I see 7,000 people wearing clothes. I see a market." He had never seen them as a market; he'd just seen them as Indians.

President Clinton: Yes, and a lot of these people—if we put more stores, for example, in these Native American areas and hired the people there to work in the stores, then even in—and they're the poorest parts of America; they have the highest unemployment rate—but if you get their unemployment rate just down to 20%, then you have 80% of the people working and you make a whole market. So by creating the jobs, you create the market to buy the products that the jobs provide. (*CNN interview, July 9, 1999*)

Clinton's security dispositive, aimed toward managing citizen-consumer populations to secure increased participation in the marketplace, articulated the economic and moral benefits of his economic recovery plan at the individual population and broader systemic level. For example, Clinton's economic recovery plan focused on the working and middle-class citizen-consumer subject as the moral protagonist vis-à-vis the "the wealthiest Americans," a juxtaposition he frequently made in his speeches. "That theme is the need for change: bold, comprehensive change to reverse the trickle-down policies of the 1980s and restore the vitality of the American Dream. Over the last 12 years, while the middle class saw their tax burdens rise and their incomes go down, the wealthiest Americans, whose incomes went up, often by paperwork manipulation and moving jobs overseas, saw their taxes go down. Higher deficits came with lower taxes on the wealthy.... The status quo simply isn't working for working families anymore" (radio address, February 13, 1993).

As Foucault explains, the security dispositive does not operate directly on individuals but at the level of the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 2007; Gordon 1991, 5). In the legal realm, Clinton's economic program aimed to enact new tax modifications to maximize participation in the marketplace. The Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1993 increased taxes for the wealthiest 1.2% of Americans while lowering taxes for the middle class (Marcus and Devroy 1993). Clinton proposed also to increase the earned income tax credit for low-income citizens to enable them to become active participants in the economy: "That will mean more money in their pockets, they'll spend more, they'll boost the consumer economy, and that will be very good. It will also be a real incentive for people to move from welfare to work" (interview with Louisiana media, July 20, 1993).

Clinton's homeownership initiative is another example of how the security dispositive was put to effect. Groups of populations (middle and working classes) are called on to actively participate in the neoliberal economy and stimulate economic growth through increased home sales.

Our administration has put in place a comprehensive strategy to increase homeownership, including dramatically bringing down mortgage rates. In the last four years, 4.4 million more Americans became homeowners; that's the highest level in 15 years.... By cutting paperwork at the FHA and giving families a break, we're cutting the average closing costs for first-time homebuyers by about \$1,000. By cutting the federal budget deficit by more than 60%, we've had on average the lowest home mortgage rates in 30 years. And as interest rates dropped, 10 million homeowners refinanced their mortgages, all of them together saving as much as \$25 billion. (*President's Radio Address, August 31, 1996*)

As Clinton articulates, the consumption practice of purchasing a house is not necessarily an isolated individual consumption practice but a citizenship act, as it helps generate demand for other consumption goods and eventually boost the economy:

All of our country will reap enormous benefits if we achieve this goal. Homeownership encourages savings and investment. When a family buys a home, the ripple effect is enormous. It means new homeowner consumers. They need more durable goods, like washers and dryers, refrigerators, and water heaters. And if more families could buy new homes or older homes, more hammers will be pounding, more saws will be buzzing. Homebuilders and home fixers will be put to work. When we boost the number of homeowners in our country, we strengthen our economy, create jobs, build up the middle class, and build better citizens.... I hope it will start all these young people on a path that will take them to great joys in their personal lives, and perhaps to other homes, but something they will always know that their country wanted them to have because they were entitled to it as a part of the American Dream. (*Remarks on the National Homeownership Strategy, June 5, 1995*)

In summary, upon taking office shortly after the 1990–1991 economic recession, President Clinton aimed to revitalize the American Dream by introducing his new covenant values and related market reforms. Clinton's morality play myth cast the wealthy Americans as the immoral antagonist vis-à-vis the middle-class protagonist who, by embracing the values of community, opportunity, and responsibility, could achieve the American Dream. Clinton furthermore closely linked his disciplinary dispositives to his legal ones as he linked his targeted investment legislation with community, welfare reform with responsibility, and tax reform and housing initiative with opportunity values.

GEORGE W. BUSH, 2001–2009: THE RESPONSIBLE, CONSERVATIVE, COMPASSIONATE CITIZEN-CONSUMER

As George W. Bush took office in January 2001, the economic expansion that started in 1992 was already coming to an end, as the dot-com bubble had burst and the stock market crashed in March 2000. The crash extended through the end of 2002, with the worst decline after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Housing prices fell by only 1.1% and durable goods by 2.9%. However, investment fell by 19%, exceeding the 1981 and 1990 economic recessions. The 2001 recession was milder than any other post-war recession due to high foreign investment, expansionary monetary policy, and loose mortgage underwriting standards in the housing market, but also paved the path to the Great Recession (Gjerstad and Smith 2010). The consumer confidence index remained relatively high in comparison to the previous recessions, falling from 139% in 2000 to 105.6% in 2001 and then to 96.6% and 87% in the consecutive years to jump up again to over 100% until the 2008 recession. The Gallup satisfaction survey also fell only slightly, from about 60% in 2000 to 50% in 2001.

Bush's disciplinary dispositive rested on the moral value of compassionate conservatism, which, very much like Reagan, celebrated individual responsibility. However, in his articulation of conservatism, Bush suggested that rather than viewing the government with disdain or as an enemy, citizen-consumer subjects should see it as a paternal figure that oversaw their lives—a shift from Reagan's rhetoric of freedom to one of compassion. Very much echoing the neoliberal logic of shared responsibility, Bush's vision of compassionate conservatism relied on self-government of individual subjects who bore the responsibilities of their own actions (Lemke 2001).

Often the truest kind of compassion is to help citizens build lives of their own. I call my philosophy and approach compassionate conservatism. It is compassionate to actively help our fellow citizens in need. It is conservative to insist on responsibility and on results. And with this hopeful approach, we can make a real difference in people's lives.

More importantly in Bush's description of compassionate conservatism, the "government of competence and ethics" Amable (2011, 19) becomes clear. As Shamir (2008, 4) points out, Bush calls for a transfer of responsibility from "institutions traditionally mandated to protect consumers as citizens with universal rights to nongovernmental organizations, charities, and corporations in facilitating and nurturing responsible consumption." Bush's compassionate conservatism fused the neoliberal championing of the free market and a faith-based concern with moral values, voluntarism, and community:

Government cannot solve every problem, but it can encourage people and communities to help themselves and to help one another. Often the truest kind of compassion is to help citizens build lives of their own. . . . All of these policies and all of these areas serve the same vision. We are using an active government to promote self-government. We're encouraging individuals and communities and families to take more and more responsibility for themselves, for their neighbors, for our nation. (*Remarks on compassionate conservatism in San Jose, California, April 30, 2002*)

Bush called on the citizen subject to be responsible, but also to be active. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, in his address to the airline employees, Bush asked citizen-consumers to continue their shopping and spending to preserve the American way. In his notorious speech two weeks after the attacks, Bush told Americans not to fear the "evildoers" and to carry on with their everyday activities and "get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed" (Remarks by the President to Airline Employees, September 27, 2001). While this message was not too far off from the historical alignment of spending with patriotic duty in the U.S. (c.f. Cohen 2003), it nonetheless was criticized for narrowing down the responsibility of the citizen-consumer to mere shopping rather than saving, which during wartime is what other nations would have advised their citizens to do (Garon 2013). Also, unlike the tax cut or homeownership policies designed to create an active citizen-consumer subject who helps propel the economic growth, this call for going shopping was met with push-back because it was not tied to higher moral values, such as freedom and community, and was seen as a populist strategy to mobilize the citizen-consumer around the individual quest of the American Dream while masking the consequences of the War in Iraq (Bacevich 2008).

To revamp the economy and increase investment, George W. Bush encouraged homeownership among minority groups. Bush saw encouraging new homeownership among this demographic group as an opportunity for economic growth. His security dispositive focused on securing increased participation in the market, especially of African American and Hispanic citizen-consumers whose homeownership rates lagged behind those of their white counterparts. As he elaborated in the White House conference on minority homeownership, the new home purchases meant "an additional \$256 billion to the economy by encouraging 5.5 million new homeowners in America. The activity—the economic activity stimulated with the additional purchasers, the additional buyers, the additional demand will be upwards of \$256 billion. And that's important because it will help people find work" (Remarks at the White House Conference on Minority Homeownership, October 15, 2002).

Homeownership, as Bush elaborated, promised not only economic benefits for the society but also moral benefits

for the citizen-consumer subject. Bush argued: “Homeownership is more than just a symbol of the American Dream; it is an important part of our way of life. Core American values of individuality, thrift, responsibility, and self-reliance are embodied in homeownership. I am committed to helping more families know the security and sense of pride that comes with owning a home” (Proclamation on National Homeownership Month, June 13, 2003).

To open the doors for homeownership among the minority groups, Bush also adopted legal dispositives. In 2002 he declared June to be national homeowners’ month and gave the following speech, which exemplifies the intricate governmentality process of linking the national mythology of the American Dream to the neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility.

Homeownership is an important part of the American Dream. As President, I am committed to helping many more Americans achieve that dream.... For many Americans, their home is an important financial investment, and it can be a source of great personal pride and an important part of community stability.

During National Homeownership Month, I encourage all Americans to learn more about financial management and to explore homeownership opportunities in their communities. By taking this important step individuals and families help safeguard their financial futures and contribute to the strength of our nation. (*Proclamation on National Homeownership Month*, 2002)

The bills and initiatives to increase homeownership were directly linked to the American Dream with their titles. For example, to encourage investors to develop housing for low-income families, Bush’s administration issued the “Renewing the Dream” tax credit. Bush also created what he called the American Dream Downpayment Initiative, which, in 2003 and 2004, provided \$162 million to help families cover the upfront costs of their home purchase. As the Department of Housing and Urban Development brochure details, these funds were expected to help an estimated 22,000 new homebuyers—families with incomes below 80% of the median income for their area—with an average of \$7,500 in assistance (https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/20604_BROCHURE.PDF).

Bush supported the dispositives of security with disciplinary dispositives, as he elaborated on the morals of homeownership:

We’ll bring the dignity and independence of homeownership to more and more Americans.... All of us here in America should believe, and I think we do, that we should be, as I mentioned, a nation of owners. Owning something is freedom, as far as I’m concerned. It’s part of a free society, and ownership of a home helps bring stability to neighborhoods. You own your home in a neighborhood,

you have more interest in how your neighborhood feels, looks, whether it’s safe or not. It brings pride to people. It’s a part of an asset-based society. It helps people build up their own individual portfolio, provides an opportunity, if need be, for a mom or a dad to leave something to their child. It’s a part of—it’s a part of being a—it’s a part of—an important part of America. (*Remarks at the White House Conference on Minority Homeownership*, October 15, 2002)

In the same speech Bush also called for the financial markets to “develop a mortgage market...that can help families move from rental housing into houses of their own.” Bush’s coupling of the belief in achieving the American Dream through homeownership with the neoliberal ideology of efficient markets and responsible consumers, however, did not turn out as he envisioned. While he garnered praise for the historically high homeownership rates, the lax lending standards and proliferation of easy credit had created a lending bubble, which burst in 2008.³ The homeownership rate reached a historic high (68.8%) in 2005, but dropped back to 62.7% in 2015 (a rate lower than 1985), with white Americans (70.8%) surpassing African (42.2%), Asian (56.6%), and Hispanic Americans (45.4%) (American Housing Survey 2015).

In summary, in 2001, President Bush stepped into office just after the economic expansion beginning in 1992 came to an end and the markets had started to slow down. To revitalize the American Dream, Bush focused on increasing homeownership among the minority groups in the U.S. His security dispositives relied on the economic and moral benefits of homeownership among the minority groups, and his legal dispositives introduced bills and regulations such as the American Dream down payment fund to incentivize homeownership. In the face of the September 11 attacks, his disciplinary dispositive cast a morality play myth between the “evildoers” and the American people. Bush advocated for the moral value of compassionate conservatism and emphasized responsibility among faith-based groups.

BARACK OBAMA, 2009–2013: RESPONSIBLE AND RESILIENT CITIZEN- CONSUMER SUBJECT IN FAIR MARKETS

Barack Obama became president shortly after the housing market crash of 2007–2008. This collapse was part of the Great Recession, one of the biggest financial crises in U.S. history, which caused extreme financial losses for families and sharp drops in employment. Before the

3 Studies show that the increase in homeownership rate from 1995 to 2005 can be partially explained by the emergence of nontraditional products and relaxation of credit standards, expanding the number of borrowers who could qualify. Research suggests that the increase in mortgage credit was unrelated to fundamentals like income growth or lender expectations of house price appreciation, and indeed was not related to demand-side fundamentals, but instead to the supply of credit through the increase in securitization (Mian and Sufi 2009, 2014).

financial crisis, the median U.S. household income was \$57,432; it tumbled to \$55,376 in 2008 and fell all the way to \$52,666 in 2012 before beginning to rebound (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2017). Meanwhile, the unemployment rate, which was 4.62% in 2007, jumped to 5.8% in 2008 and soared to 9.6% in 2010 (US Bureau of Labor and Statistics, www.bls.gov). The consumer confidence index fell precipitously, from 103.3 in 2007 to 57.8 in 2008, and remained below 60 for the next few years. According to a Gallup poll, during the Great Recession, only 15% of Americans were satisfied with how things were going in their country (Gallup 2017). While widening income gaps created political pressure to make the American Dream accessible to the growing number of households whose real incomes had remained stagnant or fallen over the past 30 years (Rajan 2010), the economic crash made that dream seem more remote than ever.

To revive the American Dream, President Obama too employed disciplinary, legal, and security dispositives. His disciplinary dispositives cast a morality play myth in which Wall Street was the immoral antagonist and ordinary citizens were the moral protagonist who, by embracing the moral values of hope, resilience, and shared responsibility, could achieve the American Dream again. His legal dispositives introduced financial reforms to secure the marketplace and ensure consumers' active participation in the marketplace again. His security dispositives were put to use to justify market actions by highlighting the economic benefits and consequences. The Leximancer analysis for Obama's speeches illustrates how they semantically linked consumer subjectivity to the financial crisis and market regulations.

First, Obama's disciplinary dispositives worked by creating a new mythic structure and providing an archetypical cultural template to support consumers through the confusion and misery of the financial crisis. As Luedicke et al. (2010, 1018) argued, "Morality plays help individuals to assuage uncertainties, doubts, and anxieties precipitated by everyday experiences of moral ambiguities." Accordingly, Obama's morality play myth cast ordinary citizens as the moral protagonist and Wall Street as the immoral antagonist who had compromised the rules of the game, leaving ordinary citizens to bear the resulting costs:

This is essential, for this crisis may have started on Wall Street, but its impacts have been felt by ordinary Americans who rely on credit cards, home loans, and other financial instruments... But what I will not accept, what I will vigorously oppose, [is] those who do not argue in good faith; those who would defend the status quo at any cost; those who put their narrow interests ahead of the interests of ordinary Americans. (*Weekly address, June 20, 2009*)

For Obama, the moral values needed to restabilize financial markets and restore the American Dream were hope, resilience, and shared responsibility. In the following

passage from his first State of the Union address, Obama constructed a morality-play frame by invoking the myth of moral protagonists, united despite their ideological differences. Like their forefathers who fought in the Civil War and World War II, survived the Great Depression, and fought for justice in the civil rights movement, these hopeful and resilient citizen-consumers would also overcome the struggles of the recent financial crisis:

It's tempting to look back on these moments and assume that our progress was inevitable, that America was always destined to succeed. But when the Union was turned back at Bull Run and the Allies first landed at Omaha Beach, victory was very much in doubt. When the market crashed on Black Tuesday and civil rights marchers were beaten on Bloody Sunday, the future was anything but certain. These were the times that tested the courage of our convictions and the strength of our Union. And despite all our divisions and disagreements, our hesitations and our fears, America prevailed because we chose to move forward as one nation, as one people. Again, we are tested. And again, we must answer history's call... Despite our hardships, our Union is strong. We do not give up. We do not quit. We do not allow fear or division to break our spirit. (*State of the Union address, January 27, 2010*)

In his rhetoric, Obama attempted to renew consumers' belief in America as a place of infinite opportunity, where the individuals and the state should share the responsibility of enabling these opportunities to be realized. He also sought to bridge the divides between ethnic groups to revive the American Dream and make it accessible to all Americans regardless of their background. To substantiate this mythic formulation, Obama often told his personal story as a microcosm of the larger narrative:

We may have differences in policy, but we all believe in the rights enshrined in our Constitution. We may have different opinions, but we believe in the same promise that says this is a place where you can make it if you try. We may have different backgrounds, but we believe in the same dream that says this is a country where anything is possible, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from. That dream is why I can stand here before you tonight. (*State of the Union address, January 25, 2011*)

Obama's focus on hope and responsibility extended the discourse of the boundless American frontier and of rugged individualism that has long been intertwined with Americans' national identity (Dorsey and Harlow 2003). Though not rejecting the individualism that has traditionally characterized Americans' Protestant moral code (Lipset 1997; Noble 2002; Turner 1893), Obama tried to reconstruct it, moving away from Reagan's nearly exclusive focus on individual responsibility and toward a larger focus on societal responsibility as essential to achieve progress (Rowland and Jones 2007). According to Obama,

for everyone, including future generations, to have a fair chance to experience the American Dream, individualism had to be teamed with shared responsibility:

The defining issue of our time is how to keep that promise alive. No challenge is more urgent. No debate is more important. We can either settle for a country where a shrinking number of people do really well while a growing number of Americans barely get by, or we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot and everyone does their fair share and everyone plays by the same set of rules... Now, a return to the American values of fair play and shared responsibility will help protect our people and our economy. (*State of the Union address, January 24, 2012*)

To oversee market relations, Obama introduced financial reforms as legal dispositives. In 2009, shortly after becoming president, he launched government efforts to secure financial markets as well as consumer trust in the marketplace. Obama announced several institutional reforms in the financial markets, including increased capitalization requirements for banks; mandating that any firm issuing asset-backed securities must purchase at least 5% of those securities itself; and establishing a Financial Services Oversight Council to assess emerging risks in the industry (Andersen 2017). Most notably, in 2010 President Obama signed into law the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, with a wide-ranging goal of regulating the financial markets. This law protected consumers from predatory lending practices by prohibiting mortgage originators from steering consumers to loans that consumers lacked the ability to repay reasonably. Section 1403 of the law barred “abusive or unfair lending practices that promote disparities among consumers of equal credit-worthiness but of different race, ethnicity, gender, or age.” Moreover, the new legislation created a new agency with the authority to examine and enforce consumer protection regulations, provide understandable information to the public, and collect and respond to consumer complaints.

Obama’s liberal policies and his attempts to reconcile individual autonomy with equality won wide praise from those who felt that the financial sector needed to be restrained. Like Henry’s (2010) liberal informants, Obama believed individual consumers should act responsibly by obtaining only loans that they could afford and by spending within their budgets, but he also emphasized the importance of government regulation in securing fair market practices:

It is past time for rules that are fair and transparent. And that’s why I’ve called for a set of new principles to reform our credit card industry. Instead of an anything-goes approach, we need strong and reliable protections for consumers. Instead of fine print that hides the truth, we need credit card forms and statements that have plain language in plain sight, and we need to give people the tools they need to find a credit card that meets their needs. And instead of abuse

that goes unpunished, we need to strengthen monitoring, enforcement, and penalties for credit card companies that take advantage of ordinary Americans. (*Weekly address, May 9, 2009*)

Obama’s financial reforms often faced stiff opposition in both the Congress and public discourse, since the political myths of individual autonomy and social equality exist in tension (Henry 2010). Libertarians who see government regulation as infringing on individual freedom interpreted increased financial regulations as telling corporations how to conduct their business. As evidenced by the following quote, President Obama viewed government intervention as a way to ensure that the free market was working:

I think it is entirely appropriate for the government to have some oversight role to make sure that consumers are protected. So banks—and any business in America—can price their products any way they want. That’s how the free market works, as long as there’s transparency and accountability and consumers understand what they’re getting. (*News conference, October 6, 2011*)

The new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) represented part of President Obama’s attempt to safeguard consumers’ rights in the marketplace. The CFPB regulated the markets to protect American consumers from subprime mortgages, as well as making sure consumers were not tricked into agreeing to loans with incomprehensible conditions or hidden terms. As Obama announced in his January 24, 2012, State of the Union address, “The days of signing people up for products they can’t afford with confusing forms and deceptive practices” were over, and “American consumers finally have a watchdog in [CFPB director] Richard Cordray, with one job: to look out for them.”

Obama’s security dispositives worked toward ensuring active participation of citizen-consumers in the market through securing the frame of neoliberalism, albeit while calling for more responsibility on part of the banks and corporations as well as citizen-consumers. As the organizing principle of the market needs to be “carefully and artificially constructed” (Foucault 2008, 120), when that organizing principle came under threat, Obama justified government intervention as a way to secure the rules of the game so as to avoid further financial damage to the citizen-consumer subject. The much-debated bailout of the financial institutions and homeowners through the Troubled Asset Release Program (TARP), for instance, was justified to avoid “an even greater calamity for the country as a whole” (President’s Weekly Address, January 16, 2010). During Obama’s administration TARP committed \$475 billion to programs that included bailouts for auto manufacturers such as Chrysler and General Motors and companies such as the American Insurance Group to prevent their collapse, which, as Obama noted, would have been

devastating to the financial markets and the economy (<https://www.treasury.gov/initiatives/financial-stability/TARP-Programs>). Under TARP Obama also introduced credit market programs targeted to restart the flow of credit to consumers, which would allow the citizen-consumer subject to remain an active participant in the economy: “To restore the availability of affordable loans for families and businesses—not just banks—we are taking steps to restart the flow of credit and stabilize the financial markets. On Thursday, the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve launched the Consumer and Business Lending Initiative, a plan that will generate up to a trillion dollars of new lending so that families can finance a car or college education” (Weekly Address, March 7, 2009).

Furthermore, TARP initiated programs to help struggling homeowners avoid foreclosure. While libertarians maintained that responsibility to manage marketplace risks fell to the individual, Obama justified the government intervention to help out corporations as well as individual consumers by citing the broader systemic consequences of the government intervention.

To prevent foreclosures for as many as 4 million homeowners and lower interest rates and lift home values for millions more, we are implementing a plan to allow lenders to work with borrowers to refinance or restructure their mortgages...

We’ve acted aggressively to jump-start credit for families and businesses, including small businesses, which have seen an increase in lending of 73%.

We’ve taken steps to stem the tide of foreclosures, modifying mortgages to help hundreds of thousands of responsible homeowners keep their homes and help millions more sustain the value in their homes...which not only helps folks hit hardest by the downturn but also encourages the consumer spending that will help turn the economy around. (Weekly Address, October 31, 2009)

As the housing market crashed in 2008, the American Dream came into question one more time. The 2008 financial crisis had forced Americans to realize, Obama suggested, that when the market and financial systems are left to operate in a laissez-faire mode, the balance between market actors can shift in undesirable ways, with Wall Street gaining more benefits at the expense of ordinary citizens. In contrast to the entrepreneur as *homo oeconomicus*, as the main consumer subjectivity promoted in the 1980s during Reagan’s administration, Obama stressed that ordinary citizens lacked the necessary skills to optimize their own human capital or financial investments. Therefore, state intervention was justified to create a milieu in which consumers could make better financial decisions as well as where big corporations could not take advantage of the

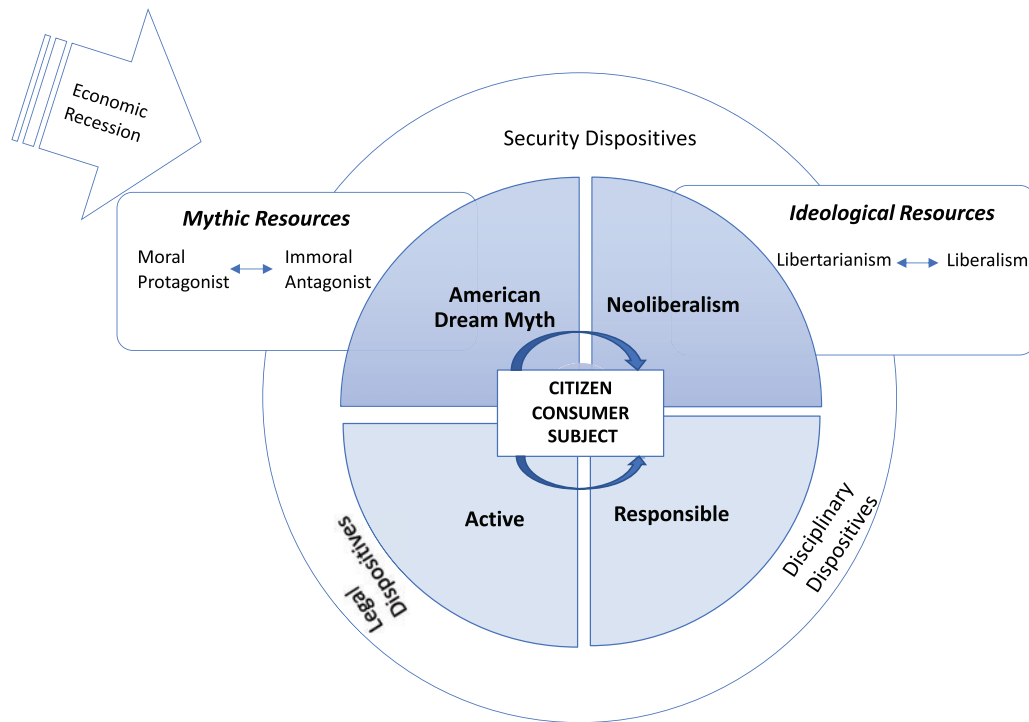
neoliberal system. Modifications and reinforcements of market relations were in order, not to promote competition and entrepreneurial behavior, as Reagan had advocated, but to ensure a fair market where hopeful, resilient, and responsible citizen-consumers can thrive.

DISCUSSION

This study brought sociological theory of governmentality to bear on a longitudinal analysis of American presidential speeches to theorize the formation of the citizen-consumer subject. Culminating from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data, I theorize the forming the citizen-consumer subject as a governmentality process that merges national myth and political ideology in a particular rendering of moral values toward addressing the economic and political goals of the state. The presidents iteratively link the neoliberal political ideology and the national myth of the American Dream through a sophisticated morality play myth, where they cast the citizen-consumer as a responsible and active moral hero on a journey to achieve American Dream. They use the disciplinary dispositive to define the moral qualities of the citizen-consumer subject, which consistently emphasizes responsibility as the key moral value (albeit meshed with liberal values of fairness and social equality during Democrat presidential terms, and more libertarian values of freedom and voluntarism during Republican ones). The presidents employ the legal dispositive to further materialize the creation of the citizen-consumer as an active and responsible subject with policies, bills, and regulations. Finally, they mobilize the security dispositive to manage the citizen-consumer as an active participant in the marketplace (see [figure 2](#) for a visual representation of the theoretical model).

The 40-year analysis of the governmentality process of the creation of consumer subjectivities offers novel insights on the functioning of American neoliberalism and implications for how we understand the consumer culture as well as consumer subjectivities. Prior consumer studies have tended to assume neoliberal ideology and national mythology operate naturally together, or have not explicitly addressed it ([Giesler and Veresiu 2014](#); [Veresiu and Giesler 2018](#)). In his *Lectures on Biopolitics*, [Foucault \(2007\)](#) reflects on how the historical and political conditions after World War II caused different forms of neoliberalism to emerge in Germany and the United States; German Ordoliberals adopted a more restricted sense of the economic logic and its applicability to all spheres of culture, while American neoliberals embraced a more radical version, applying it to diverse areas of human life such as the education of children, the treatment of crime, and the support of the family ([Becker 1996](#)). The conceptual addition of this current analysis is to illustrate how, in the

FIGURE 2
FORMATION OF THE CITIZEN-CONSUMER SUBJECT



aftermath of the 1980s, American neoliberalism was linked to the national mythology of the American Dream in a particular rendering of moral values toward addressing the economic and political goals of the state. The governmentality process not only works toward creating a framework for the society to function for and as a market (Foucault 2008), but also works through enrollment of national mythology. This particular link is important because it underlies the mechanism through which the nation state formulates consumption as a structure wherein consumers' identity projects are situated (Baudrillard 1970/1998). Arnould and Thompson (2005, 869) refer to this structure as a "social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through *markets*." The current analysis reveals the cultivation of consumer culture at the state level as a specific set of social arrangements as well as consumer subjectivities to address the lived experiences of the economic downturns, through (re)creating neoliberal assessments and management of populations and meaningful ways of life (American Dream) and distribution of the resources (tax reliefs, welfare regulations, homeownership incentives) on which citizen-consumers depend.

This observation confirms what other social scientists observe with regards to culturalization of economy and economization of culture (Foucault 2008; Lazzarato 2015) and what Foucault refers to as the "economic state" and the "economization of society." As the findings explicated, the American Dream was cast predominantly as increased participation in the market (through either spending tax monies or buying a house), albeit with some consideration of equality of access from different social class groups (e.g., tax relief introduced to lower-class families during Clinton's presidency and mortgage relief given to families in danger of losing their homes during Obama's). Overall, U.S. consumer culture was cast within the American Dream myth (with its corresponding ideals of abundance and equality) and neoliberal ideology (economic evaluation of welfare), which relies on active, responsible, and moral citizen-consumer subjects. Due to the unfailing emphasis on economic growth in the past four decades, especially during times of recession, the citizen-consumer subjects were called to be active in spending and were incentivized through tax cuts, reduction of welfare programs, and homeownership initiatives.

The theoretical contributions of this study to past consumer research are threefold. First, the current study offers extensions to the nascent scholarship on consumer

subjectivities, which has begun to investigate the relationship between consumers and their institutional contexts (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Karababa and Ger 2011; Veresiu and Giesler 2018) by theorizing the formation of the citizen-consumer subject. The insights on active consumer-subject position offered in this study extend prior studies that have conceptualized consumers' citizenship roles in voting with their pockets by consuming ethically either through opting out of conventional market services (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), boycotting global brands such as Starbucks or Nike (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004), or challenging dominant state discourse (Karababa and Ger 2011). While consumers can enact their citizenship roles by actively choosing their leisurely practices of patronizing coffee houses and choosing ethical brands, this study demonstrates that in the contemporary postmodern society, citizen and consumer identities become interlinked as the neoliberal state prescribes an active consumer subject who continuously spends (c.f. Baudrillard 1970/1998) to ensure economic growth. This insight also supports the empirical findings of Peñaloza and Barnhart (2011) that American consumers' articulations of their subject positions are embedded within the cultural legacy of abundance. The authors find that American consumers' "use of credit/debt entails a compelling form of work, perhaps even a nascent patriotism, that are both implicated in the normalization of credit/debt" (758). What I suggest is that this particular interpretation can be linked to the state discourse and policies in the last decades with American presidents as key normalization agents.

My theory of the formation of the citizen-consumer subject also underlines how the responsible citizen-consumer subject is linked to the state's political and economic goals. Just as the neoliberal logic of the World Economic Forum views responsible consumers as a solution to a wide range of problems, including health and the environment (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), and the Canadian government hopes to ease ethnic differences through its envisioned form of the ethnic consumer subject (Veresiu and Giesler 2018), American presidents advocated for a variety of citizen-consumer subject positions as a complement or solution to the limitations and shortcomings of the neoliberal market system. As economic recessions resulting from stagnation, globalization, low investment, and instability in financial markets have disrupted the American Dream, the government reformulated its relational contract with the citizen-consumer subject and proposed new subject positions.

The longitudinal analysis presented here also extends understanding of the formation of the responsible consumer subject theorized by Giesler and Veresiu (2014). Giesler and Veresiu (2014) observed that the neoliberal logic of shared responsibility remained a resilient narrative structure for the management of economic recessions. My longitudinal analysis reveals that responsibility is not the

sole moral value to support this narrative structure; rather, it is supplemented by other moral values such as freedom, voluntarism, opportunity, community, and fairness as a strategy of rendering individual subjects responsible. For example, disciplinary dispositives called for responsible and free consumers ready to embrace voluntarism in the 1980s; opportunity, community, and responsibility in the 1990s; responsibility, compassion, and conservatism in the 2000s; and resilient, responsible citizen-consumers who can trust in the fairness of markets in the 2010s. Reagan's neoliberal mythology cast citizen-consumers as moral protagonists who do not rely on the government to solve their problems, but instead organize and create their own market solutions. Similarly, in Clinton's vision, citizen-consumer subjects should not expect the government to offer limitless welfare benefits but should take responsibility for themselves, including willingness to work. Such active citizens were then expected to become productive workers and consumers within the national economy rather than economic burdens. However, government was involved as a partner to ensure equal opportunity for all and to help less privileged communities participate in the American Dream. Bush's reformulation, on the other hand, called for compassionate and voluntary citizen-consumer subjects as a part of responsabilization of faith-based communities as well as active subjects who sought the American Dream especially through homeownership. Finally, Obama's interpretation of neoliberal mythology called for hopeful and resilient citizen-consumer subject who believed in the American Dream of hard work and equal opportunity for "ordinary citizens." The legal dispositives applied during the Obama years conflated both neoliberal and liberal perspectives, expecting educated consumers to fulfill their individual responsibility for budget management and financial literacy but using the levers of government to ensure fair market practices.

The investigation of the ways in which economic recovery programs are rhetorically imbued with the myth of the American Dream contributes to extant consumer research on myths and ideologies. Most consumer research has conceptualized myths as resources for consumers' identity projects (Holt 2004; Thompson 2004). Recent work has pointed out that, in addition to providing meanings and metaphors, myths serve ideological agendas (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Thompson 2004; Zhao and Belk 2008). Most notably, Giesler and Veresiu (2014, 853), in their enlightening study, argue that "marketplace mythologies serve to naturalize culturally constituted systems of consumption within particular social settings and time periods." Zhao and Belk (2008), meanwhile, have documented China's ideological transition from a communist regime to a consumer society. Their analysis of Chinese advertising reveals that the tensions between these rival ideologies were bridged by ideological strategies of decontextualization and reconfiguration of political symbols.

Zhao and Belk's interpretation implies, and the present study makes explicit, that this reconfiguration involves culling from national mythology. As Cohen (2003) observed, mass consumption and being a good U.S. citizen have remained tightly intertwined over the past four decades. Earlier, in postwar America, mass production and consumption were positioned as means to a better and more egalitarian life and linked to a sense of national superiority over the communist Soviet Union (Cohen 2003). However, in the past four decades consumer subjectivity has been positioned as a means to overcome stagnation, globalization, low investment, and financial crisis. American presidents deployed the myth of the American Dream as a resilient narrative structure to support neoliberal political ideology. I show also that while the government's solution to economic recessions remained essentially the same—that is, constituting citizen-consumers who are united around the national mythology of the American Dream—the moral values and the proposed social contract between the government and its citizen-consumers varied considerably across the four presidential terms. The Republican presidents held libertarian positions linking responsibility with freedom and voluntarism. Democrat presidents, on the other hand, held more liberal positions that sought an accommodation between autonomy and use of government regulation to protect more vulnerable consumers.

Finally, by examining how the state mobilizes national myths and values in its marketplace actions, this study contributes to consumer research on morality and consumption. Past consumer research has documented the ways in which consumers draw from moral discourses in their identity projects. Notably, Luedicke et al. (2011, 1028) propose that “consumers’ moralistic identity projects are articulated within the nexus of mythic structure, ideological tensions, and marketplace resources.” Their analysis of the dynamics between Hummer adversaries and enthusiasts reveals the mythic and ideological tensions underlying this moralistic identity work, as consumers invoke contrasting sets of ideological meanings (e.g., American exceptionalism vs. a jeremiad against consumerism) to validate their consumption practices. Henry's (2010) work on consumer rights has also documented how consumers’ judgment of self and others was based on the political ideologies of libertarianism and liberalism. Karababa and Ger's (2011) study on the emergence of the coffeehouse culture illustrated how the consumer subject constructed self-ethics while navigating conflicting discourses of Sufi Islam, Orthodox Islam, health, and pleasure. The theoretical addendum I offer to this body of research is to show how the nation state articulates moral discourses. I show that the moral citizen-consumer subject is called upon to help address economic and political goals.

The current study also offers implications regarding how consumers’ moral habitus are potentially shaped by the state. In a study on morality and consumption, Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) draw attention to the moral habitus in

consumers’ identity projects, shaping their aspirations, goals, and evaluations of themselves and others. The authors portray the distinct moral conceptions that stratify social life among the working poor in the United States. The distinctions among these moral habitus arise as consumers draw from a range of social discourses, including the Protestant work ethic, consumerism, and community solidarity. For example, in Saatcioglu and Ozanne's study, the “Nesters” are described as subscribing to the Protestant work ethic and believe that they can achieve success through hard work and personal initiative. The “Community Builders,” on the other hand, value hard work but also fairness and responsibility. I extend this line of research on how morality influences consumers’ identity work by further explicating the mythic resources made salient to consumers through presidential discourse. The moral discourses, such as the Protestant ethic and communitarianism, that inform consumers’ moral habitus (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013) can be linked to the disciplinary dispositives employed by American presidents over the course of 40 years. Also important to note is how these moral discourses were tied to the material lives of consumers via legal and security dispositives.

Furthermore, whereas previous research has noted how moral dispositions underlie consumers’ brand relations and social relations, my study also highlights what kind of political-economic goals they can serve beyond consumers’ identity projects. Weber's classic work explained how the Protestant work ethic was an important force behind the emergence of modern capitalism. Similarly, scholars note neoliberal capitalism rests on “free and fair” competition between market actors, in which the state has a duty to maintain the market order (Amable 2011). Following this tradition, I posit that the government continuously links moral values to markets. More significantly, for the neoliberal market system to work, the state cannot restrict itself to ensuring free and fair competition but also must shape consumer subjectivities to support the system.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Building on Foucault's notion of governmentality, this work has investigated how American presidents addressed disruptions of the American Dream through the application of disciplinary, legal, and security dispositives and constructed citizen-consumer subject positions as a solution to these disruptions.

While this study documented the governmentality process where the possible field of action of citizen-consumers was structured, governmentality process includes governing through technologies of domination, as well as methods of governing the self (Lemke 2001; Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006). Therefore, future research could explore

how the formulation of the American Dream is perceived and acted upon by consumers of different social classes and ethnic groups. Cohen's (2003) historical analysis of the evolution of citizen-consumers, for example, shows how the home mortgages, credit and tax advantages, and new shopping centers of what she called the "Consumers' Republic" did not necessarily lead to an egalitarian society; on the contrary, they reinforced ethnic, social class, and gender stratifications. Picking up where Cohen off, this study illustrates the governmentality processes that integrate the national mythology of the American Dream with neoliberal political ideology so as to constitute citizen-consumer subjectivities. Future research could explore the material effects of the governmentality process described in this article, or the kinds of citizen-consumer subjectivities constructed in different fields. What kinds of power relations are citizen-consumers enmeshed in (among the state, brands, and other institutional actors)? How are disciplinary discourses adopted by different market and state actors in education, finance, or health care (e.g., Obamacare)? Consequently, how do people understand their roles as citizen-consumers in these fields, and how does their understanding inform the way in which they view their rights and responsibilities?

On a final note, this analysis has important implications regarding how to construct alternative citizen-consumer modalities or reimagine the American Dream. Although neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology in the U.S. and most of the world, critiques have pointed out the persistently unequal distribution of income and wealth, the effects of deregulation on the environment, the impact of the privatization of public services on overall consumer well-being, and the political disempowerment of the middle and lower classes (Klein 2007; Monbiot 2016; Sayer 2015). As the accessibility of the American Dream is increasingly questioned in today's political-economic environment, my analysis offers a useful framework from which to imagine alternative economic models and ideologies, as well as to construct and legitimate alternative consumer subjectivities, including some that may depart from the currently prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The author collected the data and supervised the collection of archival data by research assistants at Chapman University between 2012 and 2015. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted by the author.

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