Framing Deregulation: The Language of Trump's Environmental Executive Orders and Speeches

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Abstract

This study examines how language in the executive orders and environmental-focused speeches of Donald Trump from 2017-2025 is used to frame issues associated with energy and the environment. Topic modeling was not useful due to the repetitive and bureaucratic language, so a dictionary-based approach was used. The contained terms in the dictionary included climate, energy, regulation, and economy. The analysis revealed an emphasis on energy production and economic growth, with a few mentions of climate change or environmental regulation. The results may offer evidence of the strategic language leveraged to promote fossil fuel interests and rationalize deregulation. Overall, the results demonstrate a pattern of dominant language around the development of fossil fuels while collaterally sacrificing environmental protections.

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Federal environmental and energy policy regulations have shifted markedly since 1990 in the United States of America. Historically, the dominance of fossil fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas has shaped global energy consumption patterns. Presently, fossil fuels account for over 80% of the global energy supply, a trend which has persisted for decades (Fu & Tang, 2020; Lubitz & Tumas, 2007).

Early policies of the 1990s relied heavily on international commitments such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and proposals for cap-and-trade. Contrastingly, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the United States moved away from international accords after the Kyoto Protocol was rejected (Selin & VanDeveer, 2020). Beginning in 2007, policies slowly began to change.

In the landmark case Massachusetts v. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), the Supreme Court ruled that greenhouse gases were recognized as "air pollutants" under the Clean Air Act and subsequently, states could sue the EPA for its failure to regulate them (Justia, 2007). As such, the EPA was prompted to implement regulations to directly address and curb greenhouse gas emissions. Between 2009 and 2016, the United States' policy landscape combined several environmental perspectives, which led to strengthened domestic regulations. For example, support for the Paris Agreement has helped countries put forward their climate commitments by ensuring that all participating nations are and have done their part to not only reduce emissions but also adapt to the increasingly concerning effects and consequences of climate change. However, in the most recent years, specifically 2017-2025, there is a trend toward deregulation, withdrawal from several international agreements, and a rollback on EPA actions (Selin & VanDeveer, 2020).

Since his running as a presidential candidate and election as the highest position in the United States, Donald Trump has made clear that he supports a significant shift in United States energy policy during his presidential campaign, advocating for a pronounced pivot towards fossil fuels, reductions in regulation measures, and a diminishment of initiatives promoting renewable energy. He rationalizes these visions as essential for lowering energy expenses, attaining "energy dominance", and enhancing the global competitiveness of American industries. This approach includes the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change and the relaxation of regulations governing oil and gas extraction.

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To lay the foundation for these policies, the energy landscape in the United States currently is relatively stable, yet discussions continue regarding the nation's hydrocarbon reserves and extraction techniques ("An Overview of the USA Energy Market", 2023). The United States possesses considerable potential for renewable energy, with solar energy alone capable of exceeding total energy by a factor of 440, and wind energy potential estimated to be estimated to be three times the annual electricity usage. Nevertheless, challenges related to intermittency and energy storage persist (Cole et al., 2021). As the world's largest energy consumer, the economic stability of the United States is intricately linked to the availability of affordable energy as evidenced by previous crises such as those associated with rising oil prices (Shang et al., 2022). On a positive note, renewable energy sources like hydroelectric, biomass, and geothermal are being commercially developed and have the capacity to meet approximately half of the nation's energy requirements (Cole et al., 2021). With advancements in efficiency and technology, it is possible that the United States' energy demands could be satisfied predominantly or entirely through renewable sources (Shang et al., 2022).

Executive orders are influential instruments for Presidents in the United States' policy sphere. Previous studies have shown that presidents employ executive orders to encourage and initiate significant policy changes and bypass legislative hurdles (Kennedy, 2014). For example, Warber (2006) and Mayer & Price (2002) have documented how executive orders trigger major policy initiatives. Likewise, executive orders often precede legislative proposals (Dickison & Gubb, 2016).

In Trump's first term in office back in 2016, his executive orders and regulatory agenda had significantly impacted environmental and energy policies, particularly through deregulation efforts (Geltman, 2018). Certain orders, such as EO 13783 (Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth) have favored fossil fuel exploration and production by easing regulatory constraints, reviewing the Clean Power Plan, and streamlining the approval processes for oil and gas production (Guliyev, 2020). In addition, the effectiveness of executive orders in shaping policy can be attributed to their ability to circumvent traditional bureaucratic processes. As an example, the use of executive orders allows presidents to implement policies quickly in response to imminent environmental challenges (Arababadi et al., 2017). Generally speaking, studies have suggested that executive orders shape future policy implementation and direct action.

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The ability to issue executive orders provides the president with a powerful tool to enact their environmental and energy agendas, especially when legislative avenues are blocked. However, the transitory nature of executive orders poses challenges for long-term policy stability. Future administrations can revoke and/or amend previous executive orders, which lead to fluctuations in environmental policy direction (Shapiro, 2022). At their most impactful, Donald Trump's executive orders could pave the way for the review, replacement, or reversal of several regulations implemented in the Obama and Biden administrations. Samples of this include the Clean Power Rule, the New Source Performance Standards Subparts for the oil and gas sectors, greenhouse gas standards for both existing and new power plants, mandatory regulations on zero-emission for motor vehicles, and waivers for states, like California, which are seeking to adopt more stringent motor vehicle emission controls than those allowed in the Clean Air Pact (US EPA, 2016). There are agencies already taking steps. One such agency, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), on January 24, 2025, terminated the 2021 proceedings specifically aimed at mitigating the impact of natural gas infrastructure projects on climate change (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, 2025). Given this information, it is important to gain clarity on what Trump intends to legally do with environmental policy, specifically that of the energy sector in the United States.

As such, the purpose of this study is to investigate the language incorporated in the environmental executive orders issued by President Donald Trump as well as environmental-focused speeches beginning at the time of his inauguration on January 20th, 2025. More specifically, the current analysis will focus on how the executive orders and speeches frame issues of environmental deregulation in the sphere of energy policy. Through an examination of language, the study ultimately aims to find out the underlying priorities and perspectives that shape Donald Trump's environmental agenda. Furthermore, the study seeks to evaluate whether the language utilized in the executive orders and speeches emphasizes energy development, especially fossil fuel production and/or infrastructure, at the cost of environmental protections and climate change considerations. In doing so, this research explores how language functions as a tool to justify and influence shifts in policy, advance particular economic interests, and stagnate the progression to a more sustainable future. In addition, the contributions of this study apply to broader branches in environmental communication, regulatory policy, and political discourse analysis through demonstrating how linguistic framing can play an important role in adapting national priorities. Through this study, the primary goals are not only to make apparent the

current administration's environmental strategy but also to bring insights into the larger implications of how language can shape environmental governance in the United States.

This study analyzed a corpus of six environmental Executive Orders and three public speeches Trump delivered starting in 2017. All documents were sourced via APIs from publicly available United States government archives and government websites. These sources include the Federal Register and the official White House website. The materials utilized in this study were published between June 1st, 2017, to March 20th, 2025 (Refer to Appendix for complete list of documents used). All text data in each of the documents was pre-processed to remove the following: headers, metadata, hyperlinks, special characters, and footers. Subsequently, the documents were converted into a corpus, then tokenized, and to ensure consistency, the text was lowercased.

The data set consisted of 7 documents (all three speeches were located in one document), including both the public speeches and executive orders. After preprocessing, the corpus had a total of 4,199 unique features. Text 1 had a total of 746 tokens, Text 2 had 619 tokens, Text 3 had 1,550 tokens, Text 4 had 2,143 tokens, Text 5 had 1,324 tokens, Text 6 had 1,551, and lastly, Text 7 had 10,642 tokens. Therefore, the total number of tokens in the corpus was 18, 575 tokens. In addition, the document-term matrix was 78.44%, suggesting most terms showed up in a subset of documents within the corpus. Moreover, some of the most frequent terms throughout the corpus were "energy", "dominance", "national", and "president". These terms suggest a reflection on themes such as authority and energy development.

To address the study's research question and hypothesis, topic modeling analysis was initially used with a specific focus on using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) via RStudio. There was considerable effort to uncover the latent themes using topic modeling, but the results were determined to be inconclusive. In fact, the language present in Trump's executive orders and environmental-related speeches was not interpretable nor produced distinct topic groupings. In other words, the algorithm seemed to struggle with identifying either a cohesive or consistent theme across the corpus. Based on this outcome, it may suggest a few things. To begin, it could be possible that the executive orders and speeches chosen for the study contain a high level of repetition, perhaps in the realms of commonplace words, bureaucratic terminology, and/or generalized political language. Given the potential presence of this uniformity across the

documents, it would be difficult for unsupervised machine learning such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to recognize distinct categories.

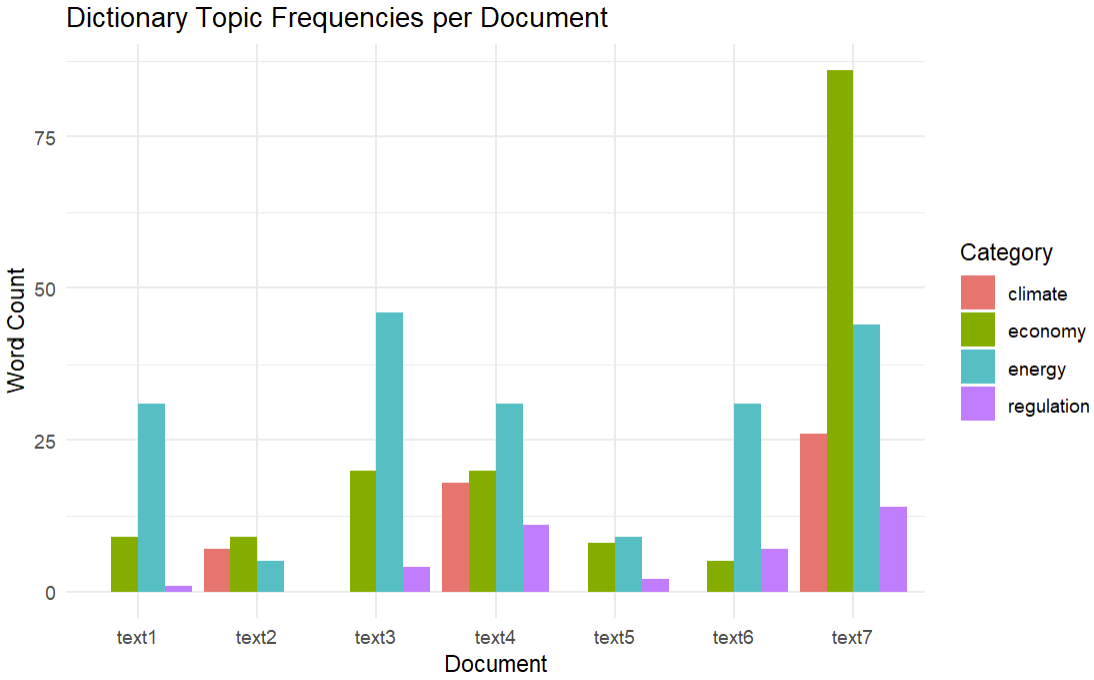
Additionally, another interpretation may be that the lack of apparent topics could reflect an intentional strategy for communication. For example, political speeches and executive orders are frequently composed to mirror a uniform message or ambiguity. Ultimately, these themes across political discourse enable interpretation flexibility. Hence, the language incorporated in the documents used for this study may be unclear, rather than uncovering distinct policies and topics in the text.

In light of the difficulties in identifying and interpreting themes presented in the corpus, in addition to the inconsistent and unreliable outcomes in the first attempt at topic modeling, a dictionary analysis was conducted to better understand the frequency of language demonstrating Donald Trump's ideas and policies in his environmental executive orders and public speeches. The analysis utilized a custom dictionary of four distinct but interrelated topics: climate, energy, regulation, and economy. Each topic had a representative linguistic term. For the topics, climate included climate, emissions, carbon, warming, and greenhouse; energy included oil, gas, fossil, drilling, pipeline, and fuel; and regulation included rollback, EPA, and compliance.

The dictionary-based analysis of the seven texts reveals some overarching thematic patterns and rhetorical prominence across Trump's environmental executive orders and public speeches. Energy terms dominated the corpus, appearing most frequently in text3 ("Declaring a National Energy Emergency") with 46 total mentions, text7 (three speeches; refer to Appendix) with 44 total mentions, and text1 ("Establishing the National Energy Dominance Council"), text4 ("Unleashing American Energy"), and text6 ("Unleashing Alaska's Extraordinary Resource Potential") each with 31 total mentions. These results reflect the linguistic emphasis the Trump administration has had on issues related to fossil fuel development, oil and gas development, and the economic infrastructure related to energy. The consistency of this theme across almost all documents is noteworthy as it not only demonstrates the centrality of energy discourse but also reflects the language even in Trump's communications related to the environment and energy.

As expected, climate terms were much less frequent and concentrated within a few texts. Encouragingly, while most of the documents contained few mentions or references, text7 and text4 had 26 and 18 mentions. This suggests that climate terms were not completely absent but

may be unambiguously secondary to energy and economy. Terms related to regulations had a similar theme, wherein text7 had the most regulation mentions at 14, text4 and text6 followed with 11 and seven terms in each document, respectively. This may suggest that deregulatory framing and/or mechanisms of policy were specifically addressed in these texts.



Last but not least, the economic language appeared in a pervasive way across all texts. However, the emphasis of each language varied. For example, the highest terms used to indicate economic consideration appeared in text3 and text4 with 20 mentions each, and the specific economic and job-producing themes took precedence and surpassed personal interest concerning the environment. The research presented in the current study identifies the ways the Trump administration leverages language strategically, not only in environmental and energy policy, but in its overall approach emphasizing fossil fuels, economic development, and deregulation.

The analysis captures elements of presidential executive orders and public speeches to indicate that language was consistent in its emphasis on "energy dominance" and national competitiveness. On the other hand, terms and phrases used by the Trump administration associated with climate change or environmental protection appeared far less often, and were occasionally of lesser importance in context. The patterns of language further suggested that policy communication may have been employed to justify environmental rollbacks, particularly in aligning with the ideation of economic necessity and industry-sector interests.

Nonetheless, there were limitations to the current study. The fairly small corpus, incorporating seven documents, was meaningful to the study's outcomes but limited generalizability to a larger population. The use of LDA for topic modeling provided insufficient value in representing the overall framing of the documents. This may have been a result of repetitiveness, bureaucratic lingo, or intentionally obscure writing, and/or distinguishing the text based on themes does not apply well to the text. The dictionary-based analysis did capture frequency but not meaningfully illustrate context and/or nuances in the language. In moving forward, future research could collect a more comprehensive corpus of data that also includes more informal communications, such as social media, interviews etc., in order to construct a more complete understanding of environmental discourse in the Trump administration.

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Appendix

Title of Document	Date Issued	Type	Source
"Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord"	June 1st 2017	Public Speech	https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/
"Remarks by President Trump on America's Environmental Leadership"	July 8th 2019	Public Speech	https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-americas-environmental-leadership/
"Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements"	January 20th, 2025	Executive Order	https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/30/2025-02010/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements
"Declaring a National Energy Emergency"	January 20th, 2025	Executive Order	https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-02003/declaring-a-national-energy-emergency
"Unleashing American Energy"	January 20th, 2025	Executive Order	https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01956/unleashing-american-energy
"Unleashing Alaska's Extraordinary Resource Potential"	January 20th, 2025	Executive Order	https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01955/unleashing-alaskas-extraordinary-resource-potential

"Establishing the National Energy Dominance Council"	February 14th, 2025	Executive Order	https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/20/2025-02928/establishing-the-national-energy-dominance-council
"Immediate Measures to Increase American Mineral Production"	March 4th, 2025	Executive Order	https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/03/25/2025-05212/immediate-measures-to-increase-american-mineral-production
"Remarks by President Trump in Joint Address to Congress"	March 20th, 2025	Public Speech	https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/03/remarks-by-president-trump-in-joint-address-to-congress/