

# The Democratic Divide: Factional Differences in Issue Frames within the Democratic Party

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**Abstract:** In 2018, the rise of the progressive faction represented a significant change to the operation of the Democratic coalition. However, we know little about how the new wave of progressive candidates altered issue conflict. Using text analysis of issue statements from over 600 Democratic primary candidates for the House of Representatives in 2018, I show significant differences between how progressive and moderate candidates frame issues. These framing differences manifest in discussion about the economy, the environment, and healthcare, but I find no differences for education and immigration. Progressive candidates are more likely to use issue frames that focus on the systematic elements of policy proposals (e.g. economic fairness, the role of large corporations, emissions, insurance companies, and pharmaceutical industry). Moderate candidates tend to focus more on the personal, practical impact of these proposals (e.g. middle- and working-class economic hardships, community preservation, and cost of healthcare). Such differences suggest both evidence of the divergent elite behavior and potential underlying divides in how voters think about political issues within the Democratic Party.

## Introduction

Senator Bernie Sanders has served the state of Vermont in Congress as both a member of the House of Representatives and the Senate since 1991. Yet his longstanding congressional service produced little national recognition. After Sanders announced his candidacy for President in May 2015, 76 percent of Americans reported having no opinion of Sanders. By September 2016, that number dropped to 8 percent.<sup>1</sup> Sanders has always been an outsider to the Democratic Party, offering policy proposals far to the left of most Democrats. His presidential bid, however, brought him and his policy proposals a significant amount of attention. In both the 2018 and 2020 congressional elections, a number of candidates running on policy proposals in line with Sanders won races in the Democratic primary.

The increased importance of the progressive faction within the Democratic Party represents a significant challenge to the party's more establishment and moderate wing. As such, understanding the similarities and differences in their approach and their supporters is an important endeavor. As for similarities, it seems both factions tend to support a liberal approach to governance, as government plays a central role in their policy proposals. Both factions also seem to emphasize the same issues. My suspicion is that the difference between factions lies in the ambition and considerations brought forward with their initiatives. For example, the moderate faction is content to build on existing programs and structures. The progressive faction, in contrast, believes old frameworks are inadequate and pursue fundamental changes to existing systems. If I am correct, that suggests that differences in issue framing between the two factions on the same issues ought to exist. The purpose of this thesis is to identify how progressive Democrats differ from moderate Democrats in how they talk about issues.

Using text analysis from over 600 congressional primary candidates' websites, I show significant differences in how progressive and moderate Democratic candidates frame issues.

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<sup>1</sup>Mccarthy, Justin. 2018. "Americans Maintain a Positive View of Bernie Sanders." *Gallup*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/243539/americans-maintain-positive-view-bernie-sanders.aspx>

Specifically, the differences in framing manifest themselves across issue statements in several policy domains, namely the economy, the environment, and healthcare. Progressive candidates more often frame policy problems as systemic in nature, and their solutions border on the Utopian. Moderate candidates, on the other hand, more often frame the same problems in more personal terms and their solutions tend toward the more practical and pragmatic. It would seem that progressive candidates are attempting to attract constituents who see problems as rooted in larger forces, while moderates are simply offering practical assistance to those in need of it. These results carry significant implications for understanding the differences between progressive and moderate Democrats at both the elite and voter level.

The thesis proceeds as follows: in the first section, I make the case for why differences in issue framing is a substantively important elite-level behavior for understanding how progressives challenged the Democratic status quo. I next discuss the empirical tools I use to study the phenomenon – candidate websites and issue statements provide an environment for studying framing differences. Using content analysis and keyword assisted topic models, I analyze the differences in frame prevalence for issue statements on the economy, education, the environment, healthcare, and immigration. The results reveal clear differences in framing when it comes to the economy, the environment, and healthcare. I conclude by discussing the implications the differences in framing have on understanding the competing forces at work within the Democratic party.

## **Issue Evolution and Strategic Elites**

Electoral winners possess a strategic incentive to maintain the status quo of issue conflict. If the issues that defined the prior election remain salient (both across parties or, as I will argue, within a party), it is advantageous for those in office. They won on these issues before and probably will again. As a result, losers of the previous election have the incentive to

bring new issues to light (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). While this logic has been applied to inter-party conflict in the past, it ought to apply similarly to intra-party conflict.

Bernie Sanders and the progressive faction occupied the outer edges of the Democratic Party until 2016. To gain traction in the Democratic Party, the progressive faction needed to gain attention and offer a competing vision. Sanders presidential run accomplished both. Although Sanders himself failed to unseat the moderate wing in 2016, he brought new and greater attention to the way progressives might approach different policies. Starting in 2018, candidates began to channel Sanders' policy positions as they ran under the progressive label, with some defeating Democratic incumbents in contested primaries. Most notably, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley defeated sitting Democratic incumbents who had both served in Congress for decades. Sanders strong showing combined with these victories suggests the progressive faction has been successful in altering the status quo within the Democratic party.

If we were to apply the issue evolution framework to intra-party competition, it would suggest that Sanders and the progressive faction raised new issues that divided the party. In practice, however, this does not appear to be the case. The 2016 presidential primaries and the 2018 congressional primaries did not give rise to new political issues. Conflict occurred on familiar policies, with media coverage focusing on economic policy, healthcare, trade policy, and the tax system.<sup>2</sup> More recent coverage of the intra-party divide has highlighted similar issues as the crux of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> The Democratic Party, then, is not experiencing an issue evolution in which new issues are displacing an old divide. Rather, I argue the former outsiders are challenging moderate candidates in a different way, namely by framing issues differently and bringing new considerations forward.

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<sup>2</sup>Prokop, Andrew. 2015. "The 6 biggest policy differences between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton." *Vox* <https://www.vox.com/2015/5/1/8530439/bernie-sanders-hillary-differences>

<sup>3</sup>Herndon, Astead W., and Adam Nagourney. 2021. "An Early Test for Biden: Managing a Divided Democratic Party." *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/09/us/politics/democratic-party-joe-biden.html>

## Issue Framing

Conceptually, issue framing is the process through which political elites emphasize certain considerations that are attached to an issue. People can think about the same issue in many different ways. For example, a protest can be “a First Amendment right” or a “threat to law and order.” How politicians talk about an issue can affect public support because different frames cause individuals to focus on different considerations when forming opinions (Druckman and Nelson, 2003). Most important for an intra-party competition, frames can have significant influence on public opinion when they are congruent with underlying attitudes. For example, when voters are presented with an economic frame rooted in compassion and opportunity, the effect of the frame is stronger among those who value economic equality (Sniderman and Theriault, 2018).

Identifying intra-party fault lines within the Democratic coalition may help identify which frames might resonate with which types of Democrats. Building on Hetherington and Weiler’s (2009) analysis that revealed that Obama and Clinton supporters possessed different worldviews in 2008, Wronski et al. (2018) found similar differences between Sanders and Clinton voters in 2016. Clinton’s supporters scored much higher in authoritarianism than Sanders’ supporters. Because Democratic primary voters are divided in their worldviews (Wronski et al., 2018), it presents a potential basis for considering the importance of different issue frames. One important manifestation of differing worldviews is that it affects the way in which people think about problems. Hetherington and Weiler (2018) find that those with more fixed, conservative worldviews tend to consider politics in more personal terms. In contrast, those with more fluid, progressive worldviews seem to consider politics in more systemic terms. It seems likely that progressives and moderates are choosing issue frames to appeal to the way their supporters think about political matters. As such, the way candidates frame issues stands as a potential mechanism for how voters have been sorted into the relevant factions if there are differences in framing along these considerations.

It is important to note that issue framing should be seen as distinct from explicit policy proposals in explaining why there are differences in worldviews among each faction. Even with progressives bringing forth policies that can be seen as more appealing to fluid worldviews, the general ideological innocence of the American public makes it unlikely explicit policy is what has attracted these voters (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017). By framing issues differently, progressive candidates are changing the nature of the issue conflict by appealing to underlying worldviews as opposed to distinct ideologies in voters. With this in mind, I examine the degree to which the progressive and moderate wings of the Democratic party adopt different issue frames in talking about the same issues.

## Data

To examine differences in framing between progressives and moderates, I use campaign website issue statements from 2018 Democratic primary candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives. As a part of modern campaign, the majority of congressional primary candidates have campaign websites (Porter, McDonald and Treul, 2021) where they publish detailed issue statements that are directly from the campaign and cover a range of issues (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin, 2009). Candidates are not limited to space and time constraints like they would in other public-facing spaces (Schneider, 2014). Not all voters will come in contact with these websites, but they provide a context in which candidates can discuss issues in the way they desire. The rhetoric on these websites reflects candidate behavior and how candidates want present themselves more broadly (McDonald, Porter and Treul, 2020).

Porter, McDonald and Treul (2021) collect issue position text for every candidate with an official campaign website that ran in a 2018 congressional primary. In total, 1,334 of the 1,938 candidates (68.8 percent) had both a campaign website and issue position statements. Issue statements were collected using a mix of web scraping and manual downloading. As part of the data collection, coders classified the issue text under each subheading into one of 23

categories. I focus on five policy areas: the economy, education, the environment, healthcare, and immigration. I chose these specific policy domains for few reasons. First, these issues had high issue salience among Democratic leaning voters in the 2016 election, suggesting they were potential areas where issue conflict occurred during the primary.<sup>4</sup> Second, a majority of candidates running in the Democratic primary had issue statements on these five policy domains, showing elites were appealing to voters along these dimensions.

There is a potential concern about selection effects, given that not all candidates provide issue statements on every issue. It would be possible, for example, that progressive candidates talk about issues related to climate change, and the omission of moderate candidates would bias results. Empirically, this appears not to be a concern. Table 1 displays summary statistics for all Democratic candidates with websites as well as the same summary statistics for candidates who discuss each policy area. The average CF Score, which is a measure of candidate ideology, is slightly more liberal than the broader population of candidates with websites for every issue other than education. However, based on a two-sided difference of means t-test, candidates talking about each issue do not differ from all Democratic candidates with websites ( $p$  value  $\geq .3$  for each issue). The same goes for candidate experience. Although the pool of candidates talking about each issue dimension is slightly more inexperienced than all Democratic candidates with websites, the differences are not large enough to conclude the groups are statistically different ( $p$  value  $\geq .3$  for each issue).

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<sup>4</sup>Winston, David. 2017. Placing Priority: How Issues Mattered More than Demographics in the 2016 Election. *Voter Study Group*. <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publication/placing-priority>

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Candidates with Issue Statements

Issue Domain	N	Mean CF Score	CF Score SD	Percent Experienced
All Candidates	617	-1.33	0.59	27.3
Economy	544	-1.34	0.53	25.7
Education	488	-1.33	0.55	25.3
Environment	444	-1.38	0.51	25.5
Healthcare	560	-1.36	0.56	24.5
Immigration	331	-1.37	0.53	24.3

## Methods

To assess the extent to which moderate and progressive candidates frame issues differently, I used a combination of small-sample content analysis as well as keyword assisted topic models. The content analysis is necessary because, prior to this study, there was little evidence of what predefined frames may exist among Democratic candidates. If I fail to consider frames that do exist, a deductive approach would overlook their prevalence (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).

When predefined frames do not exist, inductive approaches to content analysis are advantageous. In the study of framing in media, inductive approaches involve reading news stories to reveal a universe of possible frames with loosely defined preconceptions of them. Although labor intensive and only possible for small samples, the approach makes it possible to detect the range of possible issue frames. It also reduces the possibility of overlooking some frames that might not have been considered prior to analysis (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).

For the purposes of this study, I applied an inductive approach to a randomly selected five percent of issue statements from each policy domain. Within each issue dimension, two to three issue frames were identified that a majority of candidates used in their statements.



Although no empirical results come from the analytical process, it serves an important step in identifying the predefined frames that can then be assessed at a larger scale.

In analyzing frame prevalence among candidates at a larger scale, I use a keyword assisted topic model (keyATM). KeyATM is advantageous over other topic model approaches given topics and keywords are determined prior to analysis. Fully automated topic models often yield results that lack substantive interpretability (Eshima, Imai and Sasaki, 2020). Further, keywords can be selected with a focus on words that define frames rather than words that are explicitly policy focused.

I selected keywords for each issue frame using content analysis of the same five percent of issue statements where frames were previously identified. After the inductive approach, I applied a deductive approach to identify the existence of frames in each issue statement (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). From there, I identified keywords that substantively represent the frame in each issue statement where it was present. I then selected keywords for the model from the prior step with the intent to cover different dimensions of the issue frame. For example, when it comes to the economy, one of the identified frames was a fairness frame. Different dimensions of this frame ranged from explicitly discussing a fairer economy more generally to wealthy and corporations paying their fair share. As a result, keywords for the fairness frame focus on fairness more explicitly as well as discussions about corporations, inequality, the poor, and the wealthy.

I selected six to eleven keywords to define the specific issue frames. These keywords, along with the issue text, were cleaned to remove any numbers, symbols, or punctuation while also only keeping the stems of words. All keywords, as well as frame labels, are included in Table 2. The issue domain each frame comes from is included in parentheses. A more complete discussion of the content in the frames is included in the subsequent sections.

Table 2: Issue Frames and Keywords

Frame (Issue Domain)	Keywords
Fairness (Economy)	corpor, fair, inequ, pay, poor, rich, stock, wage, wealth
Middle Class (Economy)	busi, dream, famili, growth, job, local, middl, invest, small, work
Access (Education)	access, avail, everi, expand, opportun, univers
Quality (Education)	best, fund, invest, perform, qualiti, standard, succeed
Community Preservation (Environment)	air, clean, natur, preserv, protect, water
Economic (Environment)	creat, econom, economi, employ, job, invest
Emissions (Environment)	carbon, emiss, fossil, fuel, oil, pollut, reduc
Individual Access (Healthcare)	access, afford, deni, ensur, expand, right, uninsur
Quality (Healthcare)	doctor, medic, outcom, prevent, provid, qualiti, result, treatment
Systematic Access (Healthcare)	compani, cost, expans, insur, pharmaceut, premium, system
Economic (Immigration)	community, immigr, job, labor, undocu, work, worker
Opportunity (Immigration)	children, countri, dreamer, famili, nation, need, support

Beyond the advantages of topic selection, keyATM can incorporate covariates into the model. To this end, the keyATM models estimated in the next section include a variable for whether or not a Democratic candidate is a moderate or progressive. In 2018, few candidates explicitly labeled themselves progressive or moderate in the same way candidates embrace party labels. I use Bonica (2018) CF scores to determine candidates' factional identification. CF Scores measure candidates' ideal points based on contributions made to them. I label candidates who score lower than the mean Democratic candidate as progressive. Candidates who score greater than the mean are labeled as moderate. While CF scores do not directly map to whether or not a candidate is moderate or progressive, it serves as a good proxy. Although the mean CF Score is somewhat arbitrary cut point, it should represent a conservative test of the relationship. Candidates will not be perfectly sorted into their true factions – there are presumably some progressive candidates with a CF score greater than the cut point and some moderate candidates with a CF score less than the cut point. However,

this imperfect sorting should serve as a conservative test of the empirical relationship and should bias results towards zero. For example, if the *true* difference in frame prevalence for the middle class economic frame is 0.1, estimates from my measure should be lower than this due to the imperfect sorting in the measure.

To address further concerns that CF scores do not adequately map onto whether candidates are progressive or moderate, I also replicate all analysis using a different measure of candidate progressiveness. If candidates were endorsed in the 2018 campaign by Our Revolution PAC and Justice Democrats PAC, I consider them progressives, while I consider all other candidates as moderates. Both PACs self-describe as advocating for progressive candidates, providing face validity to the measure. Some might argue this is actually a better measure of which candidates are progressive. However, PAC endorsements should be considered a sufficient but not necessary condition for being a progressive candidate. Presumably a number of progressive candidates did not receive endorsements because they were not especially viable in the primary process. Most important for my purposes, the CF and PAC endorsement approaches generally classify the same candidates as progressive. Of those receiving PAC endorsements from one of the two PACs, about 75 percent are labeled as progressive candidates using the CF score approach. This further validates the use of CF score as a conservative empirical test given it does not perfectly sort candidates by what could be considered their true factional alignments.<sup>5</sup> The results for the replication of this analysis using PAC endorsements appear in the appendix.

I include controls in the model for candidate experience as well as district ideology. Candidate experience is equal to one if a candidate has previously held public office and zero otherwise (McDonald, Porter and Treul, 2020). For district ideology, I use two dummy variables that are equal to 1 when the prior Democratic presidential two-party vote share was less than 45 percent (Republican-leaning district) or greater than 55 percent (Democratic-leaning

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<sup>5</sup>The results in the appendix support this assertion. For all frames in the following section where the difference is bounded away from zero, the magnitude of that difference is larger when using PAC endorsements instead of CF Scores.

district), respectively. These controls should help account for candidates who tailor messages to their districts for electoral purposes and experienced candidates who may be more likely to use frames that are more effective in attracting support.

## Results

The following five sections lay out the results for each issue area. Within each section, I include a discussion of the circumstances surrounding salient policy debates during the 2018 congressional elections as well as the specific frames identified in candidate issue statements. In addition, I include quotes from different candidates' websites to highlight how candidates use each frame. The results from these five sections show significant differences in how Democratic candidates frame issues when it comes to the economy, the environment, and healthcare. I find no discernible differences when it comes to education and immigration.

### The Economy

In 2018, the economy was one of the most important and salient issues for candidates running in Democratic primaries. The Trump tax cuts had been recently enacted, prompting many candidates to focus on discussing revisions to the tax bill. The minimum wage, union rights, and local economic investments such as broadband internet were also significant topics for discussion. 546 of the 618 Democratic candidates running provided issue statements on the economy, second most of any issue area.

Two broad frames emerged from the issue statements. The first focused on what I describe as a middle class frame. Candidates using this frame positioned their policy proposals as a way to improve economic conditions for middle- and working-class Americans. This frame often highlighted community and small business as well. The second frame focused on how fair the economic system is. Candidates using this frame focused on making sure corporations and the wealthiest Americans paid their fair share. It is important to identify

the distinctiveness of both frames. Most Democratic macroeconomic policies are focused on redistribution, but candidates can choose how they think it is best to frame redistribution. For example, candidates proposing tax reform could frame these tax breaks as helping the middle class or as creating a fairer economy. The following two quotes demonstrate the distinction:

“Nancy knows that the middle class is the backbone of our democracy. In her time Congress, she has fought for good-paying jobs, living wages and always worked to strengthen the middle class... Americans were promised so much, but have received a raw deal from Donald Trump and the Republican Congress. Democrats are offering families A Better Deal: Better Jobs, Better Wages, and a Better Future. With concrete policy proposals, we will increase the incomes and wages of our American workers while at the same time creating millions of good-paying jobs by investing in and rebuilding our nation’s crumbling infrastructure, empowering unions, and ensuring every American has the tools they need to succeed in the 21st Century economy.” – *Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-California)*

“America used to be a place where everyone had a fair shot and everyone paid their fair share. Where if you worked hard, you could get ahead. But while large corporations are reporting record profits and unemployment is low, far too many Mainers are still struggling to make ends meet. Companies are using their profits and huge windfalls from the Trump Tax Plan to pay their CEOs even more or to buy back stock. Meanwhile wages have been stagnant for years while costs, especially for health care, continue to rise rapidly...We need an economy that works for everyone. Where anyone who works hard at a full time job is paid a livable wage. We need policies that support working families, like access to affordable child care, and paid sick and family leave. We need a tax code that asks the rich to pay their share, rather than giving them more massive tax breaks on the backs of working families.” – *Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine)*

Both Nancy Pelosi and Chellie Pingree are incumbents in 2018 and both weigh in on the Trump tax cuts. But they choose different frames to discuss them. Pelosi emphasizes prioritizing the middle class, making little reference to the rich, corporations, or Wall Street. Instead, she continually focuses on the middle class and working Americans, making appeals that are personal and practical. Pingree, in contrast, focuses on CEOs, corporations, and the rich paying their fair share. While Pingree uses some terms such as working families

that signal a middle class frame, she places a stronger emphasis on fairness of the economic system. Because the middle class frame is more focused on practical considerations, it should be expected that moderate candidates employ this frame more. This frame should appeal to voters who have fixed worldviews. The fairness frame is more systematic focused in nature and should appeal to voters with fluid worldviews. It should be expected progressives employ this frame more.

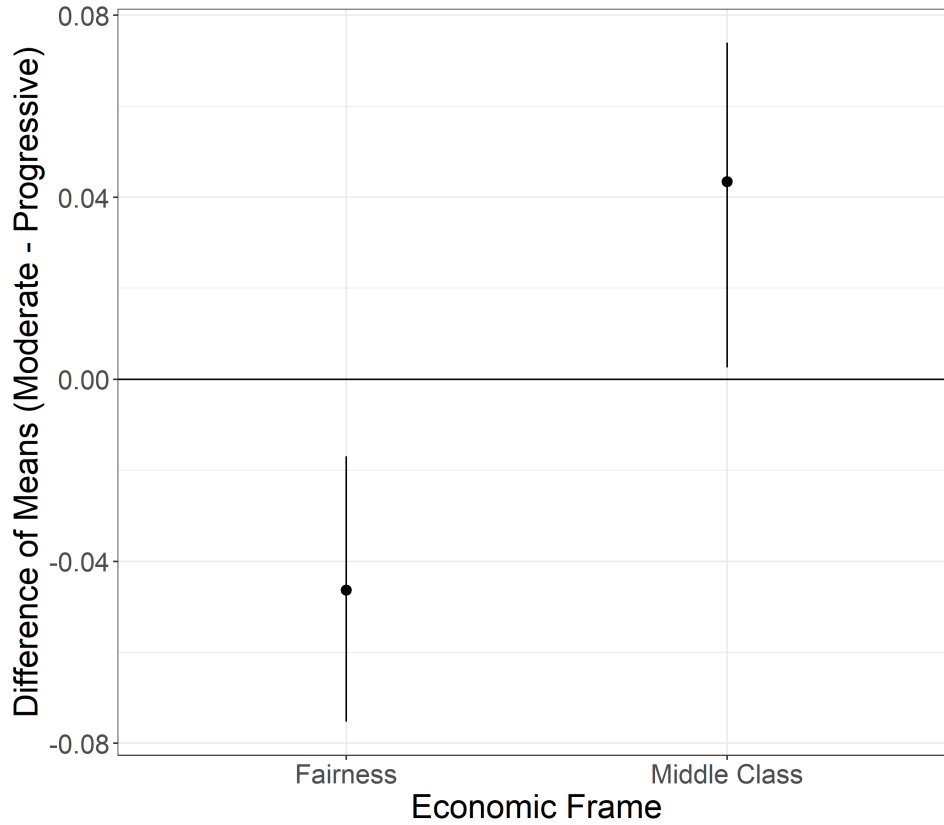
I ran a keyword assisted topic model on economic issue statements using keywords from the previous section.<sup>6</sup> I obtain the predicted topic proportion for progressives and moderates by setting the progressive candidate variable to specific values and computing the posterior distribution of its mean given the covariate value (0 or 1). The posterior distribution of the mean can be interpreted as the average proportion of a frame in issue statements for a specific value of a covariate. In general, I find higher frame prevalence for the middle class frame than the fairness frame. Progressive and moderate candidates have topic prevalence for the middle class frame of 0.421 and 0.464 respectively. These numbers can thought of as the predicted proportion of the document using the middle class frame. Those proportions drop to 0.327 and 0.279 for the fairness frame. To some extent, the higher prevalence of the middle class frame is not unexpected. While most Democrats are focusing policy on redistribution that in essence creates what could be considered a fairer economy, the middle class frame is bound to resonate with a large number of voters.

Figure 1 displays the difference of means between progressive and moderate candidates for the document topic distribution from the keyATM model. A positive number can be interpreted as an a higher relative frame prevalence for moderates while a negative number indicates a higher relative frame prevalence for progressives. 95 percent credible intervals are included around the difference of means.

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<sup>6</sup>Plots of model fit can be found in the appendix.

Figure 1: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Economic Frames



The results provide clear evidence differences exist in how candidates frame economic issues, suggesting differences in framing on economic issues. Moderate candidates more often discuss economic issues using a frame that focuses on middle class and working Americans. Progressive candidates, in contrast, focus more on the fairness frame. Both difference of means on topic distribution are bounded away from zero meaning candidates from each faction are framing economic issues differently.

## Education

While less salient than other policy areas in 2018, education was still an important issue. In total, 489 candidates made issue statements related to education on their website. Candidates focused on a range of issues from supporting teachers to college affordability. In general, however, two common frames emerged from these statements – a quality frame and an access

frame. Issue statements from two Democratic incumbents running in 2018, Rep. Ami Bera (D-California) and Rep. Donald Norcross (D-New Jersey), demonstrate these frames:

“We must invest in public education and workforce training, so that young people and a transitioning workforce have the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed. Improving education must align proper funding with substantive reform to prepare our students for a diversity of careers in a changing global environment.” – *Rep. Ami Bera (D-California)*

“Our focus as a society must be to provide a world-class education for all, and to ensure affordable, accessible higher educational opportunities so that our best, brightest, and most industrious students can start building their adult lives without being mired in debt... Now, I’m focused on expanding opportunities for students interested in attending our vocational, technical, and apprenticeship training schools so they can become valued members of our region’s workforce.” – *Rep. Donald Norcross (D-New Jersey)*

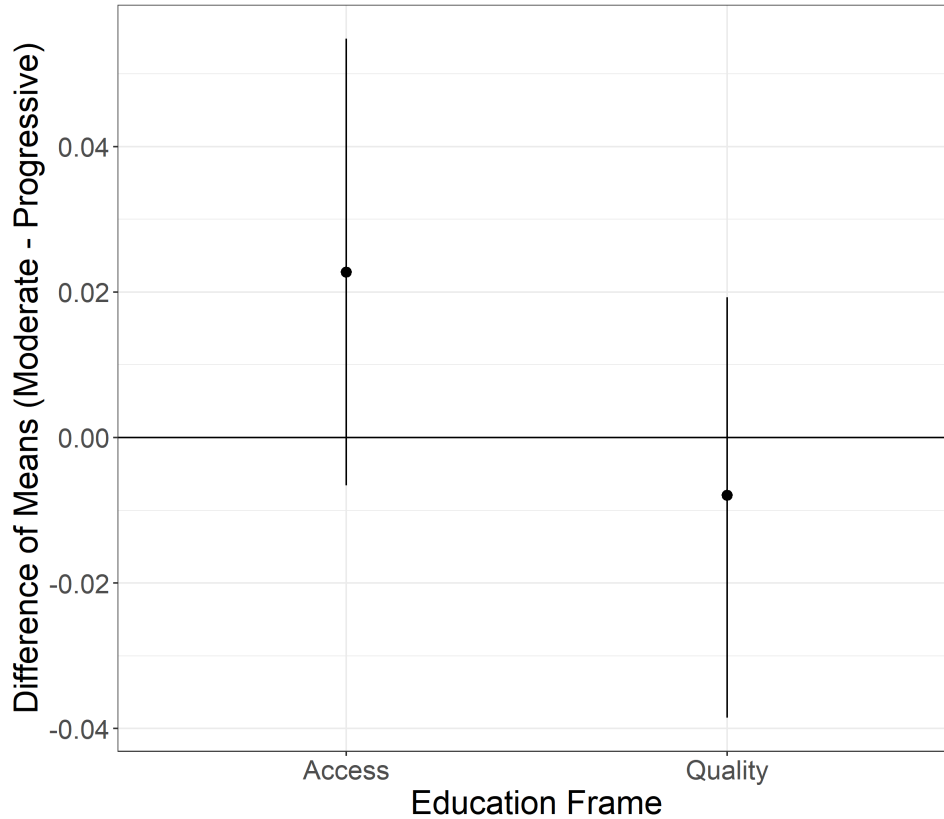
Both Bera and Norcross are endorsing policy proposals that support investment in public education to develop the future workforce. But, even with similar policy proposals, they frame the issues differently. Bera focuses more education quality, with a heavy emphasis on practical skill development in her messaging. Norcross’ issue statement focuses more on access. He discusses the more systemic concern of expanding opportunities to as many children as possible. While the use of these two frames are not mutually exclusive (many candidates discuss expanding access to quality education), the keywords presented in the previous section help to distinguish the two topics empirically.

The results from the keyATM model reveal that Democratic candidates frame education more often as an issue of access over quality: for progressive candidates, the access frame has a mean topic prevalence of 0.411. This means on average, the model predicts that the proportion of a progressive candidate’s issue statement talking about the access frame is 0.411. That number drops to 0.298 for progressives when it comes to the quality frame. Although I expected that moderate Democrats would focus more on quality than access, the data do not bear out my hypothesis. Their mean topic prevalence for the two frames is about the same as for progressives, 0.434 for access and 0.290 for quality.



The heightened emphasis on access is not surprising. In 2018, there was a significant focus on policy proposals relating to expanding access to higher education. Other policy proposals, such as supporting teachers, were more often associated with the quality frame but were less prevalent in issue statements. Figure 2 plots the difference of these means along with 95 percent credible intervals. While moderate candidates use the access frame to discuss education slightly more than progressives do, the difference is not statistically different from zero. Progressive candidates do use the quality more often than moderates, but, again, the difference is not significant.

Figure 2: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Education Frames



The results suggest there are no differences when it comes to how the two factions frame education policy. While Sanders and many progressive Democrats are focused on expanding access to college, moderate Democrats possess similar levels of focus on the access frame.

This suggests that while there are potential policy differences when it comes to education, candidates from each faction are not appealing to voters differently.

## The Environment

The environment was an important issue for Democrats in 2018. Trump had appointed Scott Pruitt to lead the Environmental Protection Agency the year before, and he had close ties to oil and gas companies, a strange profile for the head of the EPA. Trump had also announced the United States would leave the Paris Climate Agreement. As a result, many Democratic voters identified the environment as important to their vote choice in 2018.<sup>7</sup> Given the high voter issue salience, I expected almost all Democratic candidates would focus on the issue. It is somewhat surprising that only 445 of 618 candidates had issue statements on the environment.

Three prevailing policy frames emerged from the issue statements. Community preservation was the first. Candidates using this frame attempted to make the impact of climate change tangible for voters by talking about what has happening close to home. Many of the candidates utilizing this frame identified local areas that voters in the district were likely to be familiar with. Rep. Jim Himes (D-Connecticut), an incumbent running in 2018, provides a good example:

“All Americans need clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and food that is grown and harvested in a sustainable way. Protecting the environment is not partisan. Our forefathers understood that. President Teddy Roosevelt established the system of National Parks and President Richard Nixon signed the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, safeguarding these critical resources. The Long Island Sound and the surrounding watershed are a national treasure and an economic boon. The forests and wooded hills of Southwest Connecticut are among the most beautiful in New England, thanks to the vigilance of generations of dedicated citizens.” – *Rep. Jim Himes (D-Connecticut)*

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<sup>7</sup> *Pew Research Center*. 2018, “Voter Enthusiasm at Record High in Nationalized Midterm Environment”. <https://www.people-press.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/09/Midterm-report-for-release3.pdf>

While a number of candidates highlight concerns about air quality, my content analysis reveals substantively different ways that candidates choose to frame the issue. Himes focuses exclusively on community preservation, with little mention of pollution, large corporations, or big oil. Rep. Nanette Barragan (D-California), another incumbent running in 2018, provides a similar issue statement concerning air quality. But Barragan’s issue frame departs from Himes’:

“Nanette will continue to fight to protect our public health. There is no issue more important than the health of our families. That’s why we need a representative who will not pander to big corporate polluters who put the health and safety of our communities at risk—raising asthma rates and respiratory illness and making climate change impacts worse.” – *Rep. Nanette Barragan (D-California)*

Barragan uses what I call an emissions frame. This frame is concerned with the impact of pollution, power plants, oil companies, and other non renewable energy sources and their impact on the environment.

The third and final frame I identified is the economic frame. A number of candidates frame climate change as an economic opportunity to create jobs in renewable energy. Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Ohio) demonstrates this in his issue statement:

“Tim believes that by stepping up to the challenge of combating climate change we can also jump start Ohio’s green energy economy. Each wind turbine that spins in northwest Ohio has over 8,000 parts that could be built by machinists in Youngstown and Akron. In Congress, Tim has supported investment in green energy, liquefied natural gas, and fuel-efficient automotive technology, which create tens of thousands of Ohio jobs and reduce our dependence on foreign oil.” – *Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Ohio)*

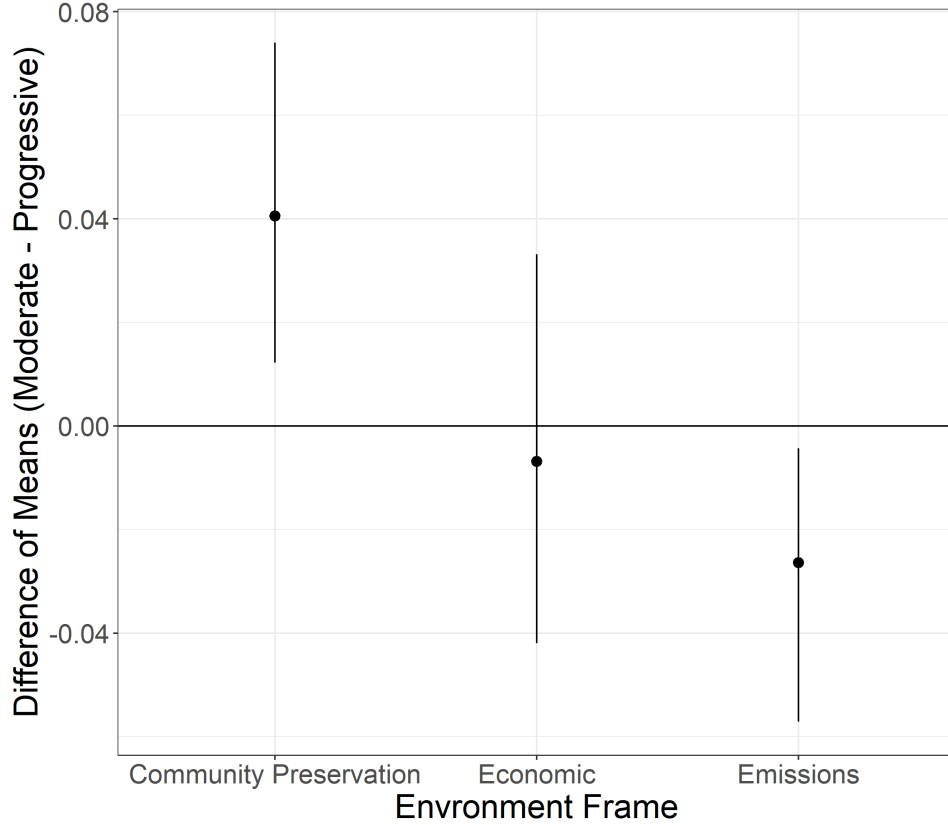
I ran a keyword assisted topic model using these frames with the keywords from the previous section. Given the practicality of the community preservation frame, it should be expected moderates employ this frame more often. The emissions frame focuses on more systemic considerations, and therefore should be expected to be used more often

by progressives. The economic frame provides a mix of both considerations – it involves both tangible benefits (employment opportunities) as well as more systemic considerations (reliance on renewable energy).

For both moderates and progressives, the economic frame is the most utilized with a topic prevalence of 0.342 and 0.350 respectively. These numbers can be interpreted as, on average, the predicted proportion of an issue statement that is talking about this frame for each faction. These numbers drop to 0.271 and 0.234 for the community preservation frame and 0.152 and 0.178 for the emissions frame. While there are differences in climate change framing, Democrats place a heavier focus on framing issues with a local focus. Community preservation and the economic frame are more often than not associated with a candidate talking about what she is able to do for her district. In contrast, candidates utilizing the emissions frame are more often focused on larger change in how energy is produced in the United States and regulations needed to fight these current trends.

Figure 3 plots the difference in means for each issue frame along with credible intervals from the keyATM model. There are clear differences with how candidates frame issues between moderates and progressives. Moderates place a heavier emphasis than progressives on the community preservation frame while progressives place a heavier emphasis on the emissions frame. There are no discernible differences in framing when it comes to the economic frame.

Figure 3: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Environment Frames



The results in this section provide evidence there are differences in framing when it comes to the environment. The results in this section bear striking similarities to those on economic issues. In both policy domains, moderates are utilizing frames that make these issues practical and personal for voters. Both the community preservation frame and middle class frame highlight considerations that are tangible for voters. For progressives, there is a heavier emphasis on broader systemic change. Both the fairness frame and emissions frames are targeted at large corporations and are suggestive that these candidates want to provide fundamental change to the broader system. The commonalities between results across issues is suggestive of the broader theory put forth that differences in framing may contribute to voters being sorted into each faction by their worldviews.

## Healthcare

Former President Trump spent the first two years of his administration dismantling the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the individual mandate. Congress had attempted to pass a replacement, the American Health Care Act, that would pose significant changes to the ACA. As a result of the circumstances, 562 of 618 Democratic candidates had issue statements on healthcare, more than any other issue domain.

Healthcare issue statements took on three different policy frames. The first two frames – a systematic access frame and an individual access frame – focused on broader problems of access and cost of healthcare. Despite the focus on similar policy problems, these two frames took drastically different tones. The systematic frame focused on insurance and drug companies, often painting the systematic components as the root cause of the problem. Rep. Lloyd Doggett’s (D-Texas) issue statement on healthcare in 2018 demonstrates this:

“Because of pharmaceutical price gouging, a diagnosis of cancer or other dreaded disease or condition is too often a prognosis for financial ruin or hardship, even for those who have insurance. I lead the Prescription Drug Task Force, which is working to stop prescription drug price gouging, like the outrageous hike in the cost of the EpiPen. As pharmaceutical drug prices continue to soar, we need federal legislation to reform the broken system of incentives and loopholes that allow companies to get away with sky-high prices.” – *Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas)*

While Doggett’s framing focuses primarily on cost and access to healthcare, there is a calculated decision to focus on more systematic components of the pharmaceutical industry. Rep. Suzan Delbene (D-Washington) also discussed cost and access in her issue statement. However, the framing in her statement relies more heavily making healthcare issues personal:

“We cannot go back to the days when someone could be denied coverage because of a pre-existing condition or when you could be charged more for coverage for simply being a woman. That’s why I’ve voted against each and every attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act. However, we must do more to make sure all Americans have access to affordable, quality health care.” – *Rep. Suzan Delbene (D-Washington)*

These two issue statements provide the contrast in how candidates can frame issues of cost and access when it comes to healthcare. While a wide range of Democratic proposals are related to solving issues of cost and access, candidates have a choice in who to target with their framing. As is evident from the above examples, candidates are calculated in what considerations they make with frame choice. It should be expected progressive candidates employ the systematic access frame while moderates focus on the personal access frame.

A third frame, the quality frame, was also prevalent in candidates issue statements. In this frame, candidates were primarily highlighting the need for improved funding, research, and healthcare outcomes. While somewhat different than the prior two frames, there were still a number of candidates who focused on issues of health care quality in the United States. Rep. Ami Bera (D-California) demonstrates this in her issue statement:

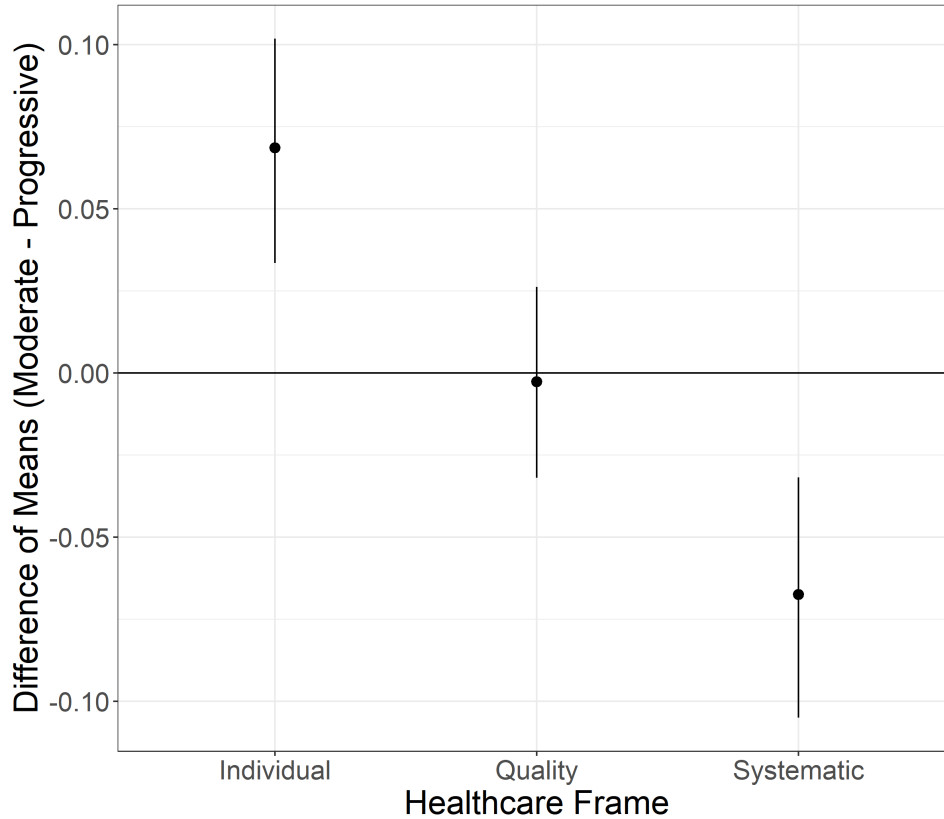
“As a Doctor and UC Davis faculty member, Dr. Bera understands the importance of investing in stem cell research. Too many people suffer from agonizing, debilitating, and life-threatening illnesses. But Alzheimer’s, diabetes, heart disease, paralysis, and Parkinson’s are tragedies that we can avoid. One day, families may never again be left to watch helplessly and hopelessly while a loved one suffers. But these miraculous achievements will not come about on their own. We need diligent research, American innovation, and the will to succeed to create a new era of medical—and humanitarian—breakthroughs.” – *Rep. Ami Bera (D-California)*

Similar to the personal access frame, the quality frame discusses tangible impacts of healthcare. It should therefore be expected that moderates employ the quality frame more often. From the keyATM model, candidates are least often focusing on the quality frame: the topic prevalence for both progressive and moderate candidates is 0.194. This means on average, the predicted proportion of a candidate’s issue statement that is dedicated to this frame is 0.194. The individual and systematic frame both have higher prevalence, but there are significant differences between progressives and moderates. For the individual frame, progressives have a mean topic prevalence of 0.330 while moderates have mean of 0.400. The

systematic frame reflects the opposite trend with a mean of 0.433 for progressive candidates and 0.366 for moderates.

While a large focus among candidates is on the costs and access barrier many citizens face, there are significant differences between how candidates frame these issues. The difference of means is plotted in Figure 4 as well as 95 percent credible intervals. As expected, moderates utilize the individual frame significantly more while progressives utilize the systematic frame more. There is no statistically significant difference when it comes to the quality frame, although moderates are employing this frame more.

Figure 4: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Healthcare Frames



Taken in the broader context of prior results, there is again significant evidence progressives frame issues with a larger focus on system wide change. This result carries across three policy dimensions. For moderates, issue frames are much more focused on the individual problems voters face with less of a focus on changing the larger system in place.



## Immigration

Democratic candidates for the 2018 primary placed a smaller focus on immigration with only 385 candidates making issue statements, the least of any issues analyzed in this paper. Despite this, immigration was still salient and important among voters: a PEW poll showed 64 percent of voters who intended to vote for the Democratic candidate in the general election identified immigration as important to their vote choice.<sup>8</sup>

Candidates with issue statements focused primarily on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the Muslim travel ban. For most, this meant running on passing legislation known as the Dream Act to provide protection to immigrant children who possessed work visas under DACA. Along with this policy proposal, there were two primary competing frames when it came to immigration. The first frame, the economic frame, focused on the economic benefit of immigrants on the local economy. Candidates also utilized an opportunity frame that often referred to America as a nation of immigrants. The usage of these two competing frames is evident in the below issue statements related to the DREAM Act from Rep. Don Beyer (D-Virginia) and Rep. Nanette Barragan (D-California). Beyer frames the DREAM Act as an economic consideration while Barragan frames the DREAM Act as an opportunity for children:

“There must be a path to citizenship for the hard-working people who contribute to our communities. They help keep our economy strong and deserve the opportunity to become new Americans... I fully support the DREAM Act and would urge my colleagues in Congress to do the same.” – *Don Beyer (D-Virginia)*

“The children of immigrants also require our attention and action. By supporting the DREAM Act, we are giving the sons and daughters of immigrants who were born outside of the U.S. but grew up here, a chance to take part in the American dream.” – *Nanette Barragan (D-California)*

The economic frame makes the benefits of immigration tangible by talking about the contributions immigrants can make to local communities. It should therefore be expected

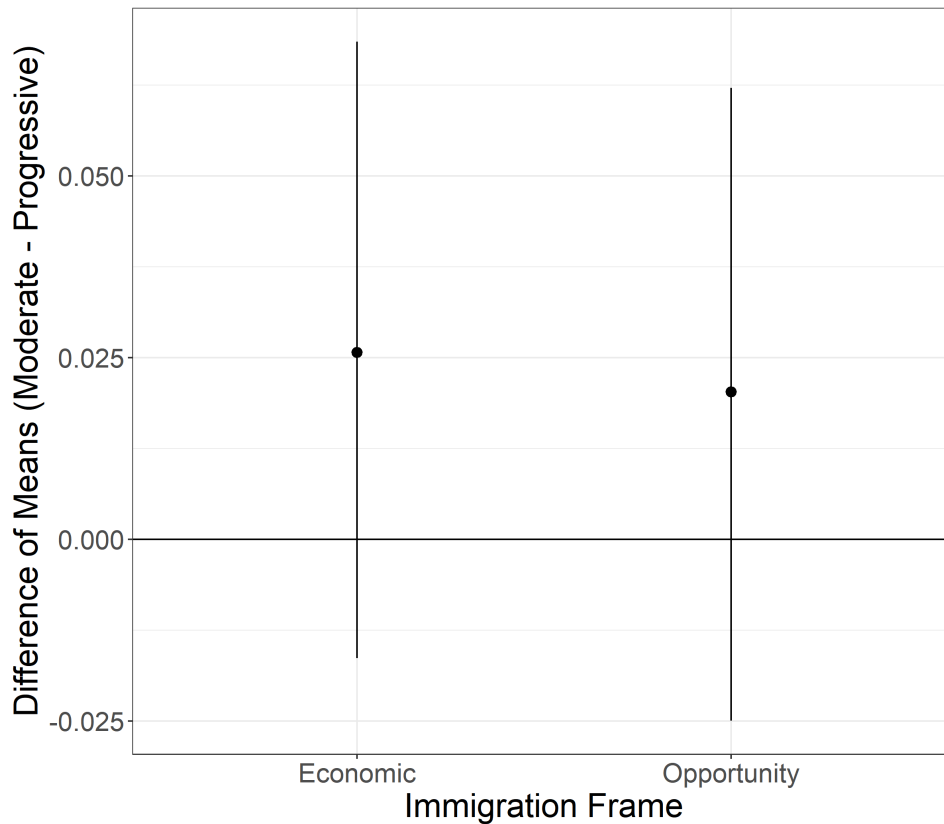
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<sup>8</sup> *Pew Research Center*. 2018, “Voter Enthusiasm at Record High in Nationalized Midterm Environment”. <https://www.people-press.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/09/Midterm-report-for-release3.pdf>

that moderates employ this frame more. The opportunity frame is somewhat more aspirational in nature. It should be expected that progressives employ this frame more.

Both frames had a high prevalence in issue statements, but candidates more often focused on the opportunity frame. From the ketATM model, the mean topic prevalence for the opportunity frame was 0.450 for progressives and 0.472 for moderates. The economic frame had a mean of 0.371 and 0.394 for each faction respectively. Despite moderates utilizing both frames more often, the differences were not statistically significant. The difference in means for each immigration frames can be found in Figure 5 as well as the 95 percent credible intervals. While there are subtle differences in utilization in these frames, the difference is not enough to conclude there are differences in framing when it comes to immigration.

Figure 5: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Immigration Frames



## Conclusion

The progressive movement has represented a significant alteration to the status quo within the Democratic Party. As the results have shown, there are differences in how progressive and moderate candidates are framing issues. Progressive candidates were more focused on framing issues in a way that focused on large systematic change. For the economy, progressives focused on a fairness frame and spent much less time emphasizing the middle class frame. For the environment, progressives framed the issue with a focus on current energy sources and pollution such as fossil fuels. Finally, with respect to healthcare, progressives are more focused on framing the issue barriers to healthcare that focus on insurance companies and the pharmaceutical industry.

Moderate candidates were more often framing issues with a focus on problems facing everyday Americans. For the economy, this meant talking about economic growth, increasing wages, and creating opportunities for small business and middle-class Americans. This frame suggests nothing about fundamental change to the current structure of the economy other than solving issues many Americans face. A similar trend is found with the environment. Climate change is a difficult topic for voters to comprehend at times. But by focusing on the community preservation frame, moderate candidates are highlighting issues that might resonate with voters when discussing protecting nature and local communities. The same goes for healthcare. Moderate candidates are more often focusing on barriers to care with a focus on the individual. These frames do not focus on fundamental change to the current system and instead focus on tangible issues faced by a majority of Americans. There is less of a focus on changing these systems as they are but rather solving problems within the system.

The results of this paper carry substantive implications for understanding the divide between progressives and moderates at both the elite and voter level. Although worldview differences have not been studied explicitly in progressive and moderate Democrats, the differences between Sanders and Clinton voters can plausibly be extended. It is likely

progressive voters prefer curiosity, independence, and political ideas that are more systemic in nature. As shown throughout my thesis, progressive candidates are utilizing frames that appeal to those exact fluid worldviews. The same goes for moderate Democrats. Moderate candidates are employing frames that appeal to voters who prefer order and for politics to be personal through their fixed worldviews. The similarities for both factions in terms of rhetoric employed and presumed worldview suggests differences in framing has an important effect on sorting voters in the Democratic party along these worldviews. These differences in issue framing carry important implications for understanding the rise of the progressive faction within the Democratic Party.

## Appendix

### Robustness Check on Candidate Ideology

The figures in this section address concerns regarding equating CF scores with progressive and moderate labels. In the main body of the paper, progressive candidates are candidates with a CF Score lower than the mean Democratic candidate CF Score. In replicating the results with a different measure, candidates are classified as progressive if they received an endorsement from with Our Revolution or Justice Democrats, two self identified political action committees. The same controls for candidate experience and district ideology (as measured by prior Presidential vote share) are included. While there are some subtle differences in point estimates, the results in this section replicate all relationships found in the main body of the text and are statistically significant.

Figure 6: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Economic Frames: Robustness Check on Progressive-Moderate Classification

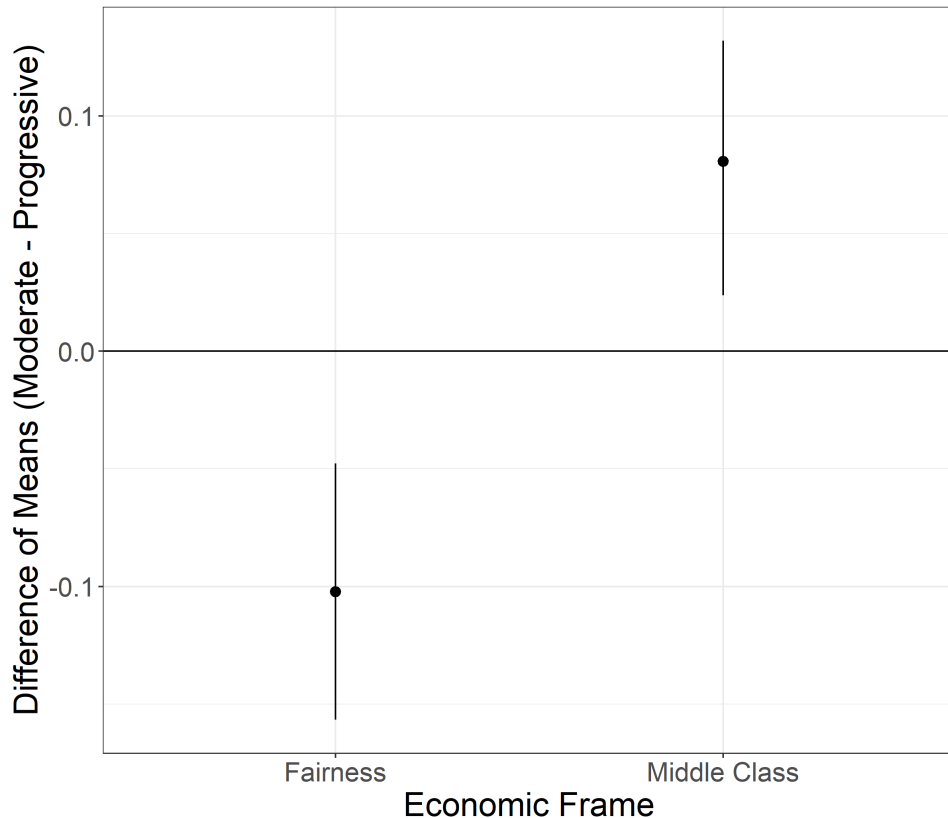


Figure 7: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Education Frames: Robustness Check on Progressive-Moderate Classification

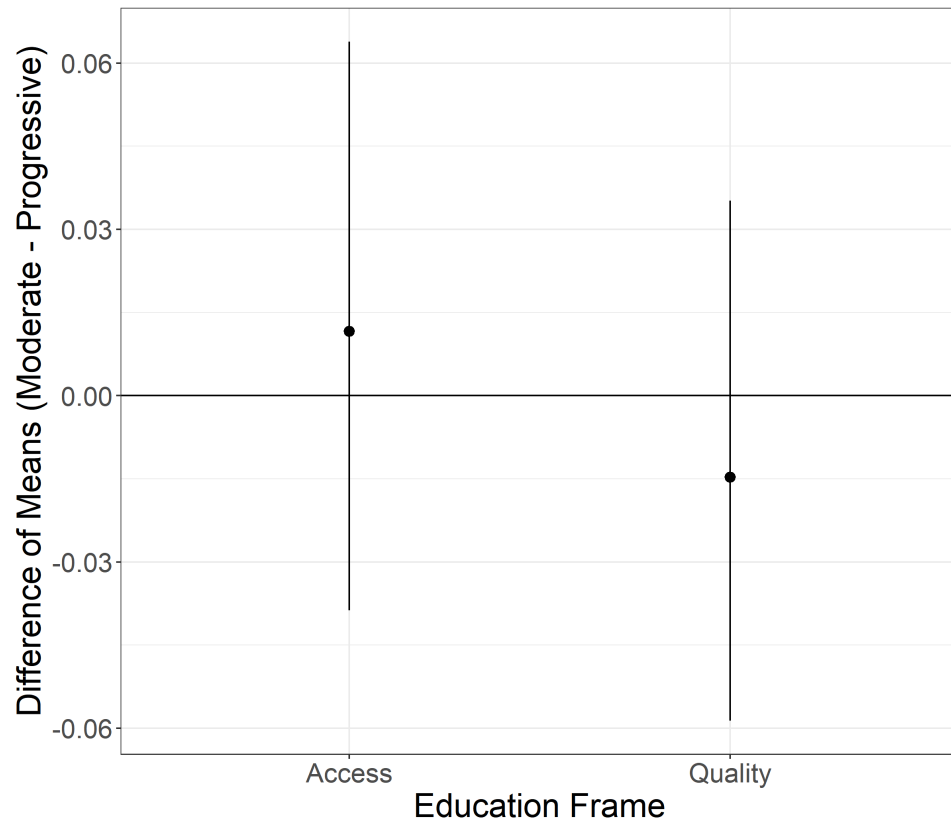


Figure 8: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Environment Frames: Robustness Check on Progressive-Moderate Classification

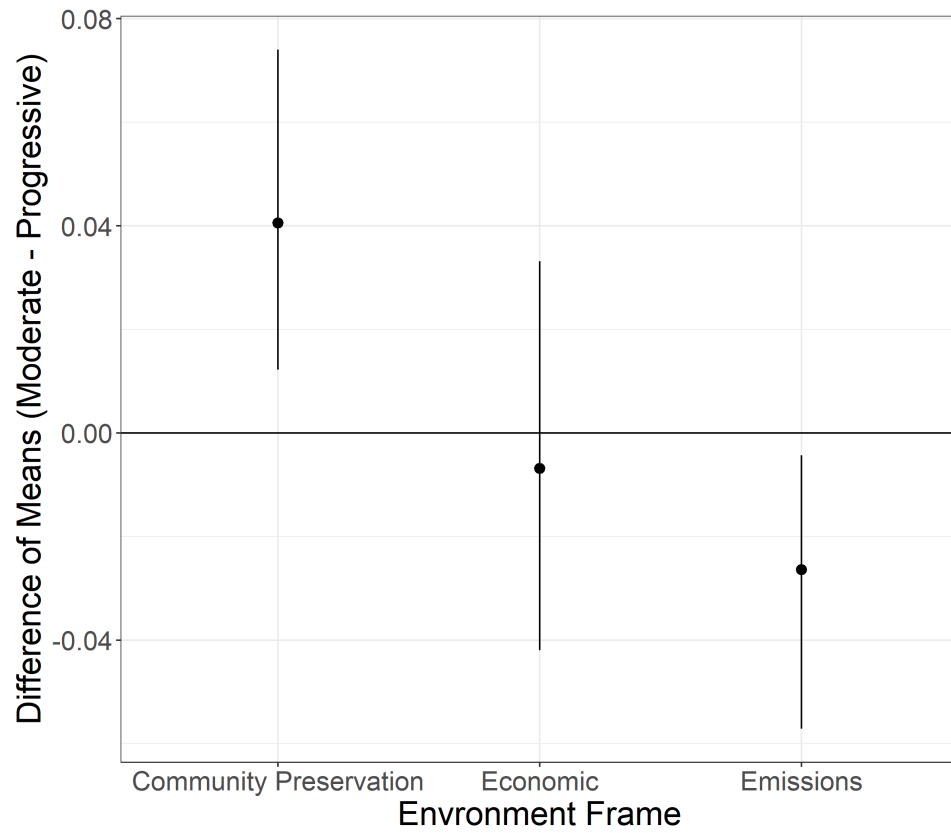


Figure 9: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Healthcare Frames: Robustness Check on Progressive-Moderate Classification

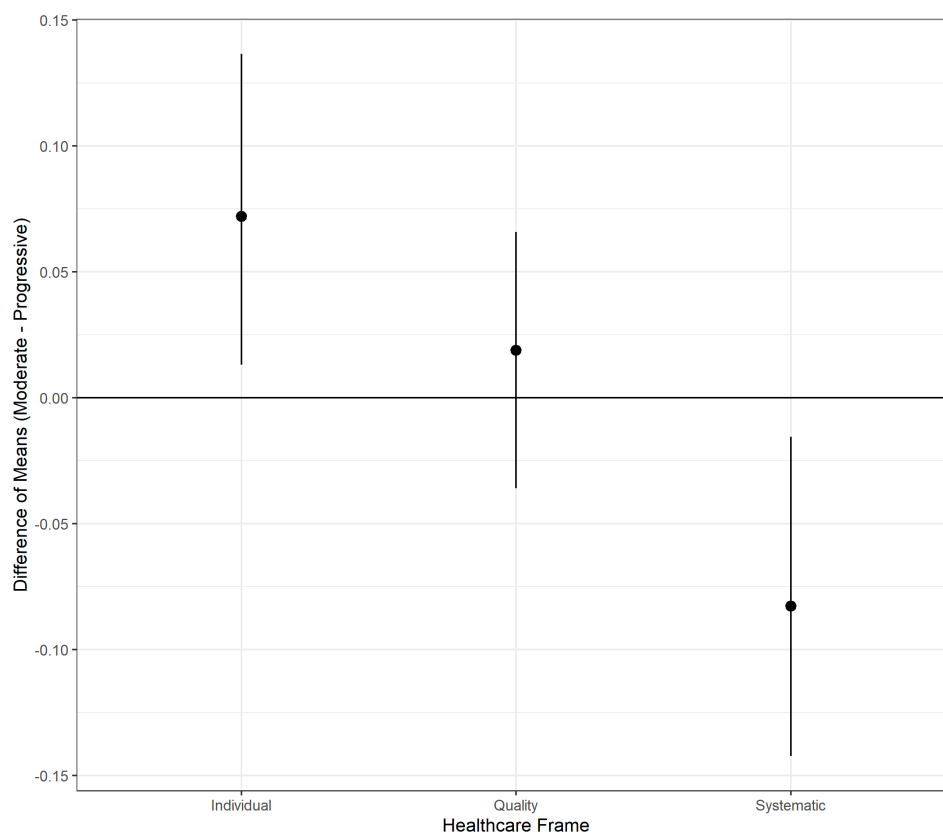
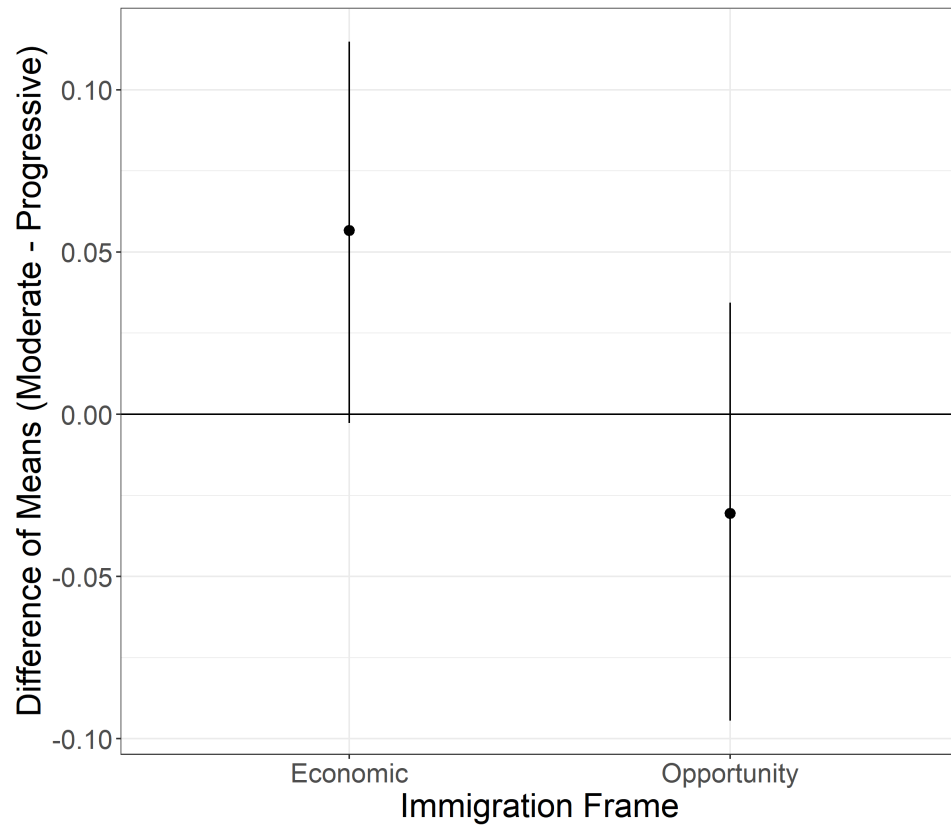




Figure 10: Difference in Means of Topic Distribution for Immigration Frames: Robustness Check on Progressive-Moderate Classification



## KeyATM Model Fit

Figure 11: Economic KeyATM Model Fit

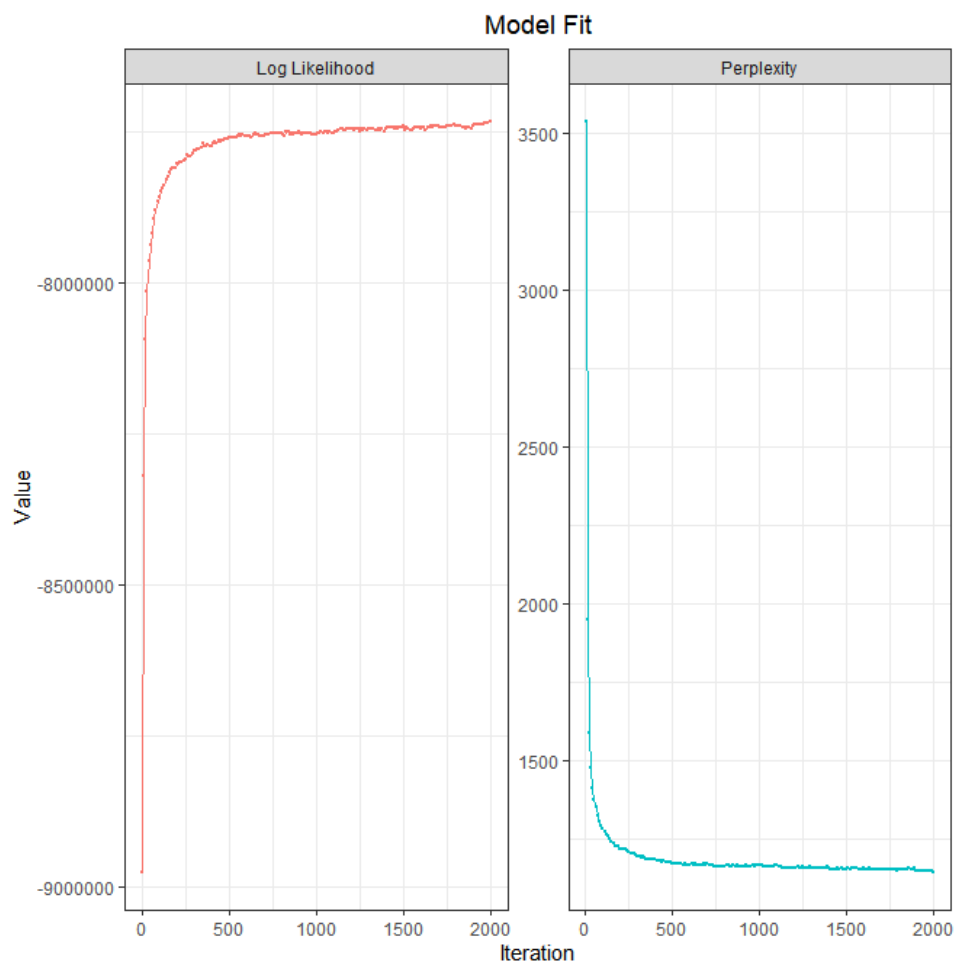


Figure 12: Education KeyATM Model Fit

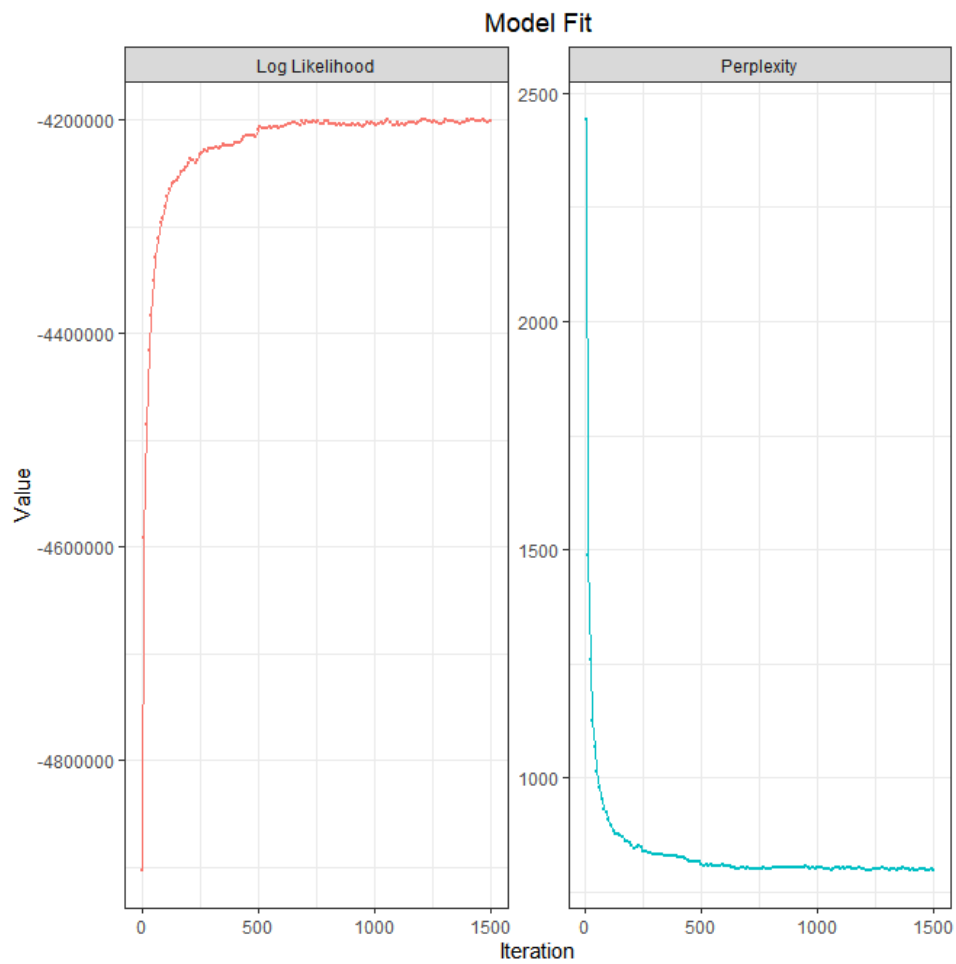


Figure 13: Environment KeyATM Model Fit

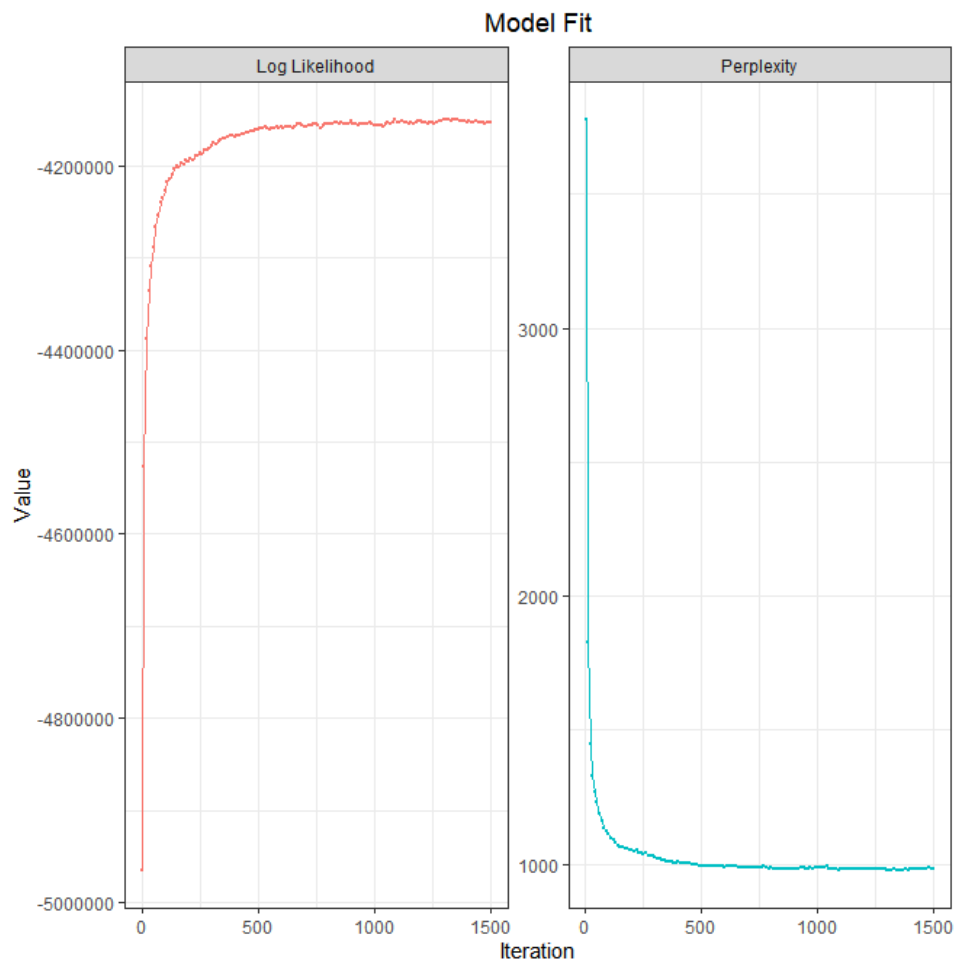


Figure 14: Healthcare KeyATM Model Fit

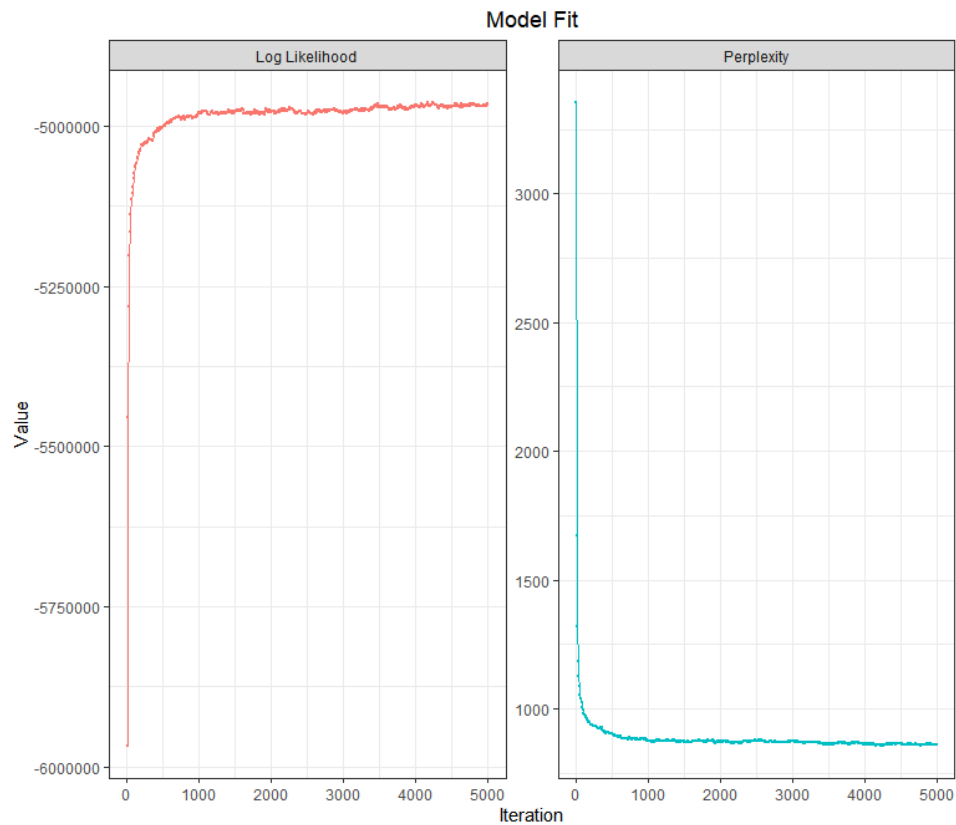
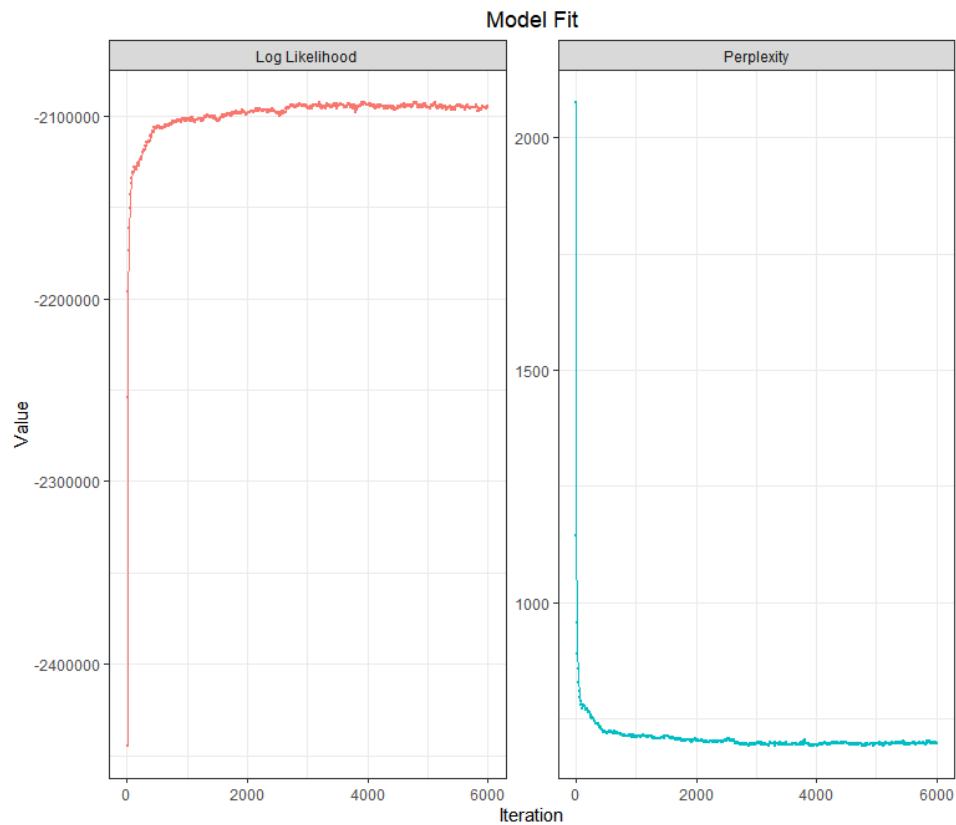


Figure 15: Immigration KeyATM Model Fit



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