Political Party Differences in Foreign Policy Discourse

Kayla N. Jordan

Erin M. Buchanan

Missouri State University

Kayla N. Jordan

Department of Psychology

Missouri State University

901 S National Ave

Springfield, MO 65897

Phone: 417-836-5592

Fax: 417-836-8330

Email: [Jordan810@live.missouristate.edu](mailto:Jordan810@live.missouristate.edu)

Erin M. Buchanan

Department of Psychology

Missouri State University

901 S National Ave

Springfield, MO 65897

Phone: 417-836-5592

Fax: 417-836-8330

Email: [erinbuchanan@missouristate.edu](mailto:erinbuchanan@missouristate.edu)

**Abstract**

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Understanding Policy and Party Differences in Foreign Affairs Using Language

In recent years, party polarization has reached an all-time high.

**Polarization and Policies**

Polarization has not necessarily across all policy areas

**Language**

Language is one of the prevalent observable behaviors of politicians, which makes for a large, rich dataset to explore with the methods described above, as well as others. The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) is a word frequency program based on a dictionary of over 4,500 words (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007). These concepts are divided into 82 word categories such as first person pronouns, present tense verbs, and cognitive mechanisms. Tauszcik and Pennebaker (2009) reviewed over 100 studies that used the LIWC as a means of discourse analysis. The reviewed studies found pronouns and verb tense to be related to attentional focus, pronouns and social words to be related to group cohesion, and prepositions and cognitive mechanisms to be related to complexity. In terms of politics, studies have found political parties to differ in a wide variety of language use ([Hart & Lind, 2014](#_ENREF_4); [Jarvis, 2004](#_ENREF_6); [Ohl, Pfister, Nader, & Griffin, 2013](#_ENREF_8); [Slatcher, Chung, Pennebaker, & Stone, 2007](#_ENREF_11)). In the current study, we used a word frequency approach to measure complex thinking and psychological distancing.

**Complex Thinking.** [Pennebaker and King (1999)](#_ENREF_10) first developed the linguistic construct of making distinctions, later termed complex thinking. Based on this construct, more complex language used more conjunctions, negations (such as *no* and *never*), exclusives (such as *but* and *without*), insight (such as *think* and *know*), and causation (such as *because* and *effect*) while using more words per sentence and fewer inclusive words such as *with* and *include*. In a college student sample, they found higher complex thinking to be related to lower extraversion, lower conscientiousness, and lower positive affect. [Pennebaker (2011)](#_ENREF_9) examined the language of both violent and nonviolent terrorist groups and found the language of violent terrorist groups demonstrated less complex thinking than that of nonviolent terrorist groups.

**Psychological Distancing.** The construct of psychological distancing, or conversely, immediacy, was also first developed by [Pennebaker and King (1999)](#_ENREF_10). More psychologically distant speech uses more articles and longer words while using fewer first person singular pronouns, discrepancy (such as *should* and *would*), and present tense verbs. Low psychological distancing reflects a personal, experiential focus while high psychological distancing reflects a more abstract, impersonal focus. Lower psychological distancing was related to neuroticism and agreeableness, and higher distancing was related to openness and need for cognition. [Cohn, Mehl, and Pennebaker (2004)](#_ENREF_2),studying blogs before and after 9-11, found psychological distancing increased following 9-11 and remained higher than baseline for the remaining six weeks of the study.

The purpose of these studies is to investigate policy and party differences in foreign affairs discourse to understand how members of Congress may be processing foreign policy in a time of political polarization and conflict.

**Study 1**

The foreign affairs committees of the U.S. Congress are where members of Congress first consider foreign policy problems. Both Senate and House committees have jurisdiction over the oversight and legislation of war powers, treaties, international sanctions, and international law enforcement (["Committee History & Rules,"](#_ENREF_3) ; ["Jurisdiction,"](#_ENREF_7)). As such the foreign affairs committees are a useful starting place in understanding policy and party differences.

**Method**

**Sample and Data Processing**

The records of foreign affairs committee hearings were searched for relevant speeches. The records of these hearings are available from the U.S. Government Printing Office and include records of all committee hearings since 1985. For the current study, the time period was restricted to 1998-2013. Hearings from both the House and Senate committees were included. Records were searched for hearings pertaining to U.S. relations with the following countries: Iraq, Kosovo, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Libya, Russia, Afghanistan, and Syria. These countries were chosen for their histories of strained and/or combative relationship necessitating a cogent foreign policy as well as having mostly stable governments allowing for cogent foreign policy. For Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, only hearings before the authorization of military force in those nations by Congress were included. From the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 384 speeches were collected; from the Senate committee, 311 speeches were collected.

**Language Constructs**

Dependent language variables were computed from individual language categories from the LIWC output. Categories were converted to z scores. Construct scores were then calculated for complex thinking and psychological distancing as follows. Complex thinking was calculated as exclusive + conjunctions + words/sentence + negations + insight + causation – inclusive; examples of exclusive words are *but* and *without*, of negation are *no* and *never*, of inclusive are *with* and *include* ([Pennebaker, 2011](#_ENREF_9)). Psychological distancing was calculated as articles + words of six or more letters – first person singular pronouns – discrepancy – present tense verbs; examples of discrepancy words are *should* and *would*.

**Predictors**

Party affiliation was coded for the speaker of each document. Because party affiliation was not included in the Congressional Record, this information was gathered from the Senate and House of Representatives websites.

Information about the region each speech focused on was available in the title of each speech as part of search parameters. Policy decision information was then recoded dividing the regions based on the action taken by the U.S.: nations in which the U.S. undertook military operations that were approved by Congress (Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo) and nations which the U.S. enacted sanctions but did not act against militarily (Libya, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Russia, Syria).

**Results**

Given that speakers would have multiple speeches in the data set, multilevel modeling (MLM) was used to analyze the data. MLM is advantageous to use with nested data to control for multiple sources from the same participant or source, as well as the ability to control for hierarchical structure of a dataset ([Hox, 2010](#_ENREF_5)). Each model was nested by speaker to control for correlated errors present in our dataset. These models were programmed in *R* using the *lme4* package ([Bates et al., 2014](#_ENREF_1)).

**Complex Thinking**

Adding in the predictors to the model, marginally improved the model predicting complex thinking (Δdeviance = 12.16, Δdf = 2). However, few differences emerged from the predictors. The political parties did not differ in terms of complex thinking (*B* = -.02, 95% CI [-0.85, 0.80], *SE* = .42, *R*2 < .01, *R*2N < .01), nor was there an interaction between party and policy decision (*B* = .32, 95% CI [-1.23, 1.87], *SE* = .79, *R*2 = .01, *R*2N = .01). Minor differences existed based on policy decision (*B* = 1.21, 95% CI [.13, 2.29], *SE* = .79, *R*2 = .02, *R*2N = .02) with more complex thinking being used when the decision was to take military action.

**Psychological Distancing**

Adding in predictors, improved the model predicting psychological distancing (Δdeviance = 24.20, Δdf = 2). Few differences emerged for political parties (*B* = .79, 95% CI [-.35, 1.95], *SE* = .58, *R*2 < .01, *R*2N < .01). Once again, minor differences appeared based on policy decision (*B* = -.56, 95% CI [-1.47, .34], *SE* = .46, *R*2 = .03, *R*2N = .02). This time interesting interaction effects emerged (*B* = -1.23, 95% CI [-2.51, .06], *SE* = .65, *R*2 = .03, *R*2N = .02). For Democrats, they demonstrated less distancing when the decision was to take military action (*B* = -1.64, 95% CI [-2.50, -.74], *SE* = .45, *R*2 = .05, *R*2N = .04). For Republicans, there was no difference in distancing for policy decision (*B* = -.62, 95% CI [-1.50, .30], *SE* = .46, *R*2 = .01, *R*2N = .01).

**Discussion**

**Study 2**

The next study examined the U.S. House of Representatives.

**Methods**

**Sample and Data Processing**

The Congressional Record was searched for speeches made in the House of Representatives from 1998-2013 pertaining to U.S. relations with the same nations as Study 1. For Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, once again only speeches made before the Congressional authorization of the use of military force were included. In the end, 1043 speeches were gathered from the time period. Data were processed in the same manner as in Study 1.

**Language Constructs and Predictors**

The language constructs used in the study were the same constructs used in Study 1. Furthermore, the predictors of party affiliation and policy decision were also the same.

**Results**

Multilevel modeling (MLM) was also used in this study as the same problem occurred as in Study 1 with multiple speeches by the same speaker. Therefore, all models were compared to a null model nested by speaker.

**Complex Thinking**

The addition of predictors into the model did improve the model (Δdeviance = 61.60, Δdf = 2). However, neither party (*B* = -.46, 95% CI [-1.09, .17], *SE* = .32, *R*2 < .01, *R*2N < .01) nor policy decision (*B* = .09, 95% CI [-.51, .69], *SE* = .31, *R*2 = .01, *R*2N = .02) accounted for much of the variation in complex thinking. Likewise, the interaction between the two predictors was a weak predictor (*B* = 1.31, 95% CI [.53, 2.09], *SE* = .40, *R*2 = .02, *R*2N = .03).

**Psychological Distancing**

The addition of predictors improved the model very little (Δdeviance = 9.21, Δdf = 2). Both party (*B* = .07, 95% CI [-.49, .63], *SE* = .28, *R*2 < .01, *R*2N < .01) and policy decision (*B* = -.50, 95% CI [-1.00, .01], *SE* = .26, *R*2 = .01, *R*2N = .01) failed to account for variation in psychological distancing. The interaction between party and policy decision also failed to account for variation in psychological distancing (*B* = .01, 95% CI [-.64, .66], *SE* = .33, *R*2 < .01, *R*2N < .01).

**Discussion**

**Study 3**

The final study examined the U.S. Senate.

**Methods**

**Sample and Data Processing**

Sampling and data processing procedures were identical to the first two studies with the exception that the Congressional Record was searched for Senate speeches. In total, 457 Senate speeches were gathered.

**Language Constructs and Predictors**

The language constructs and predictors were also identical to the first two studies.

**Results**

Once again, to control for multiple speeches by the same speaker, multilevel modeling was used with all models nested by speaker.

**Complex Thinking**

The model with predictors was better than the null model (Δdeviance = 31.85, Δdf = 2). Policy decision predicted complex thinking (*B* = 1.40, 95% CI [.79, 2.00], *SE* = .31, *R*2 = .12, *R*2N = .12) but party did not (*B* = -.15, 95% CI [-.92, .62], *SE* = .31, *R*2 < .01, *R*2N < .01). Furthermore, the interaction between policy decision and party predicted complex thinking (*B* = .61, 95% CI [-.23, 1.45], *SE* = .43, *R*2 = .09, *R*2N = .07). For Democrats, they displayed more complex thinking when the decision was to take military action (*B* = 2.00, 95% CI [1.40, 2.60], *SE* = .31, *R*2 = .18, *R*2N = .16). For Republicans, they also displayed more complex thinking when the decision was to take military action (*B* = 1.40, 95% CI [.80, 2.00], *SE* = .30, *R*2 = .07, *R*2N = .09).

**Psychological Distancing**

The model with the predictors was better than the null model (Δdeviance = 17.44, Δdf = 2). Psychological distancing was lower when the policy decision was to take military action (*B* = -1.08, 95% CI [-1.69, -.47], *SE* = .31, *R*2 = .05, *R*2N = .05). Psychological distancing was not influenced by party (*B* = .32, 95% CI [-.49, 1.14], *SE* = .41, *R*2 < .01, *R*2N < .01). The interaction between policy decision and party did not influence psychological distancing (*B* = .11, 95% CI [-.74, .96], *SE* = .43, *R*2 = .03, *R*2N = .01).

**Discussion**

**Conclusions**

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