

# Quotatives Indicate Decline in Objectivity in U.S. Political News

*Keywords: quotative, journalistic objectivity, political news, media bias, text-as-data*

## Extended Abstract

Journalistic objectivity is the notion that news should contain accurate information and not convey the personal opinions or emotions of the writer [2]. It has been a guiding principle for journalists since the early 20th century. One of the concrete ways journalists have sought to report the news objectively is through the usage of direct quotes, which typically occur several times in a news article. However, even when using a direct quote, journalistic objectivity can still be compromised by the use of certain quotatives (e.g. *claim*) that relay the emotions of reporters to readers [6] or the attempt to describe the speaker’s state of mind [4], rather than completely neutral quotatives such as *say* and *tell*. For example, in the direct quote “New York is not afraid of terrorists, **boasted**, Rep. Jerry Nadler, a Democrat representing Manhattan.” The quotative (**boasted**) carries an illocutionary force from the reporter that influences how the reader perceives the quote itself, possibly distorting its original meaning [3].

In this work, we investigated quotative usage in direct quotations in U.S. political news at scale. We ask: **(RQ1)** How has the usage of nonobjective quotatives evolved? **(RQ2)** How do news outlets use nonobjective quotatives when covering politicians of different parties? To answer these questions, we developed a dependency-parsing-based method to extract quotatives and applied it to Quotebank [10], a web-scale corpus of attributed quotes, obtaining nearly 7 million quotes, each enriched with the quoted speaker’s political party and the ideological leaning of the outlet that published the quote<sup>1</sup>. We created a dictionary of nonobjective and objective quotatives: Inspired by journalistic best practices [5, 7, 9], we define quotatives as *objective* if they refer to the direct speech action and do not involve any subjective judgment of the action (e.g. “say” and “tell”); and as *nonobjective* if they refer to some additional action or conduct and with subjective judgments (e.g. “boasted”, “rasped”, “taunted”). We applied this dictionary to the extracted quotatives and performed a series of fixed effects models.

**RQ1** First, we look at the usage of nonobjective quotatives throughout the entire study period in Fig. 1. We see a sensible ordering of the media bias categories considered, with the more partisan outlets using the most nonobjective quotatives and the less partisan outlets using the least. Then, we look at how the nonobjective quotative usage changes over time in by showing the estimated percentage rate of change per year in Fig. 2. We find that although the centrist outlets (Left-Center, Least-Biased and Right-Center) used nonobjective quotatives less on average (c.f., Fig. 1), we find that their usage of nonobjective quotatives increases over time, while the Left and Right do not show a significant change.

**RQ2** For each media bias category, we show the estimated percentage difference in the usage of nonobjective quotatives for Democratic and Republican speakers in Fig. 3. We find that, for every outlet category, there is a significant difference in quotative usage between Democratic and Republican speakers, which we call *Quotative Bias*. Notably, this difference is nearly 2%, around a third of the overall nonobjective quotative usage, for both left and right media

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<sup>1</sup>According to <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/>, a media bias rating website commonly used in the literature

outlets, which use more nonobjective quotatives when referring to politicians from opposing political parties. Finally, we investigate if quotative bias has evolved during the study period. For each media bias category, we depict the difference in the trends of nonobjective quotative usage for Democrats and Republicans in Fig. 4. For left and centrist outlets, the gap between how nonobjective quotatives are used to quote Democrats and Republicans is increasing in the study period. These increases are statistically significant and substantial compared to the existing level of quotative bias observed in our data. For example, the estimated contrast of the trend is around 0.33% for left-center outlets, and the existing quotative bias is 1.08%. Thus, the annual relative increase of quotative bias is above 30%. Left outlets exhibit the most increase in quotative bias in absolute terms, at 0.5% per year. For right outlets, we find this difference in trends leans towards Republicans, but the effect is not statistically significant.

To conclude, through the analysis of quotatives, we observe a decline in objectivity in U.S. political news. We believe that two simultaneous processes are at play: outlets are adopting more nonobjective quotatives overall and the usage of nonobjective quotatives is increasingly “mediated” by the party affiliation of quoted politicians. Both processes indicate a measurable decrease in journalistic objectivity. While detecting bias often requires some level of human judgment to determine neutrality, and while it is debatable how a neutral or balanced view can be presented in any specific context, quotative usage can be regarded as an easily quantifiable form of bias due to its prominence within journalism. There are clear and established rules for the usage of quotes on which journalists have historically agreed, as is evident from textbooks [1, 6, 8] and editorial guidelines [7, 9]. Although objective journalism is a 20th-century invention and could be considered an anomaly throughout journalism history, it is commonly regarded as central to today’s democratic process. In that context, our results indicate a decrease in the level of objective quotative usage in U.S. politics news coverage, which can be seen as a devolution of journalism as a profession.

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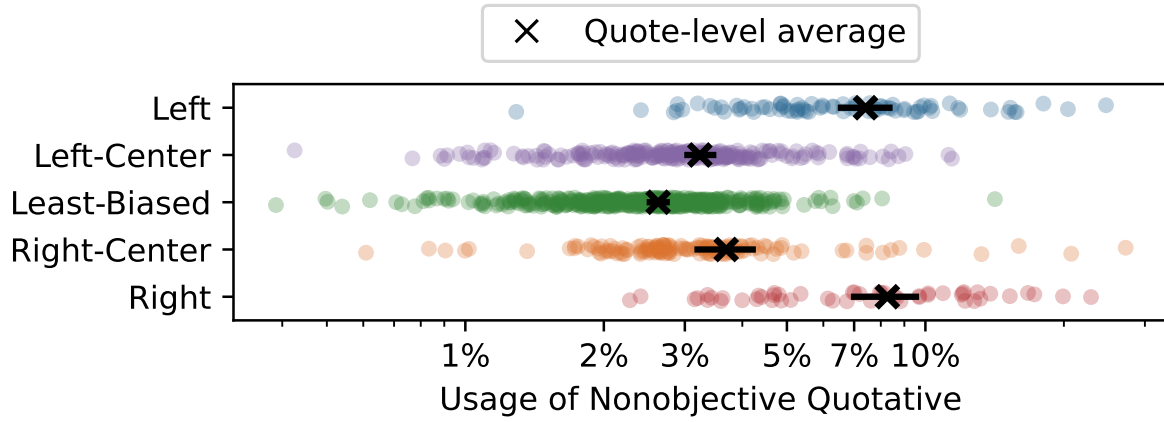


Figure 1: **Usage of nonobjective quotatives across outlets of different political leaning.** For each media bias category (on the y-axis), we depict the usage of nonobjective quotatives per outlet (each represented by a circle  $\circ$ ) and the overall average usage pooled across outlets ( $\times$ ). Note that the  $x$ -axis is on a logarithmic scale. Pairwise differences between averages are statistically significant under the Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test with Bonferroni correction.

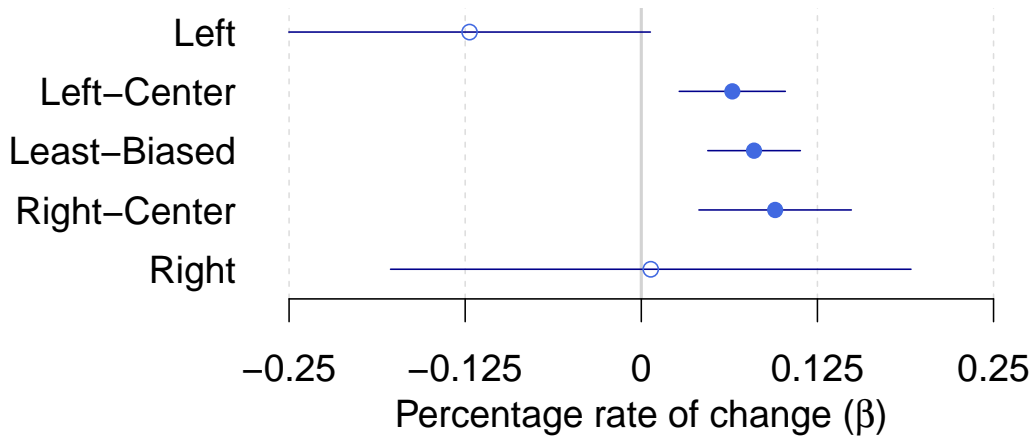


Figure 2: **Percentage yearly rate of change of nonobjective quotative usage for each outlet category.** A solid circle denotes a significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ ), and a hollow circle denotes an insignificant effect.

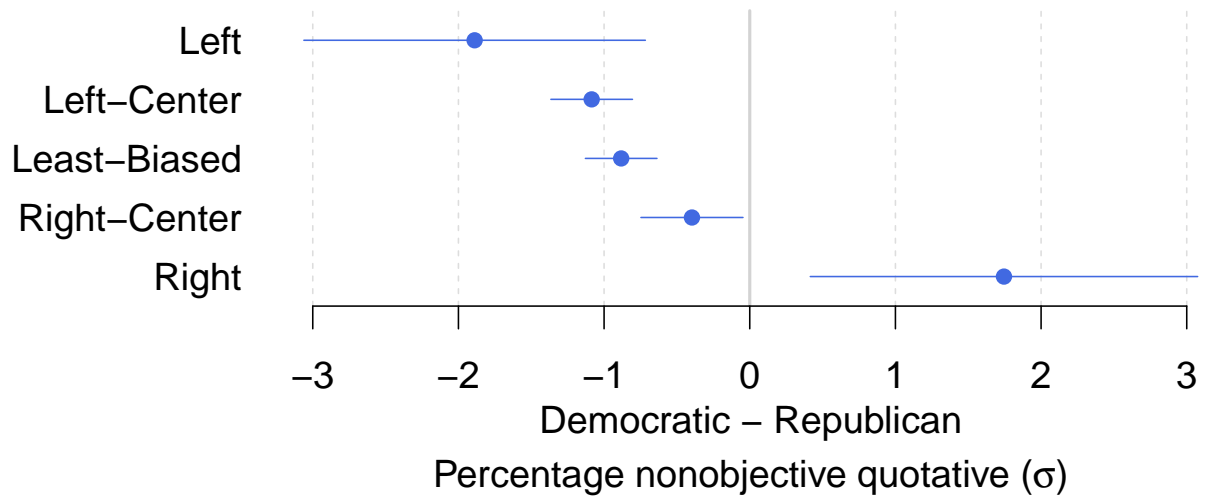


Figure 3: **Difference in nonobjective quotative usage between Democratic and Republican speakers.** All estimates are significant.

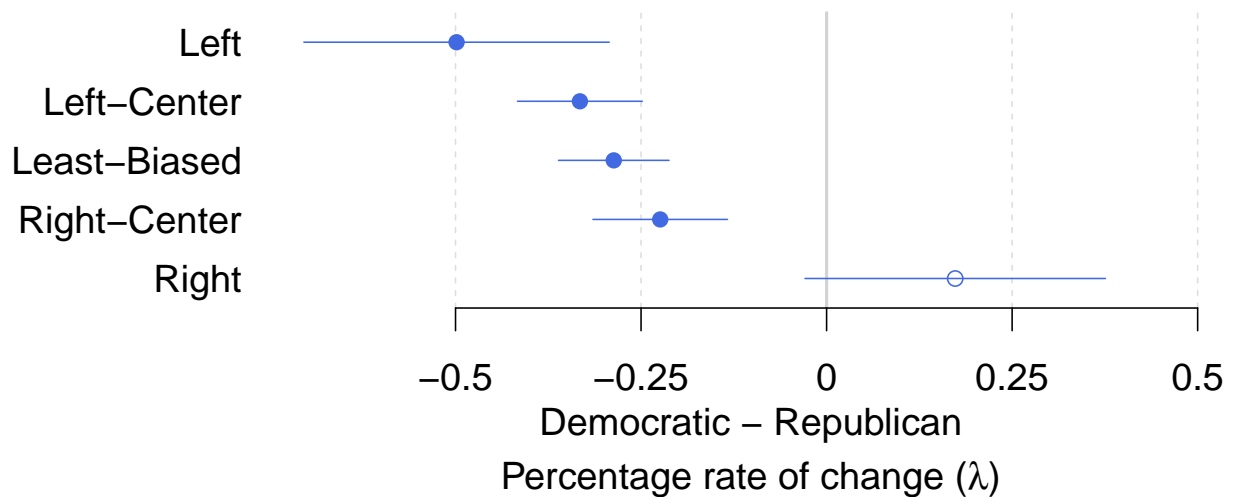


Figure 4: **Difference in percentage yearly rate of change of nonobjective quotative usage between Democratic and Republican speakers for each media outlet category.** A solid circle denotes a significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ ) and a hollow circle denotes an insignificant effect.