

# Pushing the Boundaries: Norm-Challenging Conduct and Speech among Members of Congress

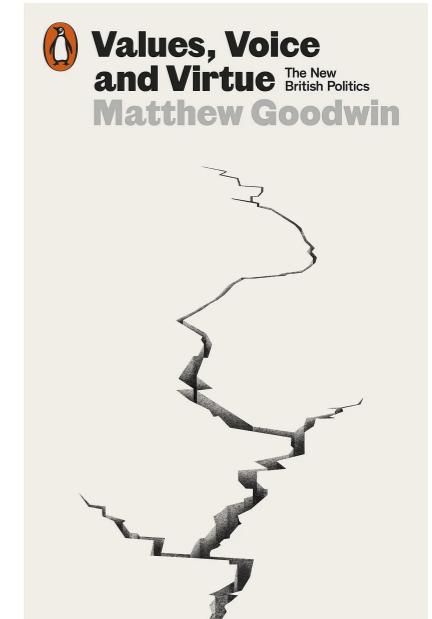
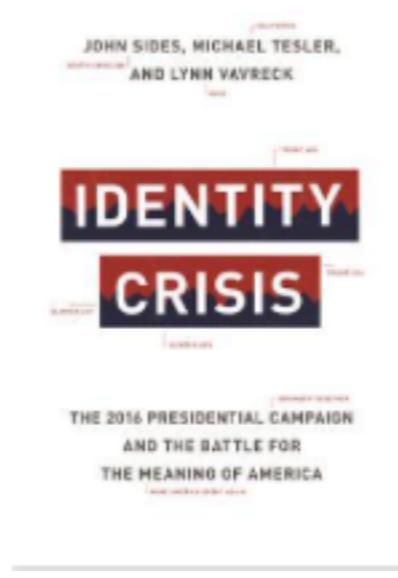
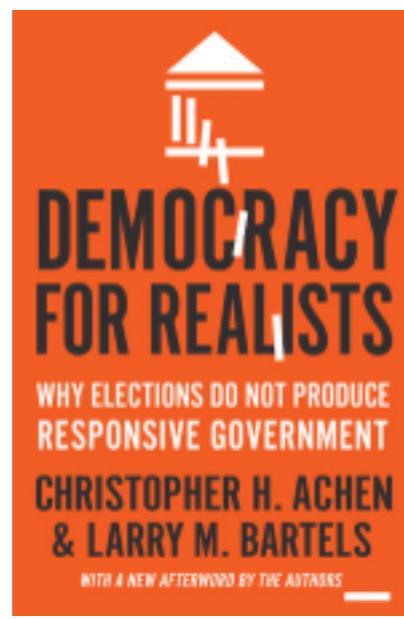
Jan Zilinsky (TUM)

APSA 2023

# Motivating questions

- To what extend do candidates view **policy representation** as their core job (as opposed to providing “symbolic victories” and psychological benefits to their supporters)?
- Do within-party rhetorical differences reveal fundamental differences across candidates, as reflected in their offline political behavior?

# Culture wars seemingly continue to motivate voters in Western Democracies



*American Political Science Review* (2017) 111, 1, 110–128

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## Moral Power: How Public Opinion on Culture War Issues Shapes Partisan Predispositions and Religious Orientations

PAUL GOREN *University of Minnesota*

CHRISTOPHER CHAPP *St. Olaf College*

**P**arty-driven and religion-driven models of opinion change posit that individuals revise their positions on culture war issues to ensure consonance with political and religious predispositions. By contrast, models of issue-driven change propose that public opinion on cultural controversies lead people to revise their partisan and religious orientations. Using data from four panel studies covering the period 1992–2012, we pit the party- and religion-based theories of opinion change against the issue-based model of change. Consistent with the standard view, party and religion constrain culture war opinion.

# Hot-button issues are similar to old “cultural/moral” issues but the set is also expanding



## Stefanik, Keller, Grothman Introduce the Restoring Academic Freedom on Campus Act

September 21, 2022



NEW & STORIES

## Professor Accuses a U.S. Senator of Being Transphobic for Saying Only Women Can Get Pregnant

NBC NEWS

CONGRESS

### Republicans are crusading against 'woke'

Yet lawmakers and operatives who spoke to NBC News varied in how they define the idea, while others said they didn't know much about "wokeness" at all.



# Multiple theoretical modes of political representation

- Policy representation (candidates anticipate that a sufficient share of voters engage in spatial voting)
- Descriptive representation (standing for “people like you”)
- Emotive representation (“I am as angry as you”)

# Framework and empirical predictions

- All modes of political representation require some attention from voters (and therefore from the media)
- Attention maximization through outrage and norm-breaking have been viewed as increasing, jointly with grievance politics
- Expectation 1: grievances are strategically mixed with **both identity and policy appeals** in political rhetoric
- Expectation 2: Meanings of fixed words will differ within and across parties, and they will offer prognostic clues about actual behavior



**Ted Cruz**   
@tedcruz

...

If you're a Chinese communist, or an Iranian Mullah, or Kim Jong Un...would this scare you?



## Humans of CIA



**Central Intelligence Agency**   
69.6K subscribers

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B**Bette**

NYC | May 7

Conservatives want entertainment, not policy. They may say they want to restore yesteryear's values (religion, white supremacy, anti women, anti gay, etc)...but at the end of the day they just like drama. And that is Trump.

[89 Recommend](#) [Share](#)[Flag](#)

Congressman Jim Banks  
26. April 2021 ·

"No policymaker would allow a company to dump toxic waste into a river upstream of a thriving town he is charged with governing. Yet corporate America eagerly dumps woke, toxic nonsense into our culture, and it's only gotten more destructive with time. These campaigns will be met with the same strength that any other polluter should expect."

Great op-ed from Senator Rubio on how Republicans should handle woke corporations. Read it, below:



NYPPOST.COM

**Corporations that undermine American values don't deserve GOP support**

"What's good for General Motors is good for the country." This was a defining American adag...



**Tim Scott**

@SenatorTimScott

We must call out woke supremacy for what it is —the attacking and silencing of individuals with differing opinions.

We have a choice: woke mandates and virtue signaling or the Opportunity Society.



**Congressman Guy Reschenthaler**

27. April 2021 ·

People are tired of being lectured by woke celebrities who don't live in the real world.



NYPPOST.COM

**Oscar ratings drop to an all-time low with unwatchable show**

About 9.85 million viewers tuned in, which is a more than 58% drop from last year's all-time lo...



**Rep. Brian Babin**  
22. April 2021 ·

You'd think that the mayor of a city where 20-plus people were shot last weekend - one death being a 7-year-old girl - would support their law enforcement more.

Unfortunately, common sense and #backingtheblue isn't on the woke Left's agenda.



FOXNEWS.COM

**Chicago mayor throws police 'under bus,' fails to call out gang violence: Dem official**



**Congressman Mark Green**

23. April 2021 ·

So this is how we take on the Chinese Communist Party? The woke leftists have lost their minds and should never be allowed in government again.

<https://www.foxnews.com/.../virginia-accelerated-math...>



FOXNEWS.COM

**Virginia moving to eliminate all accelerated math courses before 11th grade as part of equity-focused plan**



**Congressman Jason Smith**

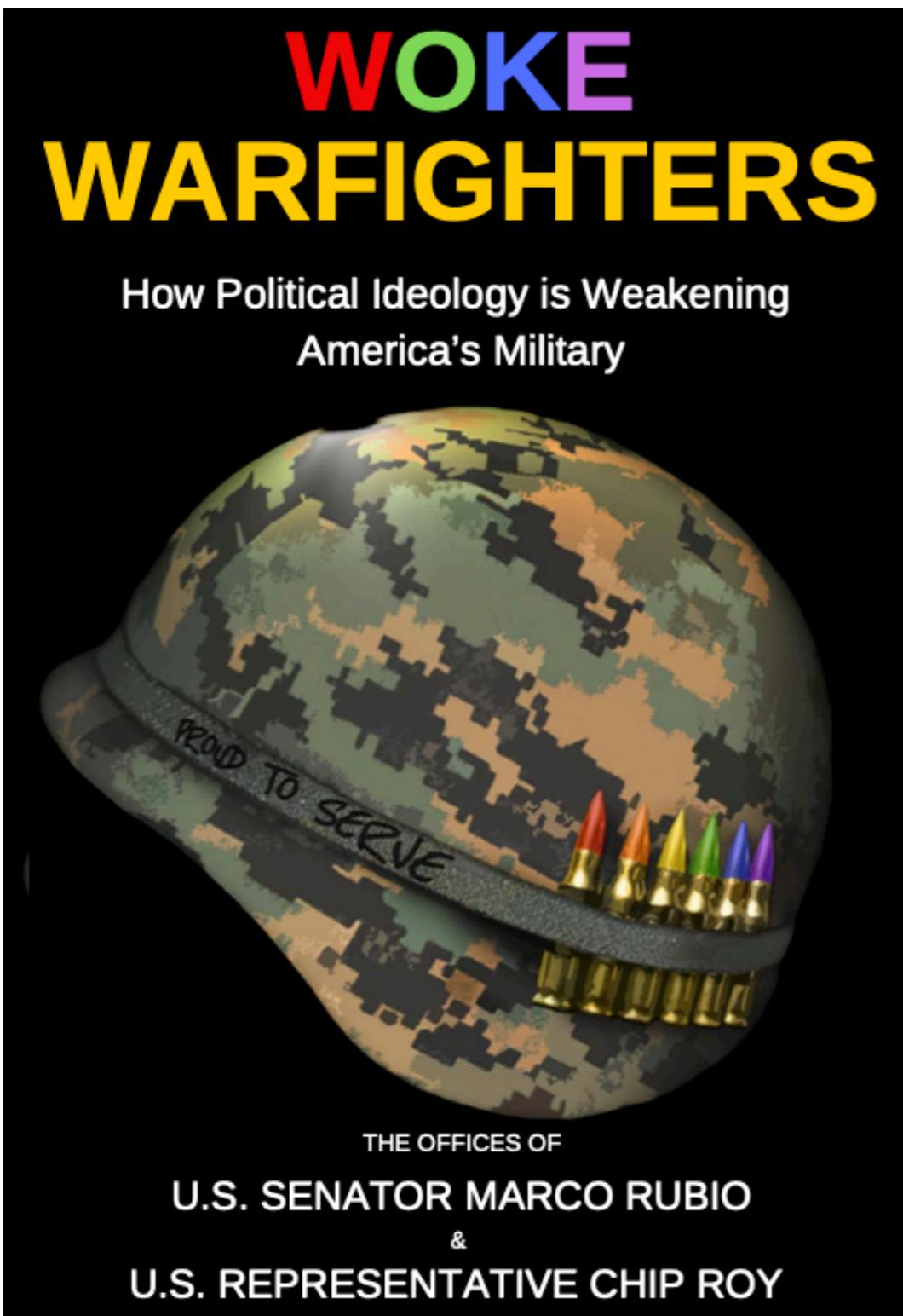
20. April 2021 ·

Where are all the woke corporations condemning House Financial Services Chairwoman Maxine Waters for inciting violence over the weekend?

144 129

833

# Not a purely a social media phenomenon



*"On February 5, 2021, Secretary Lloyd Austin signed a memorandum directing all service members and DoD civilian employees to conduct a "one-day 'stand-down' to discuss extremism in the ranks with their personnel." ... Foreign adversaries like **China** and **Russia** loved the stand-down."*

*(Rubio-Roy Report, 2023)*



**Stefanik, Keller, Grothman Introduce the Restoring Academic Freedom on Campus Act**

**September 21, 2022**

# Extremism - policy demands or performative nihilism?

The header features the CNN Politics logo with three horizontal bars to its left. To the right are links for "The Biden Presidency", "Facts First", "2022 Midterms", "Audio", "Live TV", a search icon, and a "Log In" button. Below this is a red banner with the text "HAPPENING NOW" and a close button "X". A news headline reads: "Former Arkansas Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson formally announces he's running for president. Watch CNN".

## McCarthy is speaker, but the extremists hold the power



Analysis by [Stephen Collinson](#), CNN

Updated 3:51 AM EST, Mon January 9, 2023

The header includes the NBC logo, the word "THINK", and the subtitle "Opinion, Analysis, Essays". To the right are links for "POLITICS & POLICY", "HEALTH & TECHNOLOGY", and "CULTURE & LIFESTYLE". On the far right is a three-line menu icon.

Below the header, under the "POLITICS & POLICY" section, is the title: "What's for dinner in the new Congress? Chaos and extremism". A subtext below the title reads: "A small but unwavering group of hardened MAGA Republicans spell trouble for Kevin McCarthy and any glimmer of bipartisanship hopes for voters."

# Trolling politics (some attributes)

- **Infotainment:** relies on sensationalism and publicity stunts - treats audiences more as movie goers than serious voters
- Performative transgressions & blame-seeking
- May involve deliberately shocking the media, pushing boundaries, breaking social norms, triggering the elite sensibilities
- Communicates political choices in **stark terms**, leaving little room for compromise
- Has a tenuous relationship with actual policy and governance: simplistic solutions are promised
  - Can be mistaken as non-programmatic or “post-policy”
  - Better to think of as “programmatic-light”
- Often circular: accusing opponents of hypocrisy and incivility, while mostly projecting own behaviors on the opponents
- Fuels grievances
- Often demagogic
- Viewed as toxic by some
- Related to grand-standing (see Park, 2023)
- Can still be viewed as useful in some [rare] cases (the political establishment has blindspots, so elements of populism may provide a corrective)

# Does variation in (within-party) rhetoric reveal differences in offline political behavior?

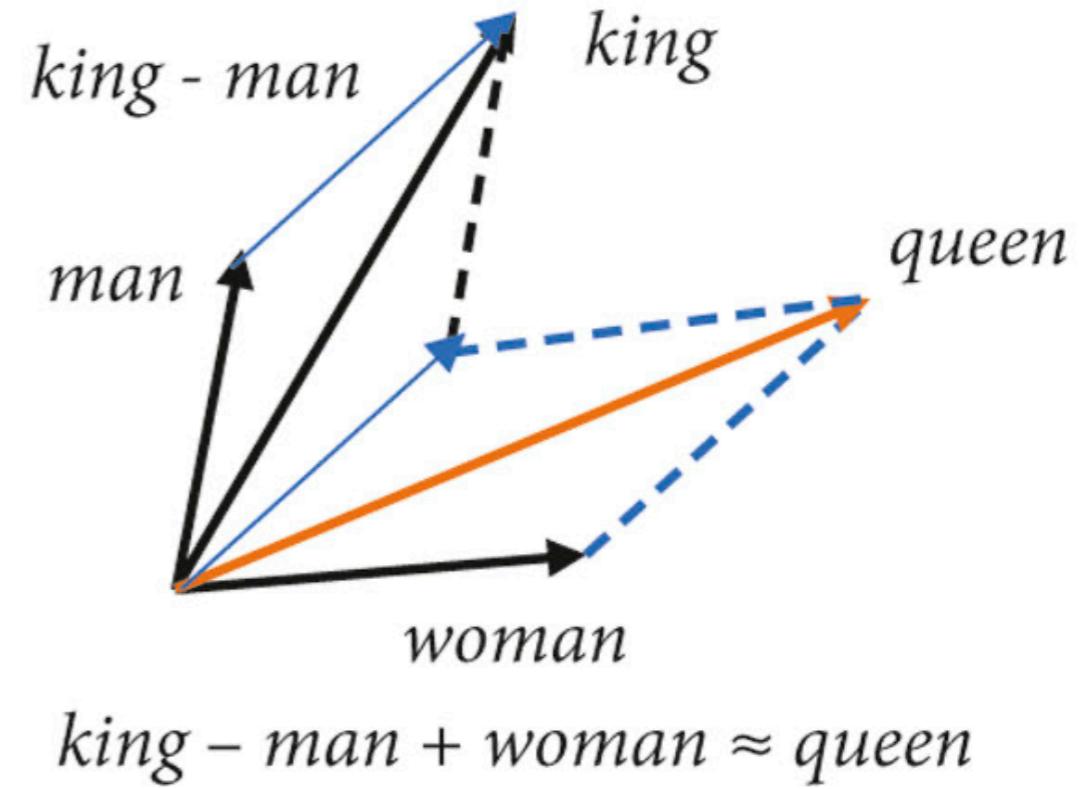
- **Method:** Use the ALC approach from Rodriguez, Spirling and Stewart (APSR, 2023)
- **Data:** Social media posts of Member of Congress (2021-22)
- Proof of concept: Embed cultural grievances
- **Predict** denial of Biden's 2020 victory
  - *Beyond ideology, is rhetoric informative?*

# When are (dis)aggregated embeddings useful?

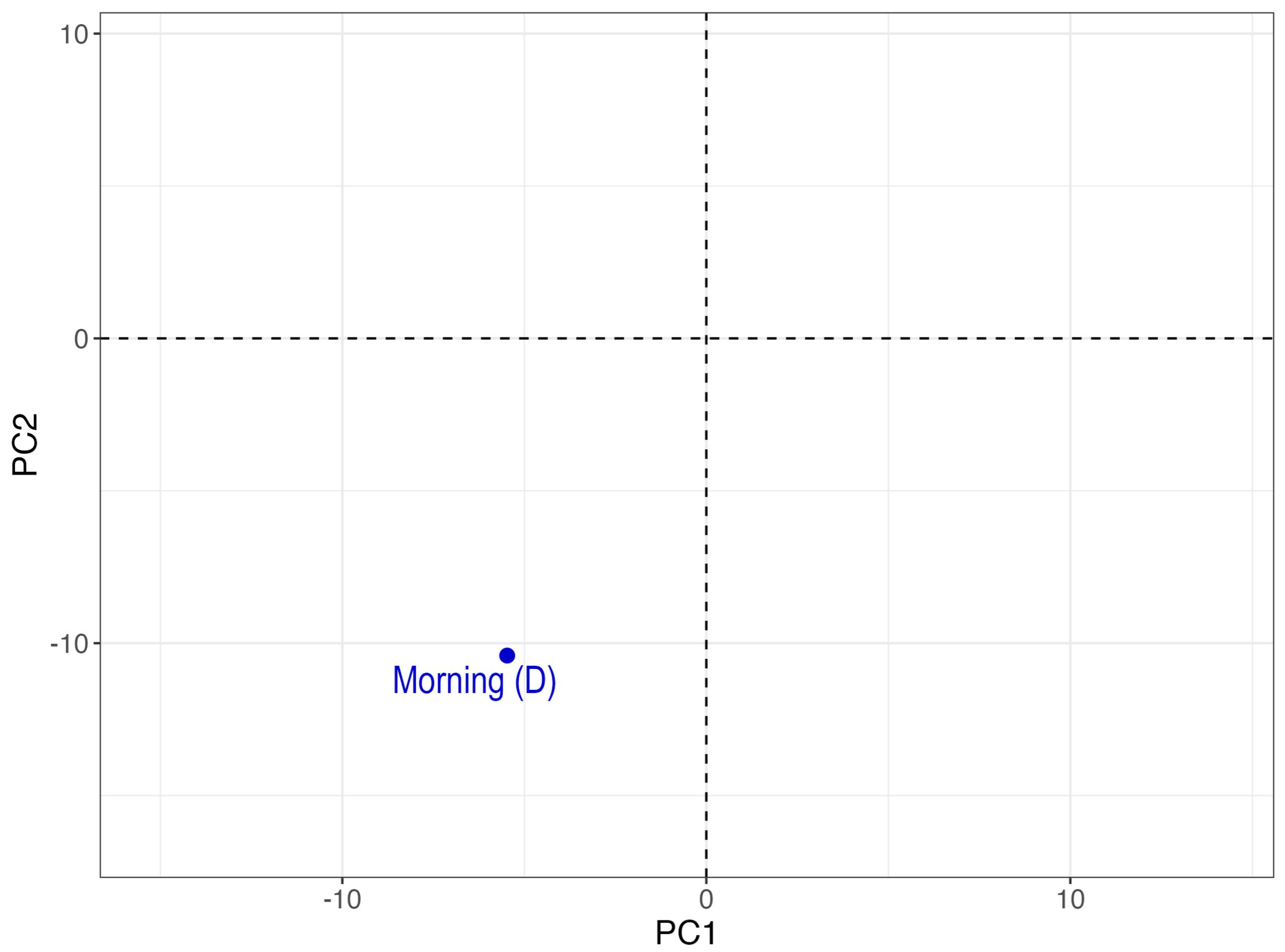
First, calculate corpus-wide averages of embeddings of salient words (by PID)

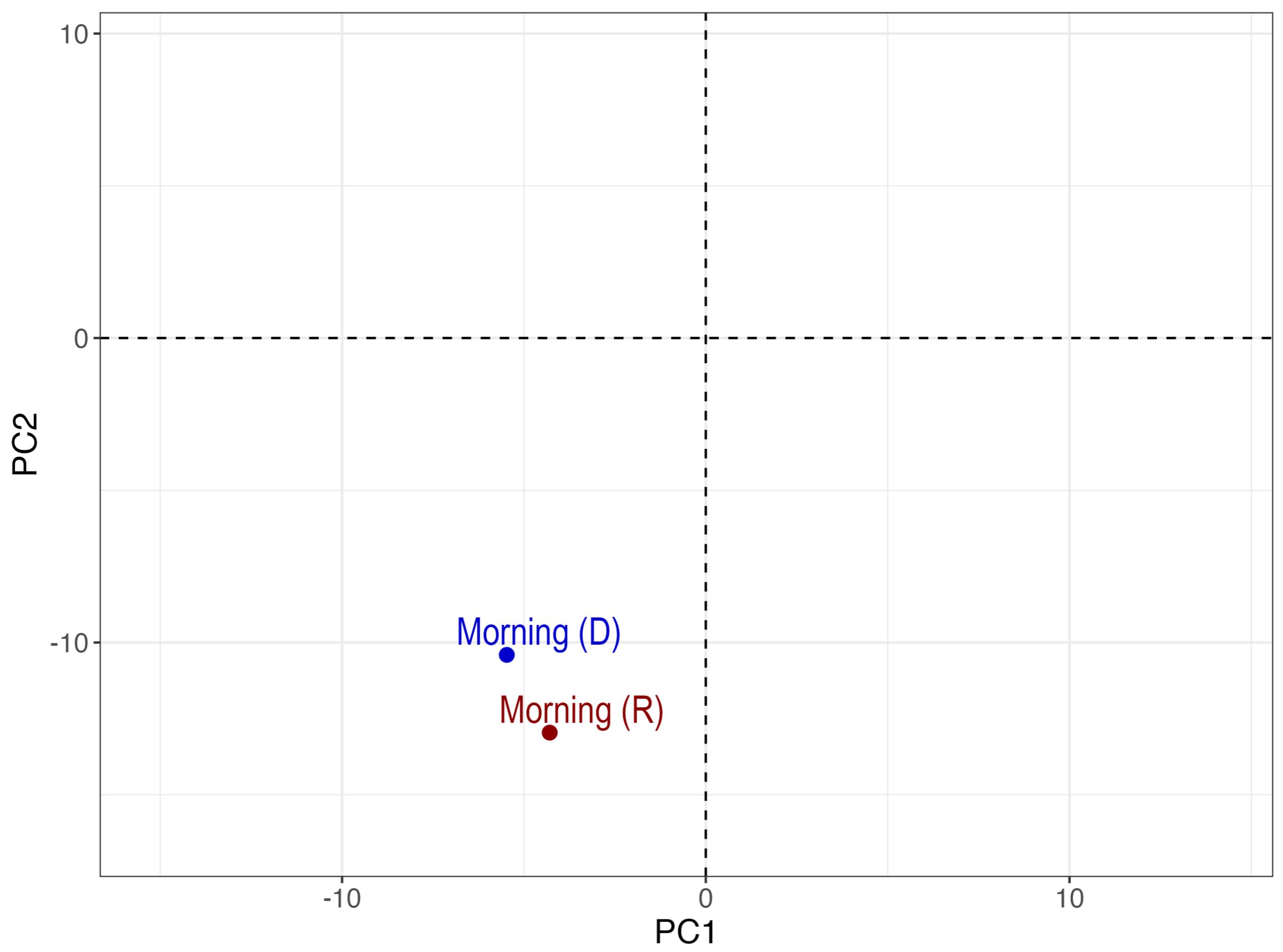
N = approx. 510,000 posts

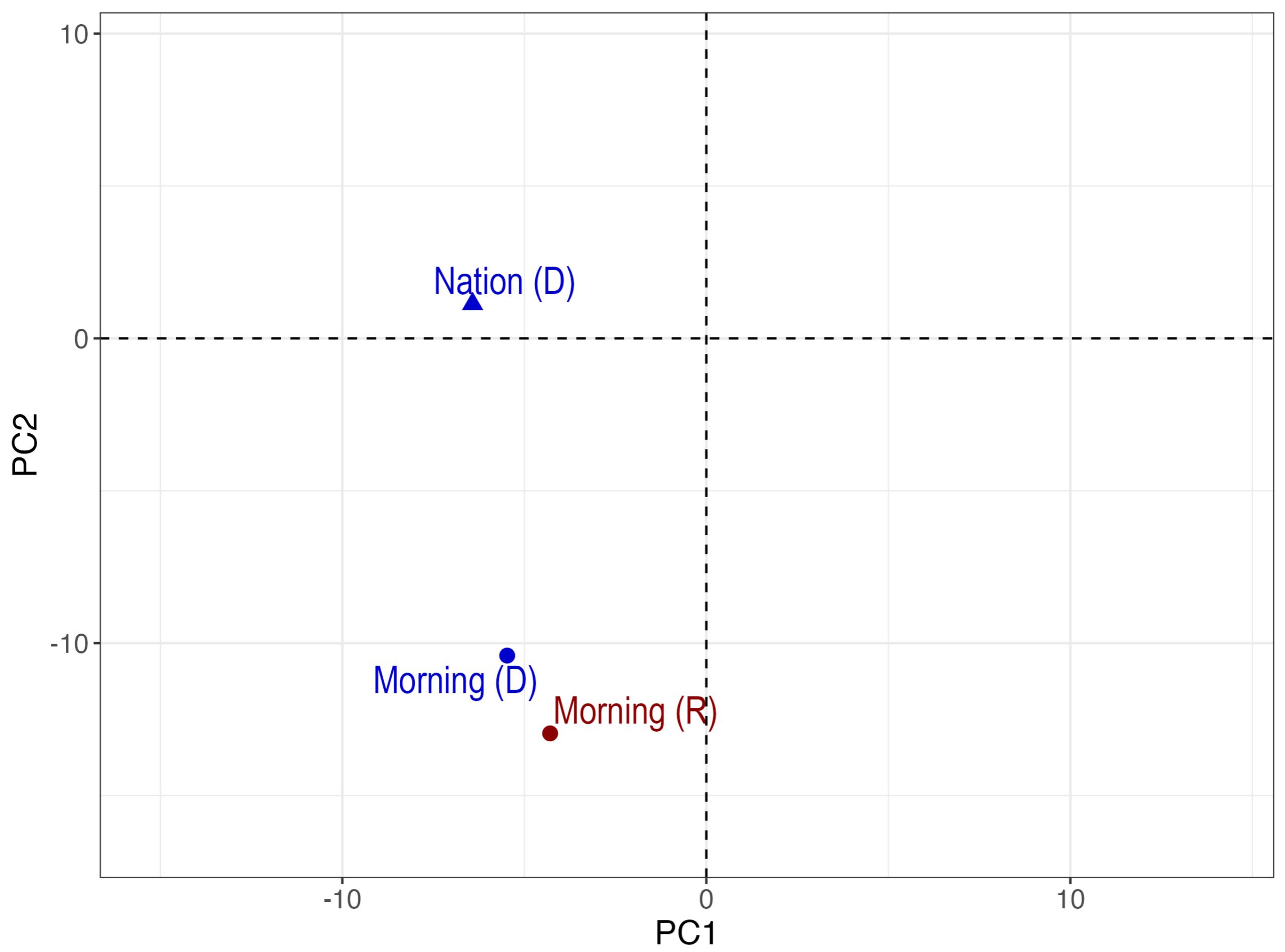
Word vectors can be projected to lower-dimensional spaces  
(and similar words will cluster together)

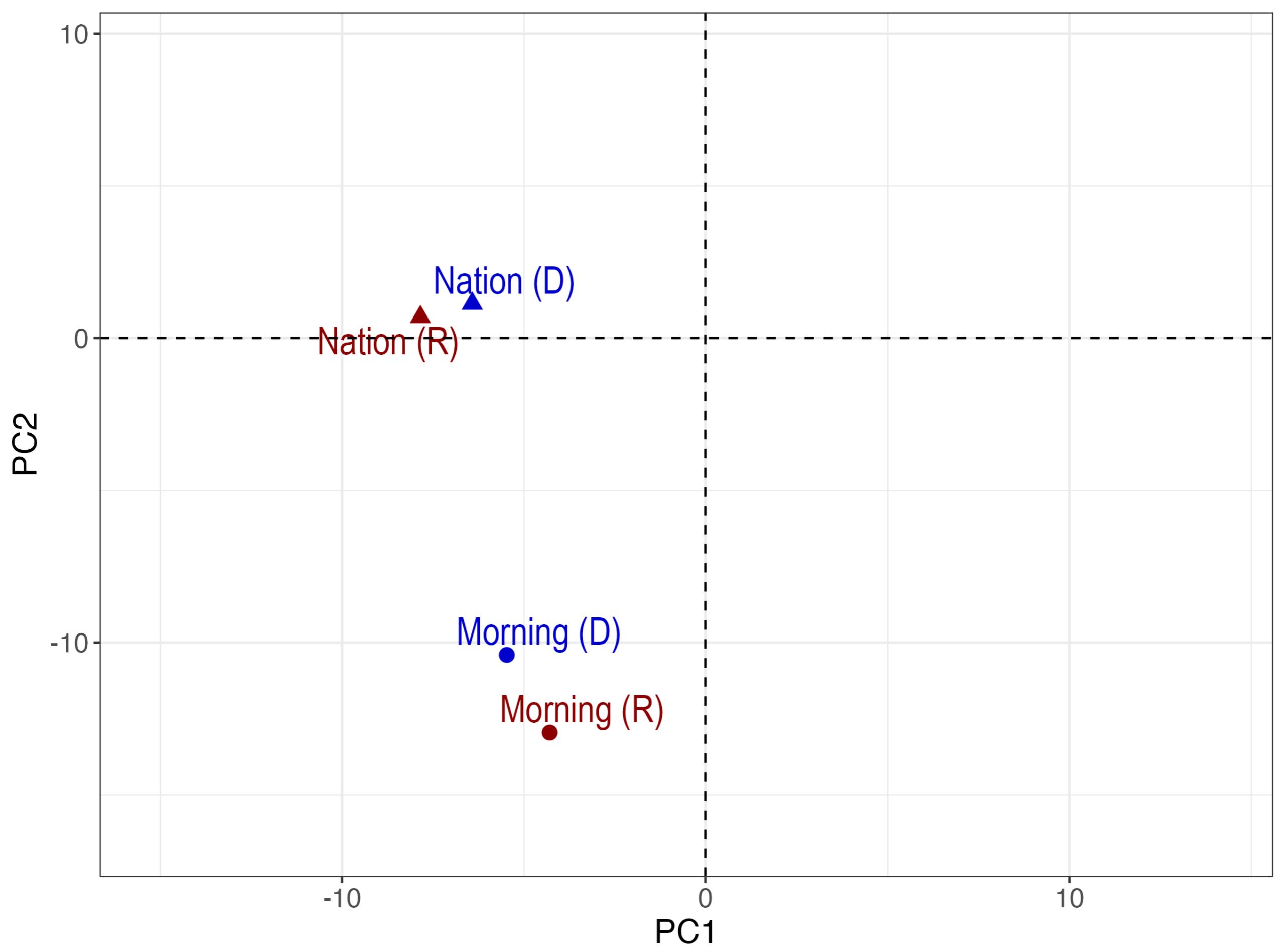


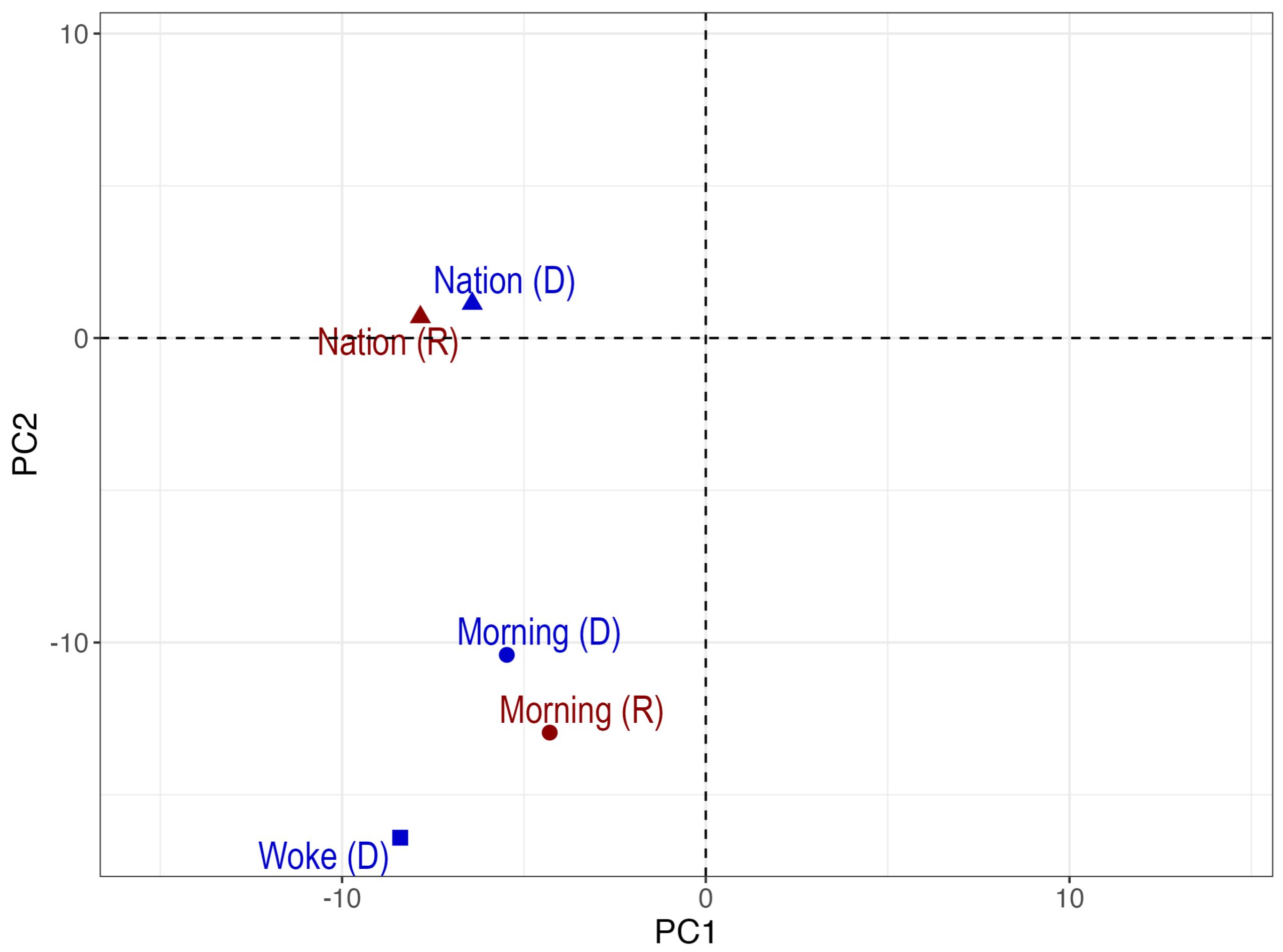
Next slide:  
Calculate and display word vectors separately for each party  
(and apply dimension reduction)

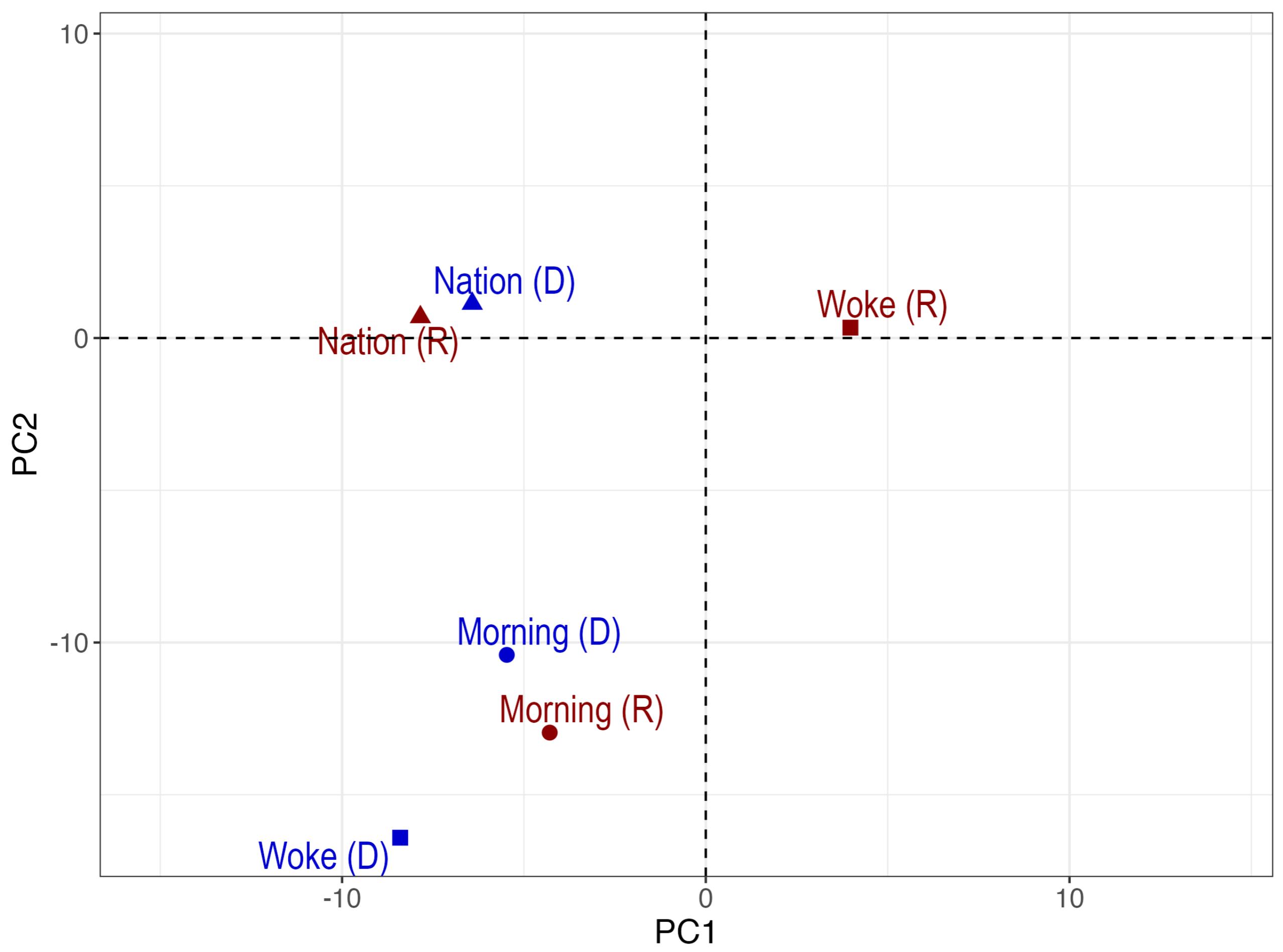


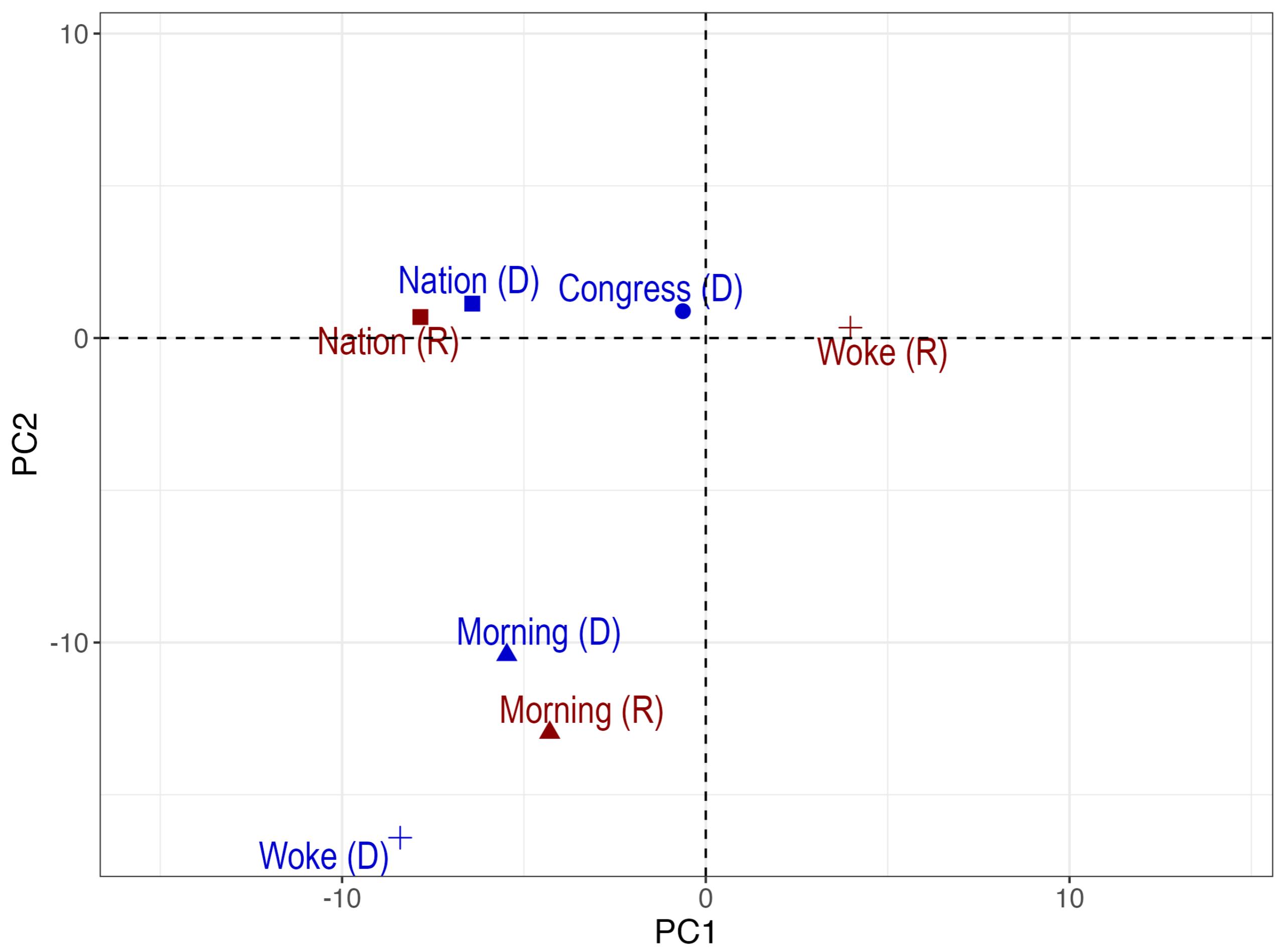


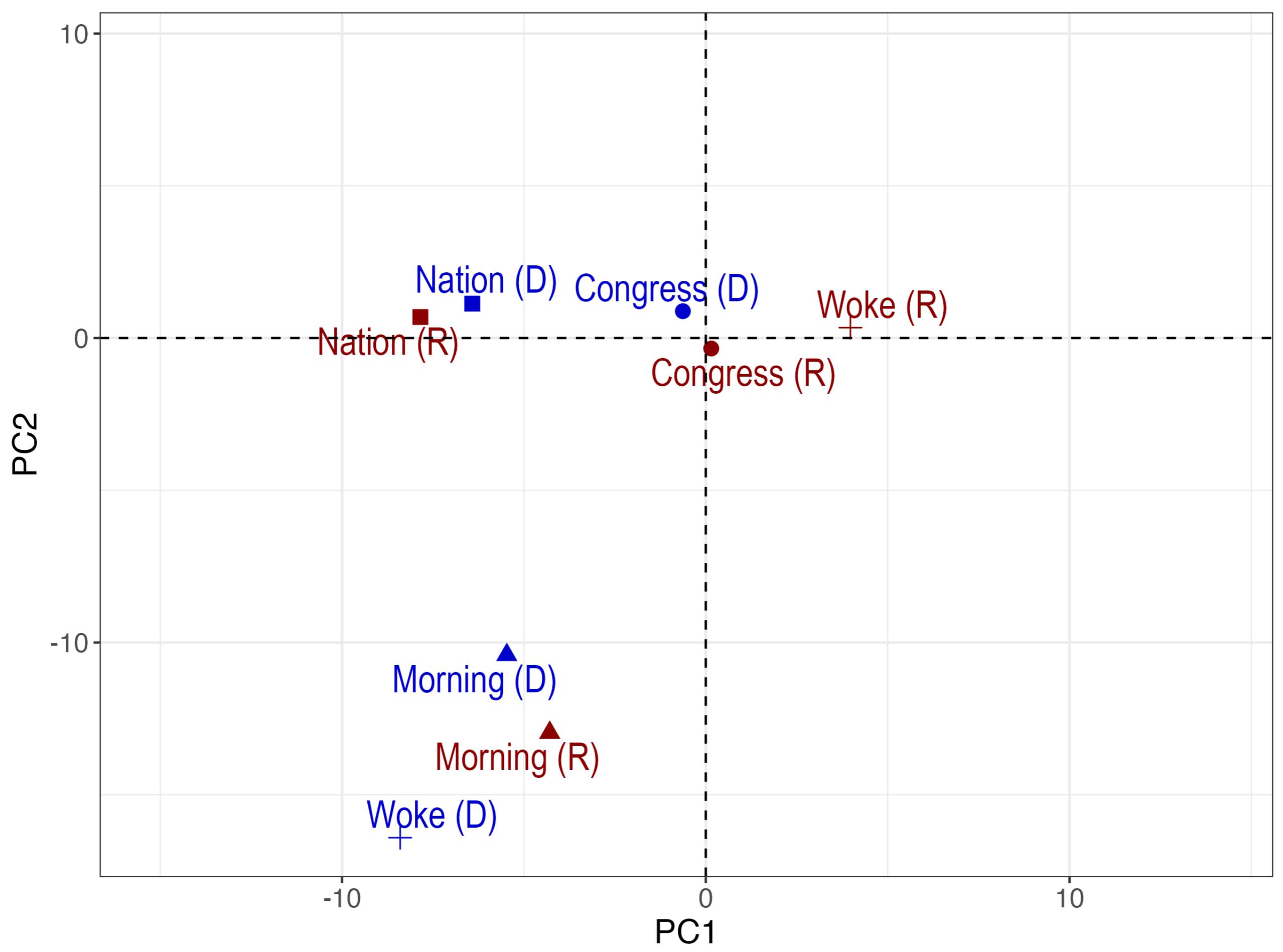


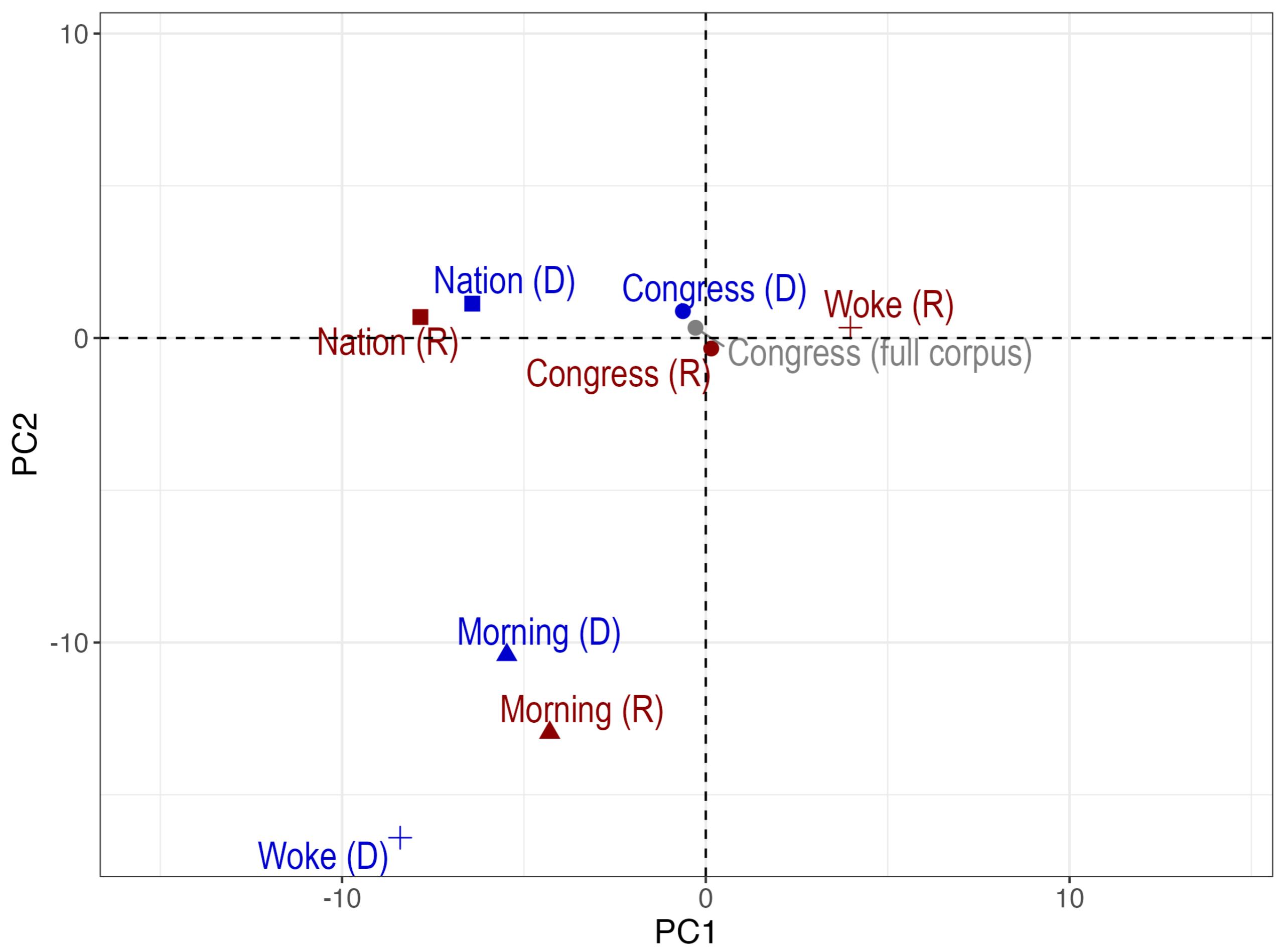


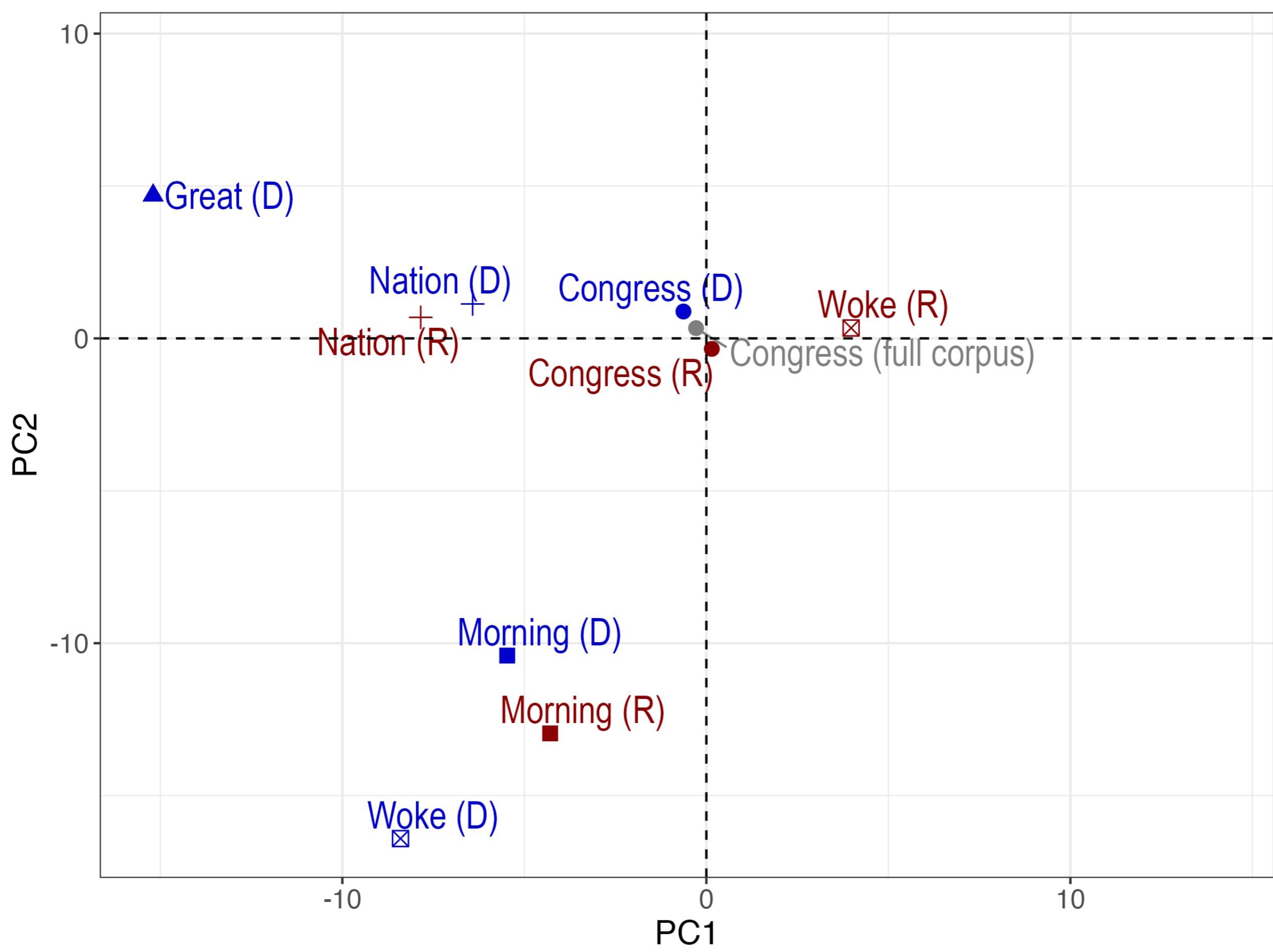


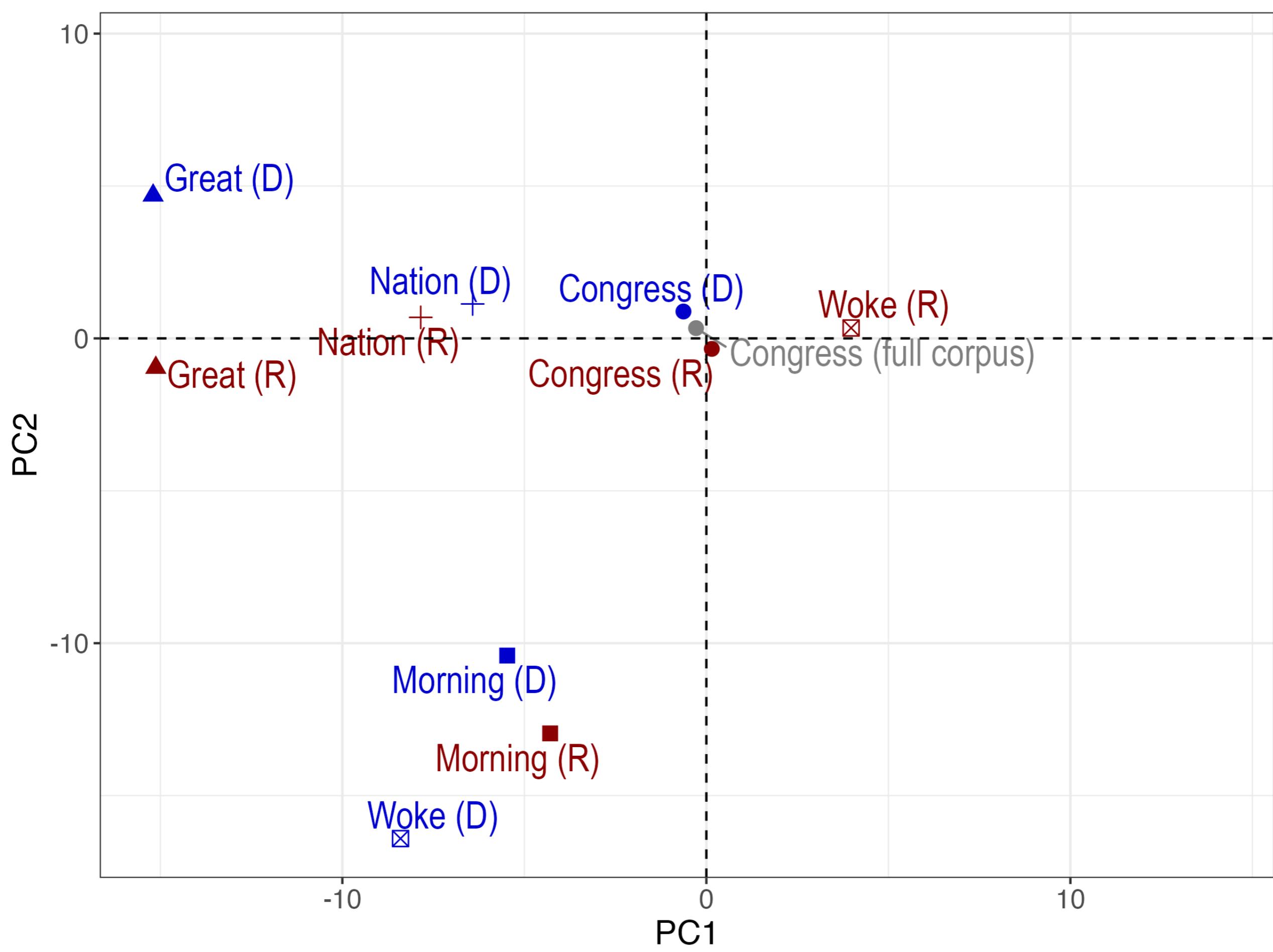


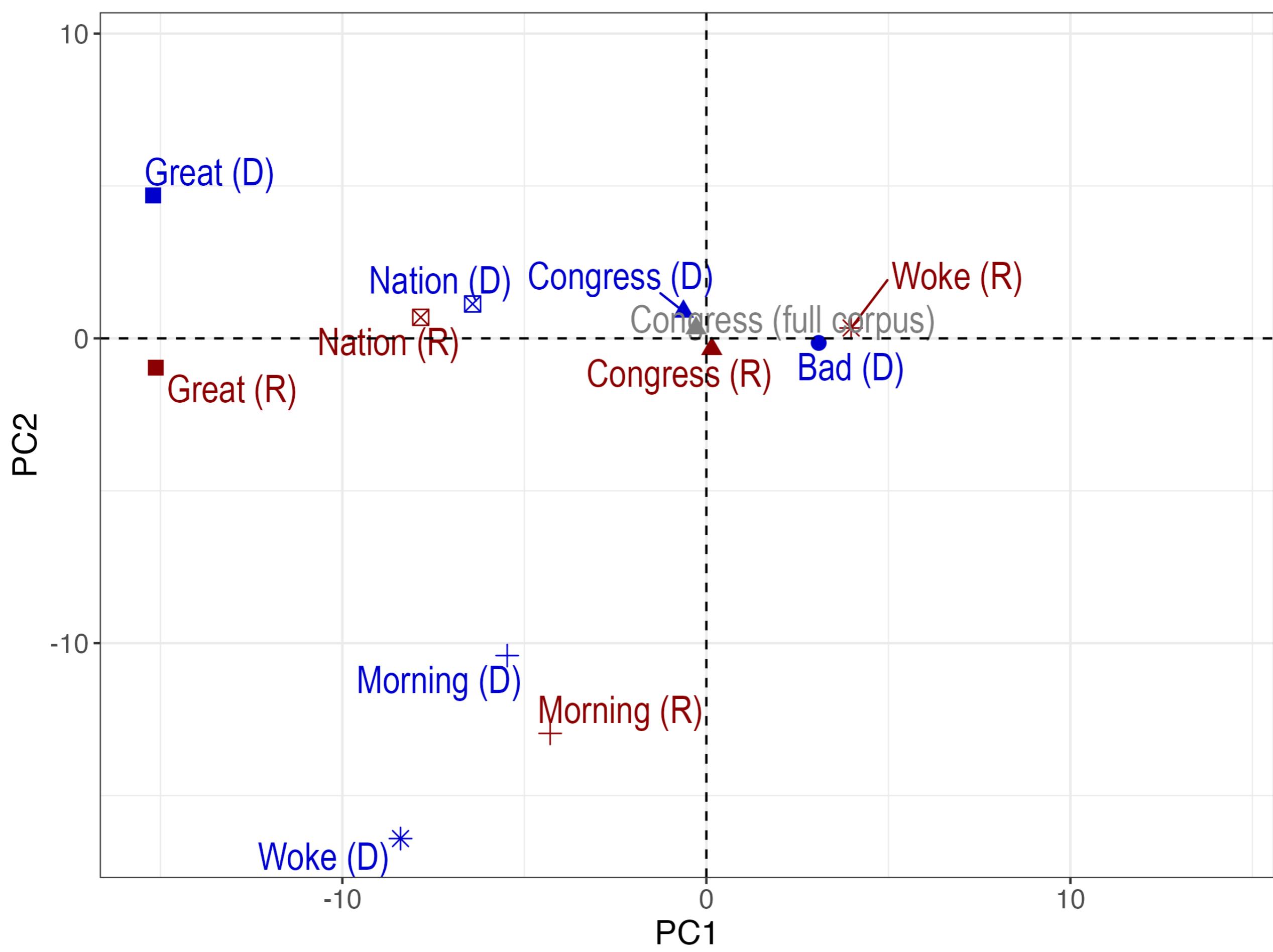


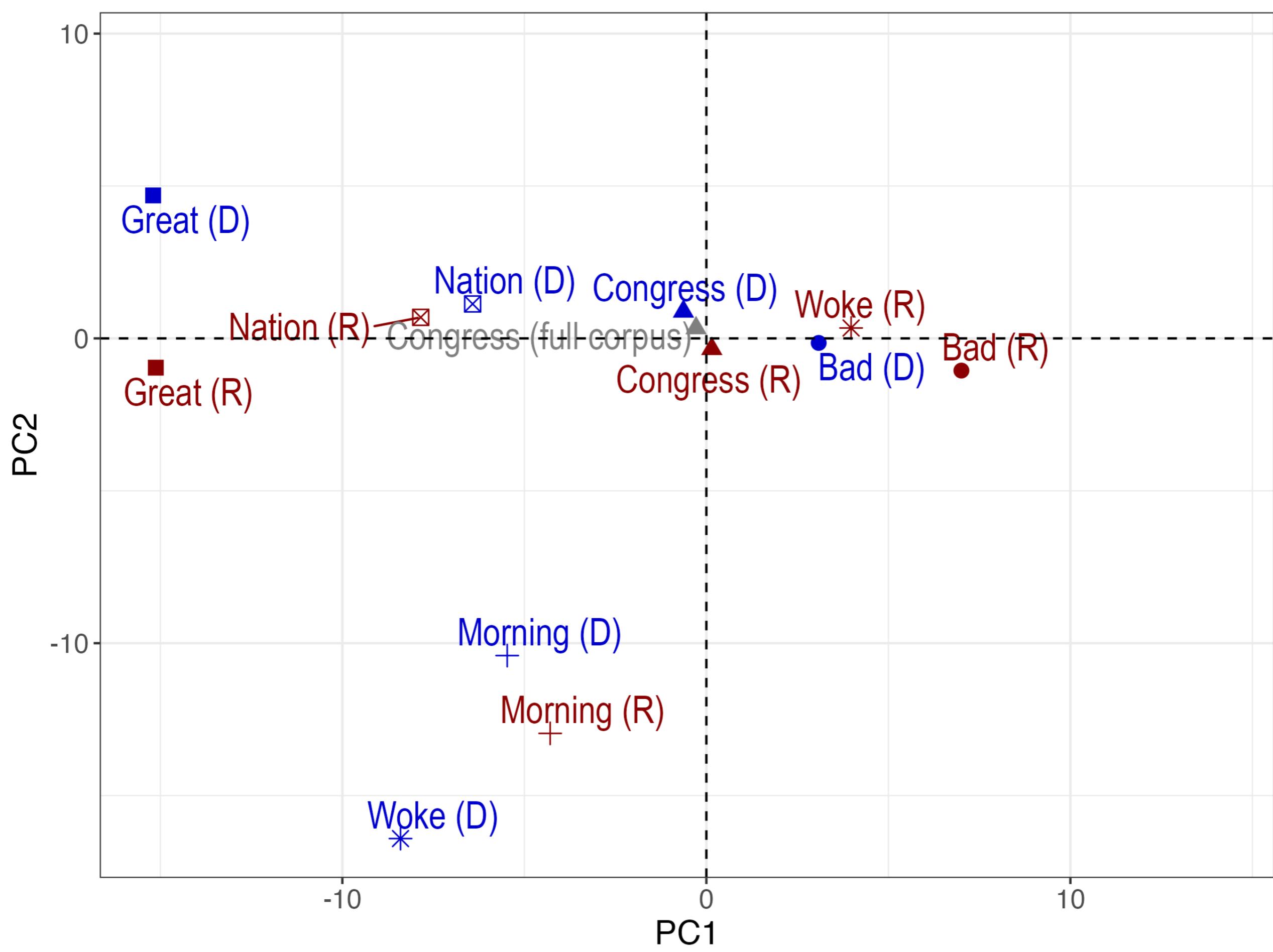


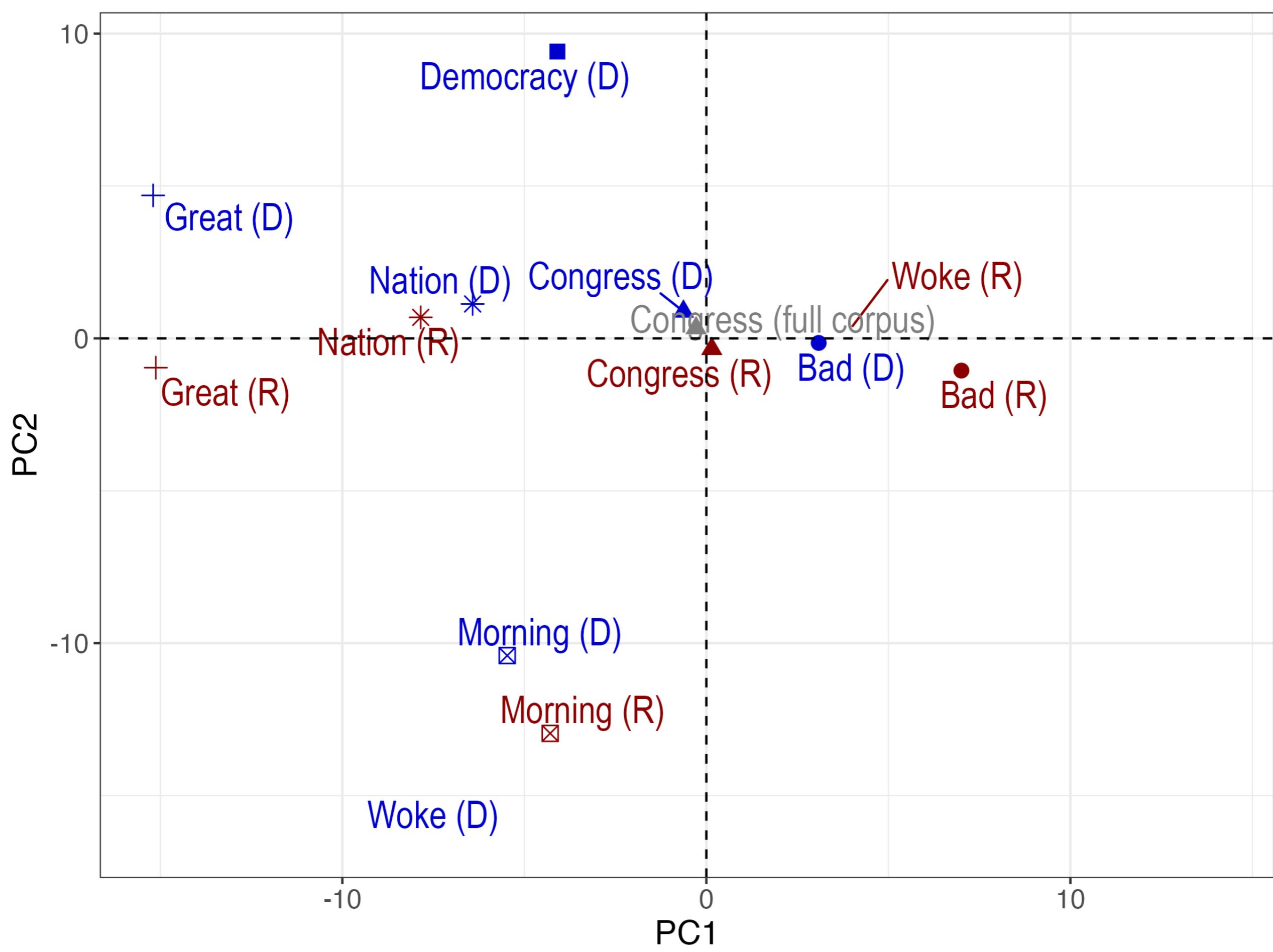


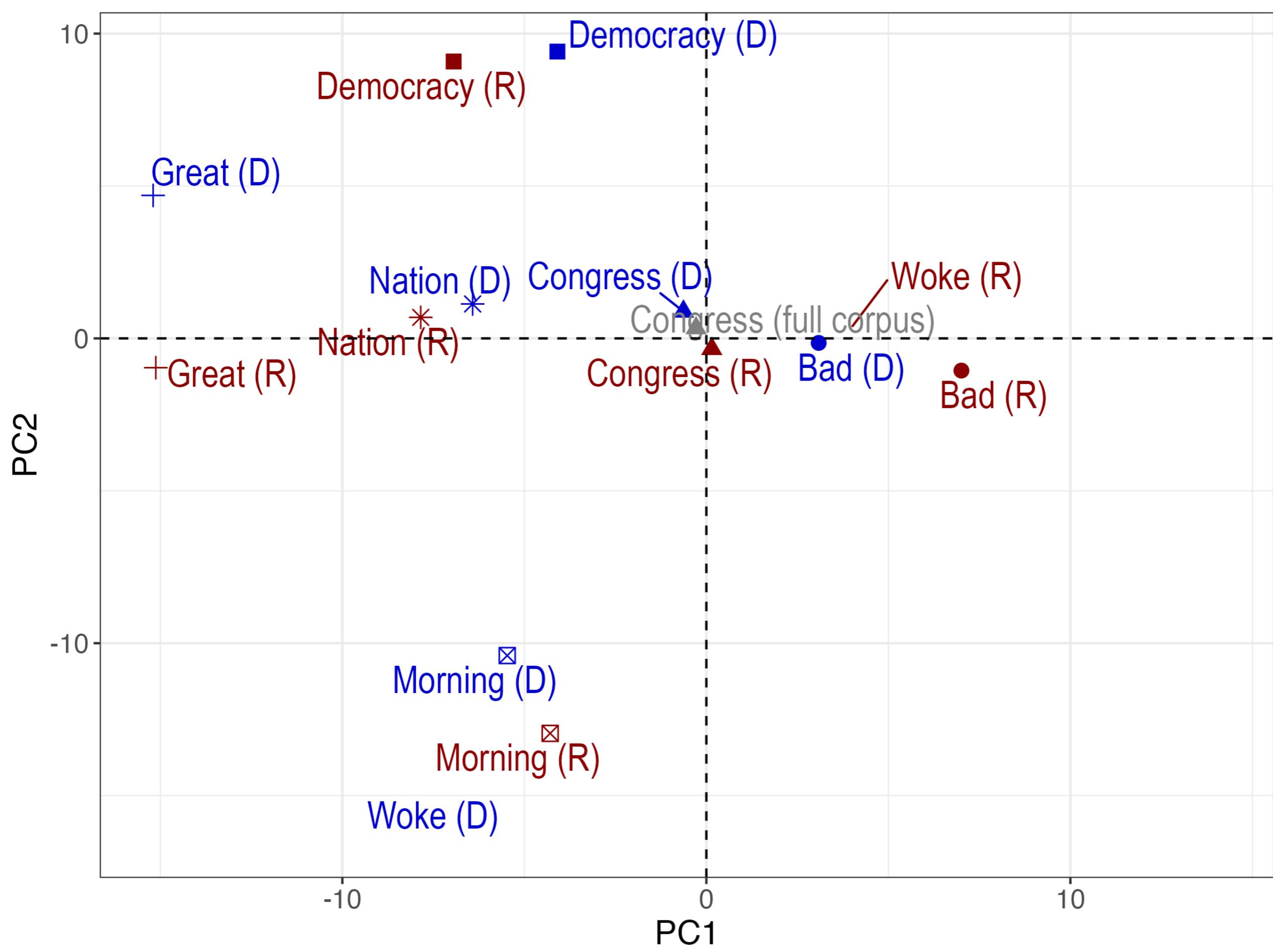


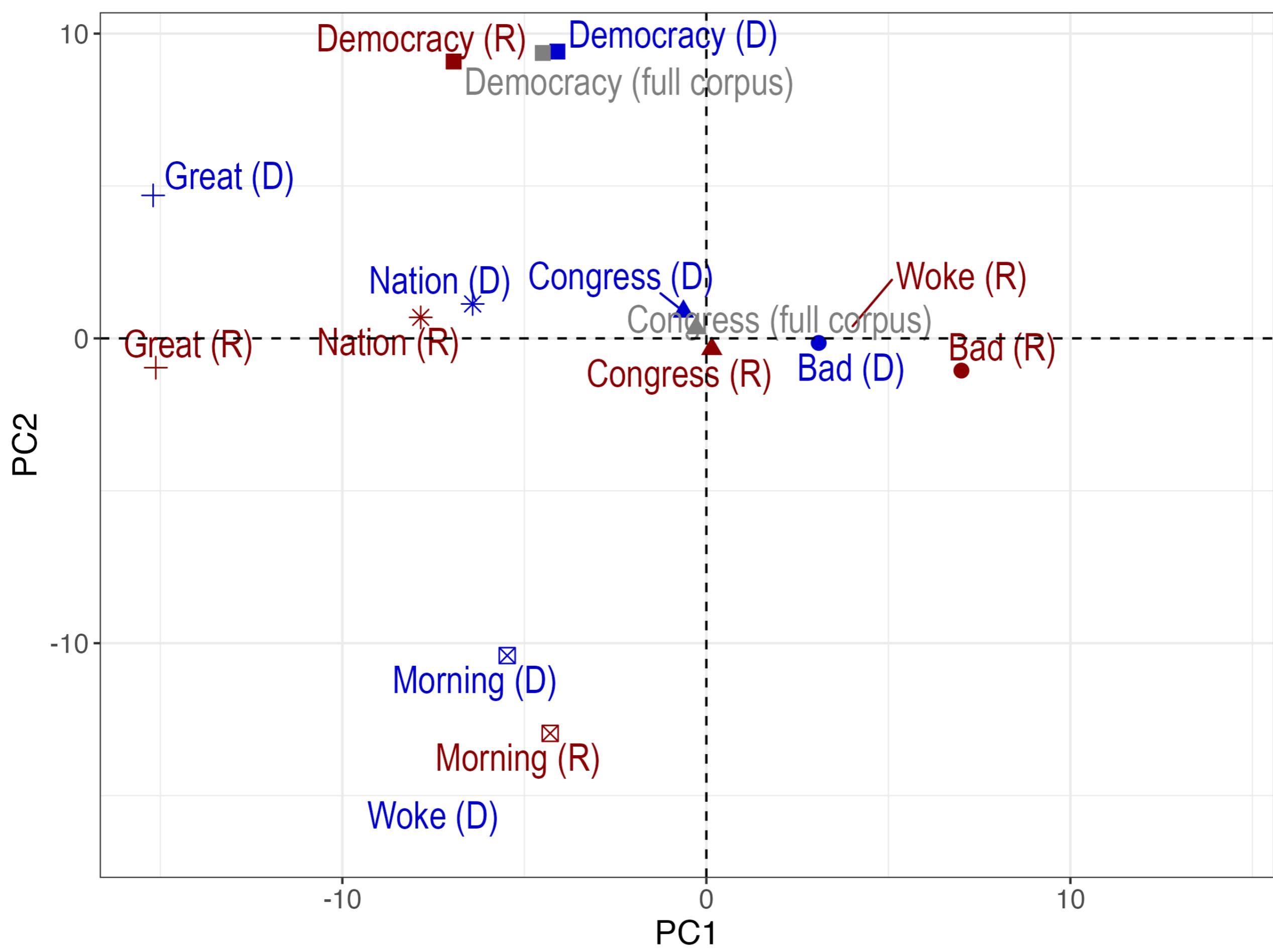


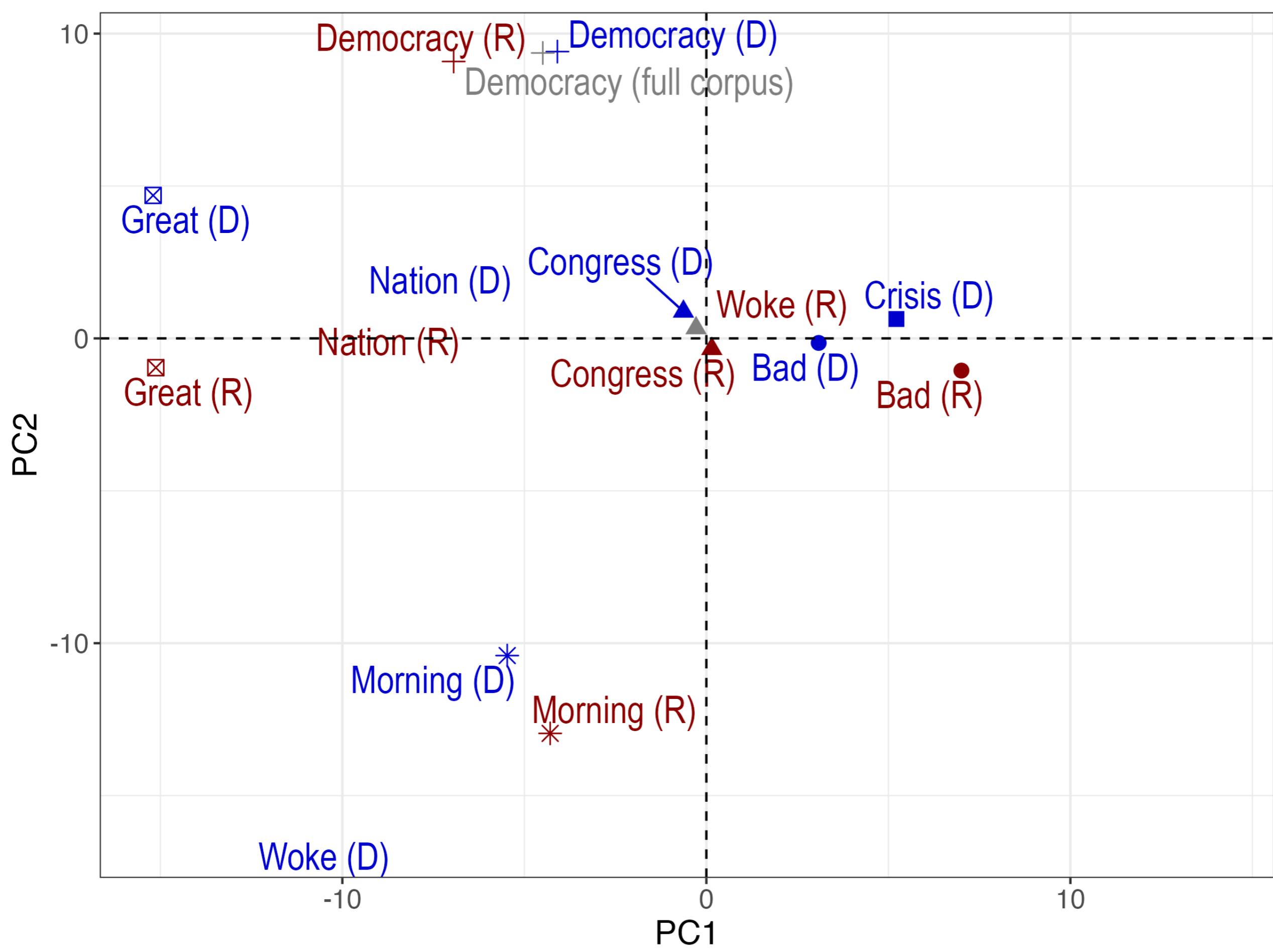


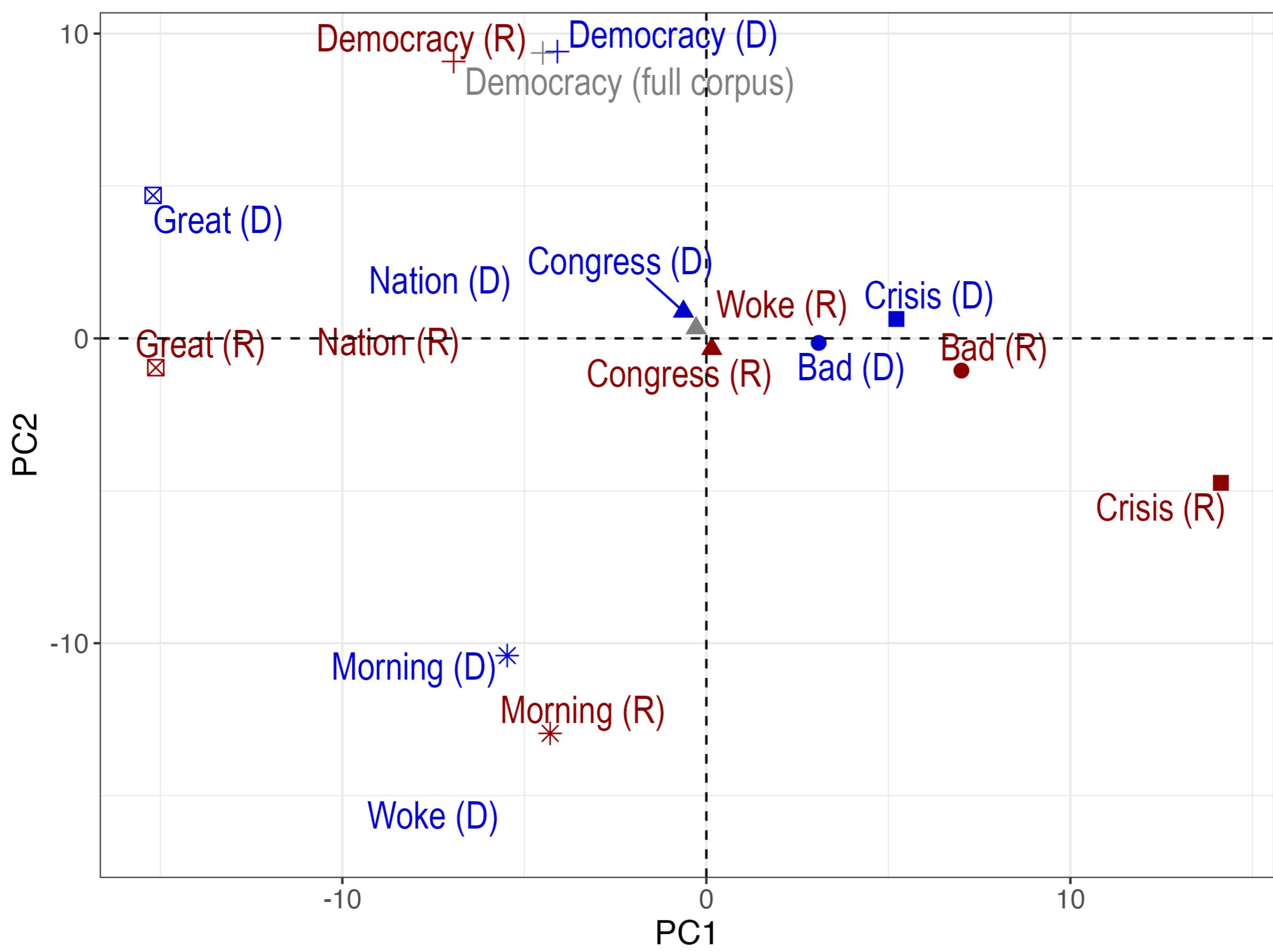


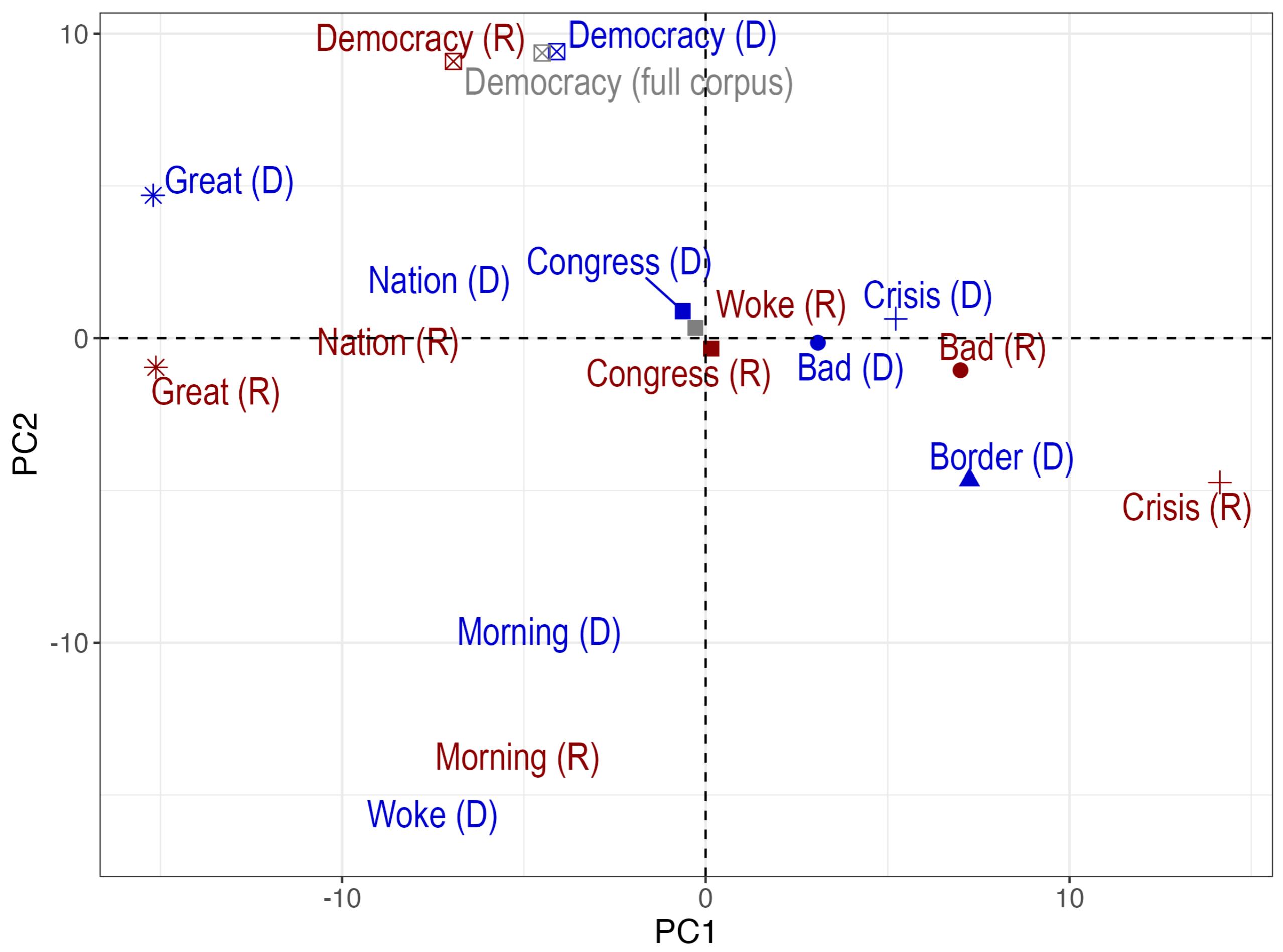


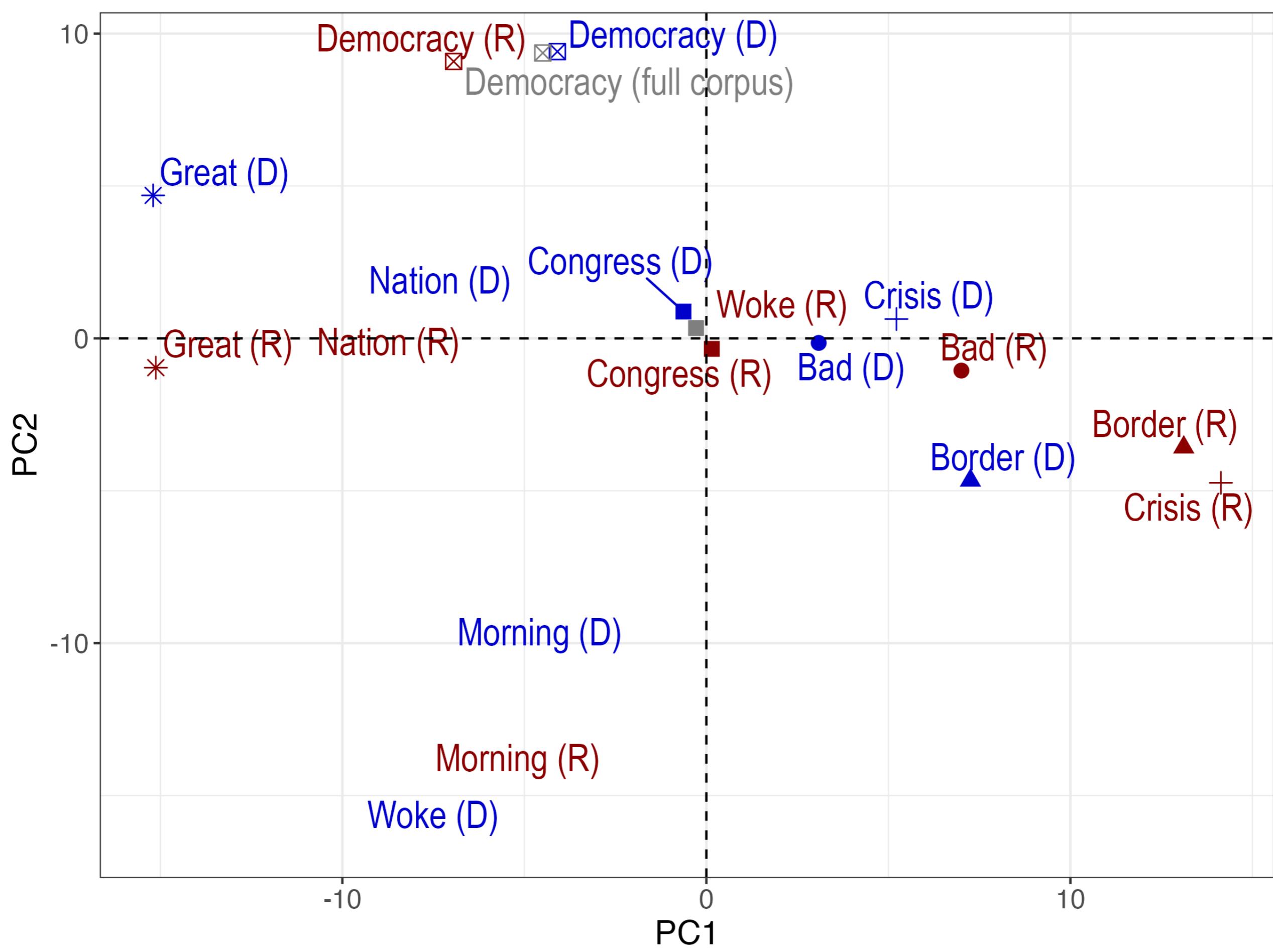


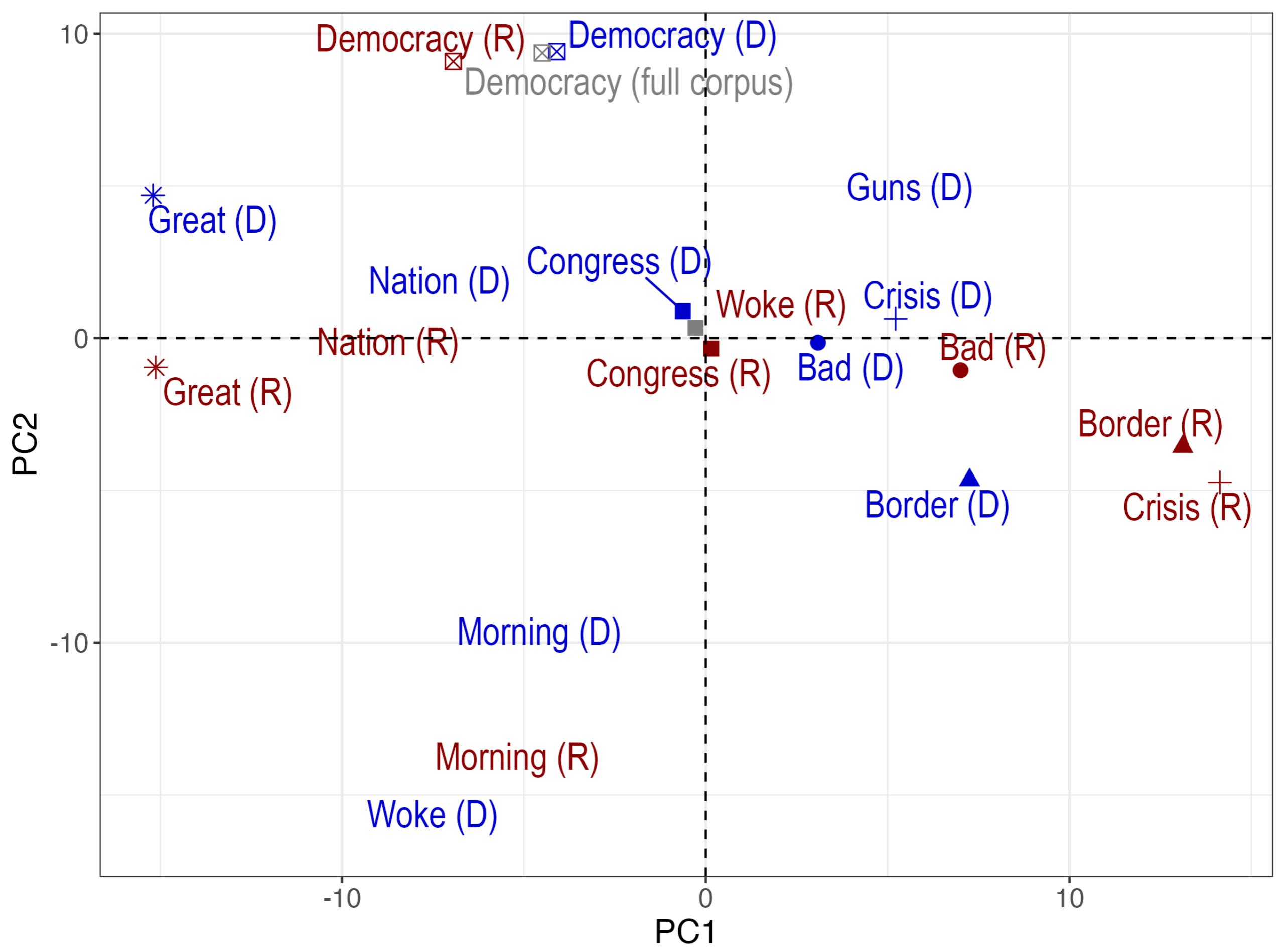


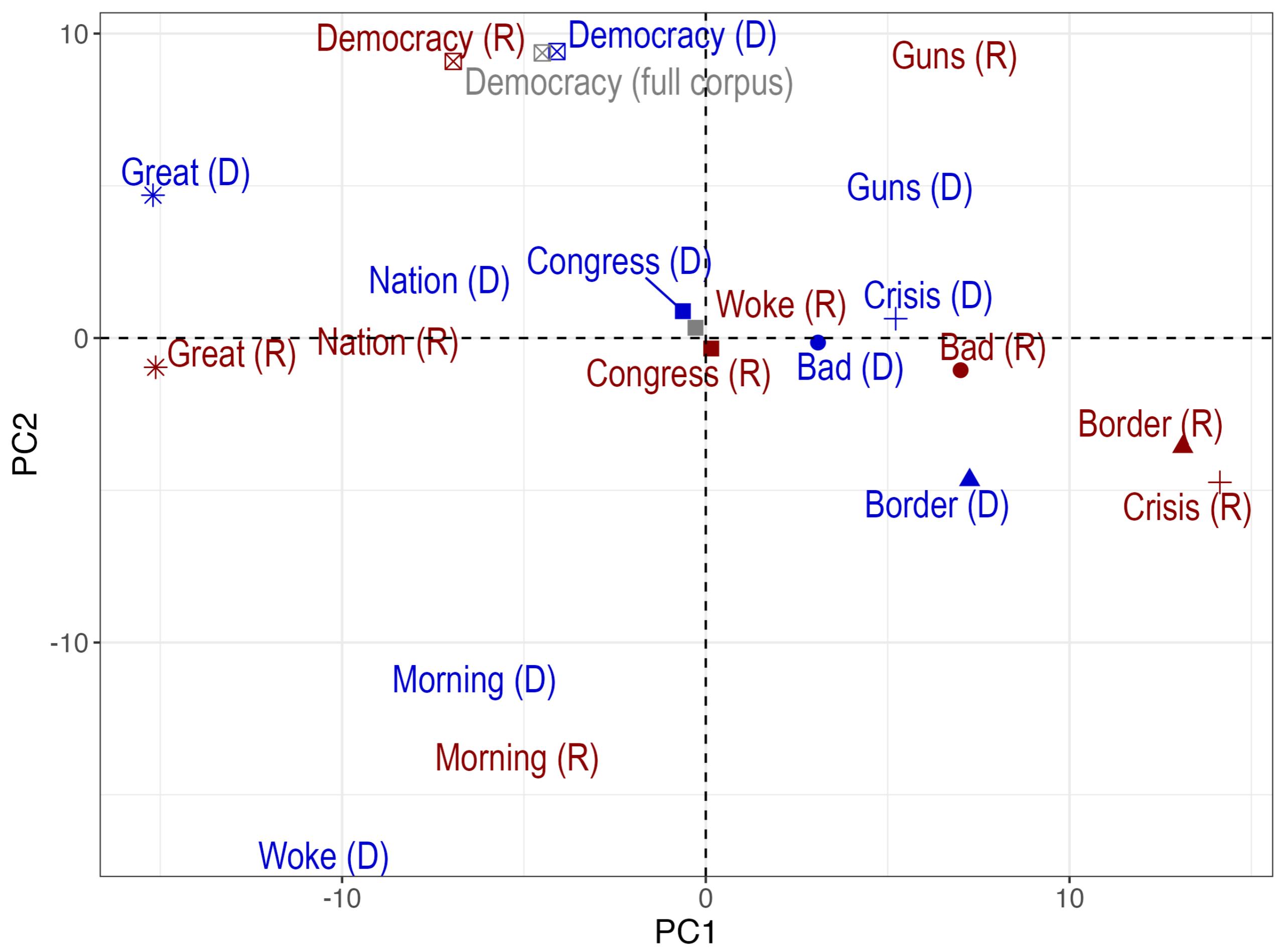


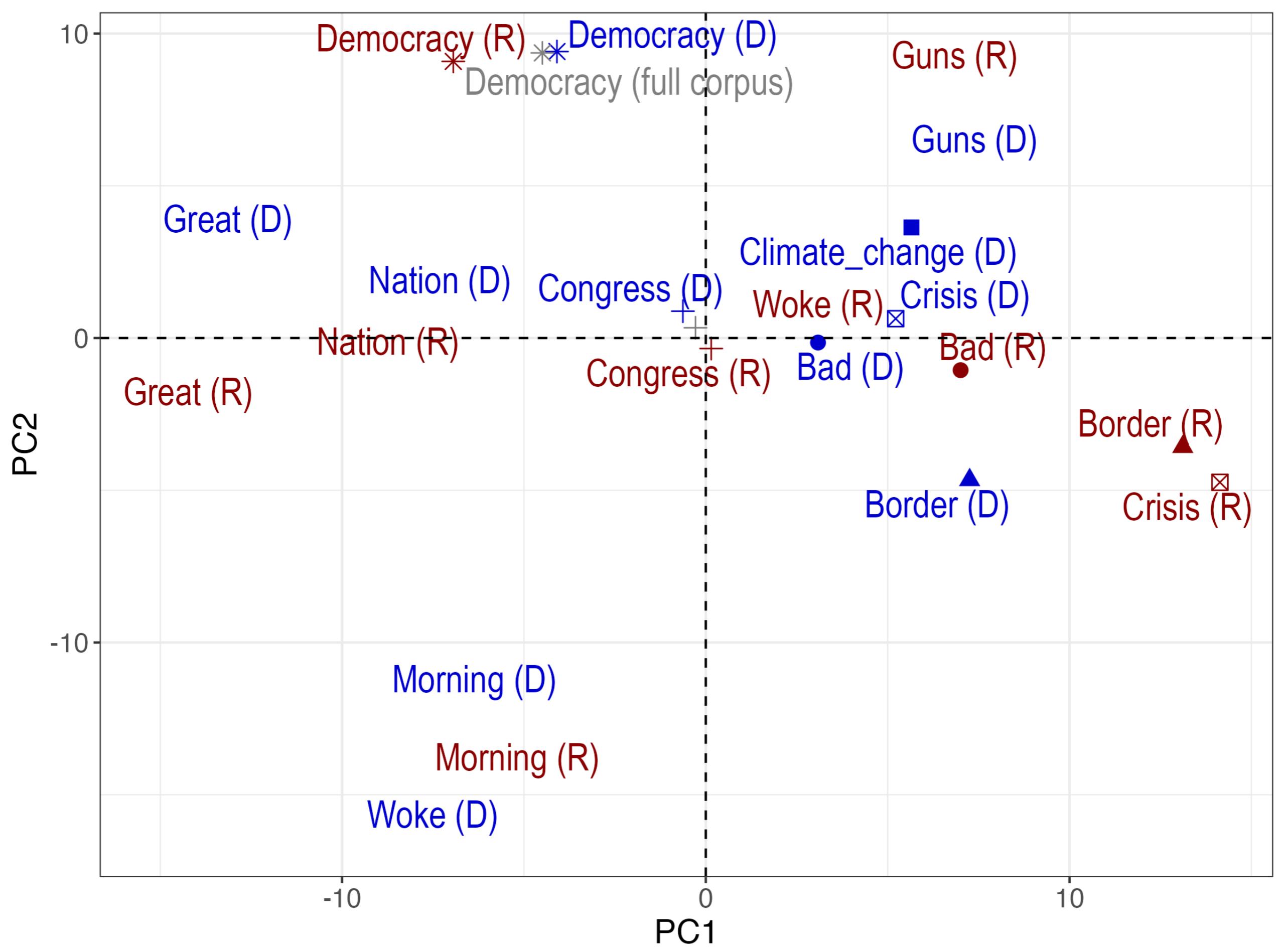


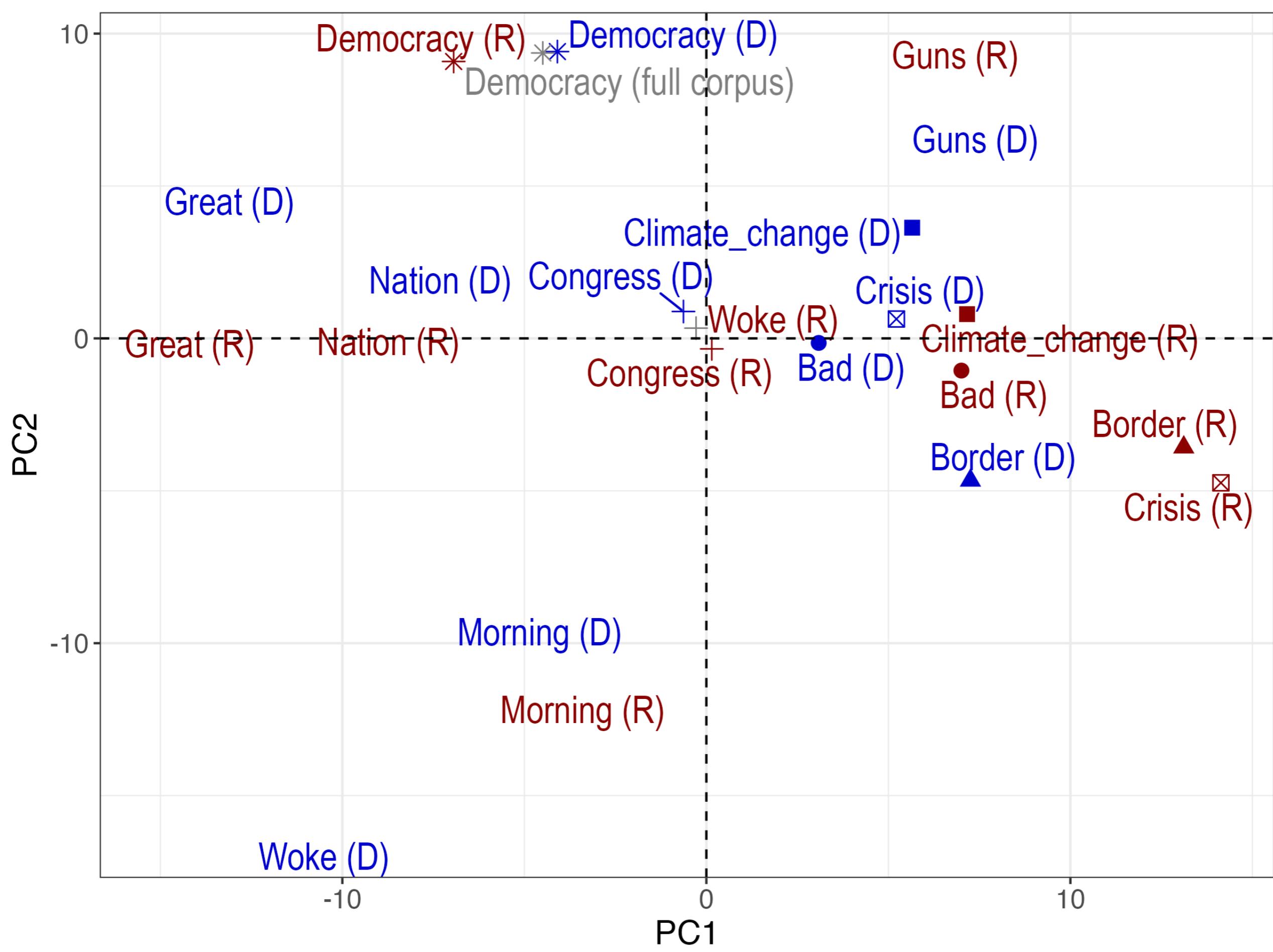




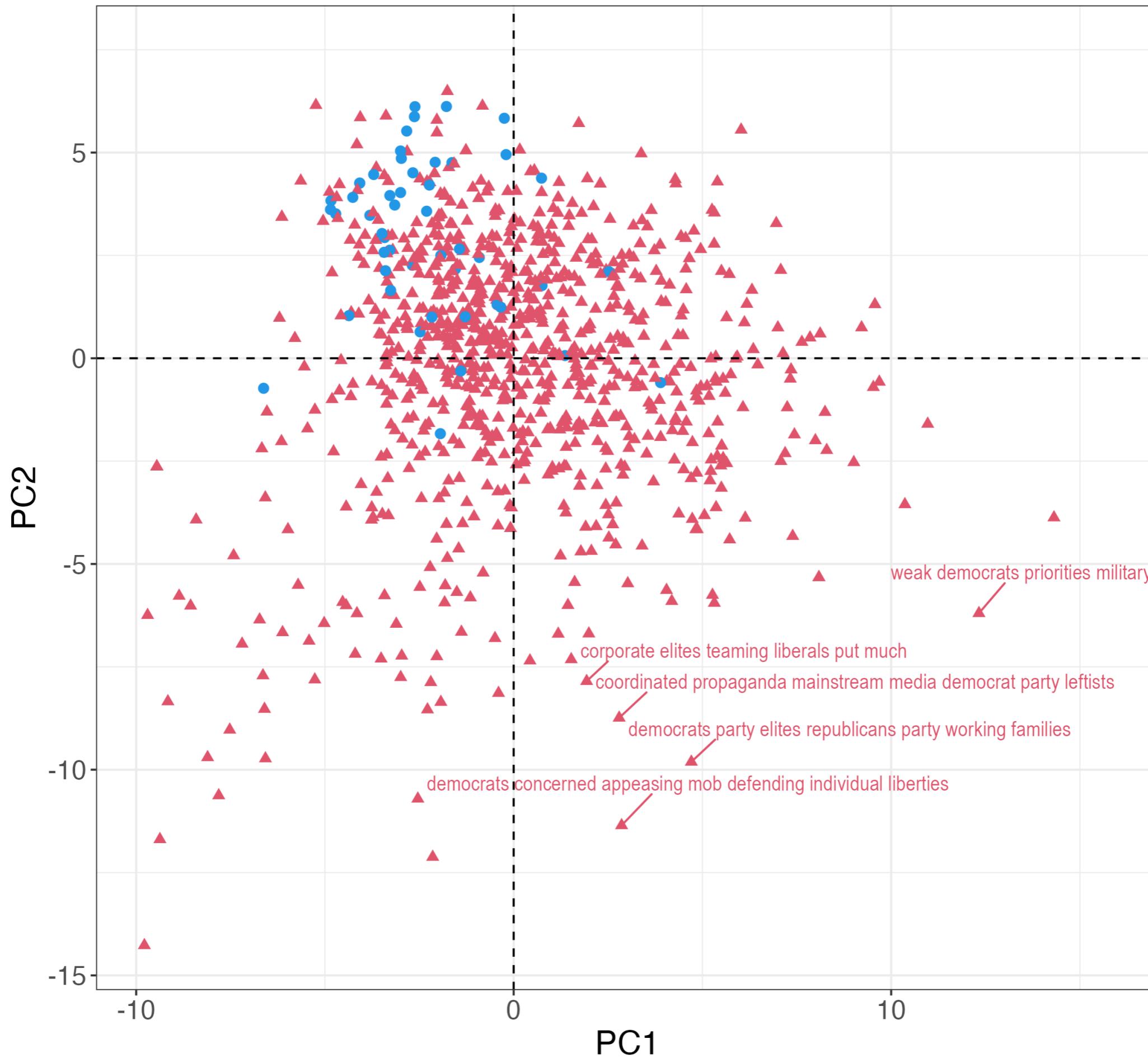




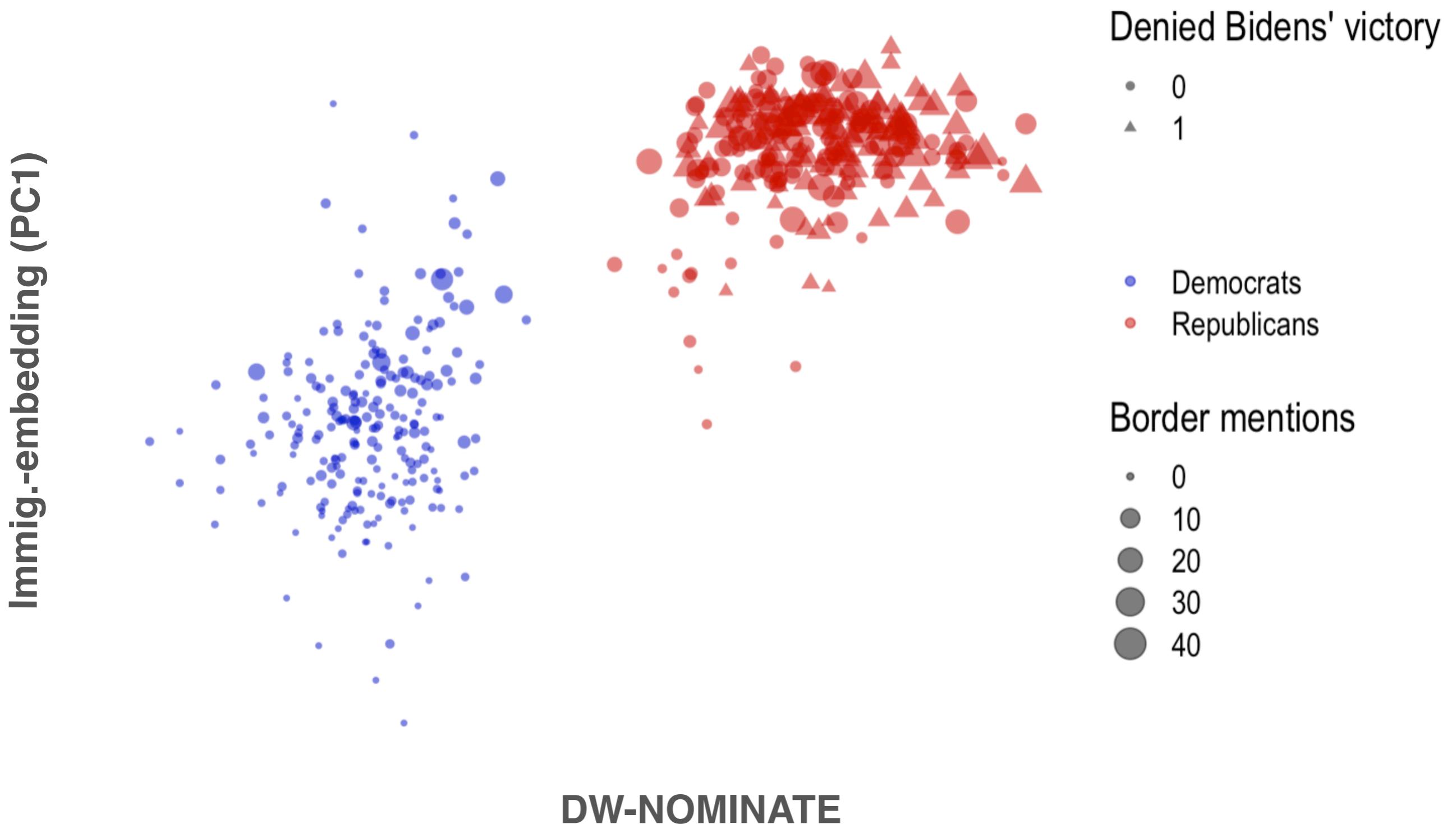




# Post-level embeddings of "woke"



# Rhetoric about charged issues correlates with standard measures of ideology but is also distinct



# Task: Predict stances on the 2020 election among GOP House and Senate members

- **Prediction Method:** Random Forest
- Data on the RHS of the model:
  - Rhetoric only (could use topics)
  - Rhetoric only 300-dimensional word vectors which into account that differences across speakers/parties may emerge (as with the example where the word “woke” was embedded)
  - District/state competitiveness
  - Voting records
- Consider one predictor at a time; then compare to a joint model

# Denial of Biden's victory can be predicted with embeddings

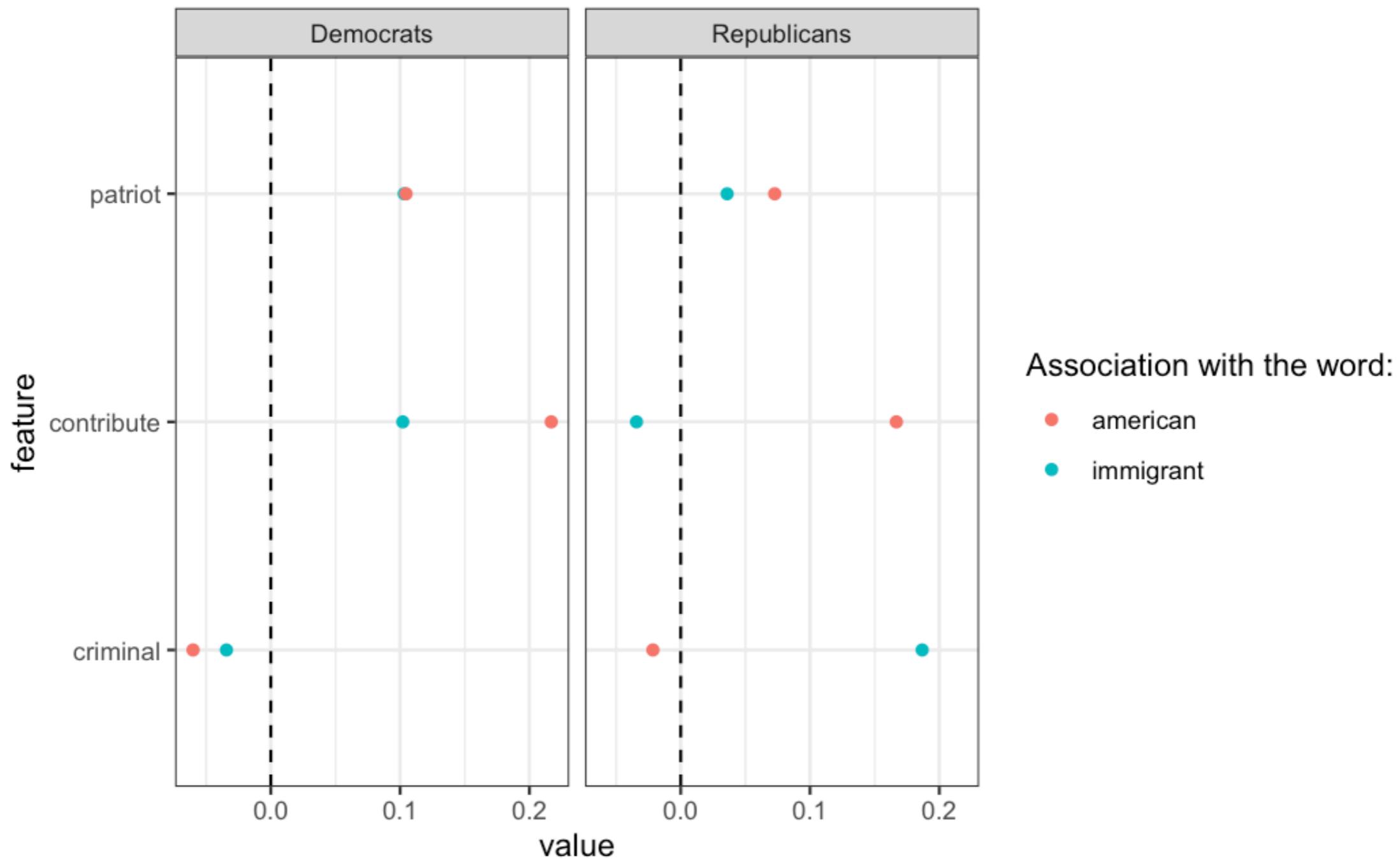
| Feature(s)                      | Prediction error |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Immig. embeddings               | 21.3%            |
| Gender embeddings               | 31.4%            |
| Immig. + gender embeddings      | 15.5%            |
| Immig. + gender embeddings (2C) | 13.4%            |
| Ideology                        | 16.3%            |
| Competitiveness                 | 14.2%            |
| All of the above                | 11.7%            |

# Conclusion

- Contexts in which legislators bring up divisive issues appears to reveal real-world behavior
- Speech on social media seems to be informative about internal, within-party differences



# Background slides



## **Top bi-grams in posts about “democracy”**

### **Republicans**

around world

fight(ing) freedom

across globe

free speech

rule law

cuban people

flag symbol

### **Democrats**

right vote

voting rights

protect(ing) democracy

voice heard

u.s capitol

american(s) people

free fair