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The Role of Symbolic Politics in Shaping Political Attitudes: A Study of Trump and Biden's Campaign Speeches

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SYMBOLOC POLITICS’ ROLE IN POLITICAL ATTITUDES: TRUMP VS. BIDEN

Abstract

In this study, five speeches by Donald Trump and six by Joe Biden were comprehensively analyzed for their symbolic politics on immigration and social issues. The data revealed a consistent trend, with Trump featuring a greater number of mentions in comparison to Biden—66 and 26, respectively. Furthermore, Trump's symbolic politics exhibited a predominantly negative tone, while Biden's approach was predominantly positive. The results of this analysis confirm my hypotheses, highlighting notable disparities in the rhetoric employed by each candidate. Trump amplified a negative outlook on social issues and immigration, whereas Biden strategically mentioned and positively framed these issues. This research provides valuable insights into the utilization of symbolic politics by each speaker.
Introduction

The 2016 elections marked a notable shift in United States politics, particularly in the manifestation of racist sentiment and xenophobia. While such elements are not foreign in US politics, there has been a discernible change in the overt expression of these sentiments. Individuals who harbored deep-seated prejudices related to race, ethnicity, or nationality now feel emboldened to openly act upon these biases. Exposure to racially inflammatory statements by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump has contributed to this shift, influencing those with high levels of prejudice to perceive discriminatory behavior as socially acceptable, which led to an increase in overt expressions of racism and xenophobia.

Throughout history, even subtle symbols, such as pronouns like “we” instead of "they," wielded the power to intricately shape the nuances of political narratives (Stetsyk, 2018, p.146). However, the recent provocative rhetoric has altered the subtlety within politics. In stark contrast to the rhetorical approaches of other politicians, this provocative discourse is notably more overt.

In this context, my research undertakes a comprehensive, quantitative, and qualitative examination of the rhetoric employed in Donald Trump's campaign rally speeches, juxtaposed with six speeches from Joe Biden's campaign. By delving into the intricacies of their rhetoric, this study seeks to uncover the apparent dispositions of these political figures on inflammatory subjects, such as xenophobia and social issues. Additionally, this analysis provides insights into the intended audience of these speeches by shedding light on the issues that resonate most with their supporters.

The theoretical framework of symbolic politics is employed to frame this investigation within this study. This theory posits that the symbolic aspects of public policy and political narratives play a pivotal role in shaping political attitudes and behaviors. The symbolic elements
often derive from “emotion-laden predispositions such as partisanship, ideology, and racial attitudes (Reny & Sears, 2020, p.2)”. Narratives crafted through symbolic politics have the power to “construct and shape” our understanding of the world (Miller, 2020, p.1). This power is potent, as these narratives can instill fear and mobilize individuals, turning politics into a theatrical display of appearances rather than focusing on substantive policy. The prevalence of "spectacular politics" prioritizes sensationalism for higher-rated headlines, ultimately reaching a broader audience with their symbolic messages (Dzhurova, 2020, p. 573).

This study furthers theoretical discussions by offering a practical application of symbolic politics. Moreover, it can contribute to a broader discussion of media literacy, emphasizing the need to move beyond headlines and comprehend the psychological impact of symbols on the masses, leading to implications within social, political, and cultural realms.

This research also expands on the field of communications by furthering the nuanced insights into the role of language in politics. Recognizing the shift in overtness of inflammatory rhetoric in recent years will prevent the normalization of discriminatory language in future politics. Since rhetoric can potentially mobilize individuals, it can lead to dire consequences if this incendiary oratory style is not halted.
Literature Review

Presidential administrations have historically utilized symbolic politics to shape public opinion in line with their political agendas (Reny & Sears, 2020, p.5). This significant tool strategically employs symbols, rhetoric, and political imagery to convey messages, create narratives, and influence public opinion without necessarily implementing concrete policies. Symbols alone can garner public support or mobilize them as the symbolizer deems fit.

Crime control has been symbolically employed to increase public support for a president's administration. The Clinton presidency prioritized crime control symbolically by introducing policies to convey the narrative of working diligently to address it. "He often spoke about crime issues in a general nature rather than proposing specific policies and ideas for deterring criminal activity" (Oliver & Marion, 2008, p.5). This rhetoric creates the public perception that the president is enforcing crime control despite a lack of concrete evidence. Symbolic politics is a method through which issues are recognized and prioritized by the general public. Exposure to political symbols can change political attitudes; the substance of the symbol does not truly matter. Implementing policies to amend issues does not necessarily shift public opinion; simply introducing them sends the message that the problem is being addressed (Stolz, 2007).

In the context of the Korean War, framing the conflict as “to stop the communist invasion of South Korea,” news outlets and political figures garnered more support, as opposed to labeling it simply as “the war in Korea” (Kuklinski, 2001, p.20). Another example of symbolic politics is evident in the conversation around welfare. When welfare support is solicited, people react adversely to the subject; in contrast, when help for the poor is requested, there is better support (Kuklinski, 2001).
Proposing legislation can also be a way to engage in symbolic politics (Ovink et al., 2016). These acts and legislations can present many narratives that "reassure the public, threaten outsiders, or establish behaviors as acceptable or unacceptable" (Ovink et al., 2016, p.1). An example of such legislation is the 2005 House of Representatives Bill 4437. This bill aimed to enforce a higher penalty against individuals who grant employment to undocumented immigrants. The bill would also "dramatically extend border fences and make unlawful presence a felony rather than a civil offense" (Ovink et al., 2016, p.1). The magnitude of punishment for helping undocumented immigrants sustain a living, and the extreme measures taken to prevent their entrance shows how unwelcomed and unwanted they are. The bill served as a symbol to present the alienating narrative. Serving as a symbol to present the alienating narrative, the bill saw numerous protests, with 'inflamed rhetoric accompanying its introduction' (Ovink et al., 2016, p.1). It reinforced "Latino/a immigration" as a "flood" that threatened to cause the "collapse" of the US economy and social institutions (Ovink et al., 2016, p.1). This phenomenon is called the emboldening effect of the Trump effect. It occurs when elites are openly prejudicing, and individuals are emboldened to act upon their prejudices (Newman et al., 2020).

The overt nature of Trump's rhetoric is undeniable, especially on issues of immigration, racism, and xenophobia. Since the beginning of his presidential race, he promised to "make America great again" by building a "big, beautiful wall along the Mexican border to curtail supposed high levels of undocumented migration, crime, and drugs" (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021, p.151). He also chastised Latin American countries for "not sending their best." Trump was so overt with his xenophobia that he openly claimed that "rapists," murderers," and "drug dealers" were coming through the southern border (Clapton, 2022, p.103).
Latinos are not the only minorities who have had to deal with Trump's racism and xenophobia. Muslims are another minority group "actively othered and discriminated against in the US" (Caption, 2022, p.137). Significant forms of symbolic politics that have explicitly exhibited discriminatory rhetorics toward Muslims are Executive Orders 13769 and 13780 (Jeonghun, 2017). Executive Order 13769, enacted on January 21, 2017, banned citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries "from entering the US and acquiring a visa for 90 days. It also suspended the US Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days and indefinitely suspended the entry of Syrian refugees" (Jeonghun, 2017, p.1). This order symbolized that Muslims are terrorists and enemies of the United States. Despite the Trump administration's efforts to negate accusations that the travel ban was discriminatory, the symbolic politics exhibited by the executive order communicated otherwise. The administration argued that they utilized "section 217(a) of the INA to select which countries would be subject to the ban" (Caption, 2022, p. 77).

Asian Americans have also been singled out and discriminated against in recent years. Racism against Asian Americans has always been present, but the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a spike in violence and harassment against them. The hate spike is in response to the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic (Ming Chan et al., 2021). Despite the World Health Organization's (WHO) warnings against attributing the virus to a specific race, Trump continued to associate the virus with Asian Americans. Trump would call the coronavirus the "China virus" (Ming Chan et al., 202, p.580). This rhetoric renewed anti-Asian sentiment throughout the United States (Ming Chan et al., 2021). The result of rampant racism towards Asian Americans can eventually lead to violent hate crimes. "On March 14, 2020, several members of an Asian American family in Texas were stabbed by a man who believed this Asian family was infecting people with coronavirus (Kim, 2020, as cited in Han et al., 2022, p. 1)." On March 29, 2021, a
"65-year-old woman was beaten outside of a New York City apartment with anti-Asian American racial slurs such as ‘you do not belong here’ said to her" (Treisman, 2021, as cited in Han et al., 2022, p. 1). While Trump's words do not directly incite violence, they feed into an already prevalent prejudice towards Asian Americans. The symbolic politics behind Trump's rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic could be used as an excuse to heighten hate against Asian Americans.

Trump's response to Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests emboldened white supremacists to perpetuate hate crimes against African Americans. During the pandemic, Trump vowed to protect the public against Black Lives Matter protesters instead of prioritizing public health. When protesters painted "Black Lives Matter" in front of one of his New York Trump towers, he labeled it a "symbol of hate" (Smith & King, 2020, p. 174). Trump's stance against Black Lives Matter symbolizes that protests to counter the unjust killings of African Americans are a stance against the United States. Trump conveyed the message that White individuals must be protected. On two occasions in which crimes were committed against White individuals by African Americans, Trump tweeted "White Genocide" (Confessore, 2016, p.1). Statistics show that counties that held rallies for Trump had a 226% rise in hate crimes in the coming years (Feinberg et al., 2019). White supremacists perpetrated hate crimes under Trump's name, and he failed to criticize these acts of violence (Smith & King, 2020). His lack of concern for the hate crimes and his messages of protecting Whites in America exhibit a dangerous narrative.

Trump alone is not responsible for the shift in the expression of prejudice. The lack of condemning his derogatory statements or even the tactful condoning enhances the emboldening effect (Newman et al., 2020). Other politicians are also to blame. One person cannot necessarily shift the norm. If someone is overtly prejudiced and then experiences backlash for the statements
by their colleagues, the narrative remains that these statements are not acceptable. However, if other politicians are strategically quiet and not overtly against the narrative, the narrative becomes that many other people feel the same way and that such remarks are acceptable.

The Trump Effect significantly shifted societal norms because of the "ripe context" of Obama's presidency. Elites were able to "challenge the norm environment" by using "explicit racial rhetoric to appeal to racially resentful voters (Newman et al., 2020, p.1142)." An example of racially motivated opposition to Obama was by Trump in 2011. Donald Trump began questioning the legitimacy of Obama's presidency by claiming he was not born in the United States and is a Muslim. A study conducted in 2017 depicts that "51 percent of Republicans said they think former President Barack Obama was born in Kenya, compared to just 14 percent of Democrats (Glum, 2017)," and about 57 percent of individuals who voted for Trump "said it was 'definitely true' or 'probably true.' This study represents the lasting damage Trump's symbolic rhetoric had on the legitimacy of Obama's presidency. The usage of such rhetoric as fuel against Obama symbolizes that there is something villainous about being Muslim and that an individual born in Kenya, even with US citizenship, is far from meeting the parameters of being "American" (Saramo, 2017, p.5).

Legislation and overt statements by politicians can significantly influence public perception of what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable. This research paper aims to recognize the disparities in the symbolic politics approach in Joe Biden's and Donald Trump's rally speeches. The existing literature suggests that there is more xenophobia and discriminatory symbolic politics present in Donald Trump's rhetoric than in Joe Biden's, evident in prejudiced statements about immigrants, Latinos, Asians, African Americans, and Muslims.
Additionally, to engage and cater to his supporters, Trump is expected to focus more on social issues than Biden. Overt discriminatory sentiments must find support within a substantial base; otherwise, such sentiments would have rendered him unfit for office. This research project aims to ascertain the validity of two primary hypotheses:

1. Donald Trump is expected to have a higher frequency of mentions regarding social issues and immigration than Joe Biden.
2. Donald Trump's mentions are hypothesized to lean more negatively than Joe Biden's.
Methods

The evaluation of whether Donald Trump or Joe Biden manifested more overtly hostile rhetoric towards minorities and social issues was conducted meticulously. It was crucial to precisely delineate the types of speeches that would serve the research's intended purpose. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on how rhetoric influences the population.

Campaign rallies were identified as the optimal choice since they serve as periods during which the vision of an enhanced America is projected. The content employed for this purpose is highly reflective, and the shift in rhetoric when addressing specific audiences provides valuable insights into the speaker's motives. A total of 11 campaign rally speeches were selected to gather the necessary data for a comprehensive analysis of Trump's and Biden's divergent positions. Initially, 5 speeches from each candidate were chosen; however, it was quickly acknowledged that the speeches varied significantly in length. Consequently, an additional Biden speech was added, maintaining the same criteria as the others. Finally, credible transcripts of the speeches were utilized for a thorough analysis.

To ensure accuracy in data collection, all statements related to minority or social issues, including immigration, undocumented immigrants, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Muslim Americans, were identified. The determination of whether the statements were positive or negative was made meticulously. In cases where a subject was addressed in multiple paragraphs, it was considered a single incident. However, if there was a break or change of topic between paragraphs, it was labeled as two separate incidents. Following a comprehensive collection, the data was organized into a table containing information on the speaker, speech date, positivity or negativity of the specific statement, and a concise description. This tabular format facilitated an organized report, enabling a constructive comparison.
Given the inherent risk of bias, categorizing statements as positive or negative posed the most significant challenge in this research. Rather than solely relying on tone or other attributes subject to interpretation, specific diction was also scrutinized to mitigate this bias. An example of this is the phrase "criminal aliens" used to describe undocumented immigrants. Regardless of the researcher's pre-existing bias, the inherent hostility in the diction of this phrase was acknowledged.

Quantitative values will be gathered to interpret the data, including the number of social issues mentioned in each speech, positive or negative mentions, and the speaker's potential prioritization of these issues. These mentions also serve as a gauge of overtness, as a higher frequency of mentions, especially negative ones, implies a more overt stance by the speaker.

It is important to note that while this research method cannot measure the exact audience reaction to the sentiments, it initiates a discourse on the visibility of overt rhetoric and its potential implications for the future.
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Findings

This examination highlights profound divergences in the rhetoric of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, particularly concerning immigration and minority issues. Symbolic politics is evident in their strategic use of imagery, ideologies, and racial attitudes to bolster their campaigns, emphasizing the need to recognize the potential misuse of this technique, as it may lead to problematic outcomes.

In the analysis of 11 campaign rally speeches, encompassing 5 from Trump and 6 from Biden, the exploration of social issues affecting various minority groups—African Americans, undocumented immigrants, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Muslim Americans—unveiled 91 mentions across both sets of speeches. Trump made 66 mentions, with 58 being negative and 8 positive.

Conversely, Biden's 26 mentions comprised 24 positive references and 2 negative ones.

Figure 1

*Total Mentions of Social Issues and Immigration by Speaker*
Exploring each speaker's nature, priorities, and target audience offers valuable insights. The data indicates that Trump strategically employed symbolic politics to cast a negative light on immigration and social issues, suggesting an alignment with a cynical perspective. Some speeches included instances where negative statements were followed by vocalized approval or applause.

At the Trump rally in Minneapolis on 10/10/19, the audience was transcribed making vocalizations and applause to support the rhetoric, particularly after derogatory remarks about Representative Ilhan Omar, the visibly Muslim hijabi in Congress. Trump accused Ilhan Omar of "minimizing 9/11," claiming she "pledged for compassion for ISIS recruits," and labeled her "anti-Semitic" for criticizing the U.S.'s substantial support to Israel despite its treatment of Palestinians. Mockingly recounting a prayer from Ilhan Omar's since-deleted tweet, Trump added the United States to her mention of Israel, implying that Ilhan Omar views the U.S. as equally malevolent. Symbolic politics, combined with audience reactions, underscores harmful rhetoric's impact on shaping perceptions.

Due to her Muslim faith, Ilhan Omar has faced numerous death threats throughout her career. As reported by CNN, Omar asserts that there has been a notable surge in death threats, particularly following Donald Trump's numerous negative remarks directed toward her (Bohn, 2019).

The number of total mentions for each candidate indicates their respective priorities and those of their audiences. Trump's speeches had notably more mentions of social issues and
immigration than Biden's. A closer examination of Biden's mentions per speech reveals that he discussed immigration and minority issues more prominently in locations with greater diversity. Specifically, speeches delivered in New York City and at Houston's historic black universities and colleges had significantly higher mentions of social issues and immigration compared to the virtual speech and those in states like Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. According to U.S. News and Reports (2020), New York City and Houston rank among the top 10 racially diverse cities.

**Figure 2**

*Mentions of Immigrants and Social Issues by Speaker*

![Bar graph illustrating mentions of immigrants and social issues by speaker](chart)

Note: This bar graph illustrates a speech-by-speech comparison of the total mentions of social issues and immigration within each speech for both Donald Trump (five speeches) and Joe Biden (six speeches.)
Biden's average rate of mentions per speech is approximately 4.3, while Trump's is 13.2. Notably, Biden's speeches in New York City and Houston had 11 mentions each, considerably higher than the average rate of 4.3. This correlation suggests that the heightened racial diversity within Houston and New York City contributed to the above-average mention rates.

In contrast, Trump's speeches consistently maintained a high average mention rate of 13.2, irrespective of the location. The median mentions per speech for Biden is 2, and for Trump, it is 10. This signifies that half of Biden's speeches had two mentions or fewer, and half had more. Similarly, half of Trump's speeches had less than 10 mentions, and half had more. These median values indicate a notable difference in the distribution of mention rates between Biden and Trump. Figure 2 depicts a speech-by-speech comparison of the frequency by which social issues and immigration are mentioned. It offers insight into the consistency and inconsistencies within each speaker's mentions. Although two Biden speeches did have higher mentions than three separate Trump speeches, it is clear overall that Trump mentioned immigration and social issues significantly more than Biden.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Trump consistently presents a negative perspective on immigrants and social issues. He frequently uses terms such as "criminal aliens" and "illegal aliens" instead of "undocumented," contributing to a portrayal that encompasses all immigrants as criminals. Employing vivid symbolic politics, he provides explicit imagery, suggesting a disturbing narrative of criminals cutting individuals into pieces with knives, emphasizing that it causes more pain in comparison to guns. Trump's speeches include commitments to constructing "the wall" on the southern border to prevent the entry of undocumented immigrants, many of whom seek refuge. He proposes that ideological alignment should be a prerequisite for admission
to the U.S., disregarding the reality that numerous immigrants arrive to escape terrorism and oppression.

A notable example of derogatory nicknames coined by Trump is his labeling of Senator Elizabeth Warren as “Pocahontas.” This nickname, used to question the authenticity of her heritage, has been widely reported and criticized. By employing a historical Native American figure as a pejorative term against a political adversary, Trump's actions are not only disrespectful to Senator Warren but also extend to offend the broader Native American community. The repetitive use of such language suggests a level of acceptability, potentially normalizing derogatory attitudes toward Native Americans. Further investigation into the use of this nickname revealed instances where Trump employed it against Warren during a ceremony honoring Native Americans, a context that Native American leaders have deemed inappropriate and classified as a “slur (Hafner, 2017).” The casual and repeated use of such derogatory language symbolizes a concerning level of acceptance for such rhetoric.

Additionally, Trump targets Sanctuary Cities, characterizing them as malevolent and advocating that they should exist for "law-abiding citizens"—Americans—rather than the "animals" from beyond "the wall." Throughout, Trump appeals to the masses by asserting that these measures will create job opportunities for Americans and enhance the country's safety by keeping criminals at bay.

Analyzing Trump’s and Biden’s speeches displays positive mentions as the majority for Biden and negative for Trump. Figure 3 and Figure 4 depict that 7% of all Biden's mentions of social issues and immigration were negative, whereas 87.9% of Trump's mentions were negative. Conversely, 92.3% of Biden's mentions were positive, and 12.1% of Trump's mentions were positive.
Figure 3

Biden's Mentions of Social Issues and Immigration

Note: This Pie Chart displays the total positive and negative mentions of social issues and immigration made by Joe Biden in six campaign speeches.

Figure 4

Trump's Mentions of Social Issues and Immigration
Note: This Pie Chart represents the total positive and negative mentions of social issues and immigration by Donald Trump in five campaign speeches.

Through an examination of the frequency of mentions of social issues and immigration by Trump in comparison to Biden, an analysis of the specific diction employed by Trump, and the substantial contrast in the positive and negative mentions made by both candidates, the original hypotheses are validated. Supporting the hypothesis that Trump places a higher emphasis on these topics in his speeches, Trump consistently exceeded Biden in the number of mentions related to social issues and immigration. Furthermore, the usage of diction like "criminal aliens" and vividly negative imagery aligns with the hypothesis that Trump utilizes hostile rhetoric for symbolic politics. Finally, the significant disparity in the number of positive and negative mentions between Trump and Biden further confirms the initial hypotheses, with Trump exhibiting more negative mentions and Biden having a higher frequency of positive mentions related to social issues and immigration.
Discussion

This study aimed to comprehensively analyze the differences between Donald Trump's and Joe Biden's rhetoric, focusing on their expressions related to social issues and immigration. Consistent with the original hypotheses, the findings indicate that Trump spoke more frequently and adopted more hostile symbolic politics concerning social issues and immigration. In contrast, Biden's symbolic politics on these issues were less prevalent and generally more positive. Disparities within each speaker's symbolic politics provide significant insight into the overt nature and priorities of each speaker’s oratory and their supporters.

The considerable length of Trump's speeches may warrant more mentions; nevertheless, even with a sixth Biden speech, Trump's references to social issues remain notably more frequent than Biden's. While Trump consistently maintains a high level of symbolic politics on social issues, it is intriguing that Biden surpasses him in mentions in diverse settings. For instance, in New York City, one of the most culturally diverse cities in America, and at Houston's historic African-American University, Biden articulated social issues 11 times. This surpasses the mention count in his other speeches, including three out of five Trump speeches.

Given the unusually persistent references to social issues and immigration, questions arise about his motives. It can be inferred that Biden strategically employed symbolic politics, emphasizing these issues more prominently in front of audiences who may prioritize them. This tailoring suggests an intentional effort to convey that he places greater value on these subjects than in his other speeches. Thus, he exemplified an evident utilization of symbolic politics to garner more support in his presidential race.

The decision to exclusively analyze campaign rally speeches was deliberate, offering profound insight into the symbolic politics perpetuated by Biden and Trump and their supporters.
Campaign rallies serve as a platform for impassioned engagement with the public, aiming to evoke support and convey the candidates' sentiments on crucial subjects. The peroration, strategically designed to provoke the audience into supporting their campaigns, underscores the emotional and persuasive nature of these speeches. In contrast, the formality of union addresses and press conferences, tailored for diverse audiences, including journalists and politicians, might dilute the accuracy of conveyed viewpoints. Focusing on campaign rallies characterized by their organic and unscripted nature, this study captured a more authentic representation of the candidates' perspectives and the symbolic politics they seek to evoke within the general public.

However, Biden's limited number of mentions regarding social issues and immigration does not necessarily offer insightful conclusions about his supporters. A cursory analysis might suggest that Biden supporters place less importance on social issues and immigration, given the infrequency of his comments on these subjects. However, such an interpretation would be an oversimplification.

Arguably, the predominantly positive nature of most of Biden's symbolic politics on these issues might assure his supporters. Despite the low frequency of mentions, the overwhelmingly positive tone may convey alignment with the apparently positive views of his supporters.

Trump and his supporters' emphasis on social issues and immigration becomes evident through the notably higher average mention rate than Biden. The significantly elevated frequency of negative mentions reflects their generally cynical perspective on these subjects. Even if some Trump supporters do not explicitly endorse the harmful symbolic politics conveyed by Trump, their silence and overall support for him suggest a willingness to overlook discriminatory and racist commentary, contributing to the adverse effects that ensue.
Attending Trump rallies may lead individuals, initially without distinctly negative views on social issues and immigration, to have their beliefs confirmed through confirmation bias. Exposure to any negative incidents involving minorities can further solidify this rhetoric. The reinforcement of these attitudes is intensified by the identity of being a Trump supporter, driven by in-group bias. As individuals naturally gravitate towards like-minded people, this phenomenon contributes to group polarization, strengthening biases as discussions unfold within these homogeneous circles.

The election of Donald Trump may additionally amplify and validate these views, affirming biases and solidifying the perception that their perspectives are not just valid but indeed correct. This reinforcement is exacerbated by informational social influence, where individuals conform due to the inherent belief that the group is correct.

The concept of self-serving bias, wherein individuals tend to attribute positive outcomes to themselves and adverse outcomes to external situations, offers further insights into the mindset of Trump supporters and the symbolic politics employed by Trump on a broader scale. This bias is reflected in Trump's symbolic politics, where any positive development in the United States is attributed to himself and his supporters. Conversely, negative aspects, such as insufficient job opportunities or crime, are frequently ascribed to out-group communities as a scapegoat. This symbolic politics, in turn, finds support among his followers, creating a reinforcing loop of attribution that contributes to shaping their perspectives.

Biden supporters are not immune to these social psychology phenomena; however, the consequences of their biases are less severe, as they are not actively against any particular group of people. Nevertheless, in-group bias and group polarization among the supporters can contribute to a deepening polarization of America. As like-minded individuals reinforce their
beliefs within their circles, their biases strengthen, further exacerbating the divide within the United States.

To distinguish if the negative symbolic politics employed by Trump has affected public perception of the perceived prevalence and acceptability of the expression of racism, one can reference PEW research. As depicted in the pie charts from the PEW research article, Figure 5, 65% of individuals now believe that racist comments have been more prevalent since Trump was elected. Moreover, 45% of individuals believe that it is now more acceptable to express racist sentiments (Horowitz et al., 2019, p. 2). Figure 6, sourced from the PEW Research, depicts that 56% of the overall adult population perceives Donald Trump as harming race relations in the United States, and 73% of African Americans share this perception (Horowitz et al., 2019, p. 2). The high percentage of individuals perceiving racist remarks as more prominent and accepted, coupled with the perceived deterioration of race relations in the United States, indicates that Trump’s derogatory statements towards minorities have had a substantial effect on public perceptions of race relations.
Figure 5

Most Say it is Now More Common for People to Express Racist or Racially Insensitive Views

Most say it’s now more common for people to express racist or racially insensitive views

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% saying, since Trump was elected ...</th>
<th>It has become ____ for people to express racist or racially insensitive views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>about as common</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less common</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more common</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| It has become ____ for people to express racist or racially insensitive views |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| about as acceptable                 | 31                                                                               |
| more acceptable                     | 45%                                                                              |
| less acceptable                     | 23                                                                               |
| no answer                            | 5                                                                                |

“Race in America 2019”
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Note: Pie charts depicting the perceived racially insensitive views.
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Figure 6

Most Black Adults Have Negative Views about the Country’s Racial Progress

Note: Results of a survey illustrating the differences between how different racial groups view racial progress.

While the literature review illudes to the potential impact of Trump's inflammatory symbolic politics on hate crimes, it is crucial to recognize that the negative effects can extend beyond this singular measure. A significant manifestation of harm lies in the pervasive fear experienced by many minorities amid the current climate. The discussion is not whether all Trump supporters are inherently racist; rather, the election of Trump conveyed a message that his
divisive symbolic politics could be either overlooked or actively supported by a substantial portion of the population. Thus potentially contributing to the grim statistics depicted by the PEW research.

Every Trump flag, banner, and sticker can send a chilling message: not only could his derogatory symbolic politics be disregarded, but it was deemed worthy of garnering support. Individuals who had experienced a sense of comfort during Barack Obama's presidency, symbolizing progress with the election of an African American, may have found themselves confronted with regression. Moreover, events such as those in Charlottesville, North Carolina, and the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, likely heightened the overall climate of fear. Thus potentially contributing to the grim statistics presented by the PEW research.
Conclusion

In this study, comparing five campaign speeches by Donald Trump and six by Joe Biden, there were significantly more mentions of social issues and immigration by Trump than by Biden. Trump had a total of 66 mentions, while Biden had 26. Of the 66 mentions by Trump, the overwhelming majority were negative, whereas Biden's were overall positive. A detailed analysis of these mentions speech by speech and an examination of the specific diction used provided further insight into the symbolic politics presented by both speakers.

The data affirms the original hypothesis, confirming that Trump featured more social issues and immigration mentions than Biden. Moreover, Trump’s mentions were significantly more negative, while Biden’s were predominantly positive. These results demonstrate both speakers' stark differences in utilizing their symbolic politics.

The higher frequency of Trump's mentions regarding social issues and immigration suggests a greater emphasis on these topics by him and his supporters than Biden. Furthermore, Trump's predominantly negative mentions reflect an overall negative outlook on social issues and immigration by him and his supporters. In contrast, Biden's considerably more positive mentions signify rhetoric that favors supporting social issues and immigration. Notably, Biden strategically emphasized these topics in campaign speeches in some of the most diverse cities in the United States, presenting a deliberate use of symbolic politics to enhance support for his campaign.

Both candidates strategically employed symbolic politics to amplify their campaigns and secure support from their target demographics. While the use of this strategy is not new, in recent elections, its overt nature has become more pronounced. Trump strategically utilized symbolic politics to appeal to certain prejudices within a specific demographic, aiming to garner support
and fortify his campaign. In parallel, Biden appealed to a segment of his supporters by advocating for social issues and immigration, especially in contexts where he is likely to encounter minorities—utilizing a social psychology lens allowed for a greater understanding of the nuances of both speakers' audiences.

One limitation of this research lies in its exclusive focus on campaign speeches. While these speeches offer valuable insights into the speakers and their audience, they only provide partial understanding. To comprehensively analyze and compare Trump's and Biden's rhetoric, examining their speeches across various platforms, including formal union addresses, would be advantageous. Another limitation is the absence of consideration for the policy implementations by both Trump and Biden. While rhetoric offers valuable insights into the candidates' verbal perspectives and their supporters' beliefs, the policies they enact represent the complete manifestation of their agendas. Future researchers can consider these limitations to further the dialogue initiated through this study.

This study not only offers policymakers and the general public valuable insights into the impact of symbolic politics and how it can be tailored to appeal to specific demographics but also creates a foundational stepping stone for more profound research. Understanding the use of symbolic politics to engage and impassion a population becomes a crucial starting point for more profound research that will provide policymakers with crucial insights to anticipate trends and prevent potentially harmful outcomes responsibly. The comprehension gained from this research can further encourage policymakers to employ symbolic politics, considering its significant effects.

In the future, scholars can delve more profoundly into the implications of the disparities between Donald Trump and Joe Biden and their contributions to transformative changes in the
United States, utilizing this research as a foundational stepping stone for a nuanced understanding.
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SYMBOLIC POLITICS’ ROLE IN POLITICAL ATTITUDES: TRUMP VS. BIDEN


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Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at Souls to the Polls event.

https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168020955108


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