

Questions in Politics

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Preface

It is with great pleasure that we present Volume XIII of *Questions in Politics*, the official journal of the Georgia Political Science Association. This volume showcases the intellectual rigor, creativity, and breadth of scholarship that continue to define the Association's work. We sincerely congratulate the authors whose research appears in this issue. Their contributions span several areas of political science and share a commitment to careful inquiry, methodological diversity, and a deeper understanding of the institutions, ideas, and political forces shaping contemporary American politics.

About the Issue

Although the articles in this volume address distinct substantive questions, a common concern with continuity and change runs throughout the issue. Collectively, the contributions examine how political strategies, institutions, policy frameworks, and patterns of political communication persist, adapt, or take new forms over time. From the development of federal artificial intelligence policy and the evolving role of national party conventions to local political influences on health outcomes and the historical development of the Southern Strategy, the articles demonstrate the value of examining contemporary politics in both its immediate and longer-term contexts.

We begin with Laurel Wei's award-winning paper, "Continuity and Contestation: A Structured, Focused Comparison of U.S. Artificial Intelligence Strategy Across Trump I, Biden, and Early Trump II Administrations (2017–2025)," which received the 2026 McBrayer Award. Wei examines twenty-three federal artificial intelligence policy documents across three presidential administrations and identifies a layered pattern of continuity and change. While chip- and compute-level export controls remain remarkably durable across partisan transitions, regulatory approaches, normative framing, and the form of international cooperation shift considerably between administrations. The article offers both an analysis of an increasingly important area of American statecraft and a framework for understanding why some dimensions of public policy prove more durable than others.

Kristina M. LaPlant and Dalton Kenyon follow with "Examining Rhetorical and Linguistic Patterns at the 2024 National Party Conventions: A Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Analysis." Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of speeches delivered at the 2024 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, they reconsider the political function of contemporary nominating conventions. Their findings show that speaker type is more consistently associated with rhetorical style and emotional expression than party affiliation. They argue that modern conventions remain important as coordinated communicative environments in which elected officials, activists, public figures, and voters offering testimonials perform distinct roles in advancing party unity, mobilization, and political branding.

Turning to state and local politics, Leah Pieper, David Pena, Lisa Holland-Davis, and Jason Davis examine the relationship between political partisanship and health outcomes in "Local Politics, Partisanship, and Health Outcomes in Georgia." Their county-level analysis shows that apparent links between partisanship and several health outcomes weaken substantially once the close relationship between partisanship and racial composition is taken into account. The findings underscore the importance of structural and demographic conditions—and particularly race—for understanding geographic differences in health outcomes and highlight the broader role of local political and institutional contexts in shaping social mobility.

Finally, Alyssa Archer's "Dog Whistles and Dixie: Tracing the Nationalization of the Southern Strategy," recipient of the 2025 GPSA Pajari Award for best undergraduate paper, uses process tracing to examine the evolution of racialized political appeals from the Southern Manifesto through the rise of Trumpism. Archer traces the adaptation of political rhetoric and strategy across successive presidential campaigns, arguing that contemporary appeals to race, cultural identity, states' rights, and federal authority emerged through a long process of strategic development rather than as a sudden departure from earlier American politics. Her analysis

emphasizes the importance of path dependence and cumulative political change for understanding the transformation of regional political strategies into national ones.

We invite scholars to submit their work for consideration in Volume XIV of *Questions in Politics*, to be published after the 2026 GPSA Annual Meeting. Submissions from all subfields and methodological approaches are welcome, and we especially encourage papers presented at the conference to be revised and submitted for peer review. We look forward to continuing the journal's tradition of highlighting outstanding political science research from across Georgia and beyond.

Thanks to the Reviewers

As always, we are deeply grateful to the reviewers for Volume XIII. We received a high-quality selection of papers for this volume, which required us to assemble an exceptional group of reviewers. Each article was peer-reviewed by scholars whose expertise enabled them to assess the quality and importance of the submitted manuscript. Our reviewers' insights and suggested edits helped elevate the quality of the work presented in this journal. Being a journal reviewer is often a thankless task, and—though it may be a small gesture—we sincerely thank our reviewers.

New Editorial Team for Volume XIV

In the fall of 2018, we inherited the editorial responsibilities for *QiP* from Adam Stone and Thomas Rotnem. The transition was smooth, and they graciously answered our questions and helped us troubleshoot as issues arose. Adam and Tom successfully raised *QiP*'s profile and standards, transforming it from a conference proceedings publication into a professional, peer-reviewed journal. We did our best to continue *QiP*'s upward trajectory, and we are very proud of the issues we edited. However, the true credit goes to the GPSA membership and to the quality of work produced by the scholars who attend the Association's annual meeting. As there is a season for all things, we are now stepping back from our editorial roles and handing over the reins to Kristina LaPlant and Keith Lee. Kristina and Keith will no doubt continue *QiP*'s current trajectory and take the journal to new heights in the years to come.

Sean Richey & Ben Taylor

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Continuity and Contestation: A Structured, Focused Comparison of U.S. Artificial Intelligence Strategy Across Trump I, Biden, and Early Trump II Administrations (2017-2025)

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2026 McBrayer Award for best paper presented at the previous conference.

ABSTRACT

U.S. federal artificial intelligence (AI) strategy has shifted sharply across the first Trump, Biden, and early second Trump administrations, yet some policy instruments have proven remarkably durable. Why does AI policy exhibit strong continuity on some dimensions and abrupt reversal on others? This study answers that question through a structured, focused comparison (SFC) and qualitative content analysis of 23 authoritative federal AI-policy documents issued between February 2019 and July 2025, coded on six variables and read through five identical questions, each governing a different policy dimension on its own logic and timescale. Applying realist, policy-process, constructivist, and institutionalist lenses, the findings show a layered pattern: chip- and compute-level controls remain stable across administrations, while regulatory posture, normative framing, and the form of alliance cooperation shift more sharply with partisan turnover. The study clarifies which parts of U.S. AI strategy are anchored in durable technology competition and which are more exposed to domestic political change. Beyond its empirical findings, the study offers a disciplined, replicable template for comparative AI-policy research.

Keywords: artificial intelligence policy; techno-nationalism; export controls; securitization; sociotechnical imaginaries; structured, focused comparison; U.S.-China competition

1. Introduction

As of mid-2025, artificial intelligence has become a central axis of American statecraft. What began as research priorities and advisory committees is now a comprehensive technology governance regime spanning export controls, federal procurement standards, alliance frameworks, and explicit normative claims about AI's role in competitiveness and national security. AI is treated no longer as a domestic innovation challenge but as a strategic technology requiring whole-of-government coordination and international positioning.

Yet this evolution has been neither linear nor unified. The first Trump administration (2017-2021) launched the American AI Initiative around innovation leadership with a light regulatory touch; the Biden administration (2021-2025) pivoted to comprehensive risk management featuring safety-testing expectations, procurement guardrails, and multilateral coordination; and the second Trump administration, in its early months, reversed course within months, trading the Biden-era framework for deregulation, culture-war framing, and export promotion alongside intensified chip controls. These oscillations raise basic questions about continuity and change in U.S. AI strategy.

If AI capabilities matter for economic competitiveness and military advantage regardless of party, why do administrations diverge so sharply on governance? Realists predict policy instrument continuity when technologies underpin relative power, yet the record reveals stark variation: testing expectations appear and disappear, "safe, secure, and trustworthy" language gives way to prohibitions on "woke" AI, multilateral forums are energized and then sidelined. Do these shifts reflect rhetorical repackaging or substantive realignment in how the United States pursues technological advantage?

This study addresses one question: What drives continuity versus change in U.S. federal AI policy across Trump I, Biden, and Trump II administrations through July 2025, and how do those forces shape export controls, regulatory posture, alliance activation, and normative framing? Drawing on a structured, focused comparison (SFC) of authoritative documents and systematic content analysis (George and Bennett 2005; Krippendorff 2018), I argue that the pattern is intelligible only as the product of four mechanisms that do not move together.

The argument is that four distinct mechanisms, each on its own logic and timescale, govern four different dimensions of the policy. Realist competition as explained by adoption-capacity theory produces continuity in the most coercive instruments: because advanced AI depends on a few high-cost, supply-concentrated chokepoints in the computing value chain, any administration facing serious competition with China converges on chip- and compute-level export controls regardless of party (Horowitz 2018; Farrell and Newman 2019). Domestic coalition politics, channeled through policy-venue dynamics,

produces rapid rather than gradual reversal of regulatory posture at partisan transitions (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 2009). Layered constructivism, combining sociotechnical imaginaries, the norm life cycle, and securitization, explains the contest over AI's purpose: the "anti-woke" construction is best read not as the mirror of Biden-era's safety frame but as an emergent norm contesting a safety frame that had gained substantial international institutional traction (Jasanoff and Kim 2015; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Burton 2023). Neoliberal institutionalism, through a five-mode typology of cooperation, explains why alliance behavior shifts in form rather than collapsing in volume (Keohane 1984). External competition sets the coercive foundation, while domestic coalitions and identity narratives determine the regulatory posture above it. This results in volatile governance frameworks atop a stable competitive base.

This analysis speaks to three audiences. For IR theory, it assigns each tradition the dimension it explains best, tied to specific coded indicators, and makes two moves existing literature has not – the five-mode typology converts "alliance activation" into a qualitative variable, and the three-layer constructivism with imaginaries, norm dynamics, and securitization turns framing variables into evidence of an organized contest over governance authority. For tech-governance studies, it offers a transparent and replicable comparison of American AI strategy across administrations. For policy communities, it clarifies which strategic commitments persist across partisan transitions and which may face reversal risk. The evidence basis is a purposive corpus of 23 authoritative federal documents issued between February 2019 and July 2025 including executive orders, statutes, agency rules and strategies, and OMB memos. Each is coded on six variables against explicit criteria and read through the same five SFC questions.

Section 2 develops the theoretical foundation and lays out four hypotheses. Section 3 specifies method and corpus. Sections 4-6 present within-case analyses. Section 7 compares administrations and tests the hypotheses. Finally, Section 8 concludes and draws implications. Appendix A has the complete document-level matrix and coding protocol.

2. Theoretical Framework

AI has become a defining technology of great-power competition, and its governance sits at the intersection of strategic, institutional, and ideational pressures that no single theoretical tradition fully accommodates. As such, I adopt an eclectic approach, drawing selectively on multiple theoretical traditions. This is consistent with recent AI and emerging-tech scholarship that treats these technologies as requiring cross-paradigm and multi-level analysis (Sil and Katzenstein 2010; Ndzendze and Marwala 2023; Tallberg et al. 2023). I assign each tradition a distinct dimension of AI policy. Realism explains why coercive material instruments converge; neoliberal institutionalism explains how cooperation is organized when no single body has jurisdiction; and constructivism explains what is being contested when administrations articulate competing visions of responsible AI. A fourth strand, coming from American policy-process scholarship, notably, Baumgartner and Jones's (1991, 2009) account of image-venue dynamics, explains why partisan turnover produces rapid policy reversal rather than gradual shift. Table 2.1 has the full mapping of theory into four hypotheses under test.

2.1 Realism and Adoption Capacity

Realists predict that states in anarchy prioritize relative gains (Waltz 1979) and compete for enduring material advantages (Mearsheimer 2001). When economic instruments are used to pursue geopolitical objectives, states may turn to geoeconomic statecraft including export controls and supply-chain restrictions to preserve or enhance strategic advantage (Blackwill and Harris 2016). Networked interdependence, in turn, creates asymmetric chokepoints that powerful states can weaponize by exploiting control over key nodes and flows (Farrell and Newman 2019). These observations explain why AI competition has become a site of structural rivalry, but not why all three administrations converge specifically on chip- and compute-level controls rather than algorithmic or software measures. That requires a more mechanism-specific account.

Horowitz's (2010) adoption-capacity theory supplies one. It disaggregates diffusion into a technology's financial intensity and the organizational capital required for adoption. High-financial-intensity technologies such as advanced semiconductors diffuse slowly, with their unit cost concentrating production in a few firms and jurisdictions. Horowitz (2018) extends this to AI, treating it as an enabling general-purpose tech in which commercial incentives drive global investments. States cannot prevent the resulting diffusion but can target the high-unit-cost, supply-concentrated chokepoints in the value chain, with advanced compute as the canonical use case. This suggests that any administration facing serious AI competition with China gravitates to chip and equipment controls, because that is where the diffusion structure offers the highest coercive leverage.

Recent literature offers further support. Allen (2025) explains that the export-control architecture the Biden administration built through the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) rules has been substantially retained while reorganized, and the semiconductor IPE literature converges on the durability of the chokepoint logic across political configurations (Miller 2022). Realism adapted as adoption-capacity theory therefore predicts continuity in the most coercive instruments even where other elements diverge.

Under this rationale, continuity should persist in Export_Tightening (SFC Q3c) specifically at the chip- and compute-level across all three administrations regardless of party. Above that hardware level, nothing can be as determinate. The claim (R&D_Budget_Change, Q3a) about federal R&D is held to a lower standard, since a corpus of strategic documents records funding commitments only intermittently, so R&D continuity is presented as weakly instrumented, corroborated with contextual evidence rather than asserted from the texts. This guards against reading generalized continuity into a record that supports it

firmly only at the chokepoint.

2.2 Neoliberal Institutionalism and the Modes of AI Cooperation

Neoliberal institutionalism holds that cooperation can persist under anarchy when institutions reduce transaction costs, generate information, and enable reciprocity (Keohane 1984). For a cross-cutting issue like AI, where no single body has clear jurisdiction, governance emerges not as a single regime but as a regime complex: an array of partially overlapping, nonhierarchical institutions whose interactions govern the issue-area in fragmented and sometimes inconsistent ways (Raustiala and Victor 2004; Alter and Meunier 2009). Epistemic communities and standards bodies further shape state preferences through two channels: networks of experts generate the consensual knowledge that underpins soft-law making (Haas 1992; Abbott and Snidal 2000), and standards bodies translate broad principles into operational international standards (Abbott and Snidal 2001).

Recent literature notes a proliferation of AI governance institutions. For example, Roberts et al. (2024) catalog more than 200 international initiatives between 2015 and 2023, while Klein and Patrick (2024) argue that AI governance will mirror the institutional arrangements of climate and trade, with multiple bodies serving distinct functions without consolidating. This is a good starting point, but it is also where existing literature falls short in cross-administration comparison, because the broad category of “alliance activation” bundles substantively distinct forms of cooperation.

Therefore, in this study I distinguish five modes of cooperation: First, formal multilateralism operates through established IGOs via consensus declarations and principles. Second, soft-law coordination operates through ad hoc high-level fora such as the G7 Hiroshima AI Process. Third, standards-setting operates through technical bodies such as NIST domestically and ISO internationally. Fourth, minilateral coordination operates through small, function-specific coalitions such as the Quad’s technology track or the U.S.-Japan-Netherlands chip-export coalition. Lastly, bilateral or inter-institute partnerships operate through dyads such as the U.S.-U.K. AI Safety Institute partnership and the U.S.-E.U. Trade and Technology Council. Different administrations activate different combinations. Conflating them mistakes a shift in mode for the collapse of cooperation.

Accordingly, Alliance_Launch (SFC Q4) records the intensity of new arrangements, while the case analysis distinguishes which combination of the five modes an administration activates. This makes a shift in the form of cooperation visible without treating it automatically as withdrawal. H4 turns on that distinction.

2.3 Constructivism: Imaginaries, Norm Dynamics, and Securitization

Constructivism redirects attention from material capabilities and institutional incentives toward norms, identities, and the social construction of legitimate state behavior. It does three distinct kinds of work here, separated into layers because conflating them obscures what is at stake when administrations articulate competing visions of AI governance.

First, national sociotechnical imaginaries, defined as “collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfillment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 4). Imaginaries are not policy preferences or ideologies but deeper visions of what a technology is for and which authorities should shape it. They become visible when actors mobilize tech to advance competing answers.

In this study, each administration articulates a distinct imaginary of American AI: Trump I, innovation-led economic and military leadership in a competitive system; Biden, risk-managed advancement of democratic values, equity, and worker protection within a multilateral order; Trump II, American tech supremacy freed from regulatory and ideological constraint and aimed at China. Each is institutionally stabilized through different mixes of documents, so contests are not surface framing disputes but rather contests over which imaginary becomes authoritative.

Where Jasanoff and Kim explain what is contested, Finnemore and Sikkink’s (1998) norm life cycle explains how contests evolve. They distinguish three stages – emergence, cascade, and internalization – separated by a tipping point at which a critical mass of states adopts a norm, with different actors and motivations dominant at each. Notably, a cascading or internalized norm can itself become the prevailing standard of appropriateness against which later norms must struggle for adoption (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895-96).

Applied to this study, by late 2024 the Biden frame of “safe, secure, and trustworthy AI” had gained substantial institutional traction through the G7 Process, the OECD Principles, and allied governance channels. The “anti-woke” frame introduced in the early Trump II administration is treated here as a competing emergent norm at the first stage, propagated by a powerful entrepreneur from a substantial platform, with its international diffusion still an open question. The question H3 puts to the data is whether Trump II is attempting the rare maneuver Finnemore and Sikkink identify as contesting a cascading norm before its internalization is complete.

The third layer comes from Burton (2023), which applies securitization theory directly to AI. Burton’s distinctive contribution is to show that AI securitization is multidirectional. AI is a securitized object, framed as a threat warranting governance, and a tool deployed against other securitized threats.

Through this lens, the contest is about rival securitizations. Biden’s “safe, secure, and trustworthy” architecture construes unsafe, insecure, and untested AI as an existential threat to democratic governance, civil rights, and worker dignity, thus justifying safety and emergency measures. The Trump II “anti-woke” frame constructs ideologically biased AI as a threat to American values and the legitimacy of federal AI use, thus justifying its prohibition in procurement. Both follow the textbook structure of securitization. What differs is the referent object, and each move transfers authority from ordinary to emergency politics.

Empirically, these three layers direct attention to three framing markers. The coded variables *American_Leadership*, *Risk_Frame*, and *Anti_Woke* (SFC Q2) are surface traces of competing securitizations attached to rival imaginaries. H3 predicts that the framing variables move together with each administration's choice of partners and fora (Q4): securitizing unsafe AI gravitates to safety-and-standards fora, while securitizing ideologically biased AI finds no established forum and turns to unilateral and export-promotion instruments.

2.4 Domestic Politics: Policy Images, Venues, and Reversal

The three IR perspectives have so far helped identify the international and ideational forces shaping American AI strategy, but they do not by themselves explain why a recently consolidated domestic policy arrangement can be rapidly disrupted when partisan control of the executive changes. Here, Baumgartner and Jones's (1991, 2009) account of agenda dynamics, policy images, venues, and subsystems supplies that domestic-level mechanism. Their theory holds that the interaction between the dominant way an issue is understood (policy image) and the institutional setting in which decisions are made (policy venue) helps explain both long periods of policy stability and short bursts of rapid change. A subsystem organized around a coherent policy image and supported by favorable venues can remain stable for extended periods. When challengers contest the image and move conflict into alternative venues, however, the subsystem becomes vulnerable to positive-feedback dynamics: image change makes venue change more likely, and venue change further legitimates the new image.

This fits the pattern the study discovers. The Biden administration built an AI-safety subsystem anchored in a coherent image and stabilized across multiple venues. Trump II's reversal was not a series of disconnected adjustments but a coordinated image-and-venue attack: the image was reframed while the venues were simultaneously reshuffled. The explanation complements the constructivist view. Imaginaries and securitizations supply the discursive content of the image attack, while image-venue dynamics supply the institutional logic through which that content reorganizes policy authority.

If reversal is driven by image-and-venue dynamics, the regulatory markers, above all, *Risk_Frame* (SFC Q3b) and the constituency alignment anchoring it (Q5), should not decay slowly but invert sharply and almost completely at the single moment of partisan transition, across several venues at once.

Table 2.1 Theory and Variables

Policy dimension (hypothesis)	Theoretical Connection	Coded indicator(s) and SFC question(s)	Observable prediction tested in Sections 4-7
Coercive material instruments (H1)	Realism adapted as adoption-capacity theory: dual-use diffusion concentrates leverage at high-cost supply chokepoints (Horowitz 2010, 2018; Farrell and Newman 2019)	Export_Tightening (Q3c); R&D_Budget_Change (Q3a, weakly instrumented)	Continuity in chip- and compute-level export controls across all three administrations, regardless of party; no determinate prediction above the hardware floor
Regulatory posture (H2)	Domestic-coalition preferences channeled through policy image-venue dynamics (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 2009)	Risk_Frame (Q3b); Anti_Woke (Q3b); constituency alignment (Q5)	Sharp, near-total reversal of regulatory framing at the moment of partisan transition, across multiple venues at once, not gradual drift
Discursive contest over AI's purpose (H3)	Constructivism in three layers: sociotechnical imaginaries, the norm life cycle, and competing securitizations (Jasanoff and Kim 2015; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Burton 2023)	American_Leadership, Risk_Frame, Anti_Woke (Q2); partner and forum choice (Q4)	Administrations securitize different referent objects; framing variables move together with each administration's choice of multilateral partners and fora
Alliance and institutional behavior (H4)	Neoliberal institutionalism plus a cooperation-modes typology for the AI regime complex (Keohane 1984; Raustiala and Victor 2004; Abbott and Snidal 2000, 2001)	Alliance_Launch; cooperation mode assessed qualitatively (Q4)	Variation in the mode of cooperation: formal, soft-law, standards, minilateral, or bilateral, not merely in its volume

Note: "Weakly instrumented" denotes an expectation that the strategic-document corpus shows intermittently and is therefore supplemented with contextual evidence rather than asserted from the texts (2.1).

The four hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Technonational Continuity. Across administrations, U.S. AI strategy will sustain or expand export controls at the advanced-compute chokepoint, regardless of party control.

H2: Domestic-Coalition Divergence. Regulatory posture will diverge by party coalition, leading to rapid reversal of risk-governance frameworks at partisan transition rather than gradual drift.

H3: Identity-Framed Norm Competition. Administrations will embed AI strategy in rival identity narratives and securitize different referent objects, with partner and forum choices tracking those imaginaries.

H4: Alliance-Institutional Activation. Alliance behavior will vary more by mode of cooperation than by simple volume; shifts in mode should not be read automatically as withdrawal.

3. Data, Methods, and Coding

This section operationalizes the framework developed in Section 2. The study tests the four hypotheses through a structured, focused comparison (SFC) of authoritative U.S. federal AI policy documents, combined with systematic qualitative content

analysis. SFC disciplines cross-case inference by posing the same questions to each case, so that observed similarities and differences reflect variation across administrations rather than shifts in analytic attention (George and Bennett 2005). Content analysis converts recurring textual signals into comparable indicators, allowing patterns of continuity and change to be summarized transparently (Krippendorff 2018). The two methods are complementary: the SFC questions preserve policy context, while the coded variables make the three administrations directly comparable on the dimensions the hypotheses concern.

The design makes three methodological commitments explicit. First, the corpus is justified by explicit selection criteria, with deliberate attention to the coercive-instrument record on which H1 turns. Second, all coding is reported at the document level and is auditable against the codebook (Appendix A). Third, the measurement discussion candidly states where the corpus instruments a hypothesis well and where it does not, so continuity is claimed only to the extent that the coded evidence supports it.

3.1 Research Design and Analytic Strategy

The study treats three consecutive administrations – Trump I, Biden, and the opening months of Trump II – as cases in a within-country, over-time comparison. Holding the state constant while party control alternates helps isolate the effect of domestic coalitions from the structural pressures of great-power competition. Because administrations inherit, retain, revise, or rescind their predecessors’ instruments, the design is well suited to detecting both incremental continuity and the punctuated reversals associated with shifts in policy image and venue (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 2009).

The evidence is in the documents. Executive orders, statutes, agency rules, strategies, and budget-bearing memoranda are the instruments through which the executive states strategy, binds agencies, and signals priorities to allies and firms. These documents therefore constitute the public, authoritative strategy that the study seeks to explain. The design speaks to stated priorities, instrument selection, and forum activation rather than to private deliberation or downstream enforcement.

Analysis proceeds in two steps. The within-case sections (4-6) explain each administration around the five SFC questions, anchored to coded evidence, establishing what each did and how it justified it. The cross-case section (7) then arrays the administrations against the six variables to test the hypotheses, translating the codes into descriptive patterns.

3.2 Corpus Construction and Justification

The corpus was assembled purposively rather than randomly, because the relevant population is finite and the analytic aim is to capture the most authoritative statements of federal AI strategy. A document was included if it met all three criteria: First, authority. It is issued from the President, the Executive Office of the President, a senior executive-branch authority such as Commerce/BIS, OMB, or NIST, or was an enacted statute. Second, strategic force. It sets strategic direction or imposes binding requirements rather than merely commenting on policy. Third, AI relevance. It substantially addresses AI governance, AI-relevant research and development, or the advanced-computing supply chain (semiconductors and compute) on which AI capability depends.

Applying these criteria yields 23 documents issued between February 2019 and July 2025, distributed across six instrument types and the three administrations (Table 3.1). The window opens with the crystallization of federal AI strategy under Executive Order 13859 and closes at a July 31, 2025 data freeze, which captures the second Trump administration’s foundational statements while acknowledging the term remains in progress.

Table 3.1. Corpus composition by document type and administration (N = 23).

Document type	Trump I	Biden	Trump II	Total
Executive orders	2	1	4	7
Commerce / BIS export-control actions*	2	3	2	7
OMB memoranda	—	2	2	4
National strategies / action plans	1	—	1	2
Statutes (public law)	1	1	—	2
NIST technical framework	—	1	—	1
Total	6	8	9	23

*Includes Federal Register rules, interim final rules, Entity List additions, and formal BIS guidance governing AI-relevant exports and the advanced-computing supply chain.

The corpus excludes congressional hearings, public comments, think-tank commentary, routine sub-regulatory guidance below the strategic threshold, and classified or non-public material. These exclusions keep the unit of comparison consistent and bound the inferences to public, authoritative strategy.

3.3 Structured Comparison and Coding Scheme

The same five SFC questions are posed to each administration. Each question features a dimension on which the theoretical framework expects either continuity or change.

Q1. Strategic objectives. What overarching goals does the administration articulate – innovation leadership, national security, societal benefit, or risk mitigation, and which dominates?

Q2. Threat and opportunity framing. How are external actors and ideas depicted: China as a rival, allies as partners, domestic ideological tendencies as internal threats? Q2 carries the framing markers (American_Leadership, Risk_Frame, Anti_Woke).

Q3. Policy instruments and intensity. Which tools are prioritized, and how forcefully: (a) R&D funding, (b) regulation and oversight, (c) coercive levers such as export controls, (d) positive inducements? Q3a instruments R&D_Budget_Change; Q3b, Risk_Frame and Anti_Woke; Q3c, Export_Tightening.

Q4. International engagement. Which forums are launched, upgraded, or sidelined, and through which mode – formal multilateral, soft-law, standards-setting, minilateral, or bilateral? Q4 carries Alliance_Launch. The case analysis distinguishes the mode of nonzero arrangements.

Q5. Domestic constituency alignment. Which domestic actors – industry, labor, civil-rights and consumer groups, the security community, are courted or referenced, and whose preferences are reflected in the chosen instrument?

Answers are recorded in an SFC matrix, in Appendix A.

The six variables translate recurring textual signals into comparable indicators. Scales are kept deliberately coarse (binary or three-point ordinal) to limit coder discretion and register only policy-meaningful distinctions. The full detail is provided in Appendix A1.

Export_Tightening (0-2) serves H1 through Q3c.

0 = no new controls, loosening, or mere reference to existing regimes;

1 = incremental expansion (e.g., Entity List additions, ECCN updates, narrow licensing requirements);

2 = major scope expansion (e.g., FDPR extensions, broad end-use rules, comprehensive advanced-computing or semiconductor-equipment controls). Entity List additions ordinarily score 1. They score 2 only when the action imposes a broad, AI-relevant denial architecture that materially expands the scope of controlled access.

R&D_Budget_Change (-1/0/1) serves H1 through Q3a, but is weakly instrumented.

1 = clear increase signaled by explicit appropriations, numeric targets, or aggregate funding statements;

0 = flat, ambiguous, or contingent on future appropriations;

-1 = clear decrease or rescission of AI-relevant R&D funding.

Risk_Frame (0/1) serves H2 through Q3b and H3 through Q2.

1 = AI is framed as requiring testing, evaluation, or impact assessment, using markers such as “safe, secure, and trustworthy,” red-teaming, or pre-deployment testing;

0 = risk framing is absent or minimal.

Anti_Woke (0/1) serves H2 through Q3b and H3 through Q2.

1 = explicit culture-war framing: “woke,” “ideological bias,” or DEI critiques deployed in a partisan remark;

0 = absent, or neutral fairness and civil-rights language without culture-war framing.

Alliance_Launch (0-2) serves H4 through Q4 and also informs H3.

0 = no new arrangement, or reaffirmation of existing institutions only;

1 = one new forum, memorandum of understanding, or working group established;

2 = multiple new arrangements launched.

American_Leadership (0-2) serves H3 through Q2.

0 = absent;

1 = at least one explicit leadership claim;

2 = repeated leadership claims combined with zero-sum language (“win the race,” “global dominance,” “outcompete China”).

Across all six variables, a nonzero score requires that the relevant signal be explicit and AI-specific in the document. General statements about U.S. technological competitiveness, semiconductor capacity, or federal science funding do not by themselves qualify unless the document connects them to AI.

3.4 Coding Protocol, Reliability, and Validity

Each document was coded through a fixed five-step workflow, set out in full in Appendix A1. Three features support reliability: a frozen codebook fixes inclusion/exclusion rules and signal terms before coding; the coarse, mostly binary scales minimize the latitude for divergent judgment; and a conservative default of assigning the lower value where a passage is ambiguous, and coding the absence of a signal, after a reasonable search, as 0 (or 0/-1) rather than missing. This guards against inflating the very continuity the study examines. Coding was performed by a single coder. Rather than report an intercoder statistic the design cannot support, the study makes its coding inspectable through the complete document-level matrix (Appendix A), a fixed codebook, coarse scales, and the within-case analyses that illustrate the textual basis for the central findings (Krippendorff 2018). These materials allow readers to assess the central coding decisions. Validity rests on the correspondence between each indicator and the construct it captures: the variables capture policy-meaningful thresholds rather than surface wording. The study does not claim a complete archival note for every coding cell.

3.5 Scope and Limitations

Four limitations bound the claims. First, the corpus captures stated strategy, not how vigorously agencies implement or enforce it. Second, R&D_Budget_Change is weakly instrumented: because only one document scores nonzero, the R&D component of H1 is advanced as a suggestive expectation, corroborated against external budgetary context, above all the CHIPS Act of 2022, rather than asserted from the coding, so the analysis claims no more continuity than the evidence will bear. Third,

the Trump II window is short, mitigated but not eliminated by the inclusion of its Action Plan and principal implementing orders. Fourth, the single-country, three-case design supports theory-testing about U.S. strategy but not broad generalization, while contributing a transparent, replicable coding template that cross-national work can extend.

4. The First Trump Administration (2017 to January 2021)

The corpus records six authoritative documents for the first Trump administration: two executive orders (EO 13859 and EO 13873), the 2019 update to the National AI R&D Strategic Plan, the NAIIA of 2020, and two BIS export actions (the October 2019 Entity List addition at 84 FR 54002 and the August 2020 FDPR amendment at 85 FR 51596). This and the next two sections read the documents through the five SFC questions. The complete document-level coding appears in Appendix A (Table A1).

4.1 Strategic Objectives (Q1)

The organizing objective is to preserve U.S. preeminence in artificial intelligence through federally coordinated research and a deliberately light regulatory touch. EO 13859 launched the American AI Initiative on the premise that sustained leadership is “of paramount importance,” directing agencies to prioritize AI R&D, technical standards, and workforce development (Trump 2019a). The 2019 R&D Strategic Plan operationalized that premise as a federal research agenda, and the National AI Initiative Act of 2020 codified its coordinating architecture, including a National AI Initiative Office (NAIIA 2021). A national-security objective ran on a parallel track through the supply-chain and export instruments examined below, but innovation leadership, not risk management or alliance construction, supplies the dominant discourse. American_Leadership codes show a tie: AmL = 1 in the three strategy documents (EO 13859, Strategic Plan, NAIIA) and 0 in the three coercive instruments, yet none of the texts sustains the zero-sum “win the race” call that the codebook reserves for a 2; the administration-level pattern is an even 3-3 split.

4.2 Threat and Opportunity Framing (Q2)

The framing markers separate cleanly by instrument type. The security and export documents name China as a strategic competitor while the innovation documents do not. EO 13873 declares a national emergency over information- and communications-technology supply chains controlled by “foreign adversaries,” and the Entity List action targets named Chinese firms (Trump 2019b; BIS 2019). EO 13859, the 2019 Strategic Plan, and the NAIIA, by contrast, keep to the moderate leadership approach identified in 4.1. Risk framing is present but confined to a technical-research scope: Risk_Frame is coded 1 in the 2019 R&D Strategic Plan, whose dedicated priority is to “ensure the safety and security of AI systems” (NSTC 2019), and in the NAIIA, which directs NIST toward a voluntary trustworthy-AI risk-management framework (NAIIA 2021). In both, risk is construed as an engineering and standards problem rather than as a governance-wide threat requiring pre-deployment testing or impact assessment. No document treats a domestic ideological tendency as a threat: Anti_Woke is coded 0 across all six, and where the texts address bias, they use neutral technical and civil-rights language.

4.3 Policy Instruments and Intensity (Q3)

The most forceful instrument track is coercive (Q3c). Three of the six documents tighten controls. EO 13873 established standing authority to prohibit transactions in foreign-adversary information- and communications-technology and services, coded 1 as an authority-creating, incremental step (Trump 2019b). The October 2019 Entity List addition is coded 2: a major, AI-targeted expansion that places Chinese AI and surveillance firms (e.g., SenseTime and Dahua) under a license requirement with a presumption of denial, on a human rights rationale tied to Xinjiang (BIS 2019). It is treated as the exceptional score-2 form of an Entity List action because of its broad, AI-relevant denial effect that goes beyond a routine listing. The August 2020 amendment is likewise coded 2: it extended the FDPR to reach foreign-manufactured chips made with U.S. technology that supply Huawei, the canonical hardware-chokepoint instrument (BIS 2020). Trump I thus reached the maximum export-tightening intensity twice.

The other tracks are comparatively muted. On R&D funding (Q3a), the strategic documents make AI a rhetorical budget priority but signal no explicit increase; R&D_Budget_Change is coded 0 throughout, consistent with its weak instrumentation by a corpus of strategic documents. On regulation and oversight (Q3b), the posture is light: risk is addressed through voluntary, standards-based trustworthiness rather than prescriptive mandates, and no culture-war regulatory measure appears. Positive inducements (Q3d) as R&D coordination and public-private partnership are present but modest.

4.4 International Engagement (Q4)

International engagement is limited. Alliance_Launch is nonzero in only one document: the 2019 R&D Strategic Plan (coded 1), whose international-cooperation language is aspirational rather than establishing a standing forum. Its mode is best read as soft-law or aspirational coordination, not formal multilateralism or minilateral coalition-building. The export actions are unilateral, and no new multilateral arrangement is created anywhere in the corpus, leaving the modal value for Alliance_Launch at 0.

4.5 Domestic Constituency Alignment (Q5)

Two constituencies are prioritized above all. The innovation and industry community is courted through light-touch regulation, standards in place of mandates, and public-private R&D partnership; the national-security community is reflected in the supply-

chain and export actions. Civil-rights, consumer, and labor constituencies are largely absent from the mentions, which is consistent with the lack of a comprehensive risk-regulation regime and with the confinement of Risk_Frame to a technical focus.

4.6 Within-Case Synthesis

The first Trump administration pairs an innovation-leadership and R&D-coordination architecture with a deliberately light domestic regulatory touch and an early, forceful coercive-instrument track aimed at Chinese access to AI-enabling hardware. Risk framing is technical and voluntary, and identity framing is absent. The case's analytically salient feature is the coercive-instrument distribution. The standing ICTS authority, the major Entity List expansion, and the FDPR extension collectively establish, within a single administration, the chip- and equipment-level instruments on which this study's continuity question turns. Whether those measures are sustained across the partisan transitions that follow is taken up in the cross-case analysis of Section 7.

Table 4.1. First Trump administration: document-level coding

Document	Date	ExpT	Risk	AntiW	AILL	R&D	AmL
EO 13859, Maintaining American Leadership in AI	Feb 2019	0	0	0	0	0	1
EO 13873, Securing the ICTS Supply Chain	May 2019	1	0	0	0	0	0
National AI R&D Strategic Plan (2019 update)	Jun 2019	0	1	0	1	0	1
Entity List addition, 84 FR 54002	Oct 2019	2	0	0	0	0	0
Huawei FDPR amendment, 85 FR 51596	Aug 2020	2	0	0	0	0	0
National AI Initiative Act of 2020	Jan 2021	0	1	0	0	0	1
Modal value		0	0	0	0	0	Split

Note: Here and in the case tables that follow, modal values understate coercive intensity because the corpus is weighted toward strategy documents; for Export_Tightening the policy-relevant signal lies in the maximum-intensity actions. Here, the two coded 2 (84 FR 54002; 85 FR 51596), not in the modal value.

5. The Biden Administration (2021 to January 2025)

The corpus records eight authoritative documents for the Biden administration: the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022; two Bureau of Industry and Security advanced-computing export rules; the NIST AI Risk Management Framework 1.0; Executive Order 14110 on safe, secure, and trustworthy AI; two Office of Management and Budget memoranda (M-24-10 and M-24-18); and the January 2025 Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion (90 FR 4544).

5.1 Strategic Objectives (Q1)

Two objectives coexist, neither subordinate to the other. The first is to govern AI for safety, security, and trustworthiness: EO 14110 supplies the master frame in its title, and that frame is built out across venues as a risk-management regime spanning voluntary standards (the NIST AI RMF), the executive order itself, and binding agency governance (the two OMB memoranda). The second is to protect the hardware base of U.S. advantage, pursued through the advanced-computing export controls and, at the period's close, an allied diffusion framework. The administration thus pairs a comprehensive domestic risk-governance build-out with a coercive technology-protection track. Leadership framing is uneven: American_Leadership is absent from the technical and governance documents and moderate in the October 2023 controls and EO 14110, intensifying to a 2 only in the January 2025 diffusion framework.

5.2 Threat and Opportunity Framing (Q2)

The dominant framing marker is Risk_Frame, coded 1 in five of eight documents. Unsafe, untested, and discriminatory AI is construed as a threat to safety, civil rights, and democratic governance; it thus justifies testing, evaluation, and impact assessment across the NIST framework, EO 14110, and the two OMB memoranda. It also appears as model-weight security in the diffusion framework (NIST 2023; Biden 2023; OMB 2024a; OMB 2024b; "Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion" 2025). China figures as a strategic competitor mainly in the export instruments, where the discourse is technical and security-oriented rather than zero-sum, except in the January 2025 diffusion framework, which couples export control with explicit leadership language ("Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion" 2025). Allies are depicted as governance partners in EO 14110 and as tiered participants in the diffusion framework. Anti_Woke is coded 0 throughout. Where the documents address bias and discrimination, they use civil-rights and technical-fairness language instead of culture-war terms.

5.3 Policy Instruments and Intensity (Q3)

Two instrument tracks run at high intensity. The coercive track (Q3c) is the corpus's strongest: three documents reach the maximum Export_Tightening score. The October 2022 BIS interim final rule imposed controls on advanced-computing chips, semiconductor-manufacturing equipment, and supercomputer and semiconductor end uses (coded 2); the October 2023 update broadened scope and closed performance-threshold workarounds (coded 2, at 88 FR 73458); and the January 2025 diffusion framework established a tiered global licensing system for advanced chips and closed model weights (coded 2, at 90 FR 4544). The regulatory track (Q3b) is equally distinctive: the five Risk_Frame documents identified in 5.2 together constitute a multi-venue risk-management regime – the NIST RMF's govern, map, measure, and manage functions; EO 14110's safety-test reporting and red-teaming standards; and the OMB memo's minimum practices for rights- and safety-impacting AI and for

responsible acquisition. Anti_Woke remains 0 throughout.

The remaining tracks are narrower. On R&D funding (Q3a), only EO 14110 signals an increase (coded 1), through its research-resource and funding measures, including the National AI Research Resource pilot. The CHIPS Act, the period’s principal semiconductor and science statute, leaves no AI-specific coded signal and is coded 0 on every variable. It is used only as external corroboration of R&D continuity, not as a coded R&D-increase signal. No R&D claim is asserted from the coded texts beyond the single EO 14110 reading. Positive inducements (Q3d) take the form of research-resource provisions and agency capacity-building.

5.4 International Engagement (Q4)

International engagement is the most active in the corpus. Alliance_Launch is nonzero in three documents and reaches 2 once. EO 14110 directed international engagement on AI governance (coded 1; a soft-law and bilateral mode, including AI-safety-institute partnerships). The October 2023 export update carried allied coordination on controls (coded 1; a minilateral mode). And the January 2025 diffusion framework includes a tiered allied licensing system (coded 2; combining formal country-tiering with minilateral and bilateral partnership). The mode portfolio thus spans soft-law coordination, standards-setting, minilateral coalition, and bilateral partnership.

5.5 Domestic Constituency Alignment (Q5)

The instruments reflect a broad constituency base. Civil-rights, consumer-protection, and privacy interests are courted directly. EO 14110’s rights and consumer provisions and the OMB memo’s “rights-impacting” category name workers, consumers, and protected groups explicitly alongside the national-security community addressed by the export controls and the domestic manufacturing base addressed by the CHIPS Act. The breadth of the risk-governance coalition is itself a feature of the coded record.

5.6 Within-Case Synthesis

The Biden administration’s signature strategy constitutes a comprehensive, multi-venue risk-governance regime organized around safe, secure, and trustworthy AI, coupled with the corpus’s most intensive coercive record at the hardware chokepoint – three maximum-intensity export actions, and its most active alliance portfolio, culminating in the tiered diffusion framework. Risk framing is pervasive, export-tightening is robust, and alliance activation spans multiple modes. The single coded R&D-increase signal is EO 14110, with CHIPS supplying external corroboration. Identity framing is absent, and leadership framing intensifies only at the close of the period.

Table 5.1. Biden administration: document-level coding

Document	Date	ExpT	Risk	AntiW	AIIL	R&D	AmL
CHIPS and Science Act of 2022	Aug 2022	0	0	0	0	0	0
BIS advanced-computing controls (Oct 2022 rule)	Oct 2022	2	0	0	0	0	0
NIST AI Risk Management Framework 1.0	Jan 2023	0	1	0	0	0	0
BIS controls update, 88 FR 73458	Oct 2023	2	0	0	1	0	1
EO 14110, Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy AI	Oct 2023	0	1	0	1	1	1
OMB M-24-10	Mar 2024	0	1	0	0	0	0
OMB M-24-18	Sep 2024	0	1	0	0	0	0
Framework for AI Diffusion, 90 FR 4544	Jan 2025	2	1	0	2	0	2
Modal value		0	1	0	0	0	0

Note: The modal-value caveat of Table 4.1 applies; the Export_Tightening signal lies in the three maximum-intensity actions. The single coded R&D_Budget_Change (EO 14110) is corroborated externally by CHIPS.

6. The Early Second Trump Administration (January to July 2025)

The corpus records nine authoritative documents for the second Trump administration: Executive Order 14179 (removing barriers to AI leadership); two OMB Memoranda M-25-21 and M-25-22 on federal AI use; two May 2025 Bureau of Industry and Security export actions (the rescission of the AI Diffusion Framework paired with strengthened chip controls, and the General Prohibition 10 guidance on PRC advanced-computing chips); and a July 23, 2025 cluster comprising three executive orders (EO 14318 on data-center permitting, EO 14319 on preventing “woke” AI in federal use, and EO 14320 on exporting the American AI technology stack) and the strategy document Winning the Race: America’s AI Action Plan.

6.1 Strategic objectives (Q1)

The organizing objective is to accelerate American AI dominance by removing regulatory barriers and expanding physical and export capacity. The theme is set by EO 14179, “Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence,” and by the Action Plan’s title, Winning the Race, and is operationalized through three moves: deregulation, the build-out of compute infrastructure, and the promotion of U.S. AI exports. Risk management survives only in lighter governance for federal use. American_Leadership is the most intense in the corpus: present in eight of nine, coded 2 in four documents and 1 in four others, so leadership and dominance, rather than risk mitigation or rights protection, supply the dominant discourse.

6.2 Threat and Opportunity Framing (Q2)

Two framing markers stand out. American_Leadership is pervasive and high-intensity, carrying the zero-sum “win the race” call that the codebook reserves for a 2 (Trump 2025a, 2025b, 2025d; White House 2025). And, uniquely in the corpus, a domestic ideological tendency is constructed as a threat: EO 14319 frames “woke,” ideologically biased AI as a danger to American values and to the legitimacy of federal AI use, justifying its exclusion from federal procurement (Anti_Woke = 1; cf. Burton 2023). China appears as the competitor to be outpaced and restricted in export instruments. Risk framing, where present, is security-oriented, as shown in AI and biosecurity in the Action Plan, governance of high-impact systems in M-25-21 and M-25-22, rather than the rights-and-testing discourse that Risk_Frame marks elsewhere.

6.3 Policy Instruments and Intensity (Q3)

The regulatory track (Q3b) is deregulatory in posture but innovative in instrument. EO 14179 revoked the prior administration’s AI executive order and directed agencies to remove barriers to AI leadership, while M-25-21 and M-25-22 retain a lighter governance regime for high-impact federal AI (Risk_Frame = 1). Trump II’s distinctive regulatory move is to turn federal procurement into an ideological instrument: EO 14319 conditions government acquisition on the exclusion of “woke” AI (Anti_Woke = 1).

The coercive track (Q3c) persists and, in one action, reaches maximum scope. The May 2025 BIS action rescinded the tiered AI Diffusion Framework while simultaneously strengthening chip-related export controls (coded 1, BIS 2025a). This indicates a restructuring of export policy away from allied tiering rather than a relaxation of the chokepoint, and the General Prohibition 10 guidance treated the use of PRC advanced-computing chips anywhere in the world as a violation of U.S. export rules (coded 2, BIS 2025b). On R&D funding (Q3a), no document signals a budget change: R&D_Budget_Change is 0 throughout, and the data-center permitting order and the Action Plan’s emphasis on compute are capacity instruments rather than coded R&D-increase signals. Positive inducements (Q3d) are substantial in this term, in accelerated data-center permitting (EO 14318) and promotion of full-stack AI export packages (EO 14320).

6.4 International Engagement (Q4)

International engagement is active but in a distinct mode. Alliance_Launch is nonzero in two documents: EO 14320 promotes the export of the American AI technology stack to partners (coded 1; a bilateral and minilateral export-promotion mode), and the Action Plan launches multiple arrangements, including partnerships for the diffusion of American AI technology stack and the contesting of adversary influence in international standards bodies (coded 2). The mode is stack-export promotion and diffusion partnerships in contrast to the risk-governance fora that dominate other parts of the corpus.

6.5 Domestic Constituency Alignment (Q5)

The instruments court the AI industry and the infrastructure and energy sectors through deregulation, data-center permitting, and stack-export promotion, and a conservative cultural constituency through the anti-woke procurement order. The national-security community is reflected in chip controls. Civil-rights, consumer-protection, and testing-oriented constituencies are less visible in the instruments chosen, consistent with the lighter risk-governance approach.

6.6 Within-Case Synthesis

The early months of the second Trump administration combine a deregulatory acceleration-and-dominance agenda with a distinctive culture-war securitization run through federal procurement. Barriers were removed, compute infrastructure was expanded, and exports were promoted. Hardware-chokepoint control persists, restructured away from allied tiering yet reaching maximum scope in the Huawei guidance. Alliance activity centers on exporting the American AI stack. No coded document signals an R&D budget change. The leadership discourse is the most intense in the corpus.

Table 6.1. Early Second Trump administration: document-level coding

Document	Date	ExpT	Risk	AntiW	AllL	R&D	AmL
EO 14179, Removing Barriers to American Leadership in AI	Jan 2025	0	0	0	0	0	2
OMB M-25-21	Apr 2025	0	1	0	0	0	1
OMB M-25-22	Apr 2025	0	1	0	0	0	1
BIS rescission and chip-control strengthening	May 2025	1	0	0	0	0	1
BIS Huawei GP10 guidance	May 2025	2	0	0	0	0	1
EO 14318, Accelerating Federal Permitting of Data Centers	Jul 2025	0	0	0	0	0	2
EO 14319, Preventing Woke AI in the Federal Government	Jul 2025	0	0	1	0	0	0
EO 14320, Promoting the Export of the American AI Stack	Jul 2025	0	0	0	1	0	2
Winning the Race: America’s AI Action Plan	Jul 2025	0	1	0	2	0	2
Modal value		0	0	0	0	0	1-2

Note: The modal-value caveat in Table 4.1 applies; the Export_Tightening signal falls within the maximum-scope Huawei guidance, and the diffusion-rule rescission strengthens rather than relaxes chip controls. The single Anti_Woke coding (EO 14319) is that variable’s only appearance in the corpus.

7. Cross-Case Comparison: The Hypotheses Against the Coded Record

This section, drawing on the within-case coding and the SFC matrix, explains the comparison across the three administrations and tests the four hypotheses listed in Section 2. The findings support continuity at the hardware chokepoint (H1), a rapid multi-venue reversal of regulatory posture at the most recent transition (H2), a contest between competing securitizations attached to rival imaginaries (H3), and variation in the mode rather than the quantity of alliance activation (H4). Table 7.1 summarizes the coded record as follows:

Table 7.1. Cross-administration coding summary

Variable (range)	Trump I (n = 6)	Biden (n = 8)	Trump II (n = 9)
Export_Tightening (0–2)	peak 2; nonzero in 3	peak 2; nonzero in 3	peak 2; nonzero in 2
Risk_Frame (0–1)	1 in 2 (technical focus)	1 in 5 (comprehensive regime)	1 in 3 (security focus)
Anti_Woke (0–1)	0 throughout	0 throughout	1 in 1 (EO 14319)
Alliance_Launch (0–2)	peak 1; nonzero in 1	peak 2; nonzero in 3	peak 2; nonzero in 2
R&D_Budget_Change (-1–1)	0 throughout	1 in 1 (EO 14110)	0 throughout
American_Leadership (0–2)	1 in strategy docs, 0 in coercive (3/6)	mostly 0; peak 2	peak 2; bimodal (4 at 2, 4 at 1)

7.1 H1: Technonational continuity at the hardware chokepoint

The chokepoint evidence supports H1, within the defined corpus and coding rules. Each administration contains at least one chip- or equipment-level action scored at the maximum Export_Tightening value (Tables 4.1–6.1). Trump I twice (the Entity List expansion and the FDPR amendment, after establishing standing supply-chain authority through EO 13873). Biden three times (the 2022 and 2023 advanced-computing controls and the diffusion framework). Early Trump II once (the Huawei General Prohibition 10 guidance, along with the incremental strengthening that accompanied its rescission of Biden’s diffusion rule). Therefore, rather than a general claim of policy continuity, this finding is bounded to the hardware chokepoint, sustained or expanded across both partisan transitions.

Two observations reinforce this finding. First, the Biden era has the largest expansion of AI-relevant export controls in the time period under study, so the coercive trajectory is truly bipartisan rather than a Trump I-era legacy left untouched. Second, Trump II’s rescission of the diffusion framework is a change in the form of export policy away from allied tiering, not a retreat from the chokepoint. The same May 2025 action strengthened chip-related controls, and the Huawei guidance reached maximum scope. Continuity therefore operates at the level of the instrument (denying adversary access to advanced compute), while its packaging varies across administrations.

The R&D side of H1 is weaker and is hence presented only as suggestive. The single coded R&D_Budget_Change signal in the entire corpus is EO 14110. The CHIPS Act shows no AI-specific coded signal and is treated as external corroboration (see 5.3); Trump I and Trump II are coded 0 throughout. The coding therefore does not support a claim of bipartisan R&D expansion; at most it is consistent with R&D being treated as a stated priority, a claim that must rest on external budgetary context.

7.2 H2: Domestic-coalition divergence and rapid reversal

The regulatory record supports H2, including its prediction of a rapid, multi-venue reversal. The trajectory of Risk_Frame is non-monotonic in a way that tracks coalition turnover: a technical, R&D-confined method under Trump I, a comprehensive multi-venue regime under Biden, and a contraction to a security-centered approach under Trump II (Table 7.1). The sharpest test is the Biden-to-Trump II transition, and it behaves as the image-and-venue mechanism anticipates. Within months, EO 14179 revoked EO 14110, OMB M-25-21 and M-25-22 displaced M-24-10 and M-24-18, and EO 14319 added a procurement instrument. These constitute a coordinated attack across exactly the same venues where the predecessor had stabilized its risk subsystem. The reversal was rapid and concentrated rather than gradual or diffuse.

However, early Trump II does not abolish risk governance but redefines which risks are authoritative. The comprehensive rights-and-testing setup is dismantled, but a narrower security-oriented risk governance survives in M-25-21’s treatment of high-impact federal AI and the Action Plan’s attention to AI and biosecurity. What reverses is the content of the risk frame from distributive and rights-based to national-security-based, not the presence of risk language as such. That is divergence in coalition priorities and should not be treated as a simple regulation-versus-deregulation switch.

7.3 H3: Identity-framed norm competition

The constructivist variables support H3: the administrations securitize different referent objects, and their alliance modes track the imaginaries they articulate. The two framing markers index rival securitizations. Under Biden, Risk_Frame is pervasive and Anti_Woke absent, articulating an imaginary in which unsafe, insecure, and untrustworthy AI threatens rights and democratic governance. Under Trump II, that pattern inverts: Anti_Woke appears and the comprehensive risk frame recedes, articulating an imaginary in which ideologically captured AI threatens American values and the legitimacy of federal AI use. Notably, Anti_Woke is coded 1 in a single document, the EO 14319 procurement order. Rather than weakening H3, the concentration is consistent with an emergent norm in the sense of the norm life cycle: a newly articulated securitization, lodged in one instrument, contesting a risk norm that the Biden administration had already advanced globally through multiple venues.

The leadership and alliance evidence reinforces the interpretation. American_Leadership rises in intensity across the cases: uniform but moderate under Trump I, uneven under Biden (absent from the technical documents, peaking only in the diffusion framework), and most intense under early Trump II, whose “Winning the Race” discourse highlights a zero-sum game. Alliance mode tracks the imaginary as H3 expects: Biden’s risk imaginary is matched by risk-governance fora, Trump II’s dominance imaginary by export-promotion and stack-diffusion partnership (detailed under H4 below). Partner and forum choices, in other words, are legible as expressions of the competing imaginaries rather than as neutral institutional housekeeping.

7.4 H4: Alliance-institutional activation: mode over quantity

The alliance record supports H4 in its mode-sensitive form. By quantity alone, activation rises from Trump I to Biden and remains substantial under early Trump II (Table 7.1). But the more informative variation is in mode. Trump I’s engagement is aspirational and soft, confined to international-cooperation language in the R&D strategic plan. Biden assembles the broadest portfolio in the corpus, combining soft-law coordination, standards-setting, minilateral coordination on controls, bilateral partnership, and the formal country-tiering of the diffusion framework. Early Trump II is active in a narrower but distinct mode centered on exporting the American AI stack to partners.

The most consequential point for H4 is its warning against misreading a change of mode as a withdrawal from cooperation. Trump II’s rescission of the diffusion framework dismantled the allied-tiering mode and, taken alone, could be read as retrenchment; yet the administration immediately rebuilt alliance activation around stack-diffusion partnerships, reaching the maximum Alliance_Launch score in the Action Plan. The evidence therefore distinguishes a reorientation in the mode of recorded cooperation from a retreat. That is the pattern H4 anticipates once the mode typology is considered, and it is why a quantity-only prediction would have mischaracterized the most recent transition.

7.5 The transition as a hinge

A single sequence makes the study’s central claim more concrete. The January 2025 diffusion framework and its May 2025 rescission and replacement are the point at which continuity and change are simultaneously visible: chokepoint controls are sustained and even sharpened (H1), the comprehensive risk regime is dismantled across venues (H2), the governing imaginary shifts from safety-and-rights to dominance-and-values (H3), and cooperation moves from allied tiering to stack diffusion (H4). The dimensions move on different logics and at different speeds, which is why the comparison resists a single-theory explanation and why arraying the administrations dimension by dimension, instead of in sequence, more precisely reveals the structure.

8. Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to explain why U.S. federal AI strategy exhibits striking continuity on some dimensions and abrupt reversal on others. The structured, focused comparison of 23 authoritative documents yields a clear answer: the pattern is the product of four mechanisms, each governing a different dimension of policy on its own logic and timescale. Coercive material instruments converge. Every administration reaches maximum export-tightening intensity through chip- or compute-level actions, sustained or sharpened across both transitions (H1). Regulatory posture inverts: the comprehensive “safe, secure, and trustworthy” risk regime the Biden administration stabilized was dismantled within months through a coordinated attack on the same venues (H2). The discursive contest over AI’s purpose pits rival securitizations against one another (H3), and alliance behavior shifts in form rather than collapsing in volume (H4). No single paradigm can fully explain these dynamics, because the dimensions do not move together.

The paper’s primary contribution is theoretical: a disciplined division of analytic labor in which each tradition owns the dimension it explains best, tied to particular coded indicators instead of competing to explain the whole. Two applications perform the analytic work that the broader literature has not. First, the five-mode cooperation typology converts “alliance activation” from a volume-centered into a qualitative variable, letting the analysis see what a quantity-only measure misses: the second Trump administration’s rescission of the tiered diffusion framework was not a retreat from cooperation but a change of mode, rebuilt around export-promotion and stack-diffusion partnerships (Keohane 1984; Abbott and Snidal 2000). Second, layering imaginaries, the norm life cycle, and securitization turns the framing variables into evidence of a contest over governance authority, showing that the “anti-woke” frame is best read as an emergent norm attempting to contest a safety frame that had gained substantial international institutional traction (Jasanoff and Kim 2015; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Burton 2023). The image-venue mechanism explains why an established subsystem collapses in months rather than eroding over years once image and venue change together (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 2009).

At the system level, the analysis points to grounded expectations rather than broad predictions, given the single-country design. The most durable is structural: if the compute chokepoint is an enduring axis of U.S.-China competition largely insulated from partisan turnover (Horowitz 2018; Farrell and Newman 2019), the coercive base of AI governance should remain stable even as the governance above is contested. That contestation concentrates at the normative layer, where the divergence H3 traces – risk-managed, rights-protective AI versus deregulated supremacy – maps onto the regime-complex structure institutionalists anticipate: convergence on technical standards and chokepoint coordination coexisting with disagreement over what responsible AI is for (Raustiala and Victor 2004; Klein and Patrick 2024). Because U.S. engagement shifts in mode rather than expanding or contracting, allied and middle powers face a moving target in which the form of American cooperation tracks the governing

imaginary. And the safety norm the Biden administration helped advance internationally through the G7, OECD, and allied safety-institute partnerships now faces an emergent domestic rival, so its consolidation depends on whether that rival attracts adopters abroad.

These inferences are bounded by the study's design: 1) the corpus captures stated strategy, not implementation or enforcement. 2) the early Trump II administration window is short, partially mitigated by the inclusion of its Action Plan and principal implementing orders. 3) the R&D variable is weakly instrumented and presented only as suggestive. 4) a single-country case supports theory-testing about U.S. strategy but not broad generalization. The transparent, document-level coding template is itself a portable contribution that cross-national work can extend, for example, to the EU, China, and middle powers. It can also apply to designs coupling stated strategy with implementation measures, and, once a fuller record permits, to whether Trump II's emergent securitization cascades or stalls.

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Appendix A. Document Corpus and Coding Matrix

Table A1. Complete coding of the 23-document corpus across the six variables. Codes follow the definitions in Section 3.

No.	Admin.	Date	Document	ExpT	Risk	AntiW	AIIL	R&D	AmL
1	Trump I	2019-02-11	EO 13859, Maintaining American Leadership in AI	0	0	0	0	0	1
2	Trump I	2019-05-17	EO 13873, Securing the ICT Services Supply Chain	1	0	0	0	0	0
3	Trump I	2019-06-21	National AI R&D Strategic Plan (2019 Update)	0	1	0	1	0	1
4	Trump I	2019-10-09	Addition of Entities to the Entity List (84 FR 54002)	2	0	0	0	0	0
5	Trump I	2020-08-20	Huawei Affiliates / Foreign-Produced Direct Product Rule (85 FR 51596)	2	0	0	0	0	0
6	Trump I	2021-01-01	National AI Initiative Act of 2020 (Div. E of NDAA for FY2021; Pub. L. 116-283)	0	1	0	0	0	1
7	Biden	2022-08-09	CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (Pub. L. 117-167)	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	Biden	2022-10-13	Advanced Computing & Semiconductor Export Controls (87 FR 62186)	2	0	0	0	0	0
9	Biden	2023-01-26	NIST AI Risk Management Framework 1.0	0	1	0	0	0	0
10	Biden	2023-10-25	Advanced Computing Controls: Updates & Corrections (88 FR 73458)	2	0	0	1	0	1
11	Biden	2023-10-30	EO 14110, Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy AI	0	1	0	1	1	1
12	Biden	2024-03-28	OMB M-24-10, Governance, Innovation, & Risk Management	0	1	0	0	0	0
13	Biden	2024-09-24	OMB M-24-18, Responsible Acquisition of AI	0	1	0	0	0	0
14	Biden	2025-01-15	Framework for AI Diffusion (90 FR 4544)	2	1	0	2	0	2
15	Trump II	2025-01-23	EO 14179, Removing Barriers to American Leadership in AI	0	0	0	0	0	2
16	Trump II	2025-04-03	OMB M-25-21, Accelerating Federal Use of AI	0	1	0	0	0	1
17	Trump II	2025-04-03	OMB M-25-22, Driving Efficient Acquisition of Artificial Intelligence in Government	0	1	0	0	0	1
18	Trump II	2025-05-13	Commerce Rescinds AI Diffusion Rule; Strengthens Chip Controls	1	0	0	0	0	1
19	Trump II	2025-05-13	BIS Guidance on General Prohibition 10 (PRC Advanced-Computing ICs)	2	0	0	0	0	1
20	Trump II	2025-07-23	EO 14318, Accelerating Federal Permitting of Data Center Infrastructure	0	0	0	0	0	2
21	Trump II	2025-07-23	EO 14319, Preventing Woke AI in the Federal Government	0	0	1	0	0	0
22	Trump II	2025-07-23	EO 14320, Promoting the Export of the American AI Technology Stack	0	0	0	1	0	2
23	Trump II	2025-07-23	Winning the Race: America's AI Action Plan	0	1	0	2	0	2

Variable key: ExpT = Export_Tightening (0–2); Risk = Risk_Frame (0/1); AntiW = Anti_Woke (0/1); AllL = Alliance_Launch (0–2); R&D = R&D_Budget_Change (-1/0/1); AmL = American_Leadership (0–2). Administrations: Trump I (Jan 2017–Jan 2021), Biden (Jan 2021–Jan 2025), early Trump II (Jan–Jul 2025). Nonzero codes are shown in bold. Full titles, citations, and URLs are listed in the References.

A.1 Coding Protocol and Measurement Notes

Coding workflow. Each document was coded through a fixed five-step workflow:

Strategic skim of the preamble and of sections flagged by the table of contents (e.g., “Implementation,” “International Cooperation,” “Budget,” “Standards,” “Safety”).

Targeted search of two to four high-signal terms per variable (e.g., “export control,” “FDPR,” “Entity List” for Export_Tightening; “safe, secure, trustworthy,” “red-team,” “impact assessment” for Risk_Frame), checking for high-signal terms and their context.

Evidence selection of the one or two strongest operative paragraphs per variable, excluding boilerplate.

Numeric coding against the codebook, entered in the project metadata sheet.

Final consistency check against the codebook and the document-level matrix.

Alliance_Launch and cooperation mode (H4). Because Section 2.2 treats the form of cooperation, not merely its volume, as theoretically consequential, the case analysis identifies the mode of each new arrangement using the five-mode typology: 1) formal multilateralism (e.g., the OECD or UN), 2) soft-law coordination (e.g., the G7 Hiroshima AI Process), 3) standards-setting (e.g., NIST or ISO/IEC work), 4) minilateral coordination (e.g., a U.S.-Japan-Netherlands chip coalition or a Quad technology track), and 5) bilateral or inter-institute partnerships (e.g., a U.S.-U.K. AI Safety Institute partnership). The 0-2 Alliance_Launch score captures the intensity of new forum creation, while the within-case sections (4-6) and the cross-case comparison (Section 7.4) identify the mode qualitatively, letting H4 test for shifts in the mode of cooperation, not only its quantity, and feeding H3, under which an administration’s choice of partners and fora is expected to track the sociotechnical imaginary it articulates.

Constructivist variables as competing securitizations (H3). Risk_Frame and Anti_Woke are treated as indicators of competing securitizations (Section 2.3). Risk_Frame marks the Biden imaginary, in which unsafe, untested, and untrustworthy AI is construed as an existential threat to democratic governance and civil rights, justifying pre-deployment testing and impact assessment. Anti_Woke marks the competing Trump II securitization, in which ideologically captured AI is construed as a threat to American values and to the legitimacy of federal AI use, justifying its prohibition in federal procurement (Burton 2023). Each variable is therefore keyed to two hypotheses: as a marker of regulatory posture, it serves H2 (Q3b), and as the surface trace of a securitization attached to a rival imaginary, it serves H3 (Q2).

R&D_Budget_Change. This is a weakly instrumented variable in the corpus. The corpus consists of strategic and regulatory instruments, so only documents that state explicit funding commitments can score nonzero; in practice, just one does. The variable should be read as an indicator of stated budgetary intent within strategic documents, not as a measure of actual federal R&D outlays.

Risk Frame. Risk_Frame marks the safety-and-testing construction of AI risk: language invoking safe, secure, and trustworthy systems, or testing, evaluation, red-teaming, and impact assessment. Export rules that restrict adversary access without invoking that construction are coded 0 even where they serve national-security ends (e.g., the October 2022 and October 2023 advanced-computing rules); an export instrument that additionally imposes safeguarding requirements on the AI artifact itself, as the January 2025 diffusion framework does through its model-weight-security provisions, clears the threshold and is coded 1.

Conservative defaults. Where a passage could support more than one code, the lower value was assigned. Absence of evidence after a reasonable search was coded 0 (or 0/-1) rather than left missing, on the principle that a strategic document silent on something is signaling its low priority. Table A1 reports the complete document-level coding, and Sections 4-6 illustrate the textual basis for the central case findings.

Examining Rhetorical and Linguistic Patterns at the 2024 National Party Conventions: A Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Presidential nominating conventions are often dismissed as politically irrelevant vestiges of a bygone era when the nomination process involved deliberative decision-making and compromise. Our study challenges this assumption by arguing that modern conventions serve as critical venues for intraparty political performances that help parties achieve broad institutional goals as they prepare for the general election. Using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) analysis, we examine the linguistic and rhetorical strategies utilized by convention speakers at the 2024 Democratic and Republican National Conventions. This study is one of the first to analyze all convention speeches, including those from activists, business leaders, celebrities, and voter testimonials, as well as the more commonly studied elected officials and political figures. Our results reveal that speaker type is significantly associated with different types of rhetorical, linguistic, and emotional patterns, not party affiliation, illustrating that while the parties differ sharply in ideology and policy positions, their shared institutional objectives lead them to adopt strikingly similar rhetorical structures at conventions. These findings demonstrate that contemporary conventions are perhaps best understood as coordinated communicative ecosystems that support parties' immediate post-primary objectives to unify, mobilize, and adopt a coherent branding and messaging strategy as they head to the general election.

Keywords: *DNC, Emotion, LIWC, National Party Convention, Political Communication, RNC*

Introduction

The presidential nominating process at national party conventions is often dismissed as mere pageantry, with delegates' roles rendered largely ceremonial by late twentieth-century reforms that allow most candidates to clinch the nomination months before the convention even begins.

Critics contend that modern conventions are primarily a symbolic affair rather than a venue for fostering meaningful bargaining or deliberation. Our research challenges this assumption by arguing that modern party conventions continue to perform a crucial, though underappreciated, function as laboratories for political communication. Drawing on a comprehensive linguistic analysis of all speeches delivered at the 2024 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, including not only elected officials but also activists, organizational leaders, celebrities, social media influencers, and voter testimonials, we demonstrate that conventions operate as a coordinated ecosystem for performative political communication. Our explorative analysis shows that speaker type is often more predictive of specific rhetorical and emotional speech patterns than is party affiliation. In other words, while the parties differ sharply in ideology and policy positions, their shared institutional objectives lead them to adopt strikingly similar rhetorical structures at conventions. Thus, our findings suggest that contemporary conventions are perhaps best understood as coordinated communicative ecosystems that support parties' immediate post-primary objectives to unify, mobilize, and adopt a coherent branding and messaging strategy as they head to the general election.

In the sections that follow, we begin by situating our argument among extant scholarship on party nominating conventions and strategic political communication. We then outline our data and methods, describing the convention speech corpus and the application of Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to analyze rhetorical and emotional patterns across speaker characteristics. In the findings section we present our central results, demonstrating that speaker type, rather than party affiliation, is the most consistent predictor of linguistic style, emotional tone, and rhetorical emphasis, with elected officials, activists, celebrities, political figures, and voter testimonials each performing distinct communicative roles in both parties. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for understanding modern party conventions as intraparty performance arenas, as well as the broader theories of party organization, political communication, and candidate-centered elections in American politics.

Literature

We begin by reviewing foundational scholarship on presidential nominating conventions, with particular attention to debates over whether conventions continue to matter in an era of front-loaded primaries. We then turn to research on convention rhetoric and political speech, noting that existing studies generally focus on presidential acceptance speeches or other keynote addresses and offer limited insight into the broader range of speakers who now dominate the convention stage. Finally, we situate our study within the growing literature that employs computational text analysis, specifically Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) analysis, to examine political communication, demonstrating the relevance of this approach for systematically examining rhetorical and emotional patterns across large corpora of political speeches and text.

Electoral Effects and Voter-Centered Approaches

Contemporary research on presidential nominating conventions tends to cluster into three general camps or themes. One dominant camp in the literature evaluates presidential nominating conventions primarily in terms of their electoral consequences, particularly how conventions affect voter attitudes, candidate assessments, and campaign momentum. A significant body of work in this field describes conventions as meaningful campaign events capable of influencing vote choice, political knowledge, and short-term shifts in public support (Cambell 1992; Hagen and Johnston 2007; Weinschenk 2017). Scholars often focus on the so-called “convention bump,” documenting temporary increases in candidate support following nationally televised conventions (Cambell 1992; Shaw 1999).

As the nomination process became increasingly front-loaded and partisan polarization more prominent, later work reassessed the magnitude and durability of these effects. Some scholars suggest that convention bumps have become more ephemeral and asymmetrical across parties, or that such effects are contingent on broader campaign contexts, media coverage, or individual-level characteristics (Atkinson et al. 2014; Cera and Weinschenk 2012; Panagopoulos 2007). This has led many scholars to conclude that conventions exert diminishing persuasive influence in modern campaigns, especially among increasingly sorted and partisan electorates.

Importantly, this literature conceptualizes conventions almost exclusively as tools of outward communication, aimed at persuading undecided voters, galvanizing partisans, or shaping media narratives. In this camp, the analytical focus is on voters. As a result, conventions are either deemed integral to the political process or irrelevant depending on whether they generate observable electoral movement.

Institutional and Delegate-Centered Approaches

A second major camp approaches presidential nominating conventions as an institutional or bureaucratic arena, focusing primarily on organization, elite political behavior, and intraparty dynamics. Polsby’s (1960) classic study reminds us that, prior to the institutional reforms of the late 20th century, conventions were rife with deliberative decision-making, uncertainty, and conflict when delegates played a more decisive role in the nomination process. In response to later reforms that would fundamentally transform the nomination process, Polsby (1983) argued that the efforts to make the nomination process more representative were likely to produce the opposite effect by incentivizing more ideologically extreme candidates to mobilize narrow factional support. Moreover, as political polarization and out-party animus have intensified, alongside an ever-growing public distrust of party elites, scholars have documented the increased difficulty party regulars face today in securing their party’s nomination (Cohen et al. 2016).

Taken together, this camp asserts that while conventions have lost much of their formal decision-making authority, they have not lost their relevance within the party system itself. Our study builds on this institutional insight by shifting attention toward how conventions now function as stages for intraparty political performance, particularly through the differentiated rhetorical roles of convention speakers.

Intraparty Communications, Performances, and Branding

A smaller, but increasingly important body of work, conceptualizes national party conventions as laboratories for political communication, identity cultivation, and opportunities for political marketing and branding. A majority of studies in this camp tend to focus on a small subset of high-profile addresses, most notably presidential nomination acceptance speeches or keynote addresses from prominent activists (Barefield 1966; Jarvis 2001; Potter 2012). These studies demonstrate that convention speeches are not mere ceremonial celebrations or symbolic affirmations of the nominee, but in many cases serve as unique opportunities to articulate values and vision, bridge intraparty factions, activate interparty hostility, and frame current events or issues in ways that are politically advantageous.

A more recent and comprehensive study analyzed prime-time convention speeches from 1972 through 2016, in which the author argues conventions operate as narrative systems where distinct genres of speeches serve specialized functions in constructing party and candidate brands (Bolton 2018). Keynote speakers, spouses, vice-presidential nominees, and presidential nominees each perform recognizable roles, ranging from promoting party unity and legacy to articulating leadership narratives and policy commitments. Importantly, Bolton shows that what appears to be a diverse collection of speakers is, in practice, a coordinated communicative structure designed to manage intraparty cohesion and present a unified identity to both internal and external audiences.

In a similar study, Reichard (2021) examines convention speeches through the lens of social identity theory, focusing specifically on how the Democratic and Republican parties mobilized liberal and conservative identities during the 2020 conventions. Using qualitative content analysis, Reichard identifies recurring thematic appeals, such as strength, order, progress, and humanity, and demonstrates how parties rely on distinct emotional and narrative frames to activate partisan identities. Reichard's findings suggest that conventions function as highly scripted performances in which parties narrate who they are, who their supporters are, and how their moral commitments distinguish them from their opponents.

These more recent studies in particular underscore an emerging consensus that conventions are best understood as symbolic and communicative institutions. Yet research in this area remains limited in scope. Extant work tends to focus on subsets of speeches, rely heavily on qualitative interpretation, or center primarily on interparty differences. Notably, few if any scholarship has systematically examined how *all convention speakers*, including elected officials, activists, celebrities, and voter testimonials, contribute to the convention's overall communicative structure. Our study builds directly upon this body of knowledge by providing systematic empirical evidence that conventions operate as coordinated communicative ecosystems, in which speaker type, rather than party affiliation, structures rhetorical and emotional expression across conventions. By analyzing convention speeches through LIWC, we extend existing work beyond elite communications and demonstrate how distinct speaker roles build party authority, unity, and brand. This approach offers a more complete account of why conventions continue to matter in contemporary American politics.

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) as a Tool for Political Speech Analysis

Our study employs Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to examine rhetorical and linguistic patterns in convention speeches. LIWC is a widely used, dictionary-based text analysis program that quantifies psychological, emotional, and structural components of language by calculating the proportion of words in a text that fall into theoretically motivated categories (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010). These categories capture a range of linguistic features relevant to political communication, including analytical complexity, authenticity, psychological function, and affective appeal. Because LIWC operationally relies on word use rather than semantic interpretation, it is particularly well suited for analyzing large corpora of political texts in a systematic and replicable manner.

LIWC has been implemented extensively in text-analysis across the social sciences and has a burgeoning use in political contexts. For instance, Windsor et al. (2014) employ LIWC to examine how autocratic leaders use language strategically following natural disasters, demonstrating that leaders systematically shift blame, claim credit, and invoke religious or moral language to maintain authority during crises. Their findings illustrate how linguistic patterns reveal elite strategies that are otherwise opaque, reinforcing the value of LIWC for analyzing political behavior through speech rather than formal institutional actions.

More recent work applies LIWC to democratic contexts, showing its capacity to distinguish ideological, emotional, and power-related differences across political actors. Jost and Sterling (2020) analyze congressional speeches and social media posts, finding consistent ideological differences in language use that align with theories of motivated social cognition, with conservatives more likely to use language related to power, threat, and tradition, and liberals more likely to emphasize affiliation, benevolence, and positive emotion. Similarly, Körner et al. (2022) use LIWC to compare the linguistic styles of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, demonstrating how differences in analytic thinking, emotional tone, and dominance-related language reflect distinct forms of political power rather than mere stylistic variation. Their findings underscore LIWC's sensitivity to leadership style and communicative intent, even within highly polarized partisan environments.

Finally, LIWC has also been extended to the study of affective polarization and political hostility. Garzón-Velandia and Pennebaker (2025) develop and validate a LIWC-based dictionary to measure negative affective polarization in political texts, showing that linguistic indicators of negative emotion, delegitimization, and political context reliably distinguish polarized political content from nonpolitical discourse across English and Spanish corpora. This work demonstrates that LIWC-based measures exhibit strong psychometric properties, particularly in large corpora, and can capture emotional and psychological dynamics central to contemporary political conflict. Taken together, these studies establish LIWC as a reliable and theoretically grounded method for analyzing political speech, capable of identifying systematic patterns in emotion, cognition, and strategic communication across diverse political actors and contexts.

Theoretical Expectations

We conceptualize contemporary presidential nominating conventions as sites of intraparty political performance for two primary reasons. First, building on work that treats parties as coalitional organizations and conventions as vehicles for cohesive branding, we argue the multi-day procession of speeches primarily operates as a means to achieve explicit intraparty goals.

These speeches, or performances, contribute toward a myriad of party objectives such as reinforcing party unity, legitimating policy positions or priorities, and perhaps most importantly, contributing toward a coherent party brand or image, even when the nomination outcome is no longer in question.

Secondly, the diversity of speakers featured at modern conventions is not incidental, nor should it be understood as a series of individualized narratives joining together in praise of the nominee. Elected officials, party elites, advocates, celebrities, and voter testimonials each occupy recognizable positions within the party's organizational framework, and thus their speeches are expected

to serve different functions, such as signaling authority, policy expertise, emotional connection, or authenticity. Moreover, the diversity in convention programming reflects complementary incentives for both speakers and party elites. Individual speakers are motivated to use the convention stage to signal loyalty, cultivate intraparty relationships, and enhance their standing within party networks, while party organizers strategically recruit speakers to generate enthusiasm, donor interest, and momentum for the nominee all while projecting intraparty unification.

Because existing research offers limited guidance on how these speaker roles should differ across specific linguistic and psychological dimensions, we adopt a theory-guided explorative approach. Rather than advancing directional hypotheses for each linguistic indicator, we examine whether systematic patterns in rhetoric, function, and emotional expression emerge and the extent to which these patterns align with speaker-level characteristics.

Methodology

The data for this study consist of a corpus of all non-procedural speeches delivered at the 2024 Democratic National Convention and Republican National Convention. The corpus includes prepared remarks delivered during official convention programming and excludes procedural speech such as roll call voting, announcements, formal motions, or administrative statements. This approach allows us to focus on the substantive communicative content of the conventions while ensuring comparability across parties and speaker categories. Transcripts were collected from official convention releases and verified media sources like CSPAN.

The primary independent variable of interest is speaker type, which captures the role each speaker occupies within the convention's programming. Speakers were classified into five distinct categories. *Elected officials* include individuals currently holding elected public office at the federal, state, or local level. *Political figures* refer to non-elected party elites like cabinet members, ambassadors, candidates for office (including both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump), and individuals who were previously elected/appointed, such as former presidents, bureaucrats, or party leaders. *Advocates* include activists, representatives of issue-based organizations, labor unions, or advocacy groups. *Public figures* consist of celebrities, social media influencers, or other prominent individuals (nominees' friends, spouse, etc.) invited to speak on behalf of the party. Finally, *voter testimonials* include private citizens who speak about personal experiences intended to humanize or validate party messages and policy positions.¹ This classification scheme reflects our theoretical expectations about differentiated communicative roles within modern party conventions and also allows us to uniquely classify all convention speakers.²

The first stage of our analysis examines broad rhetorical orientation using the LIWC summary dimensions: analytic thinking, clout, authenticity, and emotional tone. The second and third stages of analysis examining more specific linguistic and psychological processes. In the second stage, we analyze linguistic and psychological function of convention speeches across four processes: linguistic, drive, cognitive, and social. The third and final stage of the analysis focuses on emotional expression and appeal by examining affective processes, which we further disaggregate into positive tone and negative tone categories. Together, these stages allow us to assess whether rhetorical, cognitive, and emotional patterns vary systematically by speaker type, providing insight into the communicative structure of contemporary party conventions.

Analytical Approach

LIWC indicators are treated as continuous measures because each category is calculated as the proportion of words in a given speech that fall within a predefined dictionary. Rather than producing binary or categorical outcomes, LIWC generates scaled values that reflect the relative prevalence of specific linguistic, cognitive, and emotional features within each text. This proportional structure allows for meaningful comparisons across speeches of varying lengths and supports statistical modeling approaches that assume continuous dependent variables. Accordingly, we employ multivariate regression analysis to estimate the relationship between speaker type and linguistic outcomes while accounting for relevant covariates. This approach allows us to isolate the independent association between speaker role and speech characteristics while simultaneously controlling for other factors that may influence rhetorical style.

All models include four key control variables. First, we control for speaker sex, as prior research suggests systematic gender differences in political communication styles and emotional expression (Lotte and Langengen 2021). Second, we include a binary indicator for whether the speaker is Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC), given evidence that race and racialized experiences can shape rhetorical framing and narrative emphasis in political speech (McIlwain and Caliendo 2011). Third, we control for party affiliation to account for baseline differences between Democratic and Republican communication

¹Originally, speakers were coded into a larger number of discrete occupational categories, including classifications such as business executives, nonprofit leaders, social media influencers, and friends or family members of the nominee. However, several of these categories contained too few observations ($n < 10$), particularly when disaggregated by party, to support reliable statistical comparisons. Attempts to estimate models using these more granular classifications resulted in sparse cells, unstable parameter estimates, and, in some cases, model convergence issues. Although consolidating speakers into broader categories masks some within-category variation, conceptually similar occupations were combined to ensure adequate cell sizes and improve the stability and reliability of the analyses.

²Because speaker roles at national conventions are strategically selected by party organizations rather than randomly assigned, the observed relationships between speaker status and linguistic patterns should be interpreted as descriptive associations rather than causal effects. Differences across speaker categories may reflect both the communicative demands of particular convention roles and underlying characteristics of the individuals chosen to occupy those roles.

styles. Finally, we include an interaction term between speaker type and party affiliation.³ Substantively, the interaction tests whether the estimated association between speaker type and LIWC measures varies systematically between the Democratic and Republican conventions. Importantly, interaction effects should be interpreted as tests of differential association rather than as formal equivalence tests; that is, they indicate whether the relationship between variables differs detectably across groups, not whether groups are identical in their underlying patterns.

Findings

The findings are presented in three stages, corresponding to the analytical strategy outlined above. To begin, Table 1 provides descriptive information on the primary independent variable of interest, speaker status, illustrating the distribution of unique speakers by party convention (N = 251). Elected officials constitute the largest share of speakers at both conventions (n = 116), followed by political figures (n = 46), advocates (n = 40), public figures (n = 31), and voter testimonials (n = 18).

Table 1: Speaker Status by Party

Speaker Type	DNC	RNC
Advocates	19	21
Elected Officials	71	45
Public Figures	19	12
Political Figures	12	34
Voter Testimonials	4	14
Total	125	126

The subsequent analyses move beyond these descriptive patterns to examine systematic variation in linguistic and rhetorical features across speaker types. The first stage assesses differences across the LIWC summary dimensions, the second stage examines linguistic and psychological processes, and the final stage analyzes emotional expression through overall affective tone and its positive and negative components.

Table 2 presents multivariate regression models estimating the relationship between speaker type and the four LIWC summary dimensions: analytic thinking, clout, authenticity, and emotional tone. *Analytic thinking* captures the extent to which language reflects formal, logical, and hierarchical reasoning. *Clout* measures markers of confidence, authority, and leadership presence. *Authenticity* reflects the degree to which speech appears personal, sincere, and self-referential. Lastly, *tone* assesses the overall positive or negative valence of the text. The results reveal consistent and theoretically meaningful patterns of role differentiation across convention speakers, supporting our argument that conventions operate as structured systems of intraparty political performance rather than as undifferentiated collections of speeches. Importantly, the interaction effects between speaker status and party are not statistically significant across any of the four summary dimensions, indicating that we do not detect evidence of systematic differences in the relationship between speaker characteristics and linguistic style across partisan contexts.

To facilitate interpretation and discussion of the regression results, we report model-based marginal predictions for each category of speaker status, using elected officials as the reference category. These predictions are generated by holding covariates at their mean values and represent adjusted differences in expected LIWC outcomes across speaker types. This approach allows for more intuitive comparisons across speaker types by expressing differences in rhetorical and linguistic patterns relative to a common referent group that represents institutional authority and party leadership. Elected officials are used as the reference category for both substantive and practical reasons. Substantively, elected officials constitute the most institutionally central and frequently analyzed speaker group in existing research on political conventions and elite rhetoric, making them a theoretically meaningful benchmark for comparison. Practically, this category also contains the largest number of observations in the dataset, providing a stable and consistent baseline for estimation.⁴

Relative to elected officials, advocates and activists (including interest group presidents, advocacy organization leaders, and organizational executives) exhibit significantly higher predicted values on the analytic dimension (Figure 1 Panel A1). Their language is more formal, structured, and policy-oriented, emphasizing logical argumentation, causal reasoning, and evidence-based appeals. This rhetorical style reflects their institutional role as issue experts and advocates, for whom credibility is derived from demonstrating subject-matter expertise and policy competence.

³Speeches delivered within each convention are not strictly independent in a conceptual sense, as they are produced within a shared organizational and strategic context that may generate shared messaging features. However, multilevel modeling or convention-level clustered standard errors are not feasible in this design because the data include only two higher-level units (the 2024 Democratic and Republican National Conventions), which is insufficient for both reliable estimation of random effects and clustering. Convention-level heterogeneity is instead accounted for directly through the inclusion of a *Party*Speaker Type* interaction term, which allows linguistic patterns to vary by speaker type across conventions. All models additionally employ heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

⁴To address concerns regarding dependence on model-based assumptions, we additionally present unadjusted descriptive comparisons of LIWC summary dimensions across speaker categories in the Appendix. These raw means do not adjust for covariates but provide a transparent point of comparison for the model-based estimates. As shown in Appendix Table A1, the unadjusted descriptive statistics of LIWC summary dimensions closely align with the regression-adjusted marginal predictions.

Table 2: LIWC Summary Dimensions and Speaker Characteristics

Speaker [†]	Analytic		Clout		Authentic		Tone	
	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)		Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)		Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)		Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)	
Advocates	2.68 (3.50)	4.65 (3.79)	-5.82** (2.91)	-4.40 (3.44)	7.23* (4.12)	7.86 (4.35)	4.64 (4.92)	4.37 (5.21)
Public Figures	-12.64*** (3.29)	-13.88*** (3.47)	-1.51 (2.26)	-2.41 (2.43)	9.52** (4.42)	9.12 (4.48)	12.16** (4.98)	12.33** (5.07)
Political Figures	-1.88 (3.29)	-6.26 (4.45)	-4.03 (2.78)	-7.21 (4.55)	1.39 (3.29)	-0.04 (4.54)	4.85 (4.45)	5.45 (5.69)
Voter Testimonials	-10.78** (5.08)	-17.53** (7.55)	-21.82*** (6.80)	-26.71*** (8.48)	24.29*** (6.02)	22.07*** (7.43)	-20.60*** (6.97)	-19.69** (8.82)
Sex	-1.93 (2.39)	-2.18 (2.38)	0.01 (1.85)	-0.19 (1.85)	-7.70*** (2.75)	-7.77*** (2.77)	3.77 (3.38)	3.81 (3.38)
BIPOC	-1.34 (2.39)	-1.48 (2.40)	0.44 (1.84)	0.34 (1.82)	5.73** (2.73)	5.68** (2.75)	1.23 (3.49)	1.25 (3.49)
Party	5.30** (2.42)	-2.71 (6.04)	0.36 (2.00)	-5.44 (5.65)	-0.94 (2.74)	-3.58 (6.86)	6.37* (3.47)	7.46 (8.18)
Status*Party	--.--	3.26 (2.32)	--.--	2.37 (2.43)	--.--	1.08 (2.46)	--.--	-0.44 (2.29)

[†]Speaker baseline ($\chi = 2$ "Elected Officials").

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Elected officials, by contrast, appear to exhibit among the highest predicted levels of clout, although this difference is only statistically significant when compared to voter testimonials as the confidence intervals for all other speaker categories cross zero (Figure 1 Panel A2). Nonetheless, this finding is theoretically intuitive. These speeches are characterized by confident, authoritative language that signal leadership, control, and institutional legitimacy. Again, this pattern aligns with expectations that elected officials serve as the party's most visible representatives of governing capacity, tasked with projecting unity, stability, and command.

Voter testimonials exhibit the highest predicted value on the authenticity dimension; these scores are statistically significantly higher than the predicted values for both political figures and elected officials (Figure 1 Panel B1). This is also a theoretically intuitive finding, especially considering how voter testimonials rely heavily on personal storytelling, vulnerability, and first-person narratives. This allows the speaker to frame sincerity and lived experience as key sources of political credibility. Authenticity thus functions as a form of political currency, allowing these speakers to humanize party messages and translate abstract policy commitments into emotionally resonant narratives.

Voter testimonials were also dramatically more negative in emotional tone than all other speaker categories (Figure 1 Panel B2). These testimonials typically included a combination of retelling some trauma, hardship, or grievance followed by an attribution of blame against the opposing party. These emotionally gripping personal accounts firstly validate the party's position, as well as justify its out-party animus, by linking explicit political crises to the failures of the opposing party. At both conventions, testimonials overwhelmingly centered on loss of life narratives: at the RNC this included stories of how Democrats allowed waves of murderous illegal immigrants into the country, while at the DNC, many testimonials highlighted how Republicans' restrictive abortion bans were causing maternal mortality rates to spike.

Figure 1: Conditional Marginal Effects on Summary Dimension Speech by Speaker Status

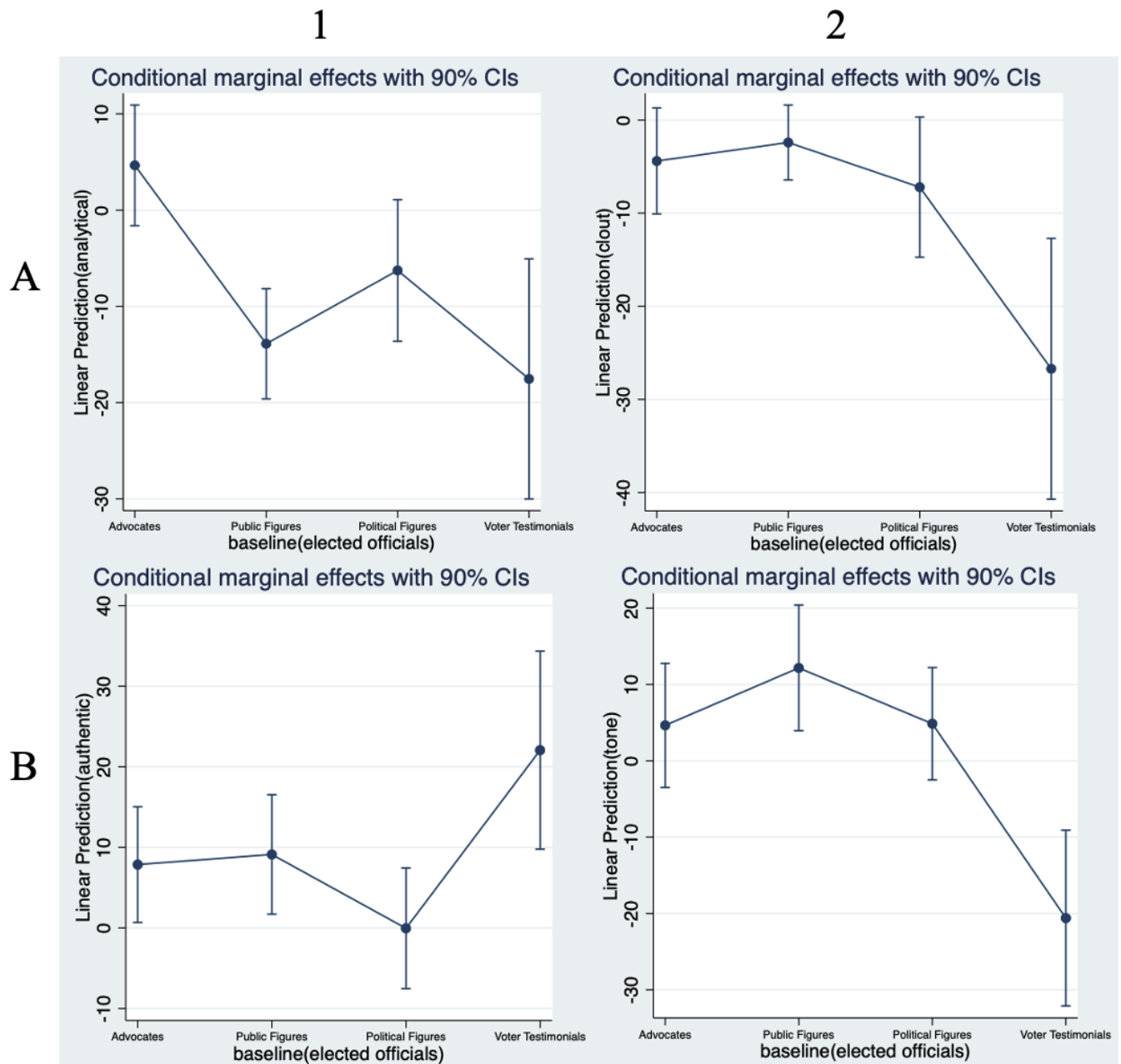


Table 3: LIWC Functional Categories and Psychological Function Indicators

Speaker [†]	Linguistic		Drive		Cognition		Social	
	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)		Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)		Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)		Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)	
Advocates	-0.91 (0.97)	-1.68* (0.99)	-0.38 (0.56)	-0.22 (0.63)	0.91 (0.69)	0.64 (0.77)	-0.89 (0.60)	-1.21* (0.66)
Public Figures	4.93*** (0.76)	5.42*** (0.81)	-1.60*** (0.55)	-1.70*** (0.58)	2.91*** (0.61)	3.08*** (0.64)	1.49*** (0.56)	1.70*** (0.57)
Political Figures	1.32 (0.84)	3.05*** (1.09)	-0.27 (0.55)	-0.63 (0.79)	0.84 (0.57)	1.44* (0.80)	-0.42 (0.55)	0.29 (0.77)
Voter Testimonials	2.03* (1.15)	4.69*** (1.77)	-0.58 (0.64)	-1.14 (1.14)	2.03** (0.92)	2.96** (1.34)	0.89 (0.89)	0.21 (1.13)
Sex	0.05 (0.60)	0.15 (0.60)	-0.03 (0.39)	-0.05 (0.39)	-0.26 (0.44)	-0.22 (0.43)	0.71 (0.40)	0.75* (0.40)
BIPOC	-0.03 (0.60)	0.02 (0.60)	0.17 (0.38)	0.16 (0.38)	0.47 (0.44)	0.49 (0.44)	0.26 (0.39)	0.29 (0.39)
Party	-1.60** (0.62)	1.56 (1.59)	-0.53 (0.40)	-1.19 (0.97)	-1.29*** (0.45)	-0.18 (1.18)	-0.28 (0.41)	1.03 (1.01)
Status*Party	--- (0.58)	-1.29** (0.58)	--- (0.38)	0.27 (0.38)	--- (0.43)	-0.45 (0.43)	--- (0.38)	-0.53 (0.38)

[†]Speaker baseline ($\chi = 2$ "Elected Officials").

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Table 3 examines variation across speaker types among LIWC's four functional and psychological process categories: linguistic, drive, cognitive, and social. *Linguistic processes* capture structural features of language use, including function words and stylistic markers (how formal or personal is the speech). *Drive processes* reflect motivational themes such as achievement, affiliation, and power (how ambitious or motivated is the speech). *Cognitive processes* assess how speakers reason about issues, including causal language and expressions of certainty or complexity (how analytical or reflective is the speech). Lastly, *social processes* capture references to relationships, group identity, and collective orientation (how communal or individualistic is the speech). Consistent with earlier findings, the interaction between speaker status and party is not statistically significant in three of the four functional and psychological process categories, indicating that we do not observe evidence of systematic variation in the relationship between speaker role and linguistic style across partisan contexts for these dimensions. The lone exception occurs within the linguistic process category, where political figures at the DNC exhibit significantly higher use of formal language relative to their Republican counterparts. This isolated significant interaction suggests a limited dimension-specific difference, but it does not substantively alter the overall pattern of relatively similar associations between speaker roles and linguistic processes across conventions.

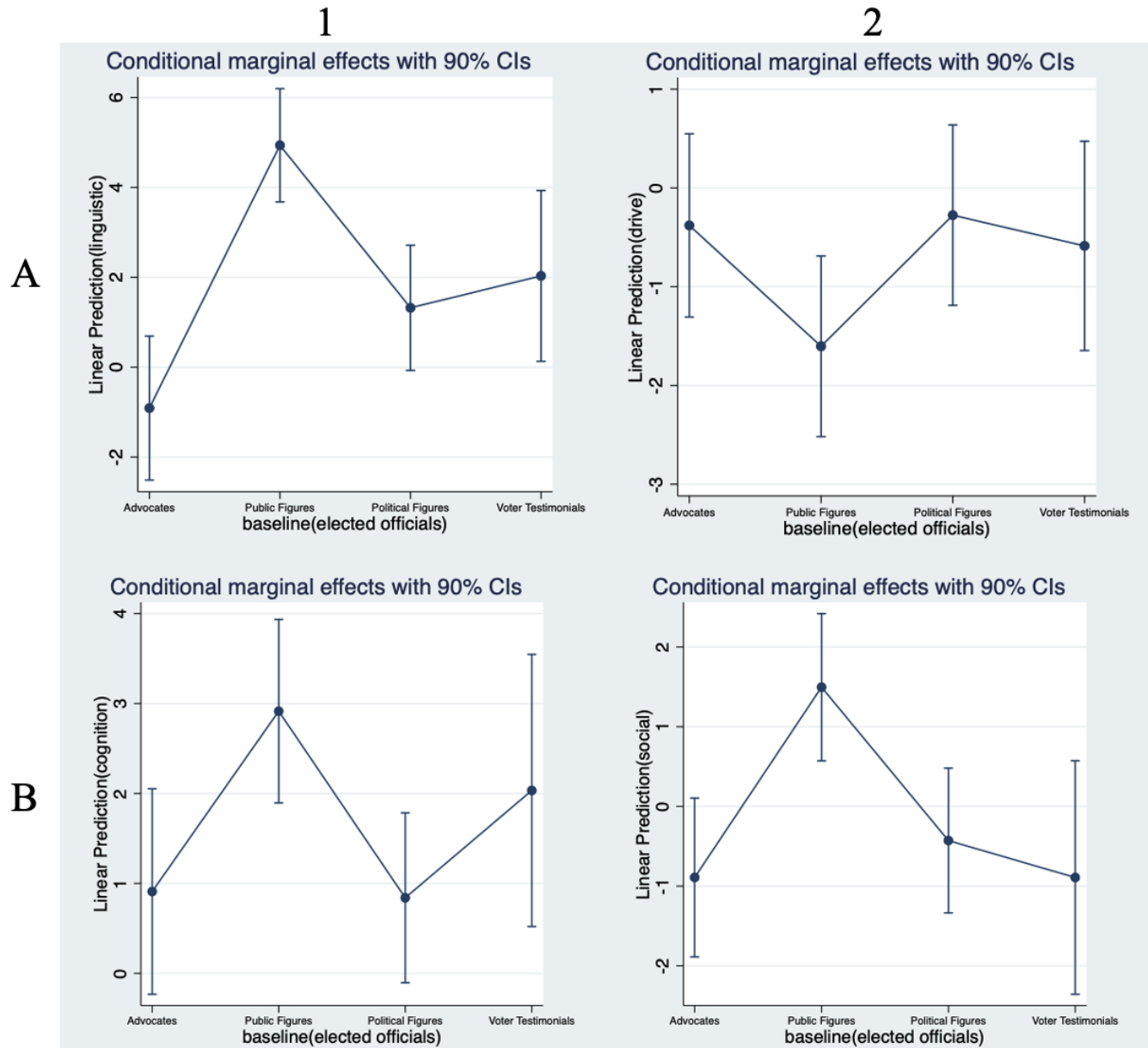
Again, to assist with our interpretation, Figure 2 reports the marginal predicted probability of each functional and psychological process for each category of speaker status, using elected officials as the referent group and holding all other independent variables at the mean.⁵ Relative to elected officials, Figure 2 illustrates public figures exhibit significantly higher predicted values on the linguistic (Panel A1), cognitive (Panel B1), and social process (Panel B2) dimensions, while displaying significantly lower predicted values on drive processes (Panel A2). This profile suggests a communication style that prioritizes clarity, accessibility, and relational engagement over action-oriented or authoritative political rhetoric. Public officials' elevated use of cognitive process words indicates a greater tendency to frame political issues in conceptual, interpretive, or reflective terms rather than through explicit policy detail or directive language. At the same time, their stronger social orientation, which is statistically significantly higher than all other speaker categories, reflects a strong emphasis on connection, shared identity, and communal narrative. Together, these results suggest public figures, celebrities, and social media influencers serve as critical narrative intermediaries at both conventions; these speakers translate elite messaging into accessible and resonant language while fostering social cohesiveness and belonging.

Voter testimonials similarly exhibit higher predicted values on the linguistic and cognitive process dimensions relative to elected officials, reflecting their reliance on detailed, story-driven narratives centered on personal experience. Through first-person accounts of hardship, struggle, or success, these speakers are able to make abstract policy concerns more tangible and experiential. Unlike public figures, however, voter testimonials do not consistently exceed elected officials on social process measures, suggesting that their primary function is not broad relational identification but the anchoring of policy narratives in individual experience.

In contrast, advocates and political figures do not differ significantly from elected officials across most functional and psychological process categories. This lack of deviation from the baseline indicates that these groups operate within a shared elite rhetorical register characterized by professionalized and institutionally guided discourse. Their speech tends to be precise, hierarchical, and goal-oriented, consistent with the norms of formal political communication and organizational leadership.

⁵See Appendix Table A2 for unadjusted descriptive statistics of psychological function variables by speaker type.

Figure 2: Conditional Marginal Effects on Psychological Function Indicators by Speaker Status



Rather than building social connection or engaging in more reflective narrative, these speakers focus on articulating priorities, asserting authority, and reinforcing institutional coherence. Taken together, the results from Figure 2 reinforce the argument that conventions rely on differentiated communicative roles, with public figures and voter testimonials deviating most sharply from other speakers to perform translative and connective functions, while elite speakers cluster around a common professional communicative framework.

Table 4: LIWC Emotional Components

Speaker [†]	Emotion		Positive Emotion		Negative Emotion	
	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)	Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)
Advocates	0.03 (0.15)	0.09 (0.16)	0.02 (0.11)	0.08 (0.13)	-0.02 (0.09)	-0.00 (0.09)
Public Figures	0.63*** (0.17)	0.59*** (0.18)	0.63*** (0.15)	0.60*** (0.16)	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.08)
Political Figures	0.24** (0.11)	0.11 (0.15)	0.22** (0.09)	0.10 (0.12)	-0.00 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.10)
Voter Testimonials	0.53*** (0.19)	0.33 (0.24)	0.09 (0.14)	-0.10 (0.19)	0.40** (0.17)	0.33 (0.22)
Sex	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)
BIPOC	0.29*** (0.11)	0.29*** (0.11)	0.12 (0.08)	0.12 (0.08)	0.12* (0.07)	0.12* (0.07)
Party	0.11 (0.09)	-0.13 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.23 (0.18)	0.11* (0.06)	0.02 (0.17)
Status*Party	--	0.10 (0.08)	--	0.09 (0.06)	--	0.28 (0.07)

[†]Speaker baseline ($x = 2$ "Elected Officials").

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

In our third and final stage of analysis, Table 4 presents our examination of how LIWC affective processes vary by speaker-characteristics. The results reveal notable contrasts in how emotional appeals are deployed across convention speakers. Furthermore, the interaction terms between speaker status and party are not statistically significant across the emotional indicators. This indicates that we do not observe evidence of systematic variation in emotional expression across partisan contexts conditional on speaker role. Rather than providing evidence of the relative importance of speaker status versus party affiliation, these results suggest that any partisan differences in emotional language are not consistently distinguishable within the present data.

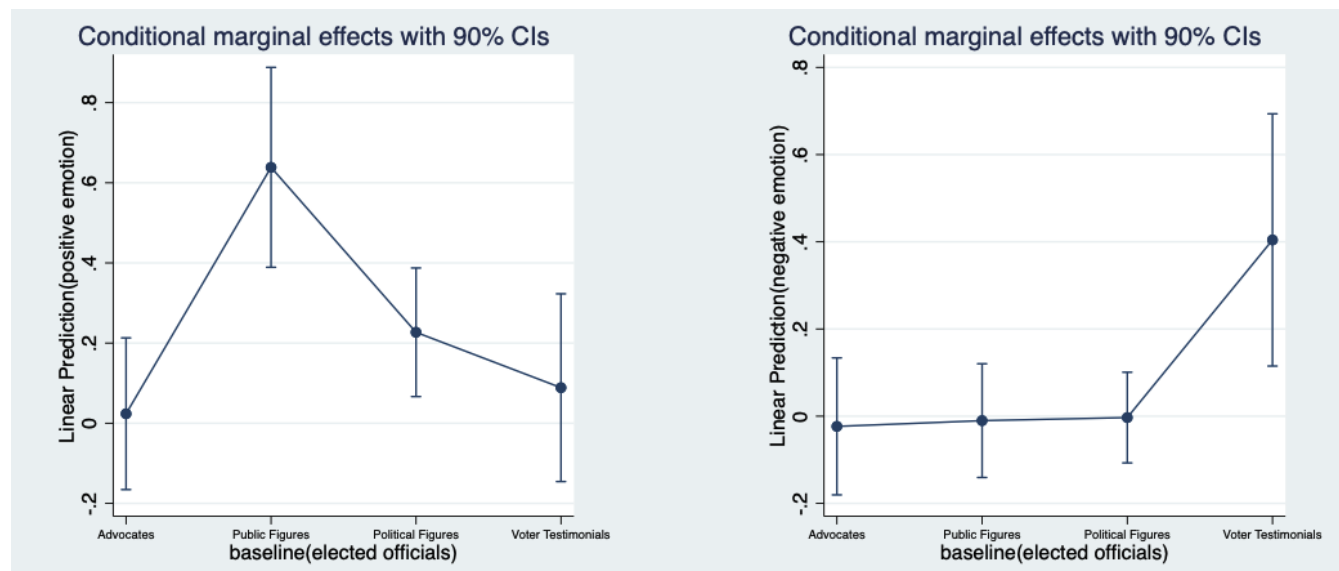
Figure 3 presents the marginal predicted probabilities for positive and negative emotional expression, calculated relative to the referent category of elected officials.⁶ Accordingly, deviations above or below zero indicate whether a given speaker type is more or less likely than elected officials to express positive or negative emotion.

Relative to elected officials, public figures and political figures exhibit significantly higher predicted probabilities of positive emotional expression (left panel). These speeches are characterized by optimism, enthusiasm, and affirmational language designed to inspire, unify, and uplift convention audiences. Compared to the baseline emotional profile of elected officials, these speakers are substantially more likely to deploy positive affect as a rhetorical resource, reinforcing emotional attachment to the party, reenergizing the partisan base, and projecting confidence heading into the general election.

In contrast, voter testimonials exhibit significantly higher predicted probabilities of negative emotional expression (right panel) relative to all other speaker types. These speeches are deeply personal and emotionally charged, frequently recounting experiences of loss, injustice, fear, or trauma that are explicitly attributed to the political failure of the opposing party. At the 2024 conventions, these narratives most often centered on themes of violence, crime, and fear. These results illustrate that convention organizers from both parties strategically recruit and orchestrate voter testimonials to explicitly link out-party governance with personal suffering.

The results in Figure 3 demonstrate that emotional expression at conventions is neither uniform nor incidental, but strategic. Different types of speakers make systematic emotional appeals to serve distinct but complementary intraparty functions: inspiration and affirmation on the one hand, and moral urgency and outrage on the other. In both cases, these emotional appeals are authenticated and justified by the speakers' personal experiences. This dynamic further underscores our central argument that conventions operate as coordinated ecosystems of intraparty political performance, in which various political actors utilize their identity to help parties achieve their post-primary goals: projecting unity, galvanizing supporters, and reinforcing a coherent party brand.

⁶See Appendix Table A3 for unadjusted descriptive statistics of tone directionality by speaker type.

Figure 3: Conditional Marginal Effect on Positive and Negative Emotion by Speaker Status

Conclusion

This study challenges the prevailing view that presidential nominating conventions have lost much of their political relevance in the modern era. Our findings demonstrate that the nomination process at national party conventions serves as a critical venue for intraparty political performance. By analyzing all non-procedural speeches delivered at the 2024 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, we show that conventions operate as coordinated communicative ecosystems in which distinct types of speakers perform complementary rhetorical and emotional roles.

Across multiple dimensions of linguistic analysis, speaker type is more consistently associated with variation in rhetorical style and emotional expression than partisan context. Activists and organizational leaders emphasize analytic, policy-oriented language that supplies rational justification and issue expertise. Elected officials project authority and confidence through elevated clout, reinforcing institutional legitimacy and party cohesion. Public figures and voter testimonials rely on authenticity, narrative framing, and emotional resonance to humanize party agendas, though they diverge in tone, with public figures emphasizing positivity and inspiration and voter testimonials articulating grievance and hardship. These patterns are observed in both conventions, suggesting broadly comparable rhetorical role structures across the 2024 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, even as the substantive content and ideological positioning of each party differ. Rather than indicating the absence of partisan influence, these findings point to a more limited role for party context in structuring within-convention variation in linguistic style relative to speaker role.

Seen in this light, contemporary conventions exhibit a logic that closely parallels Polsby's (1960) original account of conventions as social systems populated by rational political actors. Where delegates once sought influence through bargaining and coalition-building, modern convention speakers pursue influence through their performances. Participation on the convention stage allows speakers to signal partisan loyalties, demonstrate value to the party, and position themselves within intraparty networks that shape future access, influence, and opportunity.

Overall, our study contributes to the scholarship on national party conventions by providing the first systematic analysis of all convention speakers, revealing how party conventions have transformed into coordinated communicative ecosystems that perform essential intraparty functions. More broadly, our findings also suggest that the nominating process at national party conventions does retain relevance, despite nominations remaining largely uncontested. What is perhaps most apparent from our findings is how both parties devote careful attention not only to *what* is said at their conventions, but *who* can say it most convincingly and authentically. Future research should extend this analysis across election cycles to examine whether the strategic communicative roles we have identified here are stable or variable as well as the broader political and cultural shifts that have led to the diversification of speaking roles at conventions.

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Appendix

Table A1: Unadjusted Descriptive Statistics for LIWC Dimensions by Speaker Type (LIWC Summary Dimensions)

Speaker Type		Analytic	Clout	Authentic	Tone
Advocates (<i>n</i> = 40)	Mean	55.01	85.27	39.46	57.71
	(SD)	(19.62)	(17.71)	(23.31)	(26.44)
Elected Officials (<i>n</i> = 116)	Mean	51.97	91.05	33.74	51.60
	(SD)	(15.40)	(9.24)	(20.02)	(27.28)
Public Figures (<i>n</i> = 31)	Mean	39.04	89.56	42.50	64.26
	(SD)	(16.39)	(11.43)	(22.50)	(23.45)
Political Figures (<i>n</i> = 46)	Mean	52.25	87.09	34.45	58.31
	(SD)	(20.25)	(16.84)	(18.54)	(24.52)
Voter Testimonials (<i>n</i> = 18)	Mean	44.67	73.84	55.72	32.45
	(SD)	(17.31)	(26.12)	(21.75)	(24.48)
Total (<i>N</i> = 251)	Mean	50.40	87.99	37.44	54
	(SD)	(17.87)	(14.89)	(21.44)	(26.85)

Table A2: Unadjusted Descriptive Statistics for LIWC Dimensions by Speaker Type (LIWC Function and Psychological Processes)

Speaker Type		Linguistic	Drive	Cognition	Social
Advocates (<i>n</i> = 40)	Mean	63.77	11.36	19.91	17.26
	(SD)	(5.38)	(3.16)	(3.20)	(3.20)
Elected Officials (<i>n</i> = 116)	Mean	64.89	11.79	19.23	18.07
	(SD)	(4.17)	(2.74)	(2.93)	(2.92)
Public Figures (<i>n</i> = 31)	Mean	69.83	10.18	22.13	19.67
	(SD)	(3.55)	(2.78)	(3.15)	(2.71)
Political Figures (<i>n</i> = 46)	Mean	65.65	11.30	19.57	17.47
	(SD)	(5.12)	(3.13)	(3.30)	(3.12)
Voter Testimonials (<i>n</i> = 18)	Mean	65.94	11.01	20.39	18.13
	(SD)	(4.15)	(2.32)	(3.32)	(4.83)
Total (<i>N</i> = 251)	Mean	65.54	11.37	19.84	18.04
	(SD)	(4.79)	(2.89)	(3.35)	(3.20)

Table A3: Unadjusted Descriptive Statistics for LIWC Tone Directionality by Speaker Type (LIWC Tone Directionality)

Speaker Type		Tone (Positive)	Tone (Negative)
Advocates (<i>n</i> = 40)	Mean	4.11	1.57
	(SD)	(1.29)	(1.29)
Elected Officials (<i>n</i> = 116)	Mean	4.04	1.97
	(SD)	(1.54)	(1.20)
Public Figures (<i>n</i> = 31)	Mean	4.63	1.61
	(SD)	(1.44)	(0.98)
Political Figures (<i>n</i> = 46)	Mean	4.46	1.85
	(SD)	(1.37)	(1.08)
Voter Testimonials (<i>n</i> = 18)	Mean	3.60	3.22
	(SD)	(1.72)	(1.85)
Total (<i>N</i> = 251)	Mean	4.16	1.93
	(SD)	(1.49)	(1.28)

Local Politics, Partisanship, and Health Outcomes in Georgia

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ABSTRACT

Local politics influence the development, implementation, and administration of public policy in many areas, including health. Prior studies show that partisanship at the local level influences policymaking and spending, and spending affects health outcomes. As part of a broader research effort on the factors influencing social mobility in Georgia, we explore the relationship between partisanship and health outcomes at the county level. We use the Cook Partisan Voting Index to estimate the political leaning for each Georgia county in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections to examine the relationship between partisanship and three indicators of health outcomes: health access, air quality, and safety from trauma. While our findings demonstrate that county-level partisanship does not have a causal influence on health outcomes, the racial composition of a county has a salient relationship with both partisanship and health outcomes. Race is consistently and strongly associated with county-level health outcomes. Therefore, the results indicate that the relationship between partisanship and health outcomes in Georgia counties must be analyzed in the context of structural determinants of health, including race.

Introduction

Local politics play an important role in many aspects of daily life, from garbage pickup to road infrastructure, and decisions at this level also impact community health outcomes. This connection between local politics and health is a growing area of research, especially as the role of health has been established as an important factor in understanding and improving social inequality (Urban Institute 2025; Willison 2026). In the public health literature, the factors that influence health on a population or community level, rather than an individual level, are called the social or structural determinants of health, which include the systems and structures shaped by local politics and policies (Weinstein et al. 2017; Willison 2026; World Health Organization 2025). In this paper, we explore the role of local politics in health outcomes to improve understanding of the contexts that contribute to upward social mobility.

Generally defined, intergenerational social mobility refers to the extent to which a person's socioeconomic status (SES) improves or declines relative to their parents' income. While most discussions of upward mobility focus on income, wealth, social class, or education, the Urban Institute (2025) offers a more holistic approach that highlights the importance of other factors that contribute to mobility such as health, neighborhoods, and governance. In this paper, we focus on the salience of health as a key pillar of upward mobility. Having access to quality health services and neonatal health care, living in environments free of pollutants and toxins, and avoiding exposure to trauma provide opportunities for people to realize better health outcomes. Positive health, in turn, leads to the development of important cognitive skills, greater academic achievement, gainful employment, quality long-term health, and being more actively involved in one's communities.

Prior research maintains that opportunities for mobility, including positive health outcomes, are reliant on community support and local policies (Chetty et al. 2014; Eppard, Okum, and Everidge 2020; Urban Institute 2025; Venkataramani, Daza, and Emanuel 2020). Thus, social mobility varies across location. Designated as "inequality of place," low mobility counties are characterized by concentrated disadvantages like poverty, a higher percentage of single-parent households, and greater exposure to pollution, toxic waste, or noise. These factors make it exceedingly difficult for low-income individuals to acquire the skills (education, employment, positive mental and physical health outcomes) needed for upward mobility. US counties with higher social mobility rates improve the life expectancy of low-income residents, compared to low-income people who reside in counties with lower levels of social mobility (Venkataramani, Daza, and Emanuel 2020). Therefore, intergenerational mobility is a local problem directly shaped by place-based policies that improve access to pillars of upward mobility, including education, employment, safe communities, and health (Chetty et al. 2014). In other words, community-based policies have the potential to improve outcomes for children from poor families without hurting children from high-income families.

In this study, we expand our understanding of the impact of location on social mobility by exploring the relationship between local politics and health outcomes. Based on literature showing an effect of partisanship on local-level policymaking and spending (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020; Switzer 2019) and the effects of local expenditures on health outcomes (Curtis et al. 2019; McCullough, Singh, and Leider 2019), we expect that county-level partisanship will influence health outcomes in the state of Georgia. Our results do not provide direct support for the existence of this effect in the state of Georgia. However, we do find a strong correlation between racial composition and partisanship at the county level in Georgia with implications for health

outcomes. This characteristic of local politics in Georgia demonstrates the importance of understanding the role of location in health outcomes and social mobility.

Social Determinants of Health

Community-level health outcomes are commonly influenced by structural inequalities in addition to individual medical or non-medical characteristics. Although positive health outcomes are often associated with upward social mobility, access to the resources that promote good health is not equally distributed. As a result, health disparities in the United States have remained persistent despite increased health care spending and major medical advancements. Health disparities refer to differences among population groups in the attainment of optimal health and are commonly measured through variations in morbidity, mortality, and access to health care (Dressler, Oths, and Gravlee 2005; Weinstein et al. 2017). Extensive research shows that these disparities are largely driven by social determinants of health (SDOH) or non-medical factors such as demographic characteristics, geographic location, and broader structural conditions that shape access to opportunity and resources (Dressler, Oths, and Gravlee 2005; Weinstein et al. 2017; World Health Organization 2025).

At the individual level, demographic characteristics including race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, education, age, sexual orientation, and disability status are strongly associated with health outcomes. Studies consistently find that individuals who are poor, less educated, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, women, and those at the youngest and oldest ages experience greater health disparities and higher rates of morbidity and mortality (Dressler, Oths, and Gravlee 2005; Peek et al. 2010; Weinstein et al. 2017; World Health Organization 2025). For example, Black Americans experience higher rates of communicable diseases (e.g., HIV, STIs), noncommunicable diseases (e.g., hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, obesity), and injuries (e.g., gunshots, long-bone fractures) (Macias-Konstantopoulos et al. 2023).

Increasingly, explanations for these disparities have moved away from a focus on biological and genetic differences to explanations that point to structural inequality, which shapes access to the resources, environments, and opportunities that determine health (Chandran and Schulman 2022; Sonderlund et al. 2022). This structural inequality was caused by discriminatory and sometimes overtly racist policies such as Jim Crow and redlining and has not only affected the quality of and access to health care but also affected lived environments. Josey et al. (2023), for example, found that, regardless of income, Black Americans live in areas with poorer air quality than higher-income White Americans. Additionally, studies point to an even stronger link between residential segregation and poor health, such as preterm births, cancer, communicable diseases, and premature death, when the interaction between racial and economic segregation is accounted for (Sonderlund et al. 2022).

Thus, structural determinants of health play a critical role in shaping health outcomes and disparities as health outcomes vary significantly by geographic location, including differences across regions, states, and zip codes (Weinstein et al. 2017). Using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) social vulnerability index (SVI) that measures 16 structural, economic, and demographic variables that contribute to health outcomes, studies have found that SVI varies across regions with the South experiencing higher rates of vulnerability than the North and Northwest (Ng, Zhang, and Kowal 2025). Similarly, research has shown that health care outcomes vary significantly by state (Cole, Wilson, and Trivedi 2017). Research has also documented persistent health disadvantages in rural areas, which experience higher rates of mortality, chronic disease, unintentional injury, tobacco use, and certain cancers compared to urban areas (MacKinnon et al. 2023). More broadly, communities characterized by high poverty, unemployment, limited transportation, inadequate housing, unsafe neighborhoods, poor access to healthy food, and under-resourced schools tend to experience worse health outcomes overall (Weinstein et al. 2017). Designated as “inequality of place,” these economically disadvantaged areas of the country are more likely to witness higher rates of obesity, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke, and kidney disease than more affluent regions. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that health outcomes are shaped by the combined influence of individual-level characteristics and broader structural and environmental conditions.

Partisanship, Policy, and Health Outcomes

The connection between local politics and public health is also an emerging area of inquiry. The social determinants of health discussed in the previous section often overlap with the policy components and structures studied in the field of local politics, including systemic factors such as local policies and political institutions and the built environment (Willison 2026). Local governments influence the social determinants of health through the provision of services, such as education, recreation, or water treatment, and through regulations such as zoning ordinances that influence the location of housing, industry, and health care facilities. Many state- and federal-level policies are also implemented and administered at the local level through funded or unfunded mandates. The capacity of local governments in the area of public health often depends not only on funding, but also on their own administrative and fiscal structures, which are determined by local political institutions (Kuo and Kelly 2026). Given this context, further exploration of the relationship between local politics and health outcomes is needed.

In this paper, we propose that local politics, in the form of citizen partisanship, will have an impact on place-based determinants of health and outcomes, such as health care access, air quality, and mortality due to injury. A growing body of literature demonstrates the influence of partisanship on local-level policymaking and spending, including at the county level (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020; Switzer 2019). At the same time, literature in public health shows a relationship between local government spending and health outcomes (Curtis et al. 2019; McCullough, Singh, and Leider 2019). However, it

is less clear if partisanship has a direct effect on health outcomes, especially with regard to place-based health outcomes, which may be more difficult for individuals to improve. In this section, we will discuss the existing knowledge in these literatures and how this informs our exploration of the relationship between local partisanship and health outcomes.

Role of Partisanship in Shaping Public Policy in Local Government

Previous literature operated under the assumption that partisanship played a less prominent role at the local level than at the national or even state levels (Adrian 1952; Benton 2005; Cigler 1995; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020). This is mainly due to the service-oriented focus of local governments; e.g., filling potholes is a nonpartisan issue. Local governments may also face limits on decision-making due to state laws or politics. However, recent literature finds evidence that partisanship may be more relevant than previously thought, such as in county spending or municipal housing policy (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020; de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones, and Warshaw 2025). Additionally, local politics can influence the implementation of federal policy. For example, Democratic-leaning areas saw fewer violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act by utilities than Republican-leaning areas (Switzer 2019). Partisanship also affected how county governments administered TANF benefits, specifically how punitive the policies were (McBrayer 2021). This research demonstrates the potential impact of partisanship on local-level policies and policy outcomes, indicating that partisanship may also impact health policy and outcomes.

Recent work on government responsiveness to citizen preferences further supports the importance of local-level partisanship. Local governments tend to adopt policies that align with the partisanship of the voters they serve (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Switzer 2019; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). Additionally, changes in the preferences of voters may influence later changes in policy in areas not constrained by state law (Sances 2021). The effect is often observed in local government spending patterns and priorities. For instance, a greater Democratic vote share led to higher spending in both municipal (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014) and county (Choi et al. 2010; Sances 2021) governments and often prioritized redistributive programs and general services (public safety, infrastructure, etc.) (Choi et al. 2010; Hajnal and Trounstein 2010; Sances 2021). Specifically, county level spending increased by 9% on redistributive areas of the budget, such as health, housing, hospitals, and welfare, with the election of Democratic county legislators (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020). These results are particularly relevant for this paper, as these budget categories may include public health initiatives or programs or spending in other areas that have been shown to impact health outcomes.

Influence of Local Government Spending on Health Outcomes

The effect of government spending on health outcomes has been studied extensively in the public health literature. A consistent positive association has been observed between state and local government expenditures and improvements in health outcomes such as infant and maternal health and mortality and general population health outcomes (Curtis et al. 2019; McCullough, Singh, and Leider 2019; Sowmyan, Hirai, and Kaufman 2024; Vilda et al. 2023). This includes both total expenditures and specific categories of spending, including those not directly related to public health. For example, spending on both K-12 and higher education is associated with lower infant and maternal mortality and better overall population health (McCullough, Singh, and Leider 2019; Sowmyan, Hirai, and Kaufman 2024; Vilda et al. 2023). At the local level specifically, expenditures on the environment, including parks and recreation and natural resources, are associated with reduced rates of low birth weight (Curtis et al. 2019), and decreases in infant and maternal mortality (Sowmyan, Hirai, and Kaufman 2024; Vilda et al. 2023). Counties with higher spending on housing and community development also had higher rates of primary care visits among low-income older adults using Medicare benefits and lower rates of preventable hospitalizations (Oronce et al. 2025).

Investments in local public health departments and programs are also associated with improved health outcomes, especially when coupled with improvements to capacity. Increases in spending by local health departments and increases in staffing were associated with decreased mortality from infectious disease and cardiovascular disease, demonstrating the importance of investing in resources at the local level (Erwin et al. 2011). Similarly, improvements in the performance of health departments, specifically in assessment, policy development, and research on solutions to health problems, were associated with increases in maternal use of prenatal care and lower rates of heart disease (Ingram et al. 2012). Investments in hospitals and community health care have a particular impact—counties investing in these areas demonstrate improved health outcomes even beyond what their level of wealth suggests (McCullough and Leider 2017). Additionally, spending on hospitals and community health was associated with a reduction in disparities in maternal and infant health outcomes between Black and White mothers (Curtis et al. 2019; Vilda et al. 2023). Altogether, the public health literature indicates that increased spending on the local level, particularly in areas related to public and community health and the environment, may lead to improved health outcomes at the local level.

Relationship between Partisanship and Health Outcomes

The literature examined so far indicates a likely relationship between partisanship and health outcomes through policy and spending mechanisms. If partisanship is truly the driving factor behind this relationship, then we would expect to see a direct relationship between partisanship and health outcomes, specifically place-based outcomes, as these outcomes are a function of policy decisions and the built environment rather than individual characteristics, behavior, or lifestyle. However, most studies on partisanship and health outcomes focus on the relationship between partisanship and individual-level factors.

Partisanship typically affects health behaviors through attitudes and risk perception, with Republicans tending to view health as a personal responsibility rather than a government responsibility (Kannan and Veazie 2018; Lundell, Niederdeppe, and Clarke

2013; Sehgal et al. 2022). These perspectives and behaviors can impact the effectiveness of public health policy by indicating whether an individual will be likely to comply with or support measures such as vaccination, or by engaging in riskier behavior, such as ignoring governors' recommendations to stay home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grossman et al. 2020; Sehgal et al. 2022). These individual perspectives may also be held by policymakers and influence their decision-making on public health policy, especially if they are responsive to the preferences of their constituents.

As evidenced by this body of research, Democratic partisanship is often associated with policies that focus on redistribution and equity, in contrast to the less restrictive policies emphasizing personal responsibility often associated with Republican partisanship. In relation to public health, policies that address social inequality, such as social safety net and labor policies, have a strong association with improvements in health outcomes (Navarro et al. 2006). Accordingly, research has shown that Democratic-leaning areas generally have more positive health outcomes (Hamamsy et al. 2021; Paul et al. 2022). This may explain the relationship between partisanship and health outcomes observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance. States and counties with citizen partisanship leaning Republican or supporting a Republican presidential candidate saw higher rates of COVID-19 infections and mortality than those with more Democratic-leaning citizen partisanship (Bollyky et al. 2023; Sehgal et al. 2022). These states also tended to have less restrictive policies on mobility and lower compliance with governors' stay-at-home orders (Grossman et al. 2020). While the role of individual behavior was likely a significant factor in these outcomes, the overall level of risk of COVID-19 infection and mortality remained higher in these places regardless of individual behaviors due to the social and structural context created by citizen partisanship and its effect on policy and political institutions. This demonstrates the potential role of partisanship as a social and structural determinant of health.

Similarly, we expect that partisanship will function as a social determinant of health to affect health outcomes at the local level. In this way, partisanship is shaping the structural context in which individuals live, and this context cannot be easily or quickly altered by individual factors such as behavior or lifestyle. A person must relocate to another jurisdiction to change this context on their own, which involves potentially high transaction costs. For this reason, we focus on the following place-based health outcomes to test our expectation: health access, air quality, and injury mortality. These outcomes will be discussed in more detail in the next section as dependent variables, but theoretically, we expect they will reflect the context created by citizen partisanship at the county level. Health access reflects local policies and spending related to siting and funding of health care facilities including hospitals, infrastructure such as roads and public transit, community health programs, and the ability to attract health care professionals to the area. While air quality may be a function of state and federal policies, monitoring and implementation often occur at the local level, which may be influenced by local citizen partisanship, as discussed in the literature earlier. Air quality likely also reflects other local government policies and spending on the environment, including the availability of green space and the air quality benefits it provides, such as through investments in parks and recreation and natural resources preservation. Finally, injury mortality may be impacted by local policies and spending related to infrastructure, public safety, and access to hospitals, including trauma centers. While these are the theoretical mechanisms motivating our exploration, we begin our testing by exploring the direct relationship between partisanship and health outcomes using cross-sectional associations, as described in the next section.

Methods

Context

In this paper, we focus specifically on partisanship and health outcomes at the local level in the state of Georgia. The Georgia Department of Public Health works collaboratively with all 159 county health departments and 18 public health districts, which are composed of counties (GA DPH n.d.). County boards of health in Georgia may be elected or appointed by local elected officials and have the following powers and responsibilities: enforcing health laws, adopting regulations, coordinating their budget with the county commission, and coordinating with local governments, community resources, health care providers, and other local health-related organizations (District 4 n.d.). Additionally, county boards of commissioners in Georgia are elected and have the power to raise revenue through taxation and to adopt budgets to structure expenditures based on county-level needs and priorities (GA Const. art. IX, § 4). In this context of governance, public health administration, and implementation, counties are the most relevant form of local government and the appropriate unit of analysis to test our expectations.

Data

This paper examines health outcomes for Georgia counties between 2016 and 2023. Data for this research were drawn from several publicly available sources and gathered into a single county-level dataset for analysis. These sources provide information on health outcomes, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, geographic classifications, and electoral behavior across counties in Georgia. Combining these datasets allows for the examination of community conditions, population characteristics, metro or nonmetro context, and partisan patterns and their relationship to broader measures of community well-being and mobility. Median or average values for each variable were calculated during this period, as described in the next sections, to account for potential year-to-year fluctuations, resulting in a cross-sectional dataset with one observation per county ($N = 159$).

Outcome Variables

The data on health and community well-being were compiled from the Urban Institute's Upward Mobility Data Dashboard. The dashboard provides county-level indicators aligned with the Urban Institute's Upward Mobility Framework, which examines

community conditions associated with long-term economic success, dignity and belonging, and power and autonomy (Urban Institute 2025).

This analysis uses three of the four indicators from the dashboard: health access, air quality, and injury death rate, as summarized in Table 1. The Urban Institute collected these measures from federal datasets, including those maintained by the EPA, CDC, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Solari, Fu, and Evans 2025). Health access is captured by the number of people in a county for every primary care physician; we have named the variable People per PCP to more accurately reflect this operationalization. To measure air quality, the Urban Institute used estimates of carcinogenic, respiratory, and neurological hazards in air samples collected by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Air Toxics Screen Assessment. They then inverted the estimates and calculated a percentile rank for each county based on national data. This process produced a value that varies between 0 and 100 with a higher value representing cleaner air. Finally, injury death rate per 100,000 population was calculated by the Urban Institute from data obtained from the CDC WONDER system on deaths caused by homicide, suicide, and accident. For analysis purposes, median values for each outcome variable were calculated for the study period to account for potential year-to-year fluctuations.

Table 1: Variable Definitions

Variable	Operational Definition	Interpretation
People per PCP	Population per primary care physician	Higher value indicates low access to health care
Air Quality	Inverted percentile rank of standardized EPA estimate of carcinogenic, respiratory, and neurological hazards	Higher value indicates cleaner air
Injury Death Rate	Deaths caused by homicide, suicide, and accidents/100,000 population	Higher value represents more death by injury
Partisan Voting Index (PVI)	County v. state presidential election outcome	Negative values indicate county leans Democratic/positive values mean county leans Republican
PVI Residual	County PVI regressed on percent Black	Variation in PVI not linearly associated with percent Black
Education	Percent population without a college degree	Higher value represents less educated population
Household Income	Median household income	Higher value represents higher income population
Age	Median age	Higher value represents older population
Percent Black	Percent Black or African American population	Higher value represents larger Black or African American population
Nonmetro	Less than 20,000 urban population	Dummy coded, 1 represents a nonmetro county

Partisan Voting Index (PVI)

To measure county-level partisanship, a Partisan Voting Index (PVI) was created using the method employed by the Cook Political Report for state-level PVI. The measure compares each county’s presidential election results with statewide results to determine the extent to which the county leans more Democratic or Republican relative to Georgia overall. Election results used to calculate this measure were collected from the Georgia Secretary of State’s public election results portal for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The average PVI for each county was then calculated based on these two elections. A negative value on the resulting measure indicates a county leans more toward the Democratic Party than the state, while a positive value indicates a county leans more toward the Republican Party than the state.

Residualized Partisan Voting Index (PVI Residual)

Because county racial composition and partisan context are highly correlated ($r = -0.872$) in Georgia (see Table 2), including both the percent Black population and the standard PVI measures in the same model is likely to introduce substantial multicollinearity. This suspicion is confirmed by examining the variance inflation factors (VIF) for both PVI and percent Black, which, depending on the dependent variable, range from 10.57 to 10.83 and 9.67 to 10.16, respectively (see Table 6 in the appendix). While there is no hard-and-fast cutoff for the VIF, it is generally agreed that VIF values above 10 indicate a problematic level of multicollinearity which needs to be addressed (Chatterjee and Simonoff 2013).

To address this issue while preserving the theoretical importance of both race and partisanship, we employ a residualization (orthogonalization) approach (García et al. 2020). We residualize PVI on race rather than the reverse because racial composition reflects fixed demographic structure, while partisan voting is a behavioral and institutional outcome that is partially conditioned

by that structure.

Specifically, we regress the original county PVI measure on the percent Black population and then extract the residuals from this auxiliary regression. These residuals form a new variable, PVI Residual, which captures the degree to which a county is more Democratic or more Republican than would be expected based solely on its racial composition. By construction, this residualized measure is linearly uncorrelated with race, allowing both race and partisan context to be included in the same regression model without inducing collinearity (García et al. 2020).

Substantively, this alters the interpretation of partisanship in the model. PVI Residual no longer reflects raw partisan alignment but instead captures political overperformance or underperformance relative to racial structure. In this framework, the race coefficient establishes the linear baseline tied to demographic composition, while PVI Residual isolates variation in local political context, policy environment, or political culture not linearly correlated with percent Black. Importantly, while orthogonalization mitigates linear collinearity by isolating the portion of PVI not linearly associated with percent Black, it does not establish causal independence from racial structure, as non-linear dynamics, shared historical drivers, or unobserved institutional factors tied to race may still influence this residualized variance.

This approach follows established applications of residualization in regression modeling, where highly correlated predictors are decomposed to isolate their distinct effects and improve interpretability without altering overall model fit (García et al. 2020).

Demographic and Socioeconomic Factors

To account for demographic and socioeconomic differences across counties, control variables were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey five-year estimates. These variables include total population, median age, educational attainment, median household income, and race. The ACS five-year dataset was used as it provides reliable estimates for smaller counties, including nonmetro areas. County nonmetro and metro classifications were taken from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Urban Continuum Codes. This classification system distinguishes metropolitan counties by population size and nonmetropolitan counties by degree of urbanization and proximity to metropolitan areas. The RUCC system is widely used in public policy and public health research to describe variation in community context (e.g., Oronce et al. 2025; Sehgal et al. 2022; Solari, Fu, and Evans 2025).

The operational definitions and interpretation for county demographic and socioeconomic variables are listed in Table 1. As with the outcome variables, data were collected for the period 2016–2023. The median value for each variable was calculated during this period to account for potential year-to-year fluctuations. Bivariate correlations and OLS regressions were conducted in the SPSS statistical package to assess the effect of PVI and demographic and socioeconomic factors on each county-level health outcome. The findings of these analyses are presented in the next section.

Results and Discussion

This research seeks to examine the effect of partisanship on county-level health outcomes related to social mobility. At the bivariate level, a county's partisan voting index (PVI) is related to two of the three county-level health outcomes (see Table 2). Specifically, while Republican-leaning counties have better air quality (.443), they also have a higher injury death rate (.277). Several demographic and socioeconomic factors are also significantly related to health outcomes at the bivariate level. Counties with a larger percentage of residents without a college degree have significantly lower access to health care (.268) and significantly higher rates of injury death (.404) but also have significantly better air quality (.205). Counties with lower median household income demonstrate the same pattern with access to health (-.201), injury death rate (-.439), and air quality (-.264). Counties with older populations have both significantly better air quality (.344) and more injury deaths (.447), while counties with higher

percentages of Black residents have poorer air quality (-.335). Finally, nonmetro counties have both better air quality (.388) and more injury deaths (.309).

Upon examining the bivariate relationships between these variables, a strong correlation was revealed between the percent Black and African American population in a county and PVI (-.872), indicating that counties with larger Black populations lean much more heavily toward the Democratic Party in presidential elections. While this finding is not surprising, the strength of the relationship was somewhat unexpected. Including both PVI and percent Black in the model would lead to severe multicollinearity, with potentially unstable coefficient estimates and inflated standard errors. Given the strong bivariate relationship between race and health outcomes, leaving percent Black out of multivariate models would introduce omitted-variable bias into the model, and excluding PVI would prevent the examination of the main variable of interest. As explained above, we address this multicollinearity by employing a residualization approach where the standardized residuals resulting from the regression of PVI on percent Black were saved as a new variable (PVI Residual), which is uncorrelated with percent Black. The bivariate correlations between PVI Residual and health outcomes look similar to what was observed with PVI, with one key difference: the moderate, positive relationships between residual partisanship and both air quality (.307) and injury death rate (.460) remain, but a weak relationship between residual partisanship and people per PCP emerges (.169). In other words, after accounting for the influence of race on partisanship, Republican-leaning counties are more likely to have cleaner air and a higher injury death rate, but they are also less likely to have access to primary care physicians.

Table 2: Correlations Between Health Outcomes, Partisanship, and County Demographics—All Counties

	People/ Physician	Air Quality	Injury Death Rate	Education	Household Income	Age	Percent Black	Nonmetro	PVI	PVI Residual
People/Physician	1.00									
Air Quality	.137	1.00								
Injury Death Rate	.002	.305**	1.00							
Education	.268**	.205**	.404**	1.00						
Household Income	-.201*	-.264**	-.439**	-.570**	1.00					
Age	.118	.344**	.447**	.171*	-.133	1.00				
Percent Black	.015	-.335**	-.055	.097	-.411**	-.076	1.00			
Nonmetro	-.048	.388**	.309**	.310**	-.545**	.246**	.110	1.00		
PVI	.070	.443**	.277**	.253**	.117	.220**	-.872**	.164*	1.00	
PVI Residual	.169*	.307**	.460**	.688**	-.491**	.313**	.000	.532**	.490**	1.00

$N = 159$. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Next, a series of multivariate analyses were conducted to examine the effects of partisanship on health outcomes, controlling for county demographic and socioeconomic factors. Three models are presented below for each health outcome. Model 1 includes only PVI, Model 2 includes only percent Black, while Model 3 includes both PVI Residual and percent Black.

People per Primary Care Physician

Table 3 presents the results of the multivariate analysis of partisanship and demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Georgia counties on access to health care. Results are largely as expected and mirror those in the bivariate analysis with a couple of exceptions. First, when controlling for county demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, neither PVI nor PVI Residual are significant predictors of access to health care. This finding suggests that a county's political environment does not influence the number of people per primary care physician in the county. Secondly, across all three models, when controlling for other county characteristics, urban counties have a larger number of people per primary care physician than nonmetro counties. This finding is counterintuitive given the persistent finding that nonmetro areas have fewer doctors than metro areas (Serchen et al. 2025). The measurement of this variable (people per primary care physician) may reflect population density rather than health access. Alternatively, since this measure of health access does not capture the availability of medical services beyond primary care, important disparities in emergency or specialty care between nonmetro and metro areas may be obscured. Ultimately, this combination of variables explains very little (less than 10%) of the variance in people per PCP.

Table 3: Effects on People per PCP

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Variable	Beta (s.e)	Beta (s.e)	Beta (s.e)
PVI	.074 (.091)	—	—
Percent Black	—	-.061 (.089)	-.057 (.039)
PVI Residual	—	—	.056 (.126)
Education	.176 (.106)	.199* (.099)	.166 (.124)
Household Income	-.247* (.120)	-.243* (.122)	-.245* (.122)
Age	.107 (.082)	.112 (.082)	.105 (.083)
Nonmetro	-.280** (.098)	-.267** (.096)	-.286** (.105)
F-value	4.27***	4.23 ***	3.54**
Adjusted R^2	.098	.097	.092
N	150	150	150

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Air Quality

Regression results for air quality are presented in Table 4. Again, we see that the results of the multivariate analysis mirror the bivariate findings. Most importantly, PVI is a significant, positive predictor of air quality, but after correcting for multicollinearity, the direct effect of PVI disappears and the racial composition of the county becomes the strongest predictor of air quality (see Table 4 model 3). Specifically, those areas with higher percent Black population have significantly lower air quality, in line with previous research (Josey et al. 2023). Another counterintuitive finding is that the negative relationship between median household income and air quality remains even after controlling for other factors. Counties with lower median household incomes have cleaner air. While the strength of the relationship is slightly attenuated by the addition of other factors, including urbanization, there is still a moderate relationship between income and air quality. Overall, these combinations of variables explain about 38% of the variance in air quality across Georgia counties.

Table 4: Effects on Air Quality

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Variable	Beta (s.e)	Beta (s.e)	Beta (s.e)
PVI	.450*** (.074)	—	—
Percent Black	—	-.478*** (.071)	-.480*** (.072)
PVI Residual	—	—	-.029 (.101)
Education	-.159 (.085)	-.046 (.078)	-.029 (.097)
Household Income	-.298** (.098)	-.339*** (.097)	-.339*** (.097)
Age	.196** (.067)	.218*** (.065)	.222*** (.067)
Nonmetro	.153 (.081)	.216** (.077)	.226** (.084)
F-value	18.10***	20.33 ***	16.85 ***
Adjusted R ²	.351	.380	.376
N	158	158	158

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.**Injury Death Rate**

Finally, Table 5 examines the impact of partisanship, demographic, and socioeconomic factors on injury death rates. As with air quality, PVI is a significant, positive predictor of injury death rates, but correcting for multicollinearity by including both residual PVI and percent Black in the model reduces the effect of county partisanship to insignificance. Racial composition remains a significant predictor of injury deaths, with counties that have higher Black populations having a lower injury death rate. Again, this finding is unexpected. The race effect is the weakest predictor, with the effects of both household income and age having more impact on injury death rates. Not surprisingly, counties with older populations have a significantly higher injury death rate as do counties with lower household incomes. Finally, the nonmetro/metro difference in injury death rates observed in the bivariate analysis disappears after controlling for these other variables. As with air quality, nearly 39% of the county-level variance in injury death rates is explained by these models.

Table 5: Effects on Injury Deaths

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Variable	Beta (s.e)	Beta (s.e)	Beta (s.e)
PVI	.213** (.075)	—	—
Percent Black	—	-.170* (.073)	-.158* (.073)
PVI Residual	—	—	.179 (.103)
Education	.058 (.085)	.124 (.080)	.019 (.100)
Household Income	-.427** (.097)	-.413*** (.099)	-.416*** (.098)
Age	.352*** (.067)	.368*** (.067)	.346*** (.068)
Nonmetro	-.058 (.081)	-.018 (.078)	-.080 (.086)
F-value	20.39***	19.57***	17.04 ***
Adjusted R ²	.389	.379	.388
N	152	152	152

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.**Race, Health, and Structural Inequality**

While the extent to which race and partisanship are related is surprising, the strong correlations between racial composition and health outcomes are not. It is plausible that the strong correlation between race and partisanship is an artifact of the policies that produced residential segregation in the South during and following the Jim Crow era. In addition to residential segregation, these same policies produced environments with a concentration of structural inequality that are related to disparities in observed health outcomes, as noted in recent literature described earlier (Chandran and Schulman 2022; Sonderlund et al. 2022). Many of these policies were either created at the local level or were state or federal policies implemented by local governments. This demonstrates the importance of local politics and governance in shaping the structural contexts in which the social determinants of health exist.

Conclusions and Future Directions

While this study did not find significant relationships between county partisanship and county-level health outcomes at the multivariate level, it did reveal some interesting relationships that warrant future investigation. We did not test the proposed theoretical mechanisms, that partisanship influences local government spending and policies, which in turn influence health

outcomes. Instead, we tested the direct relationship between partisanship and health outcomes as a first step. Our results do shed some light on the structural nature of this relationship due to the influence of race (percent Black) on health outcomes in our models, which is related to structural political factors, as discussed above. More research is needed to determine if this relationship is related to local government spending and policy decisions, including beyond the state of Georgia.

Other variables, including median household income, percent of the population with less than a college education, percent Black population, age, and level of urbanization, were found to be consistent predictors of county-level health outcomes, although not always in expected ways. For example, lower median household income was strongly associated with cleaner air quality even when controlling for the level of urbanization. The RUCC system categorizes areas along a nine-point system and allows for differentiation of nonmetro areas by proximity to metro areas. Perhaps a different approach to operationalizing the metro/nonmetro divide that accounts for nonmetro proximity to metro areas would allow for a more thorough investigation of area impact on health outcomes. Additionally, exploring the injury death rate as one measure that combines accidents, homicides, and suicides may be masking some important age and income-related effects. To the extent that older populations may experience more accidental deaths from things like falls, the combined death rate may prevent a full understanding of how county-level demographics impact death from trauma.

Another main takeaway from this study is the strong impact of race on both partisanship and health outcomes. County racial composition relates so closely to partisanship that we could not include the raw PVI measure and percent Black together in the same multivariate model without inducing severe collinearity. After we created the PVI residual variable to isolate the portion of partisanship not predicted by race, that residualized measure lost its significance in the models, while race remained a consistent and often strong predictor of county-level health outcomes. The only exception occurred in the models estimating people per PCP. In that set of analyses, none of the variables of interest reached significance. This pattern suggests that once the shared variance between race and partisan alignment is separated, the remaining independent partisan variation is not associated with these health outcomes. The partisan effects seen in simpler models reflect the shared structural and demographic context of the county rather than distinct political influences, at least in the state of Georgia.

Future research should continue to prioritize the examination of race effects. One avenue that may be useful is to expand the focus beyond Georgia to examine partisanship and race across all US counties with a population of over 100,000. Multilevel analysis would be used to account for the nested structure of counties within larger state political environments. State-level PVI measures would be less impacted by county-level racial demographics; while taking into account that health policy is implemented at the county level, policy decisions are largely made at the state level. Regardless, the exploration of partisanship and health outcomes in this paper supports the importance of examining factors related to location, including the interactions between institutional and societal structures at the state and local levels, as an integral component of social mobility.

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Appendix

Table 6: Variance Inflation Factors for Independent Variables

	People per PCP	Air Quality	Injury Rate	People per PCP	Air Quality	Injury Rate
PVI	10.83	10.66	10.57	—	—	—
Residualized PVI	—	—	—	2.63	2.56	2.63
Percent Black	10.15	10.16	9.67	1.32	1.30	1.31
Education	2.53	2.38	2.47	2.53	2.38	2.47
Household Income	2.46	2.39	2.38	2.46	2.39	2.38
Age	1.14	1.13	1.14	1.13	1.13	1.14
Nonmetro	1.83	1.80	1.82	1.83	1.80	1.82

Note: VIF values above 10 indicate severe multicollinearity.

Dog Whistles and Dixie: Tracing the Nationalization of the Southern Strategy

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Southern elites forged a strategy that, as Maxwell and Shields assert, “made the party southern, not in terms of place, but in its vision, in its demands, in its rhetoric, and its spirit” (2019, 35). Localized flashpoints morphed into national forces: the 1956 Southern Manifesto’s defiance laid the groundwork; Barry Goldwater’s 1964 campaign transformed regional defiance into electoral gains; Nixon’s disciplined “law and order” dog whistles refined messaging; Reagan’s 1980 Neshoba County Fair speech nationalized states’ rights rhetoric. George H.W. Bush’s Willie Horton ad and George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” further adapted the rich historical playbook, culminating in Donald Trump’s overt challenges to federal authority. Trumpism emerges not as an anomaly but as the logical endpoint of decades of deeply entrenched, iterative framing and adaptation, ultimately leading directly to the rebirth of the Southern Strategy and renewal of the Southern Manifesto.

Introduction

At the height of massive resistance in 1958, Virginia school boards closed public schools rather than integrate, forcing white families into segregated academies, a flashpoint that would resonate in Donald Trump’s later refrain to “build the wall.” Process tracing reveals the causal steps that link such pivotal flashpoints, elite choices, and strategic reframing over time, showing how localized triggers expand into national political forces: “The essence of process-tracing case studies is that we shift the analytical focus from causes and outcomes to the hypothesized causal mechanisms in between” (Beach and Pedersen 2019, 1). In this paper, I apply that lens to Southern resistance against federal desegregation mandates, showing how the 1956 Southern Manifesto, Goldwater’s 1964 outreach, Nixon’s coded “law and order”, and subsequent presidential rhetoric formed an unbroken chain.

Tracing these decisions reveals that Trumpism is not an aberration but the logical culmination of decades of iterative framing and tactical adaptation. While some scholars (Kaufmann 2020; Campani et al. 2022) have characterized Trumpism primarily through the lens of immigration, such as the call to build a wall, this paper moves beyond single-issue interpretations. Process tracing, as a methodological tool, enables the reconstruction of causal pathways by identifying key decisions and threshold effects that have gradually reshaped the political landscape. By mapping these sequential mechanisms, this paper demonstrates that Trumpism is not simply a response to modern events, but a governing realignment.

The Southern Manifesto

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court challenged the deeply entrenched segregationist policies within the South. The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) resulted in eleven states pledging to use “...all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision which is contrary to the Constitution and to prevent the use of force in its implementation” (Driver 2014, 1067). The Southern Manifesto relied heavily on the Jim Crow system to enforce racial hierarchies, and the Court’s ruling threatened not only established educational practices, but also a broader social order. In Virginia, school boards went as far as closing public schools rather than risk integration, forcing parents to seek segregated private education: “...a private school system for the affluent and white and public system for the poor and black” (Pratt 1991, 416).

The Southern Manifesto was not merely a legal or political document; instead, it was a declaration of the South’s distinct identity and a commitment to resisting rapid social change: “any changes to the rules, so to speak, whether by Court or Congress, were met by many southern whites with creative noncompliance, or massive resistance, or both until directly enforced” (Maxwell and Shields 2019, 34). The defiant tone of the Southern Manifesto reinforced a narrative of Southern exceptionalism, one shaped by a long-standing resistance to federal authority dating back to the Civil War. This legacy became a political asset as the Republican Party sought to attract white Southern voters alienated by civil rights reforms, tapping into regional grievances and cultural memory. The Manifesto’s symbolism of defiance handed political movements a powerful idea that the South was standing up against federal interference.

The Evolution of the Southern Strategy

The South’s defiance evolved into a framework for political campaigning by attracting white southerners who felt that there was a major disruption of a long-established way of life. These intensified feelings led to the alienation from the National

Democratic Party. Recognizing opportunity, Republican leaders began modifications to capture the disaffected white southerner electorate by tapping into the language of resistance to portray federal mandates that threatened local values and traditions. Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon employed subtle, racially coded rhetoric. They emphasized “law and order,” states’ rights, and a return to traditional values to appeal to those who felt betrayed by rapid social change. As stated by Lillian Smith (1949, 16), “...when we are threatened with change suddenly it draws the whole white south together in a collective fear and fury that wipe our minds clear of reason.” This fear-driven unity often translated into political and social movements that resisted progressive change, allowing Nixon and Goldwater’s rhetoric to result in a Southern Strategy to reorient the Republican Party.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan picked up the torch and resonated with racial issues among white voters. On August 3, 1980, he spoke at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, famously declaring his support for “states’ rights.” Reagan was signaling a shift in political strategy, tapping into Southern sentiments that would shape national politics for decades. The same thing occurred in 1988 with George H.W. Bush’s campaign leaning into fear-based messaging with the infamous Willie Horton ad. Though it was only aired once by the political action committee, its impact was seismic, shaping the election’s tone and redefining the use of race in his campaign strategy. Years later, in 2000, George W. Bush’s campaign adopted the language of “compassionate conservatism,” signaling a rhetorical shift that softened traditional conservative positions by pairing personal responsibility with a promise of social support. It was conservative to cut taxes, but compassionate to let families retain more of their income. This framing allowed Bush to court moderate voters while subtly invoking the legacy of the Southern Strategy. Rather than relying on overt racial appeals, the campaign emphasized cultural values, religious identity, and law and order themes. These coded appeals resonated deeply with Southern voters and preserved the region’s political distinctiveness within a more palatable national message.

Trumpism

In later years, Trumpism, a political ideology and style associated with Donald Trump and his supporters, entered the presidential spotlight as the Southern Strategy saw a rebirth with Trump’s campaign as he tapped into historical roots. Trump, in contrast to W. Bush, revised the strategy by amplifying overt appeals to racial and cultural issues by providing a platform for many white Americans, who consciously or unconsciously, have come to see the Republican Party as closely aligned with their sense of identity (Royce 2018). He makes numerous appeals to working-class white voters who feel left behind by globalization and social changes, just like white southerners felt after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was decided. Also, Trump pledged to build a wall to restrict immigration and defend American identity: “It has become a daily routine that ‘this is my neighborhood, this is my city, this is my country’ reverberate with ‘go back to Africa, go back to Mexico, go back to China.’ Trump’s rise has made it loud and clear that this land is my land.” (Yang 2018, 2).

In 2016, Trump leaned into racial and cultural grievance politics, updating old dog whistles with blunt rhetoric: building a wall, banning Muslims, and restoring “law and order.” By 2024, the strategy evolved. Trump wrapped his message in economic nationalism, warning about immigration’s impact on resources and jobs. He still emphasized cultural identity and border security but also made inroads with Latino voters by reframing his pitch around protectionism and patriotism. The Southern Strategy’s bones were still there, fully dressed in populist armor.

Methodology

To explore the revival of the Southern Manifesto and the Southern Strategy within the context of Trumpism, I utilized process-tracing as a methodological tool. According to Peter Hall (2000, 14), “...process-tracing is a methodology well-suited to testing theories in a world marked by multiple interaction effects, where it is difficult to explain outcomes in terms of two or three independent variables.” Hall’s assertion of process-tracing is especially relevant when analyzing the Southern Strategy, the Southern Manifesto, and Trumpism because these political frameworks are not driven by a single variable like race or party affiliation alone. In this context, process-tracing moves beyond simplistic cause-effect models and instead traces how Trumpism selectively revives and reconfigures elements of these Southern political traditions.

Moreover, this approach allows for comparative insight across presidential cases that reflect distinct yet interconnected iterations of Southern political appeals. As George and Bennett (2005) note, “when explanations for the outcome of individual cases vary, the results can be cumulated and contribute to the development of a rich, differentiated theory about that phenomenon.” To do this effectively, however, the cases must be path dependent: “...consist of a sequence of events, some of which foreclose certain paths in the development and steer the outcome in other directions” (George and Bennett 2005). This path-dependent logic is crucial for understanding how early decisions and rhetorical strategies, such as Goldwater’s “go hunting where the ducks are” or Nixon’s coded appeals to “law and order” create trajectories that shaped the political possibilities available to later figures like Trump.

Throughout this process, I analyzed six presidential candidates, five of whom won their elections to understand the racial coding, regional identity, and defiance of the federal government and I used the American National Election Studies (ANES). ANES includes a vast number of variables covering political attitudes, voting behavior, demographics, and policy opinions. I used multiple time-series studies ranging from 1960 to 1972, as well as from 2012 to 2024 where they contained thousands of variables for each election cycle. To get a feel of public opinion from this time period, I pulled variables including where one grew up, feeling thermometers of blacks and whites, how one favors desegregation, gender, race, aid to blacks, and whether

blacks should work without special favors.

Each presidential case and the data serve as a layer in a broader historical sequence, where political appeals are not simply replicated but reconfigured to fit new contexts. This layering process, akin to Schickler (2001), is in some ways path-dependent due to earlier rhetorical strategies and ideological frameworks constraining and shaping the possibilities available to later candidates. Trumpism represents a revival and reconfiguration of those frameworks, mobilizing white voter grievance and reshaping Republican political identity. By tracing these layers and counterfactuals, asking for instance whether Trump's appeals would have emerged in the absence of Nixon's racial coding or Reagan's regional signaling, I will demonstrate how presidential candidates influence public opinion through inherited and retooled discursive strategies.

Case 1: 1964 – 1980

The Southern Strategy was a deliberate effort by the Republican Party to gain support from white voters in the South by exploiting racial tensions. It relied on both subtle and overt racial messaging to connect with disaffected white voters, shaping conservative Republican campaigns from Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential bid to Donald Trump's presidency. Senator George McGovern from South Dakota described it as:

It says to the South: Let the poor stay poor, let your economy trail the nation, forget about decent homes and medical care for all your people, choose officials who will oppose every effort to benefit the many at the expense of the few-and in return, we will try to overlook the rights of the black man, appoint a few southerners to high office...it is a clever strategy (Bass and De Vries 1976, 31).

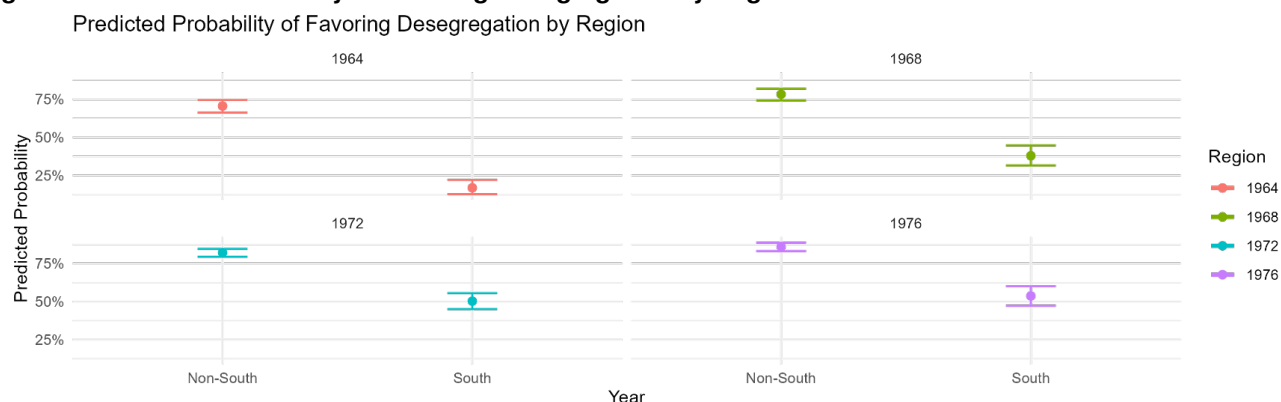
The Southern Strategy appealed to southern pride and autonomy, suggesting that the South could prioritize its own values, even if it meant neglecting broader progress or equality.

In his 1964 presidential campaign, Senator Barry Goldwater stated, "go hunting where the ducks are" which was his way of saying that the Republican party should "...concentrate its attention on wooing the traditionally conservative segments of the American electorate, particularly in the South" (Schreiber 1971, 157). The ducks he referred to were strong, ideological, racially motivated, white conservatives. Goldwater's effort to draw voters who supported states' rights into the Republican Party appeared somewhat successful, as he managed to secure victory in five Deep South states along with his home state: Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

During Goldwater's time, segregation was at its highest in the South, specifically in 1964 when Goldwater ran for president. Figure 1 shows the predicted probability of favoring desegregation by region (South v. Non-South) with confidence intervals. With this statistic, a shorter bar signifies greater precision in an estimate resulting in a tighter range of values where the true "mean" is likely to fall. A large sample, such as the ANES time-series studies, leads to a small standard error. The smaller the standard error is, the narrower one's confidence intervals are.

From 1964 to 1976, it is predicted that non-southerners' opinions stayed the same most of the time in the 75-80% range in favoring desegregation (see Figure 1). Specifically, in 1964, the interval shows the "true" mean lies between 62.5-75%. Then, from 1964 – 1976, southerners' support for desegregation increased. As their favorability increased, opinions differed causing more variability in the confidence interval. In 1968 when Nixon ran for president, for example, three years after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed, the interval shows the "true" mean between 15-35%. Due to more variability, there is a greater range of values which causes less precision in determining the estimate for the true population parameter. However, this was expected.

Figure 1: Predicted Probability of Favoring Desegregation by Region from 1964–1976



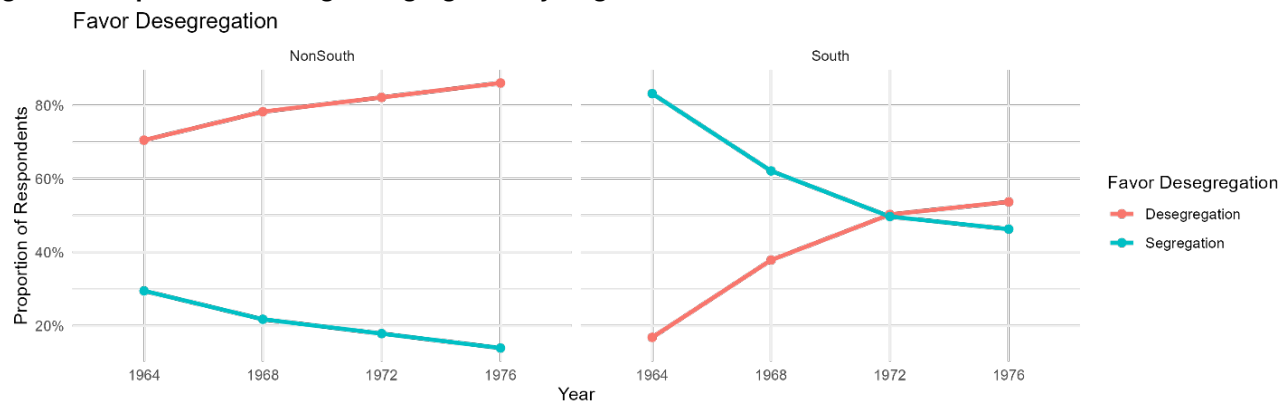
When the Voting Rights Act was passed, hundreds of thousands of black voters registered to vote, but many white politicians saw the law as federal overreach, just as they did for *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Some tried to circumvent it by changing local voting rules or dragging their feet in compliance with southern states quickly filing lawsuits to block or weaken

the law. For many white southerners, the Voting Rights Act represented not just as a legal shift but a cultural defeat, an erosion of southern tradition, resulting in them shifting to the Republican Party, partly because of the appeals of the Southern Strategy.

After Nixon's defeat in 1960, the Republican Party embraced Goldwater's idea that securing a strong presence in the South could pave the way for winning the presidency and gaining influence in Congress (Aistrup 1996). This shift was further reinforced by the impact of George Wallace's 1968 campaign, which demonstrated the power of mobilizing white disaffected voters through racially charged rhetoric and strong stances on states' rights. Wallace's success underscored the political potential of catering to Southern conservatives, shaping the Republican Party's evolving strategy. With this in mind, the party realized that "Senator Barry Goldwater...ran that well precisely because Johnson was seen as a sympathizer...and the whites were bloc-voting against him" (Murphy and Gulliver 1971, 219). Because of this, they had to appeal to the white disaffected voters of the south who "...felt he had the right to keep the blacks out of his home, out of his church, out of his mind, and...out of his political party" (Murphy and Gulliver 1971, 210).

In Figure 2, specifically in 1964, 70% of non-southerners favored desegregation. As time went on, non-southerners that favored desegregation had a 15% increase. This increase was due to multiple reasons. First, images from Birmingham, Selma, and other Southern cities shocked viewers across the country, especially non-southerners who did not witness overt racism firsthand. Also, national Democrats increasingly embraced civil rights, distancing themselves from their segregationist Southern wing. Then in the South, in 1964, when white disaffected voters wanted blacks out of their political party, over 80% of southerners favored segregation.

Figure 2: Proportion Favoring Desegregation by Region from 1964–1976



However, in 1972, half of the southerners favored desegregation when the other half favored segregation. This shows that white southerners viewed desegregation as a threat to local control and traditional social hierarchies. Politicians spent years framing desegregation as federal overreach, fueling long-term opposition, as well as GOP's appeal to "law and order" and states' rights subtly reinforced racial conservatism.

In 1968, the Nixon administration continued Goldwater's Southern Strategy, emphasizing law and order in a way that reassured white southerners about achieving their desired political outcomes. This rhetoric was carefully calibrated to reassure white Southerners that their cultural and political priorities, especially resistance to federal civil rights enforcement, could still be preserved under Republican leadership. Nixon's approach marked a strategic evolution: rather than attacking civil rights outright, his campaign targeted the legal and institutional mechanisms designed to dismantle segregation. As Aistrup notes, "Although the tactics of Nixon's Southern Strategy did not attack civil rights per se, it did publicly attack laws designed to break down the intermediate and inner color lines" (1996, 33). This distinction allowed Nixon to maintain plausible deniability while still signaling solidarity with Southern resistance to integration. The success of this strategy was evident in Nixon's ability to flip several Southern states to the Republican column, accelerating the region's political realignment which is supported by Figure 2 (see above). Following Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974, Gerald Ford assumed the presidency. Notably, Ford did not fully embrace the Southern Strategy during his tenure (Ayres 1975).

Intervening Years: Southern Strategy in Transition

The next prominent Republican to carry the torch was Ronald Reagan during his 1980 presidential campaign. Reagan's decision to launch his campaign in Neshoba County, Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers involved in Freedom Summer, a movement to register black voters, was widely interpreted as a symbolic gesture aimed at Southern voters (Oppenheimer et al. 2018). This location signaled not only a regional appeal but also a deliberate continuation of the Southern Strategy. Reagan understood that the civil rights movement had reshaped public discourse on race, making overt appeals to white supremacist sentiments increasingly untenable. In response, he refined the strategy by deploying coded racial rhetoric by subtle, seemingly neutral language that resonated with white voters' resentment toward civil rights advancements, all under the guise of common sense (Perlstein 2008).

Beyond racial messaging, Reagan expanded the strategy's scope by integrating positions on social and tax issues that reinforced its foundational appeal to racially conservative values (Edsall and Edsall 1992; Aistrup 1996). Lee Atwater was quoted in 1981 saying:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "N*****, n*****, n*****." By 1968 you can't say "n*****" – that hurts you, backfires. So, you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites. "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "N*****, n*****."

This broadened framework allowed Reagan to connect with working-class white Southerners, aligning economic grievances with cultural and racial anxieties. As Perlstein (2008) observed, "Reagan was sailing a course that's pure Goldwater; the difference is that Reagan's turned out the running lights" suggesting Reagan's strategic subtlety in advancing Goldwater's ideological legacy. By adopting a "color-blind" rhetoric and reframing white dissatisfaction with civil rights progress into a broader economic narrative, Reagan redefined the Southern Strategy for a new political era (Inwood 2015). In doing so, he tapped into a longstanding Southern ethos of defiant self-determination, reinforcing the belief that restoring traditional American values was essential to curbing what many perceived as federal overreach.

As Reagan's presidency drew to a close, the political landscape he helped reshape remained firmly in place. His strategic use of coded racial rhetoric, economic populism, and appeals to traditional values had not only redefined the Republican Party but also laid the groundwork for his successor. In 1988, Vice President George H.W. Bush inherited this political legacy and sought to preserve its momentum. While Bush lacked Reagan's charismatic persona, he proved adept at leveraging the Southern Strategy's evolved framework particularly through emotionally charged messaging and cultural symbolism. His campaign famously deployed the Willie Horton ad, a pivotal and controversial element against Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis. The ad centered on the case of William "Willie" Horton, an African American man serving a life sentence for murder who, while participating in a Massachusetts weekend furlough program, committed additional violent crimes, including armed robbery and rape (Mendelberg 1997). Although the furlough program had originally been signed into law by Republican Governor Francis W. Sargent in 1972, Dukakis' 1976 veto of a bill that would have excluded first-degree murderers from eligibility became the focal point of the Bush campaign's critique.

Strategist Lee Atwater orchestrated the ad's narrative with surgical precision, using Horton's mugshot to visually amplify the threat he posed. The stark image, paired with ominous narration, framed Dukakis as dangerously lenient on crime. While the ad never explicitly referenced race, its racial subtext was unmistakable: Horton's blackness, juxtaposed with the violent nature of his crimes, was leveraged to provoke fear and reinforce stereotypes. The ad was widely condemned for its racial undertones, arguing that it stoked white anxieties about crime and implicitly linked blackness with danger and lawlessness. By weaponizing racially coded imagery and fear-based storytelling, Bush's campaign tapped into the same psychological and cultural currents that had long animated the Southern Strategy. The Horton ad did more than attack Dukakis' record; it reactivated a familiar narrative of racialized threat and governmental failure, reinforcing the idea that conservative leadership was necessary to restore order. In doing so, Bush extended Reagan's legacy, demonstrating that the Southern Strategy had evolved into a sophisticated, media-savvy tool capable of shaping national discourse through implication rather than overt declaration.

Yet at the turn of the millennium, the political climate had shifted. The overt racial cues and fear-based appeals that defined earlier iterations of the Southern Strategy were increasingly scrutinized in a more media-saturated and demographically diverse America. In response, George W. Bush introduced a rhetorical pivot: "compassionate conservatism." During his 2000 presidential campaign and subsequent presidency, Bush sought to soften the Republican image by blending traditional conservative principles such as limited government, personal responsibility, and free-market solutions with a moral vocabulary rooted in empathy and faith (Loconte 2000). This approach was designed to broaden the party's appeal, especially among moderate voters, religious communities, and minority groups who had historically been alienated by the party's racialized messaging.

Bush's version of conservatism redirected federal resources toward faith-based initiatives, empowering churches and religious nonprofits to address social issues like homelessness, addiction, and educational inequality. These programs were framed not as government overreach, but as moral partnerships between state and civil society to restore the community through spiritual stewardship. In doing so, Bush repackaged the Southern Strategy's core concerns such as poverty, crime, and education, within a religious and ethical framework, sidestepping overt racial rhetoric while still engaging the same policy domains that had historically been racialized. Rather than invoking racial resentment, Bush's compassionate conservatism used inclusive language and moral appeals to signal concern for all Americans, especially the "forgotten or underserved." However, it was noted that this rhetorical shift did not necessarily dismantle the underlying structures of racial inequality; instead, it reframed them. By embedding conservative policy goals within a narrative of moral uplift, Bush modernized the Southern Strategy, transforming it into a more palatable and less overtly divisive form of political overreach. His approach reflected a strategic evolution: one that maintained the strategy's electoral unity while adapting its tone to the demands of a new century.

Case 2: 2008 - 2024

While the Southern Strategy evolved through various rhetorical appeals, one foundational truth remained: "The Southern

Strategy rested, finally, on a calculated appeal to white segregationist sentiment” (Murphy and Gulliver 1971, 249). Initially rooted in southern white resentment toward black Americans, the strategy broadened to encompass appeals to gender and religion. As Maxwell and Shields observe, “The politicization of these southern white conservatives and more often than not, religious women in opposition to second-wave feminism resuscitated and kept the GOP strategy alive” (2019, 9). By mobilizing conservative southern white women, many of whom were religious and opposed to feminist movements, the strategy tapped into deeper cultural anxieties surrounding shifting gender roles and social norms, thereby sustaining its political relevance. This ideological trajectory ultimately paved the way for the rise of Trumpism, which channels longstanding fears about racial and cultural transformation in the United States (Gerrard 2024). Echoing George Wallace’s binary framing “you’re either for it or against it,” Trump’s rhetoric emphasized the preservation of traditional values and national identity, reinforcing themes central to the Southern Strategy. By exploiting societal fears, his support was fueled by a perceived loss tied to the waning dominance of white cultural and political power (Royce 2018).

This racialized lens of political discourse in America was evident before Trump’s rise. Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential victory, historic as the election of the first African American president, challenged the very foundations of the Southern Strategy and the racial resistance codified in the Southern Manifesto. His success signaled a disruption in the decades-long Republican reliance on coded appeals to white Southern identity, law and order, and cultural conservatism. While Obama did not win the majority of Southern states, his campaign mobilized a diverse coalition that reflected the demographic and ideological shifts undermining the old racial order. The Southern Manifesto’s defiance of integration and the Southern Strategy’s calculated appeals to segregationist sentiment were recontextualized by Obama’s ascent, which forced a national reckoning with the legacy of racial politics in the South. His presidency exposed both the progress made and the enduring tensions beneath the surface, revealing that while the architecture of the Southern Strategy remained influential, its cultural dominance was no longer assured.

However, the rise of the Tea Party in 2010 marked a striking continuation of the ideological currents set in motion by the Southern Manifesto and refined through the Southern Strategy. While the Tea Party framed itself as a grassroots movement focused on fiscal conservatism, limited government, and constitutional originalism, its rhetoric and cultural appeals echoed long-standing Southern resistance to federal authority and social change. Much like the Southern Manifesto, the Tea Party positioned itself as a defender of traditional American values against what it portrayed as an overreaching federal government under President Obama.

By mobilizing white middle-class voters, many of whom felt threatened by demographic shifts, economic instability, and the symbolism of a Black president, the Tea Party picked up the torch of what was known as the Southern Strategy. Tea Party rallies frequently featured slogans like “Take Our Country Back” and calls to restore the “real America” all of which reinforced a narrative of white dispossession and cultural loss. These themes mirrored the defiant tone of the Southern Manifesto and the strategic ambiguity of the Southern Strategy, repackaged for a post-civil rights era. Though the Tea Party did not explicitly defend segregation, its resistance to progressive reforms, especially the Affordable Care Act, was often framed in ways that aligned with historical Southern anxieties about federal intrusion and racial transformation.

The evolution of federal social policy from the Reagan era through the Obama presidency reflects a broader ideological divide over the role of government. Reagan and Bush entered office with conservative mandates that prioritized limited government intervention. By viewing federal programs as inefficient and counterproductive, their administrations implemented significant cuts to domestic aid, including Medicaid and housing assistance. In contrast, President Obama’s administration expanded Medicaid and established insurance marketplaces under the Affordable Care Act, reframing healthcare as a right rather than a commodity. His policies emphasized structural support over individual self-reliance, challenging the notion that social mobility could be achieved without government aid. Below, Figure 3, illustrates regional differences in the belief that Black Americans should “help themselves” rather than receive government assistance.

As shown below in Figure 3, in 2012, 90% of non-southerners and southerners preferred that Black Americans help themselves. However, in 2016 when Trump comes into the picture, it is predicted that between 70-75% of non-southerners prefer blacks to help themselves which differs from the 80-85% of southerners.

This shift reflects growing national debates around race and the role of government catalyzed by Trump’s rhetoric and policy positions. By 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the polarizing election between Trump and Biden, support for the “help themselves” narrative declined sharply across regions. This predicted drop likely signals increased awareness of systemic barriers and a renewed call for institutional accountability. Yet by 2024, regional divergence re-emerges: non-southerners maintain lower levels of support, while southerners begin to show renewed preference for self-reliance, suggesting a re-entrenchment of conservative attitudes in certain areas.

As predicted, in Figure 4, between 2016 and 2020, the preference for aid overlaps specifically in the non-south. Trump’s first term emphasized “law and order” and brought race into the forefront of politics. He criticized movements like Black Lives Matter which may have influenced how non-southerners view racial justice and personal responsibility. Due to George Floyd, many especially outside the south began to favor institutional solutions over community empowerment. Then in 2020, we see government help is preferred more where COVID-19 could have been a catalyst. Also, systematic support was seen as essential where policy change was not just a thing but change in perception was as well. In 2020 and 2024, there is another overlap within the non-southerner’s preference which could have been caused by the midterms which resulted in debates about race and government spending. Both sides used rhetoric that either emphasized racial justice or criticized it as divisive. This created a

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Preferring ‘Help Themselves’

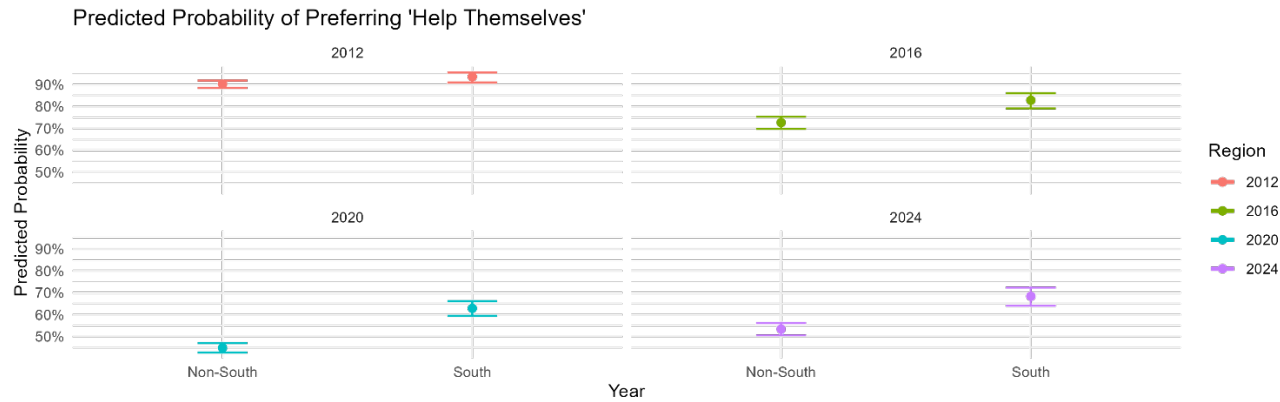
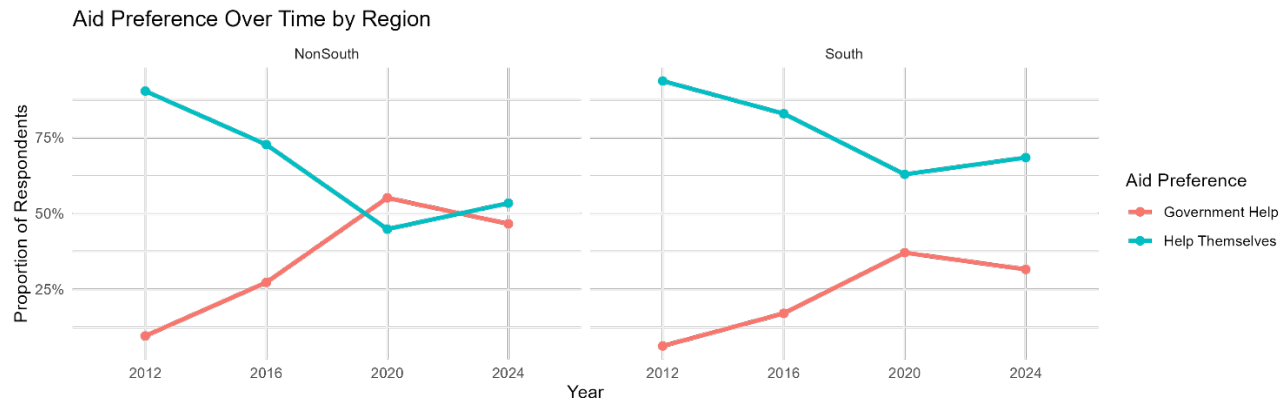


Figure 4: Aid Preference over Time by Region



paradox where some voters supported government programs but became skeptical about race-targeted initiatives especially if they felt excluded. However, in the South, the preferences never touch 50% which shows that even through a pandemic, racial appeals are still at the forefront.

In 2016, the presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton marked a striking reactivation of the ideological undercurrents rooted in the Southern Manifesto and sustained through the Southern Strategy. While Clinton's candidacy represented a historical breakthrough for gender representation, her campaign collided with deeply entrenched cultural and political norms in the South, especially among white conservative women. Trump's campaign emphasized on "law and order," national identity, and cultural restoration, but gender played a crucial role in this iteration. Clinton's association with feminism and progressive social change alienated many Southern white women, whose political identity had long been shaped by opposition to feminist movements and a commitment to traditional gender roles. As Maxwell and Shields note, "Southern white women...were never and still are not feminist, and they will not vote for a woman who is one." (2019, 21).

This resistance was not merely personal, instead it was ideological. Southern white women had historically been mobilized by the GOP through narratives of family values, religious duty, and cultural preservation, often in direct opposition to second-wave feminism: "...the party took hardline stances on social conservative issues like gay marriage and abortion. Such issues could be folded under the banner of family values, cribbed from anti-feminism...that the white South built" (Maxwell and Shields 2019, 17). In 2016, these narratives had resurfaced with renewed intensity, shaping voter attitudes and reinforcing the cultural framework that made Hillary Clinton's candidacy particularly polarizing in the South. Trump's outsider populism and aggressive attacks on Clinton broke conventional norms about gendered political discourse yet resonated with voters who viewed Clinton as emblematic of elite liberalism and cultural decline. In this sense, the 2016 election was not just a contest between two candidates, it was a referendum on the legacy of the Southern Manifesto and the Southern Strategy. Trump's victory reaffirmed the enduring power of coded appeals to race, gender, and tradition otherwise known as the Southern Strategy.

Rebranding the Southern Strategy: Trump's Presidential Terms

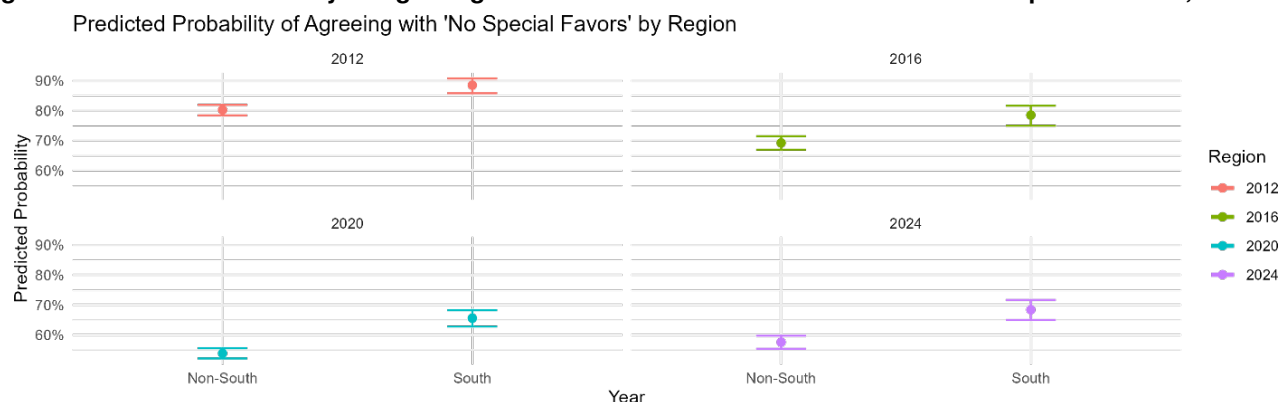
Donald Trump's presidency offers a striking modern evolution of the Southern Strategy, first in rhetoric, then in policy. His 2016 campaign and first term revived the cultural and racial appeals central to the Southern Strategy, a Republican blueprint originally designed to attract white Southern voters by opposing federal civil rights enforcement and promoting states' rights. Trump's emphasis on "law and order," opposition to immigration, and symbolic gestures like defending Confederate monuments reflected a calculated appeal to white identity politics, particularly in Southern states where racial resentment and nostalgia for traditional hierarchies remained politically potent.

During his first term, Trump's administration often resisted federal oversight in areas like education, civil rights, and environmental regulation echoing the Southern Strategy's historical emphasis on limiting federal power to preserve local control. His rhetoric, while not explicitly segregationist, tapped into the same cultural anxieties that animated the Southern Manifesto: fears of federal intrusion, racial transformation, and the erosion of traditional values. In contrast, Trump's second term has intensified these themes, not just rhetorically, but structurally. His administration has sought to dismantle key federal agencies and programs, like the Department of Education, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and civil rights enforcement offices. This aggressive rollback of federal authority reflects a deeper ideological commitment to the Southern Strategy's foundational goal: reducing the federal government's role in shaping social and racial equity. The dismantling of government programs disproportionately affects marginalized communities mirroring the Southern Strategy's historical use of policy to reinforce racial and social exclusion without overt racial language. By shifting responsibilities like disaster response and education to the states, Trump's second term reasserts the primacy of states' rights, a core tenet of both the Southern Manifesto and the Southern Strategy.

In 2017, Trump revoked many diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across the country that Obama put in place. DEI acknowledges and values differences in background, adjusts resources or opportunities to address systemic disadvantages, and creates environments where all individuals feel respected and able to contribute. Figure 5 shows how non-southerners and southerners agree that blacks should work without special favors, correlating with DEI.

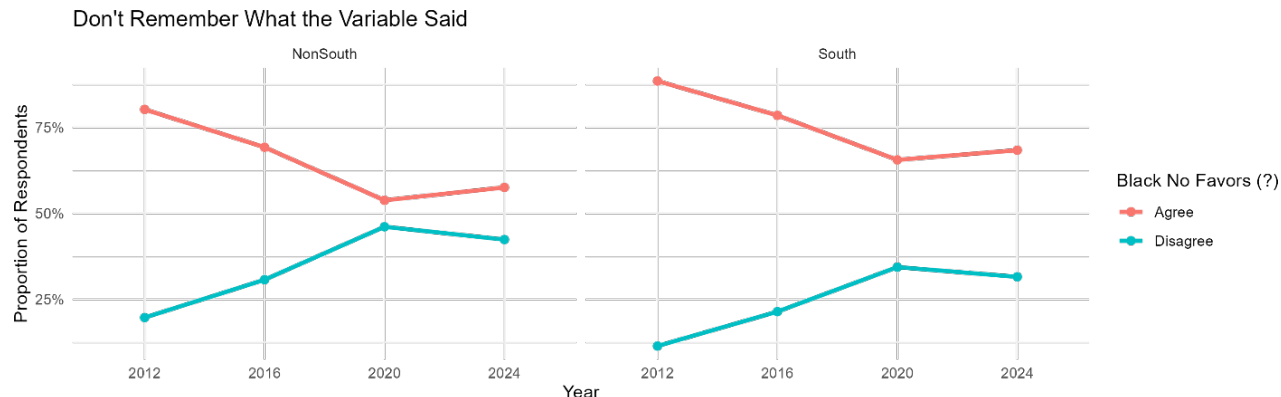
As shown below in Figure 5, from 2012 to 2020, it is predicted that non-southerners' agreement in favoring blacks should work without special favors decreased. However, in 2020, the agreement dropped somewhere between 40-50%. This type of drop could be due to the Black Lives Matter ("BLM") movement as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. BLM allowed non-southerners to attribute racial inequality more to systemic discrimination than to individual shortcomings. "No special favors" is rooted in racial resentment, a subtle form of prejudice that frames race-conscious policies as unfair advantages. Non-southerners began to see race-based disparities as structural rather than personal where "special favors" seemed less objectionable and more necessary causing the agreement to the above variable to decrease throughout the years as mentioned. However, it was not just non-southerners decreasing in this statement from 2012-2020, southerners also did as well. But, in 2024, a predicted 5% increase occurred. This could be due to Americans, especially in the South, who began to express skepticism about DEI initiatives. Also, in 2023, the Supreme Court decided to end race-based admissions in colleges, reinforcing the idea that "special favors" are unjust (Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard & Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina).

As predicted (see Figure 6 below), the majority of non-southerners were split in whether Blacks should work without special favors, with only a little over 50% agreeing with the statement in 2020, a notable decrease from 2012. As BLM and COVID-19

Figure 5: Predicted Probability of Agreeing That Black Americans Should Work without Special Favors, 2012–2024

receded and the Supreme Court shifted further right, DEI in education and employment became a flashpoint. By 2024, over 50% of non-southerners once again agreed that Blacks should work without special favors, coinciding with Donald Trump's explicit pledge to dismantle DEI programs across federal, state, and private sectors. Trump's signature efforts to roll back DEI reflect a broader ideological stance that echoes Richard Nixon's earlier ambitions to disband or severely limit federal government authority, particularly in areas of civil rights enforcement and social welfare. Both leaders framed federal intervention as a threat to individual liberty and local control, reinforcing a narrative that government aid, especially when race-targeted, was unfair.

It is important to note in Figure 6, below, the majority of the South has consistently agreed that Blacks should work without special favors. Although a small dip occurred in 2020, the majority never dropped below 60%. This enduring preference suggests that “special favors” are perceived in the South as unfair advantages, and that these disaffected sentiments align with Trump's revival of the Southern Strategy.

Figure 6: Agreement That Black Americans Should Work without Special Favors, 2012–2024

In essence, Trump's presidency has moved from symbolic defiance to structural transformation. As such, we can see that the Southern Strategy reflects a profound structural and symbolic reawakening. At the start, “...southern white elites turned the clock back in as many ways as they could, reasserting their control and supremacy” (Maxwell and Shields 2019, 6) and this approach has not ended because Donald Trump is attempting to turn back the clock as well. The southern white elites bend their culture to their political will by trading democracy for power (Maxwell and Shields 2019), but when that power is threatened, they make sure to strike other bargains and appeal to other issues. What started out with Goldwater “go hunting where the ducks are” to the driving support for Trump being less about economic anxiety and more about a loss of ‘status’ (Royce 2018) the rebirth of the Southern Strategy is shown.

Discussion

In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, Southern political elites faced a crisis of legitimacy as federal courts dismantled Jim Crow's legal scaffolding. Their collective anxiety found expression in the 1956 Southern Manifesto, a public declaration of defiance. This elite signaling served as the critical first link in a causal chain: by uniting behind a clear grievance, Southern leaders created the discursive space for national politicians to capitalize on regional resentment. A decade later, Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign turned that regional revolt into an electoral asset. His injection to “go hunting where the

ducks are” explicitly courted white Southern voters, translating elite defiance into tangible votes. Richard Nixon then refined the playbook, using “law and order” rhetoric as a coded critique of civil-rights enforcement. Without Goldwater’s overt overreach or Nixon’s disciplined dog whistles, the Southern revolt risked splintering and never coalescing into a coherent Republican strategy.

The process of nationalization accelerated in the 1980s. Ronald Reagan’s 1980 speech at the Neshoba County Fair publicly embraced the Southern gambit, elevating states’ rights discourse from regional dog whistles to a national rallying cry. George H.W. Bush’s 1988 Willie Horton ad further amplified this dynamic, weaponizing fear-driven imagery to prime racial anxieties outside the South. Tracing this sequence, Goldwater through Nixon, then Reagan and Bush, reveals how a once-localized strategy embedded itself into the fabric of national campaigns. At the turn of the century, the chain extended yet again.

George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” reframed states’ rights defiance within a faith-based, moral vocabulary, demonstrating the strategy’s rhetorical adaptability. Under Donald Trump, these coded appeals ignited into overt challenges to federal authority: border walls, economic nationalism, and explicit calls to dismantle or reconfigure agencies became everyday discourse. Each link, elite signaling, tactical innovation, rhetorical nationalization, and strategic adaptation proved indispensable. Had any actor faltered, the broader trajectory of nationalizing Southern grievance might have unraveled before Trump transformed it into the rebirth of the Southern Strategy and renewal of the Southern Manifesto.

Quantitative political science with roots in positivism is often characterized as “x causes y.” That formulation is inadequate for many historical and institutional transformations. Instead of saying racial attitudes in the South lay dormant for decades until Obama arrived, process tracing shows the causal story as “x triggers the sequence of a, b, c which yields y” (Mahoney 2000). These processes can have modest or negligible effects until they accumulate and cross a critical threshold, at which point they produce major, rapid change (Pierson 2003). What appears latent can therefore generate sudden, dramatic political shifts once intermediate steps accumulate and pass a tipping point.

Trumpism did not emerge spontaneously; it is the product of a long, deliberate evolution of political attitudes and institutional strategies. Much like the rise of the subnational authoritarian South in the late 19th century, Trumpism was built, not merely born. As Edward Gibson (2012, 70, emphasis mine) writes,

The Solid South did not emerge: it was built. It was built brutally and chaotically at first, but with increasing institutional sophistication as the years wore on. Its construction required the defeat of a center-led democratic transition of massive proportions, and subsequently, the destruction of living democratic polities.

This quote underscores the broader theoretical claim that causal chain arguments, especially those involving path dependence and threshold effects, explain how distant institutional outcomes stem from early political choices (Pierson 2003). Substituting “Solid South” with “Trumpism” reveals a striking parallel: both were forged through iterative, intentional developments that gradually undermined democratic norms.

The Trump political machine has grown more disciplined and institutionally sophisticated since his first term, reflecting decades of strategic refinement. This research demonstrates how long-run processes, rooted in racialized defiance, rhetorical adaptation, and institutional engineering, can transform seemingly stable democratic systems into authoritarian regimes.

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