Political Rhetoric for the 21st Century:

Analyzing Congressional Tweets in the 2020 US Election

- Scott Richard[[1]](#footnote-1)

Abstract:

How frequent is partisan rhetoric from politicians on social media platforms? Are there particular words or phrases used by one party over the other? These are pertinent questions when examining the rise of partisanship and the increasing use of social media by politicians. This paper examines the use of the word socialism/socialist on Twitter and argues that aspects such as party identification predict the use of this specific term. I test this argument by surveying Twitter posts by a sample of 360 House incumbents and their Twitter posts during the 2020 election year. I find that Republicans are significantly more likely than Democrats to use the word socialism/socialist on their Twitter platforms. This paper provides evidence that some politically loaded words used on social media during the campaign trail may be a particular campaign tactic used by the Republican party.

1. **Introduction:**

Politicians' ability to connect to their voter base and the general populace is predicated on their ability to use powerful outreach and rhetorical tactics. Over the years, direct partisan rhetoric has been a staple of American politics but has also shifted between both political parties. While recent years have shown a general decrease in partisan rhetoric and a focus on bipartisan features, the introduction of social media has created an outlet for more fiery discourse to take place. Issue framing remains a constant and ever-present focus in campaigning, often using partisanship to present specific issues to an audience. The research into these topics is ongoing and never transparent but remains a focus of those interested in the effect of rhetoric and campaigning, in general, have on our politics.

      It is crucial to lay out the theoretical basis for this project to argue better and justify the contribution of my topic and the research design. Regardless of researchers' findings that most politicians tend to oscillate between partisan rhetoric and a stance on bipartisanship moderation, there has been an ever-growing move towards the former in recent years. It is not easy to pinpoint when this shift began, but it is at the very least observable that certain words and phrases have been unsurfaced by politicians and used in their rhetorical strategy.

What seems to have surfaced is an influx or trend of very particular words being used as ways to attack fellow politicians. This research is important because I anticipate that these terms will not only grow in popularity rhetorically but will often be used as strawman arguments by candidates as a cudgel to attack their opponents. Why have specific terms gained popularity in mainstream political rhetoric, and what has caused this to occur? Will this cause a shift in campaign strategy for future political candidates?

           Over recent years, there has been a growing interest in the usage and discussion of "socialism" in mainstream politics and broader society. What was mainly a term left to academia and niche political theory courses at universities has now arguably become a topic of great importance in American politics. It should also be noted that while the term itself has gained some ground recently in left/liberal discourse, the term still broadly has a negative connotation in American Politics. This negative connotation will be important in the relevance of my theory and the basis for this particular research.

           On March 18, 2021, newly elected Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene stated the following to their Twitter followers:

           "Democrats' Build Back Better plan is a political weapon to radically transform America into a socialist nation. Dems are pushing climate justice, $15 min wage, wealth distribution, government-run healthcare, 'family infrastructure,' and MORE taxes into infrastructure plan.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

And earlier, on November 18, 2020, Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sent out a tweet as follows:

         "If you say 'socialism' three times in a mirror, a corporate lobbyist-backed candidate grows their wings.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

What can be observed here is a possible growing trend of politicians on Twitter using a particular word or phrase in their rhetoric. This type of observation is the foundation of my research on the conversation of political rhetorical strategy and social media. There is growing research into the use of social media by politicians and partisan rhetoric as a whole. However, there is not much research into using exact phrases in campaigning/messaging and their use rhetorically. However, first, we must examine how this theory is anchored in the current literature presented earlier in this paper.

1. **Literature Review**

           Much of the research into messaging by campaigns and politicians focus on partisan rhetoric as a focal point of contention in the political world. In this case, partisan rhetoric would be how language is used in persuasive or argumentative forms that hinges on a particular political party's platform and ideology. Albert and Rhodes (2015) pose the question of the dynamics of partisan rhetoric from presidential candidates and how it manifests over the years. The researchers hypothesize that although both Republicans and Democrats have used partisan rhetoric in many different ways, current-day research points to a predominantly "conciliatory" approach. Similarly, Russell (2020) probes how Twitter acts as an institutional force that allows for partisan rhetoric between US senators instead of presidential candidates. Russell is also examining politicians but comes to a much different hypothesis than Albert and Rhode's research while simultaneously probing how much Twitter exacerbates US senators' partisan rhetoric.

           Distinguishing previous research, Russell (2020) theorizes that in this case, Republicans will use more hyper-partisan rhetoric than Democrats, regardless of where the Republicans stand in Congress or the White House. Often, and dependent on many factors within Congress, political parties will potentially opt for what Albert and Rhodes deem the "bipartisan posturing" hypothesis: politicians will tone down hyper-partisan rhetoric to match the moderates in the general public. However, keep in mind that this study was done just before the 2016 Presidential Election, which may arguably be a moment in time where partisan rhetoric changes completely in presidential campaigns.

           Both Albert and Rhodes (2015) and Russell (2020) are measuring slightly similar units of analysis---although this may make a difference further down the research line, they hypothesize two different outcomes. The former theorizes that one of their main independent variables ("bi-partisanship posturing") will be the clear strategy from most politicians that affects partisan rhetoric. The latter broadly hypothesizes that many variables (such as "asymmetric polarizing rhetoric," "minority party agenda setting," etc.). may affect partisan rhetoric (dependent variable) but that Republicans will engage more overall. Much like the significant difference in polarization in Congress between the two parties over the years, "asymmetric polarizing rhetoric" describes how Republican party partisan rhetoric has become much more prevalent than that of the Democratic party. The variable titled "minority party agenda setting" describes the response by minority party legislators to seek other means of agenda-setting outreach in an attempt to negate those in the majority party who have the vast majority of means by which to communicate to the populace.

The use of "issue framing" is among the many focuses of researchers on political messaging. This term describes how politicians describe specific policy issues and their relation to a party alleviating them. Both Arbour (2014) and Walter and Ophir (2019) attempt to explore the use of issue framing within the contexts of two different units of analysis: Republican candidate tweets on Twitter and Republican and Democrat candidate's campaigns. Arbour (2014) adds to the literature by examining the particular issues campaigns highlight and, most importantly, how these issues are framed.

Not only will districts matter in partisan framing, Arbour predicts, but how politicians use framing may point to a connection between partisanship (independent variable) and the use of issue framing (dependent variable). Within the context of the social media platform Twitter (similar to Russell), Walter and Ophir (2016) examine both "issue framing" and "strategy framing" by Republican candidates. Walter and Ophir define "strategy framing" as the particular way in which candidates focus on tenets such as the dichotomy of winners or losers in their messages, a strong focus on optics and performance, and welcoming language such as "character" or "pride."

           This research differs from Arbour by attempting to differentiate between two types of framing (issue and strategy) within what they deem the "e-campaign." Instead of matching purely partisan framing to a political party, such as Arbour (2014), the researchers look at the change in framing during the campaign itself within presidential Republican primaries in 2016. The possible dependent variables measured are issue framing, strategy framing, and campaigning information; the independent variables that could affect these are broadly political events and the period over the 2016 Republican primary. Going a slightly different route and not looking at time as a variable, Arbour looks at the effect of partisanship of candidates, voters' partisanship, and district on the use of issue frames by political candidates.

           Flowers et al. (2002) look at the different techniques political candidates use in their campaigns to reach out to potential voters through a much broader lens. Specifically, they examine what they deem as the "invisible primary": a time frame at the beginning of the primaries in which candidates make an extenuated effort to reach voters in hopes of garnishing early leads. While Albert and Rhodes (2015) focus strictly on partisan rhetoric, and Arbour (2014) explores issue framing, Flowers et al. instead ask how "positioning" is used by primary candidates and the typography of both what they label "substantive" and "competitive" positioning.

           This research adds to the literature by asking whether candidates' strategic efforts are relative to their position/ranking in the primary field. It must be noted that one of Albert and Rhodes' hypotheses does involve a candidate's rhetorical efforts being affected by their place in Congress (aptly labeled by the researchers as "Strategic Context"; hypothesis found on page 567 of research). Similar to the research above, this study uses political candidates as the primary units of analysis, but again, differences arise. Broadly, Flowers et al. (2002) hypothesize that whichever of the three tiers the candidate ranks in (independent variable) will determine whether they use "competitive positioning" or "substantive positioning" (dependent variables).

           When researching the many aspects of political rhetoric, frame issues, and other politicians' methods in a campaign, it is apt to use content analysis.Much of the research covering rhetorical strategy, partisan rhetoric, and issue framing use this method to bridge the gap between verbal/written statements into units that can be operationalized and measured empirically. Whether it be analyzing stump speeches, collecting Twitter posts, or campaign advertisements, the breadth of research on this topic employs various content analysis methods.

           Research from Russell (2020) and Walter and Ophir (2019) analyze US senators' tweets. In recent years, the rise of social media has provided researchers with an opportunity to navigate the role of partisanship and rhetoric used by politicians. To avoid a conflation of tweets focused strictly on campaigning, Russell first sections off tweets by US senators that occur within the first six months of a new Congress. Walter and Ophir conduct a content analysis of tweets and focus on "topic modeling," which takes large amounts of data and boils them down into a more general list of topics. Walter and Ophir choose tweets to analyze because, with the increase of Twitter, messages on this platform regurgitate messages from other, more traditional news sources or amplify new messages from the campaign specifically.

           From 2013 through 2017, posts were collected, analyzed, and then grouped based on tweets' partisanship nature. To be more precise, Russell (2020) sections off partisan tweets but with an additional qualifier: the tweets must specifically call out another senator. However, Walter and Ophir (2019) collect tweets and emphasize issue framing rather than straightforward partisanship, like Russell. The researchers developed and categorized issues, strategies, and campaign information. Tweets were operationalized by assigning numbers that spoke to the amount, or lack of, issues mentioned in the post. There is much to gain from using this strategy of collecting social media posts from politicians. The ability to collect, categorize and analyze content from politicians through social media could be limited by not taking into account or researching the possible differences in rhetorical strategies between social media and live speeches. Politicians may be more emboldened to speak in a hyper-partisan manner or focus more clearly on specific issues they care about on social media instead of a live audience.

           As mentioned earlier, there is a fascinating question of how partisan rhetoric relates to social media instead of a live speech or even a campaign as a whole. Russell (2020) finds that while on Twitter, at least for Republicans, US senators tend to use partisan rhetoric at a considerable rate compared to their Democratic counterparts. On the other hand, Albert and Rhodes (2015), while examining rhetoric during presidential campaigns, find almost precisely the opposite: the more the years go on, the less divisive and partisan both Republicans and Democrats become in their speech. Russell finds that while Republicans tend to engage in more hyper-partisan rhetoric online, there is also an influence that affects both parties: political party positioning in Congress and the Whitehouse. When the Democratic party had minority seat status in Congress and the White House, they engaged in more partisan rhetoric on Twitter, often calling out specific members of the opposite party. Some research questions generated from the literature review are as follows: Why, exactly, has the term seen a rise in popularity in recent years by politicians on social media, and to what end is it being used? Are there factors, such as party ID or majority party status, that will dictate the use of this term?

What are the possible rhetorical effects of the term socialism?

           My observation and general theory anchors in partisan framing and the rise of social media—specifically, Twitter as a platform politicians use as a conduit for their political outreach and rhetorical strategies. The rise in partisanship and social media over the years forms the catalyst from which my theory draws. Not only are politicians constantly using partisan or fiery rhetoric (Albert & Rhodes, 2015), but they do so to frame the opponents' issues. The significance of Twitter, highlighted by Russell (2020), shows that ever-increasingly, Senators are implementing Twitter to extend party polarization from the halls of Congress to that of social media. Additionally, Russell argues that a political representative's rhetorical attack on social media is sometimes dependent on their majority or minority-party status in the White House.

1. **Hypothesis and Variables**

This project seeks to empirically measure the number of Tweets by House incumbents during the 2020 Presidential campaign trail that mentions either 'socialism' or 'socialist'. The sample will focus strictly on the House of Representatives' population during the 2020 General Election as part of the 116th Congress. I contemplated using the US Senate, but it was taken out of consideration with its smaller population size and only roughly a third of its members running each election. I finalized the timeline for gathering the Tweets from January 1, 2020, to November 1, 2020, just before the Presidential Election. The idea was to pinpoint the best range of time that would capture the campaign trail and encompass the wide range of primaries that occur during this time leading up to the election. Transitioning from the proposed theory above and the relevant literature, the formulated hypothesis for this research paper is as follows:

**H1: In comparing political candidates, Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to use the term socialism on Twitter.**

The dependent variable is the number of Tweets (raw numbers) that politicians use the term "socialism" and would be explicitly expressed as an interval-level variable. The independent variable, expressed as a nominal-level variable, is party identification and displayed as either Republican or Democrat. The theory is that the number of Tweets by politicians that use the word "socialism" can be predicted by party identification. The units of analysis for this research will be broadly political candidates, specifically United States House Representatives' Twitter posts.

      The theory that Republicans will use the word socialism more than Democrats is rooted in the literature review by Russell (2020) titled "asymmetric polarizing rhetoric." This term describes the asymmetric manner in which the two political parties, Republicans and Democrats, have greatly differed in the intensity of their partisan rhetoric. Over the years, and even more increasingly so today, Republicans have taken the mantle of using fiery partisan rhetoric. It would, therefore, be theorized that with this rise of partisan language, the use of the word "socialism/socialist" would follow for politicians in the Republican party.

           Some of the standard control variables included in the analysis were gender and the incumbents' current rank in Congress. Because I theorize that Republicans may be much more likely to use socialism in tweets, I wanted to control some conservative-specific variables. I collected data on the Republican vote-share in the 2018 election to see if this may impact the use of the word. It may be the case that if a Republican is in a less-safe seat, they may use the word as an attack on the other party. Similarly, I collected data on the DW-nominate scores for each incumbent to potentially tap into something more than just an R or D next to their name. Because socialism/socialist tends to be such a loaded economic term, I also opted to collect data on the district's medium income and the percent bachelor's degrees earned in each incumbent's district. The idea was that this might be a predictor of the use of the word because they are both economically-based variables. Lastly, I noted which incumbents planned to retire during the 2020 election. It may be the case that the use of the word socialism may be predicted by whether or not someone would remain in politics or not.

IV. **Research Methodology**

           To arrive at my sample, I went through all 435 district elections for the House of Representatives and ensured that I could pinpoint what I would be studying. I would omit House incumbents if they fell into the following four categories. If they did not have an active Twitter account on and after January 1, 2020. Secondly, if the House race had no incumbent and consisted entirely of outside challengers for an open seat. If a third-party challenger was present, the incumbent was omitted. The idea is to focus and pinpoint a Republican versus a Democrat. And lastly, the incumbent was omitted if they were part of a co-partisan race. Because of California's contentious "Jungle Primary" system, quite a few incumbents from that state were omitted. It is important to note that the reasons for omissions that I just listed would be fascinating variables to control for later. It may be the case that certain situations in which either a co-partisan candidate or a third-party challenger may predict the use of socialism on Twitter.

           As with Louisiana, some rare cases use a system that often yields no General Election and therefore was omitted almost entirely. In Louisiana, if a candidate wins more than fifty percent or more of the vote in the primary, they are declared the winner, and there is no general election that follows. In all cases but one, District 5, this was the outcome of the primary and was thus not relevant to this study. I am interested in the rhetoric used online leading up to the general election, so if the primary signaled the end of the race, I was forced to omit the incumbent entirely from the sample.

           It is important to note that most politicians do not have one singular account; many times, there may be up to two or even three accounts. When canvassing the various Twitter accounts, I noticed that I could categorize most accounts within three different categories: personal, congressional, and campaign-related. A personal account would occasionally speak on political matters but may mainly focus on apolitical content as a whole. What I deemed a congressional account is one in which the individual's political position is clearly stated and is used to relay political information to the constituents. I arrived at this distinction between personal and congressional because the vast majority of House incumbents had two main accounts that needed to be differentiated in some manner. A campaign-related account was specifically designed to act on behalf of electing the incumbent and may be sporadic in its activity on Twitter. I was unable to control the various accounts in the regression. However, it was a way to ensure that I was collecting the entirety of the politician's Tweets and not conflating dead accounts or just one account in general. The line between what defines a personal versus a congressional account is sometimes blurred, but it was essential to categorize in this manner.

1. **Data Collection**

           After the omissions were complete, I ended up with a total number of n = 360 House incumbents for my study. More specifically, my sample contains 202 Democrats and 158 Republicans for observation. The difficulty remained of how, exactly, to get access to a large number of Tweets I would be anticipating for this sample. For this data collection, I contracted out the team at SocialScrapr to use a form of web scraping to collect the Tweets for this project. SocialScrapr used the program software Python to generate and scrape specific Tweets from the Twitter API and transfer the Tweets into an Excel sheet. I ensured that SocialScrapr organized the tweets by individual Excel files that differentiated between the "type" of accounts mentioned earlier in this paper. The total number of Tweets that were processed and sent back by SocialScrapr was around 350,000. I word searched both the terms socialism and socialist within each of their accounts within each Excel sheet. Specifically, I counted the number of Tweets that each politician mentioned the term socialism/socialist. For example, if a singular Tweet mentioned socialism two times---which was the case quite a bit---I noted that as counting as one specific time, not two.

VI. **Results**

     A negative binomial regression was used to test the significance of the party ID onto the number of Tweets using the word socialism. The idea was that this specific regression model would best fit the extensive set of numbers contained within my dependent variable.

Number of observations: 333

Pseudo R2: 0.1189

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tweetssocialismused | Coef. | Std. Err. | z | P>z |
| Retiree | -2.036887 | (.5770285) | -3.53 | 0.000 |
| Partisanship D and R | 3.613925 | (.4893749) | 7.38 | 0.000 |
| Rank | .0011383 | (.0010402) | 1.09 | 0.274 |
| Median Household | -3.20e-07 | (.0000132) | -0.02 | 0.981 |
| Bachelor’s Degree | .0183396 | (.02322) | 0.79 | 0.430 |
| Republican Vote Share | -.0099124 | (.0148779) | -0.67 | 0.505 |
| DW-Nominate | .0018404 | (.0026115) | 0.70 | 0.481 |
| Gender | -.2525953 | (.356751) | -0.71 | 0.479 |
| \_cons | -2.164976 | (.8897187) | -2.43 | 0.015 |

The results from the regression provide only a couple of interesting insights. The first is that being a Republican significantly increases your chances of using the word socialism in your Twitter posts.  This does satisfy H1 and shows that there is indeed a relationship between Party ID (specifically Republican) and the dependent variable. A negative but still significant finding is that of retirees on the campaign trail in 2020. It seems that if you were planning on retiring on the campaign trail in 2020, you are more likely not to use the term socialism on Twitter. None of the intraparty control variables, such as Republican vote-share and the DW-nominate ideology score, were statistically significant. Additionally, both the economic-based variables have shown to be insignificant when predicting the term socialism.

VII. **Discussion and Conclusion**

           It may be the case that these results have tapped into a campaign tactic specifically within the Republican party by way of social media use on Twitter. There was no correlation between more specific conservative ideologies or even if the district was wealthier or not. However, it does seem that Republicans are using the word itself during a contentious election time. This paper made full use of web scraping from the team SocialScrapr and was able to collect and empirically count the number of times the word socialism was used by each candidate on the campaign trail in 2020.

           Some limitations of this finding are that I have not examined the actual rhetorical effort of Republicans and how, exactly, they use the term. More qualitative methods may provide helpful information here as this paper only empirically measures the number of Tweets socialism in and not how it is being used. Because the term socialism carries rhetorical weight, it would be helpful to examine individual Tweets and code them based on policy, rhetorical effect, ideological views, etc. Lastly, it may be helpful for future research to code for more than just one word. Other loaded words or terms may provide a more in-depth view of political rhetoric based on party identification.

           This paper has shown that party identification, to an extent, can predict the use of loaded terms like socialism/socialist on the social media platform Twitter. Although, these findings seem to only describe a potential rhetorical tactic on the campaign trail and are not linked to other factors such as party vote share or economic measures in congressional districts. This study contributes to the increasing focus of political rhetoric on rising social media platforms. Increasingly, politicians are implementing many tactics through social media to reach their constituents. Rising social media online may be the conduit of partisan party politics and rhetoric from politicians making their case to the world.

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1. California State University Long Beach, California, USA [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Source: https://twitter.com/mtgreenee/status/1372527796552146944?lang=en [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Source: https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1329132215901556737?lang=en [↑](#footnote-ref-3)