

Analytic republicans and authentic democrats: linguistic analysis of the 2020 broadcast presidential campaign ads

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Abstract

This study investigates linguistic patterns in 2020 presidential broadcast ads using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) automated language analysis tool. Results reveal notable differences: Republican ads exhibited a higher negative tone and more analytic language, while Democratic ads displayed increased levels of cognitive processes and greater authenticity. Interpreted through the lenses of Lakoff’s *Strict Father* and *Nurturant Parent* models, these findings suggest that language choices in campaign messages may reflect core party values. As an exploratory analysis, this study provides a foundation for future research into the role of linguistic framing in presidential advertising and its alignment with ideological archetypes.

Keywords

linguistic analysis, political advertising, persuasive messaging, ideological frameworks

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Introduction

Since Dwight D. Eisenhower first aired a television spot in the 1952 presidential campaign, political advertising has become an indispensable tool for campaigning and winning political office. Although Americans often express a dislike for political advertising, especially negative ads (Berger, 2004; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014), empirical evidence suggests that advertising plays a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes. A meta-analysis by Benoit, Leshner, and Chattopadhyay (2007) confirmed that watching political spots enhances knowledge of campaign issues, alters attitudes toward candidates, and increases the likelihood of voter turnout. Another meta-analysis by Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) concluded that negative campaigning is both memorable and informative, though it may also erode trust in government and political efficacy.

Given the tangible impact of political advertising, it is unsurprising that presidential campaigns invest heavily in it. According to the Biden Campaign Memo on the General Election Paid Media Strategy (O'Malley Dillon 2020), Democrats allocated a historic \$280 million for fall advertising, with \$220 million earmarked solely for television – the largest ad reservation in presidential campaign history. Meanwhile, the Trump campaign committed \$145 million, also primarily focused on television. These extraordinary expenditures translated into record-setting ad volume; in the two months leading up to Election Day, campaign ads aired 804,000 times, more than twice the volume of 2016 and far surpassing 2012 (Ridout, Fowler and Franz 2021). This intensified reliance on television also reflected the unique constraints of 2020: the pandemic curtailed in-person events, particularly for Democrats, and even led to the cancellation of a debate following President Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis. Under these conditions, television became a central channel for reaching and engaging voters, underscoring its critical role in the 2020 campaign landscape.

In light of these unique circumstances, the presidential TV spots of 2020 warrant close scholarly attention. If presidential advertising is indeed a powerful form of political discourse capable of shaping democratic outcomes, it is imperative that researchers thoroughly examine these messages. This study, exploratory and descriptive in nature, assesses the tone and linguistic content of broadcast advertisements in the 2020 presidential campaigns through automated language analysis. More specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- How do Biden's and Trump's 2020 broadcast advertisements differ in tone, analytic thinking, cognitive processes, and authenticity?
- To what extent do these linguistic differences reflect broader ideological distinctions, particularly as conceptualized in Lakoff's *Strict Father* and *Nurturant Parent* frameworks?

The insights gained from this research are relevant to those involved in the creation, execution, and coverage of presidential campaigns, including campaign managers, consultants, media professionals, and the candidates themselves.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: First, it reviews relevant literature on content analysis in presidential advertising, providing background for this study. Next, it introduces the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) method and discusses its application in presidential discourse research. This is followed by a description of the methods and a discussion of the results, framed within the *Strict Father* and *Nurturant Parent* models of Moral Politics Theory

(Lakoff, 2002). The paper concludes by addressing the study's limitations and proposing directions for future research.

1. Literature review

According to Functional Theory (Benoit, Blaney & Pier, 1998) candidates can persuade voters of their desirability in three ways. First, they can engage in acclaiming by offering positive reasons for voter support, such as highlighting past accomplishments, outlining future plans and vision, or emphasizing qualifications, experience, and personal attributes. Second, candidates may attempt to create doubt and concern about their opponents' suitability for office by attacking perceived flaws, mistakes, or failures. Third, candidates who are targeted by attacks can attempt to counter or refute those criticisms. Functional Theory expects defenses to be rare, as they often require candidates to deviate from their core message and may inadvertently highlight a potential weakness. Between 1952 and 2004, only 1% of general election presidential TV spots included defenses (Benoit, 2007).

Empirical studies on presidential advertising have largely focused on acclaims and attacks, typically categorized as positive and negative ads. Damore (2002), for example, analyzed presidential ads from 1976 to 1996, observing that positive appeals were more common than negative ones (66% versus 34%). Kaid and Johnston (2001) also examined ads from 1952 to 1996, with Johnston and Kaid (2002) later extending the analysis to include the 2000 election, which showed that over 60% of candidate-sponsored ads had a positive tone. Kaid and Dimitrova (2005) confirmed that positive ads remained predominant in the 2004 election.

The 2008 presidential campaign marked a notable shift in advertising tone, with a heavy reliance on negative ads. In a stark departure from earlier trends, approximately three-quarters of candidates' ads were attacks, though their strategies differed. More than half of Obama's ads focused on issues and primarily employed emotional appeals, whereas McCain's ads were more image-driven, frequently featuring endorsements from political figures to enhance credibility (Kaid, 2009).

Drawing on Functional Theory, Benoit and Compton (2016) hypothesized that presidential television advertising in 2012 would feature more acclaims than attacks. However, contrary to their expectations, the analysis revealed a continued trend of negativity, with Obama and Romney using attacks in 66% of ads compared to 32% for acclaims. This finding is consistent with Fowler and Ridout (2013), who reported that 61% of ads during that election year were negative.

In 2016, negative advertising remained a prominent feature of the presidential race, although it became somewhat less negative as the share of attack ads dropped to 52%. The main difference was that Clinton employed more direct negative ads, while Trump used contrast ads that combined attacks on Clinton with positive statements about himself (Fowler, Ridout, & Franz, 2013). The same team of researchers noted a further decline in negative advertising to 34% in the 2020 presidential campaign, alongside an increase in positive ads from 18% in 2012 to 25% in 2016 and 27% in 2020 (Ridout, Fowler & Franz, 2021). These findings differ from those of Winfrey (2022), who reported that approximately 89% of Trump's ads and 52% of Biden's ads were attacks in 2020.

1.1. Linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC)

The studies reviewed above provide valuable insights into trends in presidential advertising campaigns over time. However, much of this research has relied on traditional content analysis, where trained judges evaluate and classify texts according to categories predefined by investigators. Variations in coding schemes across studies may have contributed to discrepancies in findings. For example, Winfrey (2022) categorized ads simply as acclaims or attacks, while Ridout et al. (2021) differentiated among positive ads focused on the favored candidate, negative ads targeting the opponent, and contrast ads that combine elements of both. In recent years, automated language analysis methods, such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Boyd et al. 2022), have grown in popularity as a supplement to traditional content analysis. This closed-vocabulary approach analyses text by comparing word frequencies with predefined corpora, converting word counts into scores to show their relative prominence in the text. Initially designed to examine positive and negative emotions, LIWC has since evolved to include a wide array of linguistic, psychological, and topical categories, successfully applied to diverse text types – from essays and blogs to novels and speeches (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010).

A key distinction made by LIWC is between content words and style words. Content words, also known as lexical words, include nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and most adverbs. These words convey the substantive meaning of a message and are often context-specific. In contrast, style words – frequently termed function words – are shorter, more common words such as articles, prepositions, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs. For instance, in a hypothetical presidential campaign statement like, "Our nation is stronger, safer, and more prosperous," the content words are "stronger", "safer", and "prosperous", while the style words include "our", "is", "and," and "more".

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Pennebaker et al. (2014) compared function words to the bones of a message and content words to the meat, emphasizing their complementary roles. While content words provide substance, function words connect, shape, and organize that substance. Notably, function words have remained relatively stable in the English language over time, allowing them to reveal consistent patterns in how individuals and groups structure communication.

Function and content words also provide different insights into language use. Content words allow researchers to assess *what* is being communicated, while function words shed light on *how* topics are approached. For example, a high frequency of articles and prepositions signals analytical thinking, as these parts of speech indicate concepts and the relationships between them. Conversely, authenticity is associated with increased use of self-references, other-references, auxiliary verbs, and adverbs, which suggest a more informal and personable style focused on people and actions (Jordan et al., 2019).

1.2. LIWC in presidential discourse research

A number of studies have applied LIWC to examine presidential and vice-presidential language across various communication forms, political figures, and time periods. For example, Slatcher et al. (2007) compared linguistic styles between U.S. presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2004 election, uncovering distinct patterns associated with cognitive complexity, honesty, and femininity. Extending this focus, Körner et al. (2022) analyzed

speeches and tweets from the 2020 election, finding that Biden’s language was more analytical, with frequent references to moral values, while Trump’s language conveyed a more positive tone. Additionally, Biden used more social words and words related to virtue, honesty, and achievement compared to Trump. The authors suggested that these linguistic patterns reflected distinct forms of power exhibited by Trump and Biden – coercive and collaborative, respectively.

In other studies, Donald Trump’s language was also compared to Hillary Clinton’s. Jordan, Pennebaker, and Ehrig (2018) observed that Trump’s language during the 2016 presidential campaign debates was low in analytic thinking but high in negative tone and authenticity, whereas Clinton’s language displayed the opposite pattern: high in analytic thinking and positive tone but low in authenticity. These findings were echoed and expanded by Savoy (2017), whose analysis of interviews and TV debates revealed that Trump favored short sentences, avoided complex formulations, employed a reduced vocabulary, and frequently used verb phrases – indicating a simple yet active communication style.

Motivated by empirical evidence of Trump’s low analytic thinking scores, Jordan, Sterling, Pennebaker, and Boyd (2019) examined his language patterns within a broader historical context to determine whether he was an outlier or aligned with existing trends. Their analysis showed that over more than two centuries, presidential discourse in America has exhibited a downward trajectory in analytic thinking. Although Trump’s scores were somewhat more extreme than predicted, he appears to be part of this long-developing trend rather than a political aberration. Notably, analytic thinking remained high and stable throughout the 18th and 19th centuries but began to decline around Wilson’s presidency and the onset of World War I.

In the realm of political advertising, Gunsch et al. (2000) conducted the only study to date applying LIWC to analyze linguistic features in positive, mixed, and negative ads. Their research, now nearly a quarter-century old, revealed that positive ads were more likely to include self-references (e.g., “I”, “we”), focusing on the candidate producing the ad, while negative ads contained more other-references (e.g., “he”, “she”, “they”) as they targeted the opponent. Furthermore, positive ads demonstrated higher cognitive orientation, emphasizing the present and future, whereas negative ads often highlighted financial issues, expressed anger, and focused on the past.

Building on this work, the current study analyzes tone, analytic thinking, cognitive processes, and authenticity in Biden’s and Trump’s broadcast advertisements from the 2020 presidential election campaigns. Tone of advertising was examined because negative political messaging is a defining feature of American media politics. From the country’s first contested election in 1800, strategists have crafted advertisements that venerate their candidate while vilifying their opponent (Jamieson, 1984). This tradition endures because elections are inherently competitive; candidates must not only present reasons to vote for them but also articulate why their opponent is unfit for office (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991).

Analytic thinking was of particular interest because Trump represents the lowest point in a long-developing decline in presidential analytic language (Jordan & Pennebaker, 2017; Jordan et al., 2019). Jordan and Pennebaker (2017) suggest that this downward trend may reflect shifts in voter preferences, indicating changes not only in who is voting but also in what they seek in a president.

Cognitive processes were included to supplement tone, capturing rational appeals that engage the mind alongside emotional messaging that appeals to the heart – a distinction central to advertising strategy and research (Tellis, 2004). As Vaughn (1986) observed, effective ads often blend both approaches, noting that advertising “must often make greater use of both rational and emotional devices to have an effect” on the audience.

Authenticity was selected as a critical dimension because it provides a linguistic window into how perceptions of sincerity and relatability shape trust in political candidates. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in the U.S. government plummeted by 14 points among the general population and 30 points among the informed public in the years leading up to the 2020 election (Edelman, 2018: 11). This decline spanned partisan lines, with trust falling by 22 points among both Trump and Clinton voters after the previous election (Edelman, 2018: 12). In this climate, authenticity became essential for candidates to rebuild trust and connect with voters.

All four measures – tone, analytic thinking, cognitive processes, and authenticity – are nontransparent composite variables, as LIWC’s developers keep their specific algorithms proprietary. Nonetheless, each has been validated in past research and has proven effective in capturing the intended linguistic dimensions (Boyd et al., 2022; Pennebaker et al., 2015; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

2. Method and analysis

This study focused on ads aired during the general election phase, specifically within the two months leading up to the 2020 Election Day. Nearly 80% of ads in presidential campaigns are aired during this critical 60-day period, making it a key time for shaping voter perceptions (Holman & McLoughlin, 2000). The final sample consisted of 73 ads from the Biden campaign and 53 from the Trump campaign.

The advertisements were primarily sourced from the official YouTube pages of both candidates. Only ads that included a candidate approval statement were selected, ensuring they reflected the candidates’ official communication strategies and complied with Federal Election Commission requirements for disclosure. The sample was limited to 30-second and 1-minute advertisements, the most commonly used formats, to provide sufficient text for meaningful linguistic analysis.

To ensure the completeness of the collection, two additional sources were used to cross-check the ads. The first was a series of press releases issued by the campaigns announcing new ad launches. The second was the “Democracy in Action” website, which provides a comprehensive archive of political ads from the 2020 election. Each advertisement was transcribed and reviewed for accuracy.

The most recent 2022 version of the LIWC software was used to analyze the text of each advertisement. This process generated linguistic scores, which were then used to compare the Democratic and Republican presidential ad campaigns across four dimensions of interest. The results of independent sample t-tests for each dimension are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Linguistic Analysis of 2020 Presidential Campaign Ads.

Dimension	Republican Ads (M)	Democratic Ads (M)	t- statistic	p-value
Positive Tone	2.84	2.79	0.10	p = 0.92
Negative Tone	2.76	1.83	2.22	p < 0.05
Analytic Thinking	55.38	40.53	3.20	p < 0.01
Cognitive Processes	8.10	10.54	-3.49	p < 0.01
Authenticity	28.62	39.02	-2.02	p < 0.05

Source: Author’s dataset based on LIWC analysis of 2020 presidential campaign advertisements

3. Results and discussion

As Tausczik and Pennebaker (2009) suggest, while computerized text analysis like LIWC can quantify linguistic patterns, the true value of these metrics emerges when contextualized within the original communicative framework. The following section interprets key differences between the Biden and Trump campaigns through the lenses of Lakoff’s (2002) *Strict Father* and *Nurturant Parent* models, using ad exemplars to illustrate patterns in tone, analytic thinking, cognitive processes, and authenticity.

3.1. Tone of advertising messages

The tone of a message, as analyzed by LIWC, reflects the overall emotional sentiment conveyed through language. LIWC measures tone along two dimensions: positive and negative. Words contributing to positive tone include terms such as “good,” “well,” “new,” “happy,” and “respect,” while negative tone encompasses words like “bad,” “wrong,” “too much,” “hate,” and “kill” (Boyd et al., 2022).

Regarding positive tone, the analysis revealed no significant difference between the Biden and Trump campaigns ($p = 0.92$), indicating that neither candidate's messaging was noticeably more optimistic or hopeful. However, a significant difference emerged in negative tone, with Republican ads expressing a stronger negative tone ($M = 2.76$) compared to Democratic ads ($M = 1.83$, $t = 2.22$, $p < 0.05$)

Consider the following example from the Republican campaign with the highest negative tone:

“For five decades Joe Biden has been losing. Joe Biden lost millions of manufacturing jobs to Mexico and China. Joe Biden lost veteran lives waiting for care from the VA. Joe Biden lost America's respect when he opposed the raid to kill Osama Bin Laden. Joe Biden lost our trust when he sold us out to China. Now Joe Biden has lost it. Joe Biden. America deserves better”.

This ad exemplifies the classic attack ad, directly naming the opponent and focusing on a series of alleged failures. By listing concrete losses – jobs, lives, respect, and trust – the ad highlights Biden’s past performance as a series of critical missteps and frames him as an incompetent leader. The repetition of the phrase “Joe Biden lost” implies that these failures may continue or worsen if he is elected.

According to the framework of Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991), this ad employs two thematic designs to amplify its impact. One of them is Being Your Own Worst Enemy, where the candidate's past actions are used against them. The ad critiques Biden's record on manufacturing jobs and veterans' care, emphasizing perceived policy failures. Your Political Character is another technique, questioning Biden's trustworthiness and loyalty, as reflected in references to losing America's respect and selling out to China. These attacks transcend specific policy issues and aim to undermine the candidate's credibility and overall fitness to lead.

Overall, the finding of a higher negative tone in Republican ads aligns with Winfrey's (2022) report that 89% of Trump's ads in 2020 were attacks, compared to 52% of Biden's. This reliance on negative advertising is notable, as it is traditionally associated more with challengers than incumbents. Strategically, challengers deploy attack ads to undermine an incumbent's record, convincing voters that change is necessary and positioning themselves as the agents of that change. In contrast, incumbents typically emphasize their accomplishments and continuity, leveraging their record of leadership. From this perspective, Biden's use of attack ads fits the challenger's playbook, while Trump's heavy reliance on negativity, despite being the sitting president, may have undermined his position.

Negative campaigning, as Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) concluded, can erode trust in government and diminish political efficacy, which is particularly risky for an incumbent. Ridout and Searles (2011) further argue that excessive negativity can cause voters to reject not only the target of the ads but also the sponsor. Trump's incendiary rhetoric throughout his presidency, explored in depth by Garcia (2020), likely compounded this risk. While his core supporters may have rallied around his aggressive tone, independent and swing voters – crucial in the 2020 election – may have grown weary of the pervasive negativity, ultimately contributing to his loss in the 2020 election.

Compared to Trump's ads, Biden's campaign was less negative in tone. Consider this message, which received the highest negative score for Democrats:

“I was a casualty notification officer when I was a young captain in the Air Force. When you're walking up to knock on that door, you're already grieving for the family. These military families suffer, and those spouses are not suckers, and those children are not losers. It's obvious that this president has no real empathy; it just shows he doesn't get it”.

Unlike its Republican counterpart, which focuses on policy issues, this ad centers on the emotional narrative of an individual. It employs Johnson-Cartee and Copeland's (1991) The People Against You thematic design, relying on a personal testimony – a relatable “citizen speaker” – to deliver the critique. By featuring a military officer recounting their story, the ad forges an emotional connection with viewers, contrasting Trump's perceived lack of empathy with the lived experience of someone directly affected by his comments.

Similar to its Republican counterpart, the above ad incorporates Your Political Character thematic design (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991), although the aspects of the opponent's character under attack are vastly different. The Democratic ad highlights Trump's perceived lack of empathy and emotional intelligence, while the Republican ad portrays Biden as an incompetent and unreliable leader.

Moral Politics Theory, developed by cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2002), offers another conceptual framework for exploring the ads discussed above and understanding the broader narratives of the campaigns they represent. At its core, the theory argues that human thought processes are deeply metaphorical. In the political context, these metaphors cast the nation as a family, with the government in the role of a parent and citizens as the children. The political ideologies of liberals and conservatives, Lakoff suggests, emerge from contrasting views on what constitutes an optimal parenting style – how children should be raised and, by extension, how the nation should be governed.

Drawing on the metaphor of the nation as a family, Lakoff posits two major models of political morality. The *Strict Father* model views the world as a dangerous place where discipline, self-reliance, and respect for authority are essential for success. In politics, this model aligns with a conservative worldview that emphasizes strong leadership, personal responsibility, and respect for hierarchy – similar to how a strict father demands obedience and accountability from children. In contrast, the *Nurturant Parent* model sees the world as fundamentally good but requiring care. In this view, children – or citizens – thrive through empathy, nurturing, and encouragement. Politically, this reflects a progressive worldview that prioritizes community, support, and care for all members of society, much like a nurturing parent fosters growth and development in their children. These models serve as archetypes of political leadership, shaping citizens' beliefs and permeating political communication, from everyday discourse to campaign strategies.

The distinction between Lakoff's two models of political morality is vividly reflected in the highest negative-tone ads from both campaigns. The Republican ad draws directly on the *Strict Father* archetype, presenting Biden as a leader who has consistently failed to meet his fundamental responsibilities. In this model, leadership is defined by accountability and strength – qualities the ad suggests Biden has lacked throughout his political career. By emphasizing the loss of manufacturing jobs, the ad portrays Biden as unable to protect the nation's economic well-being, a key obligation of the “father figure”.

The critique deepens as the ad highlights Biden's opposition to a critical military operation and failure to protect veterans, framing him as incapable of warding off external threats and defending the family – another vital role of the patriarch. Furthermore, the ad questions Biden's moral integrity, accusing him of betraying the country's interests to foreign powers, which implies a loss of trust that further undermines his authority. The closing line, “America deserves better,” reinforces the demand for a leader who embodies the *Strict Father* traits of strength, security, and decisive action.

In contrast, Biden's ad leans heavily on the *Nurturant Parent* model, portraying Trump as a leader detached from the suffering of the people, with his lack of compassion signaling a moral failure. In this view, leadership is defined not by dominance and control but by care and support. The ad appeals to these values through the officer's words, which suggest that a true leader recognizes and alleviates the grief military families endure. It emphasizes that these families – spouses and children – deserve respect and dignity, key principles of communal relationships in the *Nurturant Parent* model. By stating, “this president has no real empathy,” the ad underscores that emotional intelligence is the defining trait of leadership in this archetype. A leader must be attuned to the struggles of others and act with a sense of shared humanity. The ad explicitly critiques Trump in this regard, stating that he “doesn't get it,” while implicitly positioning Biden as the leader who does.

3.2. Analytic thinking

Analytic thinking is a metric of logical and formal thinking (Boyd et al., 2022). Linguistically, it is evident when conceptual categories are organized hierarchically and complex ideas are parsed into smaller, manageable components, with attention to the relationships between them. Previous studies have demonstrated the applicability of this measure in various political texts, including speeches, debates, and social media posts (Jordan & Pennebaker, 2017; Jordan, Pennebaker, & Ehrig, 2018).

In the 2020 campaign, Republican ads scored higher on the analytic measure, with a mean of 55.38, compared to 40.53 for Democratic ads ($t = 3.20, p < 0.01$). Moreover, a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.36, p < 0.01$) was observed with negative tone in Republican ads, indicating that more critical ads tend to be more analytic in nature. This contrasts with Democratic ads, where negative tone correlates with a decline in analytic thinking ($r = -0.26, p < 0.05$).

A notable example of this analytic language appears in the ad with the highest score:

“Hunter Biden joined the board of a corrupt Ukrainian energy company for over 80,000 dollars a month while Joe Biden was vice president. In China, Hunter joined the board of a private equity company funded by the state-controlled Bank of China. In Romania, Hunter Biden represented a businessman convicted of massive corruption. The question is not why Hunter Biden used his name to get these gigs; it’s why Joe Biden let him do it”.

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This ad exemplifies inductive reasoning, moving from specific details – such as Hunter Biden's activities in Ukraine, China, and Romania – to a broader implication, subtly building a pattern of behavior that implies Joe Biden’s complicity without directly stating it. The deliberate omission of an explicit accusation, combined with a rhetorical question posed at the end, prompts viewers to piece the details together, subtly guiding them to draw their own conclusions. Additionally, the specificity of the details – countries, companies, monetary figures – gives the ad a grounded, fact-based feel, another hallmark of analytic thinking.

As defined by Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991), this ad functions as a transfer ad, where negative perceptions of Hunter Biden’s actions are shifted onto Joe Biden, positioning him as guilty by association. Lakoff’s *Strict Father* framework (2002) offers insight into how Joe Biden is portrayed as culpable in this scenario. First, in this model, a father (or leader) is responsible for preventing wrongdoing within their sphere of influence and enforcing a clear moral distinction between right and wrong. The ad suggests that Joe Biden either condoned or ignored his son’s alleged unethical behavior, reflecting a failure to intervene when necessary. Second, the ad frames Hunter Biden’s actions as nepotism, violating the merit-based principles central to the *Strict Father* model, which values success earned by personal effort rather than family connections. The ad implies that Joe Biden failed to instill the value of hard work in his son. Furthermore, the *Strict Father* framework, as noted above, holds leaders accountable for protecting their domain from external threats. The ad presents Hunter’s questionable business dealings as evidence of Joe Biden’s inability to guard the nation from foreign influence and corruption. Overall, the ad portrays Joe Biden as a leader who cannot impose limits, uphold

ethical standards, or safeguard the nation, suggesting that if he cannot manage his family, he cannot be trusted to lead the country.

The observation that Republican ads tend to be more analytical contrasts with the findings of Jordan et al. (2018), who reported that Trump exhibited lower levels of analytical thinking during the 2016 presidential debates compared to Clinton. This disparity may stem from the nature of debates, which allow for more spontaneity in communication, where Trump's less formal, more instinctive approach might have come to dominate. In contrast, presidential ads are crafted with strategic intent, designed to project a controlled, carefully curated image that appeals to specific target audiences. Republican ads, in particular, may adopt an analytical tone, reflecting the *Strict Father* archetype, and are deliberately constructed to convey the image of a rational, authoritative leader.

3.3. Cognitive processes

Cognitive processes, as measured by LIWC (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010), reflect the extent to which a speaker engages in deeper, reflective thinking, revealed through specific linguistic dimensions, including causal words and insight words. Causal words (such as *because*, *reason*, *effect*) are used to explain events and establish cause-and-effect relationships, while insight words (such as *think*, *realize*, *understand*) indicate introspection and the construction of meaning from experiences.

At first glance, one might expect that ads scoring high in analytic thinking would also demonstrate elevated cognitive complexity, as both involve structuring ideas and reasoning through them. However, the data reveal a different pattern. While Republican ads, as previously discussed, ranked higher in analytic thinking, their scores for cognitive processes were notably lower. Republican ads averaged 8.10 on this measure, compared to Democratic ads, which scored 10.54 ($t = -3.49$, $p < 0.01$). It appears that analytic thinking and cognitive complexity capture different aspects of thought: the former focuses on the logical organization of a message, while the latter invites deeper cognitive exploration.

An example of this distinction is the previously analyzed Republican ad, which critiques Biden's performance over five decades. Despite having the highest negative tone and a strong analytic score, this ad recorded the lowest measure for cognitive processes in the entire dataset. It presents Biden's perceived failures in a structured sequence but does not encourage further contemplation. Much like a basic equation – one plus one equals two – the ad delivers clear assertions without engaging in more complex reasoning.

In contrast, the following Democratic ad, which holds the highest cognitive processes score, illustrates a more reflective approach:

"I'm Ryan Shazier. In 2016, I didn't vote. I didn't think it mattered. I won't make that mistake again. One thing I learned in life: you have to make the most of every opportunity you get. Right now, you have the opportunity to make positive change in your community by voting. When you vote, you use your voice and you flex your power to make change. Want change? Go vote. Use your power".

Unlike the Republican ad, this Democratic message engages deeper cognitive processes by integrating both causal and insight dimensions. It subtly establishes a cause-and-effect

relationship – voting leads to positive change – while focusing on personal growth and learning from past mistakes, prompting viewers to reflect on their own choices. This approach aligns with Lakoff’s *Nurturant Parent* archetype (Lakoff, 2002), which emphasizes guidance through reasoning rather than directives. By highlighting the link between individual actions and societal outcomes, the ad exemplifies a participatory leadership style, akin to how a nurturing parent helps a child understand their role within the larger family.

3.4. Authenticity

Authenticity emerged as another key dimension where Democratic ads stood out, aligning closely with Lakoff’s *Nurturant Parent* archetype (Lakoff, 2002). Defined as the perception of honesty and genuineness, authenticity is not often associated with politicians (Jordan et al., 2018). To counter this skepticism, campaigns frequently shift the narrative to ordinary citizens, using their stories to create a sense of trust and connection with the audience.

This storytelling approach is evident in the two Democratic ads mentioned earlier. In the Ryan Shazier ad, his personal journey with voting is used to emphasize the importance of civic participation, bringing this message to life. Similarly, the most negative Democratic ad, which critiqued Trump for his lack of empathy, utilized the thematic design *The People Against You* (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991) to convey the emotional story of delivering tragic news to the families of fallen soldiers. The same thematic design is also employed in the following Democratic ad, which received the highest score for authenticity:

“I think you got to go downstairs, buddy... go down... In the beginning, it was okay, and we could just see the silver linings, but I think what’s been really hard is that there’s just no end in sight... Sorry, the dog needs to come in now. I want to know that kids in the United States are not going to fall catastrophically behind because there was no plan and no leadership to get life moving again”.

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This ad epitomizes the *Nurturant Parent* archetype by presenting a compassionate, relatable figure – mirroring the experiences of many parents juggling childcare and household responsibilities amid uncertainty. As the mother speaks into the camera while tending to her child and dog, she subtly critiques the lack of leadership during the pandemic, implicitly alluding to Trump’s failure to guide the nation through the crisis. The authenticity of the message stems from its raw, unscripted tone, enhanced by the close-up shots of her home and the natural blending of personal moments with political commentary. By focusing on shared parental concerns rather than launching explicit partisan attacks, the ad seeks to create an emotional connection, amplifying its resonance with viewers.

The above ad is emblematic of a broader trend in Democratic messaging, where authenticity was more prominent. Democratic ads, on average, scored significantly higher in authenticity compared to their Republican counterparts, with a mean score of 39.02 versus 28.62 ($t = -2.02$, $p < 0.05$). Interestingly, there was a moderate positive correlation between authenticity and cognitive processes ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that more genuine Democratic ads also encouraged deeper cognitive engagement. In contrast, Republican ads showed no such association.

The findings of higher authenticity in Democratic ads diverge from those of Jordan et al. (2018), who observed that Clinton was perceived as less authentic than Trump during the 2016 presidential debates, an impression that may have contributed to her defeat. By contrast, the

stronger authenticity of Biden’s ads in 2020 could have played a key role in his victory. This aligns with the case studies presented by Westen (2007), which demonstrate how both Republican and Democratic campaigns tend to succeed or fail based on their ability to tap into voters’ values, hopes, and fears. Podhoretz (2012) pointed to a similar dynamic in the 2012 election, where, despite Romney’s stronger alignment with voters on policy, Obama outperformed him by a wide margin (81-17) when voters were asked which candidate “cares about the problems of people like me”. Podhoretz argued that such perceptions, rather than policy positions alone, frequently drive electoral outcomes, underscoring the significance of authenticity in political campaigns.

Conclusion

This study examined linguistic patterns in the 2020 presidential broadcast ads, revealing notable differences between Biden’s and Trump’s campaigns that align with ideological archetypes. Using automated language analysis, the findings indicated that Republican ads leaned toward a higher negative tone and greater markers of analytic thinking, echoing *Strict Father* traits. In contrast, Democratic ads reflected *Nurturant Parent* values through greater cognitive engagement and authenticity, emphasizing empathy and shared ideals (Lakoff, 2002).

As an exploratory analysis of a single election cycle, these findings suggest a potential resonance between linguistic strategies and ideological frameworks in political campaigns. A systematic, longitudinal approach in future research could assess whether these archetypal patterns recur over time, offering insight into the extent to which campaign strategies are rooted in stable party ideologies or vary by candidate and context.

This study also raises questions about the impact of archetypal language on voter support. Future research could investigate whether adherence to a *Strict Father* or *Nurturant Parent* framework enhances message effectiveness and perceptions of leadership or whether significant deviations from these frameworks might yield unexpected voter responses. While this study does not address these questions, it lays essential groundwork for future hypothesis-driven exploration.

Future research should also examine the challenges that political advertising, particularly negative advertising, poses to democratic processes and its impact on voter perception. Scholars such as Iyengar and colleagues (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2019) have highlighted the growing phenomenon of affective polarization, where ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the opposing party. Exposure to campaign messaging is one factor that contributes to this animosity. When individuals identify with a political party, they tend to divide the world into an in-group (their party) and an out-group (the opposing party), fostering positive feelings toward the former and negative evaluations of the latter. Political campaigns, by making partisan identities more salient, exacerbate divisions and reinforce affective responses toward political parties.

Negative advertising, in particular, intensifies partisan animosity by portraying the opposition in harsh terms, deepening hostility, and encouraging voters to adopt more extreme ideological positions. Over time, this antagonism risks transforming political rivalry into entrenched partisan hatred. In the 2020 election, 90% of Democrats and 89% of Republicans believed that losing the election would cause lasting harm to the United States (Dimock & Wike, 2020). Warner et al. (2019) found that attributing malevolence to political opponents is associated with

endorsing violent tactics and eroding trust in democracy. The events surrounding the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol starkly illustrated these dynamics, driven in part by divisive political messaging. Individuals who perceive political opponents as existential threats are more likely to question the legitimacy of their actions and policies, undermine democratic institutions, and resort to protests or violence (Iyengar et al., 2012). Future research should examine how linguistic framing in campaign advertising shapes voter perception and, in turn, influences affective polarization and public trust in democratic institutions.

Limitations of this research include potential biases in the composition of the ad sample, which was primarily sourced from official YouTube pages and press releases. While this approach ensured accessibility, it may have excluded ads tailored to specific demographics or geographic regions, as well as those aired on alternative platforms. Consequently, the findings might not fully capture the diversity of campaign strategies or variations in messaging designed to resonate with targeted audiences. Another limitation lies in the proprietary nature of LIWC's composite measures, which, while validated in prior studies, could benefit from greater transparency to enhance interpretability. Additionally, because LIWC categorizes words based on predefined dictionaries, it may not fully capture subtleties in tone or contextual nuances such as humor, sarcasm, or implicit messaging strategies (Kangas, 2014). Future research could address these concerns by broadening data sources and incorporating alternative automated linguistic tools to provide complementary insights into political communication and its alignment with ideological frameworks.

In conclusion, examining linguistic framing in presidential campaign ads is crucial in today's polarized political climate, as it may illuminate how political communication strategies can be adapted to foster a more constructive and less divisive environment. Insights into how language choices reflect core party values and resonate deeply with voters' beliefs can inform more effective political communications, shaping public opinion, engaging the electorate, and contributing to democratic decision-making. Ultimately, broadcast presidential campaign ads are integral to political discourse, playing a significant role in determining whether political rivalry remains a healthy force for democracy or devolves into partisan hatred, which undermines democratic institutions and processes.

As Lakoff's metaphor suggests, the state is like a house, requiring careful maintenance to remain strong and secure. Words, however, are like fire – they can warm and unite, or they can burn it down. By choosing language that fosters unity rather than widens division, there is hope for alleviating polarization and rebuilding trust in the nation.

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