The presidential politics of climate discourse: Energy frames, policy, and political tactics from the 2016 Primaries in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of an investigation into the frequency in which four candidates of the 2016 United States Presidential Primary season communicated their political positions on climate change, and how they subsequently framed these stances in numerous contextual drivers alongside energy policies. A systematic content analysis of political debates, campaign speeches, and press statements reveals how Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and Ted Cruz undertook in vote-seeking behaviour to create distinct stances on energy and climate issues. Results indicate not only partisan polarization, but also that stakeholder dynamics, control of communications and communication frequency are inter-dependent and reinforcing in generating differing climate positions. Institutional dynamics exacerbate these 'logic schisms' rather than providing a means of collective decision making. We test such climate discourse according to a typology of scientific, economic, national security, and moral frames. We also assess how particular frames morph over time, and are impacted by exogenous factors such as global climate change negotiations, national environmental crises (such as the Flint Water Crisis), and contestation over stranded assets and fossil fuel divestment. We find that political climate discourse must communicate to collective, bipartisan interests whilst avoiding politically divisive climate frames.

1. Introduction

The 2016 Presidential Primaries in the United States have been perhaps the most captivating election cycle since Barack Obama's insurgent victory in 2008. Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton faced challenges from the left by Independent-turned-Democrat Bernie Sanders whilst Billionaire GOP nominee Donald Trump defeated sixteen other contenders, including Ted Cruz (Jacobs et al., 2016). Voter turnout in the primary cycle rivalled that of 2008, with Republicans seeing record numbers and Democrats experiencing a higher than usual number of participants (DeSilver, 2016).

The election cycle has been criticised for its lack of coverage on climate change issues (Kalhoefer, 2016). Concerns for the economy, healthcare, employment, and national security seemed to represent the most salient issues to both Democrats and Republicans. Polling data suggests that both parties regarded climate change as 'below average in importance'. Nonetheless, climate change is the single most discrepant issue tested, with Democrats' importance rating 48% points higher than Republicans' (Gallup, 2016).

The political discourse of climate change has split policymakers between the convinced and sceptical camps. It has been argued that such discourse has led the climate debate to a new plateau of polarization where meaningful dialogue between participants has been found wanting (Hoffman, 2011). Such logic schisms (Hoffman, 2011) present significant barriers to climate and energy policy. If policymakers are to overcome these logic schisms, it is important to understand how intentions shape climate change stances and what the consequences for policymaking are. Presidential election cycles are thus the opportune time to keep one's finger not only on the political pulse of America, but other places where populism and post-truth politics are on the rise (Janda et al., 2017)

This study presents the results of an investigation into the frequency in which four candidates of the 2016 United States Presidential Primary season communicated their political positions on climate change, and how they subsequently framed these stances within numerous contextual drivers. Ted Cruz; Donald Trump; Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders were the most successful candidates by vote share in each party adding legitimacy to their climate positions. Although the primaries did not receive as much political coverage as the general election, the investigation itself still offers insight into how political actors may

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genuinely stand on climate issues as nominees often converge to the centre after winning the primaries (Hummel, 2010). Discourse, framing and content analysis reveal how vote-seeking behaviour shapes the presidential candidates' climate change stances. The study develops a basic taxonomy developed of four issue categories with two dichotomous frames per category for source analysis. This highlights the key differences between the candidates whilst broadly capturing both sides of the logic schism.It also reveals some of the undercurrents to current domestic energy and climate policy polarization. The frequency in which the candidates invoked a climate frame reveals differing climate communication strategies. Identifying the most often-communicated climate stances also uncovers how the campaigns attempted to win votes by appealing to stakeholders in specific frames.

Lastly, the study contextualises political climate change discourse and identifies three drivers: the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21), The Flint Water Crisis and Clinton's "Greenpeace Gaffe." This serves to go beyond the counting of frames to demonstrate discursive tactics in action. These 'frames in motion' contextually evolve within stakeholder sensitivities and shape climate narratives and agency influence accordingly. As such, the study reveals how important the political campaigns regard the need to control their climate stances in both unforeseen and predicted circumstances and how this may hinder or advance climate policy development. Significantly, institutional-stakeholder dynamics, control of communications and communication frequency are inter-dependent and reinforcing in generating differing climate positions. Such a relationship exacerbates the current logic schism between policymakers. The implications of such a study make a case for political climate discourse to develop 'broker categories' in which climate positions can be collectively communicated between seemingly polarised interests and narratives. National security is offered as a means of potential reconciliation and the discourse surrounding this must be deliberative in order to promote consensus driven politics and raise public awareness, bringing more stakeholders into the discussion.

2. Political communication, discourse, content analysis, and frames

This section of the paper presents our key conceptual approaches, namely those of political communication, discourse, content analysis, and frames. Thus, the framework utilized in this study is the result of synthesising several literatures. Political communication and political economy literature provide the assumption that all candidates seek power and communicate policy stances to gain votes. Content analysis reveals the extent to which candidates regard the issue of climate change as a source of political capital, denoted by the frequency in which the issue is raised. Discourse analysis and framing literature reveal how the candidates communicate a narrative by specifically constructing climate stances to engage specific stakeholders. How candidates employ certain frames will ultimately uncover whether candidates frame their stances different in context specific situations in order to maximise political capital.

2.1. Political communication

We begin by drawing from political communications literature to illuminate the machinations and intentions of agency behaviour and source material. Denton and Woodward state that 'the crucial factor that makes communication 'political' is not the source of the message, but its content and purpose' (1990, p.11). 'Content and purpose' allude to embedded interests; namely, what the sender's intentions in influencing the political arena are. McNair describes this intentionality of political communication as 'purposeful communication about politics'; arriving to the conclusion that communications undertaken by political actors are for the purpose of achieving specific objectives (McNair, 2011, p.4). This conception of political communication lies in the

standard assumption of political economy: that leaders act with the goal of maintaining or achieving power (Victor, 2009). To contextualise the abstract, this statement is true for all presidential candidates as they are significantly motivated by the possibility of winning elections (Hummel, 2010). Presidential elections have especially strong incentives to pursue vote-seeking strategies because candidates must win a large portion of the national electorate (Samuels, 2002). An explanation of candidate's behaviour is developed: candidates communicate climate stances in an attempt to convince the electorate that they are the best suited contender to serve as President.

2.2. Discourse and logic schisms

Despite the apparent settling of the debate within the academic sphere the understanding of climate change within the public and political realm remains unresolved (Hoffman, 2011, p.8). Discourse analysis is useful in identifying and comprehending a political actor's understanding of anthropogenic induced climate change. We take Adger et al.'s (2001, p.683) definition that discourse represents 'a shared meaning of a phenomenon'. Phenomena vary in magnitude and may be understood by small or large groups of stakeholders on levels ranging from the local to the international. The actors devoted to a discourse participate in varying degrees to its influence by transforming, promoting and reproducing through written and oral statements. Such a constructivist approach uses an 'anti-essentialist ontology [assuming] the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities rather than a single reality… and puts emphasis on the communications through which knowledge is exchanged' (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005, p.176). Nietzsche's statement that 'there are no facts, only interpretations' (Deane, 2006, p.29) is insightful because actors have differing conceptions of reality, rather than objective facts. These shared meanings are indicative of subjective worldviews (Sovacool et al., 2016, p.332), representing a particular way of viewing the world and defining what is possible. Thus, for stakeholders, discourse captures both problems and their necessary solutions (Rafey and Sovacool, 2011, p.1142).

Given the scientific consensus on climate change, we have polarised the discourse into two distinct camps – those that hold to the worldview of anthropogenic climate change and all other views. Hoffman (2011) proposes that a "logic schism" - whereby competing worldviews hold no common values and beliefs - exists concerning the debate on anthropogenic induced climate change. Such schisms 'arise due to linguistic and value differences that lead to positions that are relatively exclusive, rigid, inelastic and restricted' (Hoffman, 2011, p.8–9). The result leads to both sides talking past each other. Hajer and Versteeg (2005) argue that a discussion (the object of discursive analysis) is subject to democratic quality, known as 'deliberation'. A phenomenon can have 'deliberative quality if it is inclusive, open, accountable, reciprocal and integer and when the various participants can learn through iterative dialogue'(Hajer and Versteeg, 2005, p.176). Logic schisms in part arise from a lack of deliberation in discourse and if meaningful climate policy is to transcend such barriers, discourse and climate politics need to be consensus orientated. Easier said than done. Partisan polarization - the homogenisation of policy positions and increasing differences between party stances on major political issues, is increasing. Hoffman (2011, p.20) offers 'broker categories' - worldviews that hold common ground; in order to bridge the schism to difficult issues. At the same time, these categories need to be non-threatening (deliberative) in nature so as not to be immediately dismissed out of hand by competing stakeholders.

2.3. Content analysis

Relatedly, content analysis is useful in understanding how actors use language to mobilise key stakeholders, shape public opinion and build consensus on solutions whilst sustaining media attention on a specific issue (Fletcher, 2009).

Content analysis is the systematic classification and description of