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DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL STRATEGY, AND THE GOP:
A HABERMASIAN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS SURROUNDING THE ISRAEL-HAMAS
WAR

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ABSTRACT

The realm of the digital public sphere remains an area of interest for scholarship concerned with the democratic project. Technology once promised an upward trajectory for democratic conversation and the transmission of ideas, yet the actualization of those technologies seemingly undermines the promises of a time passed. This thesis is concerned with social media, namely X (Twitter), as a realm for political engagement and the implications of digital discourse. I start by tracking deliberative democracy theory, as an ideal, and the practical functionalities of the theory outlined in the twenty-first century. For the process of deliberation to unfold, a healthy public sphere needs to be maintained; therefore, I track the evolution of the public sphere as outlined by Jurgen Habermas, the functionality of constitutive rhetoric, and the emergence of the digital public sphere. This is followed by an analysis of algorithms as inherently oppressive background operations of the digital public sphere, designed by individuals with inherent biases that present themselves in the information that information systems present to the users. These systems unfairly benefit politicians, bolstering their voices to the expense of individuals with less social capital. To ground this literature, my project seeks to understand how various members of the GOP construct their digital identity, specifically focusing on their rhetorical strategies during a primary season. Using Andre Brock’s Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis as the guiding methodology, this thesis pulls the data from Mike Pence, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, and Nikki Haley.

Keywords: Habermas, Deliberative Democracy, Israel-Hamas, Public Sphere
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family and coaches who have supported me throughout my academic journey:

My family have stood by me in moments of immense uncertainty, listening to me panic on phone calls and providing me with comforting words to ease my worries. Without your constant support, I would not have made it. Thank you for the many late calls, encouraging messages, and excitement as I continue to navigate the academic world. I love you all.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE ................................................................. i
ABSTRACT ................................................................. ii
DEDICATION ............................................................... iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................... iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS ...................................................... v

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ......................................................... 1

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ........................................... 4
    Deliberative Democracy and its Functions ......................... 4
    Evolution of the Public Sphere ...................................... 17
    Algorithms of Oppression ............................................ 34
    Politicians and Social Media ...................................... 40

III. METHOD ............................................................. 42
    Framework .......................................................... 42
    Data Collection .................................................... 44

IV. ANALYSIS ............................................................ 47
    Mike Pence .......................................................... 48
    Chris Christie ...................................................... 55
    Ron DeSantis ....................................................... 62
    Nikki Haley ........................................................ 70

V. DISCUSSION ........................................................ 77

Table of Contents (Continued)
VI. CONCLUSION. ................................................................. 82
VII. REFERENCES. ............................................................. 84
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has seen technologies take a pronounced role in shaping human culture, institutions, and society. As explained by Zeynep Tufekci (2017), “The shift from face-to-face communities to communities identified with cities, nation-states, and now a globalized world order is a profound transition in human history” (p. 5). The dynamics of public spheres are increasingly intertwined with power relations, social structures, and technologies that evolve over time. For example, the New York Times announced in October 2022 that, “Elon Musk Completes $44 Billion Deal to Own Twitter” (Conger and Hirsh, 2022). The news came after months of back-and-forth between Musk and the previous owners of the platform, lawsuits, verbal condemnations, and a near full trial before the acquisition. A year later, the implications of the purchase are not fully known; however, the connection between X, formerly Twitter, and democracy is a subject of interest as the platform is a prominent tool for political communication and engagement. In 2009, the platform's power as a journalistic tool unfolded as US Airways flight 1549 landed successfully on the Hudson River in New York City (Hayes, 2023). Ferry passenger Janis Krums broke the story on Twitter with a hastily snapped camera phone image of passengers disembarking the half-submarined aircraft, and the site promptly crashed as thousands of Twitter users attempted to view it simultaneously. X’s unique characteristics, including its real-time nature, global reach, and accessibility has allowed it to play a significant role in shaping democratic processes. Political actors, from elected officials to activists and citizens, utilize X to disseminate information, mobilize supporters, and engage in public discourse.
Potential democratization of communication enables a more direct and immediate connection between political leaders and their constituents, potentially enhancing transparency and accountability in democratic systems. Yet the relationship between X and democracy is not without controversy, as concerns about misinformation, echo chambers, and the potential for manipulation have raised questions about the platform's contribution to a healthy democratic public sphere. Therefore, the case-study of this thesis examines the various strategies utilized on X, specifically from the perspective of GOP presidential candidates during the 2024 primary cycle. This thesis demonstrates how presidential candidates used X as part of their campaign during a contentious primary period in the fall of 2023. The members of the GOP, while having similar platform standards as representatives of their overarching political party, have strikingly different approaches to online dialogue and strategy. Politicians obviously hold a unique position in the creation of political culture as they maintain the ability to bring political wills to the consensus in an effort to win over voting blocs towards their political whims.

This thesis will first develop an outline of deliberative democracy and its functions, analyzing both the theoretical foundations of the framework and the pragmatic contributions made throughout the twenty-first century. Deliberative democracy, as an ideal to the status quo, stands in stark contrast to aggregate politics in many regards, necessitating an accessible and dynamic space for public discourse to take place. As such, the evolution of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere will be developed to further understand the spaces necessitated for the functionality of deliberative politics. The public sphere will serve as the guiding concept for this work, linking deliberation and democracy to the rhetorical practices, or constitutive rhetoric, of politicians in the digital public sphere, specifically analyzing X as a pertinent realm of political discourse. An analysis will be provided as to why studying politicians is uniquely
important, recognizing that the youth are progressively turning away from the traditional media and towards the digital realm for their political information; therefore, understanding how politicians engage digital users is fundamental for conceptualizing how future generations might come to engage in politics. The methodology guiding the discourse analysis will be Andre Brock’s Critical Techno Discourse Analysis, with Foucauldian Discourse Analysis serving as the methodological framework. This thesis examines four politicians: Mike Pence, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, and Nikki Haley.
CHAPTER TWO
Review of Literature

Deliberative Democracy and its Functions

Theoretical Foundations

Bachtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, and Warren (2018) provide a few key characteristics of deliberative democracy. They explain that, “Deliberative democracy is grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issue they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives” (p. 2). Deliberation itself is meant minimally as the mutual connection that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern. Theories of deliberative democracy maintain that deliberation must have a central place in civic life before calls for voting on issues of general interest can occur. This concept of a deliberative democracy exists in stark contrast to an aggregate democracy, one that is normally based on the counting of votes, with deliberative conversation occurring alongside the vote or after the voting has occurred (Bachtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, & Warren, p. 2). Within established democratic states, both deliberation and aggregation are usually important for decision-making at different stages. Ideally, citizens and representatives discuss the issues before them and either come to agreement or, when conflict remains after discussion, make the ultimate decision by a vote. The role of deliberation before votes, unlike how it is practiced within aggregate democracies, is to help citizens to better understand the issue, their own interests, and the perceived interests of others.

Deliberative democracy theory is often said to have developed from one of two traditions: the Rawlsian liberal tradition and the Habermasian critical theory tradition.
(Hammond, 2019). For most of its career, deliberative democracy research has been something of a small subfield of political theory, with numerous empirical calls for proofs of implementation, institutional design, and pragmatic evaluation (Ryfe, 2005). However, despite claims for empirical proof, deliberative democracy theory arises in part to address the failing representative mandate in liberal democracies and explores a broader range of mechanisms for overcoming the profound disconnect between citizens, their political representatives and the policy-making process (Crowley, 2009). The 1990s saw democracy theory take a strong deliberative turn, with democratic legitimacy coming to be seen in terms of the ability or opportunity to participate in effective deliberation on the part of those subject to collective decisions (Dryzek, 2009). This “deliberative turn” in democratic theory owes much inspiration to a lack of faith in representative political practices that manifest as public cynicism, apathy, and distrust by the constituents beholden to these systems.

For Jurgen Habermas, the question of how democracy ought to be practiced is central as he outlines serious limitations to the concept of “reason” developed in previous centuries, which he traces to an erroneous understanding of the concept of reason itself (Vitale, 2006). Vitale (2006) explains that the foundation of modernity ruptured the ethical unity present in a sacred world, causing the fragmentation of the various spheres of value that started to differentiate out from one another based on the criteria of specific rationalities. For example, Max Weber used the concept of rationality in a number of different ways (Carrol, 2011). A formal rationality of the economic, legal, and bureaucratic systems that subsume decisions under general rules and so allow an individual to calculate the likelihood of a particular outcome, and a substantive rationality of these systems when they aim to distribute goods in a particular way or to bring about some substantive end that fulfills a publicly defined purpose (Carrol 2011; Vitale 2006).
Vitale (2006) explains, “For Weber, the advancing process of rationalization meant that the cognitive, aesthetic-expressive and moral-evaluative elements of the religious tradition detached themselves, and were then free to follow their inner logics” (p. 740). As a result, politics, art, eroticism, science, and religion constituted independent spheres governed by distinctive and incomparable principles. In this modern context, the now fragmented and differentiated spheres increasingly coexist in tension since nothing could encompass all of them as religion had historically done (Vitale, 2006; Carrol, 2011). For Weber, modernity resulted in both the loss of meaning and loss of liberty.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1*, Habermas disagrees with both of these conclusions. The very existence of a lifeworld, or a world-concept, and corresponding validity claims that provide scaffolding with which those acting communicatively order problematic contexts of situations (Habermas, 1984, p. 70), all actors share a certain horizontal of meaning, despite the immense complexity of and fragmentation of modernity (Vitale, 2006). Vitale explains, “[O]ne of the main problems associated with the process of fragmentation is the gap between the elitist concepts developed by specialists in the different cultural spheres of value and everyday concepts” (p. 741). The existence of a lifeworld means that there will always be a possibility of dialogue and the potential for consensus-based solutions to the many problematic situations that exist in the fragmented universe of modernity. However, Habermas does not deny that increasing bureaucratization and its related functions pose considerable problems for the modern governing system. The institutions formed in the process of societal rationalization, the capitalist system and the modern state seek to dominate other spheres of value, putting them at a disadvantage. “Habermas sees the capitalist system, on the one hand, and the modern state, on
the other, at the two subsystems of a systemic universe that are in tension with the lifeworld” (Vitale, 2006, p. 742).

It is apparent a conceptualization of democracy that is grounded in discourse and political deliberation is necessary. Deliberative democracy theory formation is thus a short formula for a normative theory of democracy that tries to provide a criterion to analyze the legitimacy of a given liberal-democratic political system (Biebricher, 2007). In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), Habermas poses this critique of political systems:

As with all functional systems, politics, too, has become an autonomous, recursively closed circuit of communication furnished with its own code. In connection with the legal system responsible for securing legality, such a contingent, self-referential politics draws everything it needs for legitimacy from itself. The need for legitimation can be met paternalistically through lines of connection that, running from the ritualized confrontation between the incumbent Government and the opposition, reach via party competition into the loose network of the voting public (p. 342).

Each functional system forms its own picture of society, with subsystems no longer sharing a language in which the unity of society could be represented for all of them in the same way. There is no longer any place where problems relevant for the reproduction of society can be perceived or dealt with (p. 343). Habermas (1996) goes on to explain that special languages like money or administrative power wear down ordinary language, so much that neither one presents a sounding board that would be sufficiently complex for thematizing and treating society-wide problems (p. 343). This disintegration of society poses a special challenge for politics and law, with the only standard of “legitimacy” pertaining to legal and political questions, but not to societal ones.
In response to these institutional challenges, Habermas came to view “deliberation” as a normative category which underlines a procedural conception of democratic legitimacy (Lubenow, 2012). Two normative models, the liberal and the conservative, had dominated the debate of democracy leading into the latter half of the twentieth century; however, Habermas proposes the procedural model of deliberation. The liberal normative model has a democratic objective for the intermediating of society and the state so that politics has the function of aggregating social interests and imposing them on the state system. The conservative model does not obey market structures but orients public communication by mutual understanding in public spaces. In contrast to both models, the deliberative model seeks to take elements from both sides and integrate them into a new and distinctive manner (Lubenow, 2012, p. 60-61). Lubenow explains, “This comprehension of democratic process has stronger normative connotations than liberal model, but less normative than republican model” (p. 61).

The discursive democratic theory reserves a central position to the political process of opinion and will formation, without coming to understand the state-judicial constitution as something secondary. Like the liberal model, the discursive model places respect on the limits between the State and civil society. Lubenow (2012) further, “Democratic procedures offer rational results as institutionalized formation of opinion and will is sensitive to the results of its informal formation of opinion which results from autonomous public spheres and gets formed about them” (p. 61). Public communication is captured and filtered by associations and parties, which become canonized to institutional forums of resolution and decision making. In democratic theory, the public sphere plays a central role and ought not be limited in its ability to see and identify issues of societal interest. The concept of the public sphere will be expounded
upon in order to exemplify the mechanisms for the arena in which deliberation takes place, before grounding this analysis into online spaces as practiced within the status quo.

**Pragmatic Contributions**

In response to critiques from empiricists, modern rhetoricians and politicians have provided a more pragmatic approach to the development or implementation of deliberative democracy, transitioning away from the more Habermasian theoretical approach. Two such authors are current United States Ambassador to Germany Amy Gutmann and Harvard professor Dennis Thompson in their book *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (2004). Gutmann and Thompson (2004) begin their analysis with a contextualization of what deliberative democracy is for the individual that may consider themselves a nontheorist. They explain, “Most fundamentally, deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reasons for the decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return” (p. 3). Therefore, the first and most important characteristic of deliberative democracy is a *reason-giving* requirement, one that begs that reasons should be accepted by free and equal persons seeking fair terms of cooperation. The basis for a reason-giving process is a moral one, common to many held conceptions of democracy (p. 4). Individuals should not be treated merely as objects of legislation, subjects to be ruled, but as autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their society through their representatives.

Darrin Hicks (2002) adds to this contextualization through analyzing what he characterizes as the “promises of deliberative democracy”. In line with Gutmann and Thompson’s first characteristic, Hicks furthers that the legitimacy of a democratic system of
governance rests on its commitment to public justification (p. 224). That public officials should justify social and political policies to all citizens may seem noncontroversial; however, the limits of human judgment, diversity of values, and the presence of competing needs and desires that result from the free use of reason may make this political dream seem a practical impossibility. Hicks explains that deliberative democrats may address this dilemma by shifting the locus of justification for applications of social and political power from public officials to the stakeholders themselves. He puts forward, “[T]his strategy renders the reasons used to justify those policies consistent with the conceptions of the good held by stakeholders, making it more likely that they will accept the policy as justified” (p. 225). Evidence suggests that stakeholders who have adequate pre-decisional voice and participate in open, credible, and collaborative processes are able to revise any decisions resulting in inefficiency of injustice will endorse policies ensuring from this process, even at the cost of their own individual interests (Thibaut & Walker, 1975).

Deliberative democracy justifies a much stronger ideal of inclusion than is present in other forms of democratic theory, with the adequate ideal that all persons are deemed capable of making informed and insightful judgements on moral and political manners (Hicks, p. 226). In deliberation, all should have an equal chance to express their wishes, desire, and feelings with an equal chance to introduce, question, and counter any arguments put their way. Additionally, constituents must be able to call attention to power relationships that may constrain the free articulation of their assertions and questions (Hicks, p. 226). As such, politicians have an obligation to present a set of reasons that take into account the myriad of contesting discourse constituting public opinion or find ways of converging competing perspectives when possible and refuting unreasonable claims when necessary. Obviously, an impossibly large body of
citizens deliberating in a single forum, face-to-face, on every decision is practically infeasible. Individuals do not have to pass judgment on every single policy or collective decision to which they are subject; however, they may participate in the legitimization of social policy by engaging in the formation and contest of discourses whenever they desire.

The second characteristic of a deliberative democracy posited by Gutmann and Thompson is that the reasons given in this process should be accessible to all the citizens to whom are being addressed (p. 4). Justification necessitates that the reasons being put forward be comprehensible for if one seeks to impose their legal will, comprehensibility in position allows for fruitful discussion surrounding an issue. Further, deliberation must take place in public. This is in stark contrast to Rousseau's conception of democracy, as a space in which individuals reflect on their own what is right for society as a whole, and an embrace of a Habermasian understanding of democratic ideals, as one in which public individuals can gather to discern issues of general interest. Gutmann and Thompson posit that, “A deliberative justification does not even get started if those to whom it is addressed cannot understand its essential content” (p. 5). For example, it would not be acceptable to appeal to an authority of revelation, either divine or secular. The authors cite the war in Iraq as an example, with most of the justification for going into the conflict appealing to evidence and beliefs that almost everyone could access. Though Bush implied that God was on his side, he did not rest the argument for intervention on instructions from a divine ally.

Hicks furthers this characteristic through his contention that democracy, in principle, refers to a promise that those who call upon the law and those whom the law calls upon are also its authors. He explains, “Given the heterogeneity of ‘the people’, an institutional arrangement generating binding decisions is democratic if it is constituted by free and open participation of all
(or at least sufficient representation of those affected by the decision) and if, from the perspective of the participants, the outcomes of this process are not known in advance” (p. 230). If the decision-making process is dependent on the claims and conduct of the participants, and not the material interest, social status, cultural attachments, or ethical commitments ascribed to participants, then the decision arrived at constitutes as democratic. This is not to say that all opinions are relevant, informed, insightful, or actionable, but that final judgment should always be situational and not attached to any particular person or group before they speak.

As such, three sorts of goods are required for a political equality to substantiate “the people”: access, resources, and capabilities. This would require access to the full range of information necessary for citizens to understand their own needs, full range of data used by public authorities to construct social issues, and concrete efforts on behalf of governing bodies to intervene when obvious inequality presents itself. Hicks expounds, “Deliberators, if they are to enjoy equal rights of participation, must not only be granted access to important information and possess relative equality of resources; they must also be relatively equal in the capabilities needed to have their claims acknowledged and taken seriously” (p. 231). If reasoned public deliberation capable of securing democratic legitimacy is a priority, alongside the possession of a minimum threshold of cognitive and communicative capability is a necessary condition for political equality and hence legitimacy, then the reforms necessary to ensure that all citizens can participate in an equal fashion should be a political mandate backed by the force of law (p. 233). Systemic inequality generates a vicious cycle of exclusion that drains political motivation for the most disadvantaged to participate in public deliberation or community collaboration; therefore, egalitarianism would focus attention on the conditions contributing to the relative deficiencies in political motivation and call on advocates and educators to generate strategies for achieving
motivational parity. Unfortunately, the political reality of the status quo sees little effort being made toward this ideal, an idea that will be explored further in upcoming sections.

A third characteristic of deliberative democracy posited by Gutmann and Thompson is that its processes are directed at producing a decision that is binding for some period of time (p. 5). In this respect, discussion is aimed at influencing a decision the government will make, or a process that will affect how future decisions are made. At some point, deliberation will cease and leaders must make a decision. For example, deliberation about whether or not to enter into Iraq went on for a long period of time, longer than most of the preparations for war; however, the president had to make a decisive decision whether or not to proceed. Post-decision, a new deliberation arises that calls into question whether the original decision was justified or not. It is not as though this new deliberation seeks to undo the original decision, but rather seeks to cast a judgment claim over the choice to do or not to do something.

The continuation of debate exemplifies the fourth characteristic of deliberative democracy that Gutmann and Thompson lay out: processes are dynamic (p. 6). Though deliberation aims at producing justifiable decisions, it does not presuppose that the current decision will in fact be justified, nor that a justification today will be sufficient to an indefinite future. Deliberative practices keep open the possibility of a continuing dialogue in which citizens can criticize previous decisions and move ahead towards new ideas and ideals. Decision-making processes and the human condition are an innately imperfect orientation, so the decisions we make today may be correct tomorrow, but become less justifiable over time. However, deliberation forces reciprocity between constituents and necessitates that, even in disagreement, citizens be willing to engage one another through conversations surrounding policy, culture, morality, and other issues of general interest. The authors explain, “The basic premise of
reciprocity is that citizens owe one another justifications for the institutions, laws, and public policies that collectively bind them. Reciprocity suggests the aim of seeking agreement on the basis of principles that can be justified to others who also share the aim of reaching reasonable agreement” (p. 132).

Interestingly, deliberative democracy theory contends that what the majority of citizens decide, even after deliberation, need not be right. For example, a majority of individuals may be in the wrong if they require a minority of individuals to worship the same deity they do (p. 135). A purely procedural conception of democracy would contend that this law is justifiable; however, it cannot be justified to the minority of individuals who do not share the majority’s religion and whose personal integrity the law ignores. This scenario violates the principle of reciprocity as it ignores the ideal of treating every person as a free and equal human being. Reciprocity also prescribes a principle of fair opportunity, necessitating nondiscrimination in the distribution of social resources the people value highly. Basic opportunities like health care, education, security, work, and income are goods necessary for living a decent life and having the ability to flourish beyond basic necessities. Laws, then, cannot be mutually justified, as reciprocity principles require, if they violate the personal integrity of individuals.

Further, many democratic theorists tend to emphasize the disagreements with their rivals in trying to demonstrate the superiority of their own principle. In contrast, deliberative democrats initially stress agreements, an inverse in approach. Most theories of democracy either directly or indirectly defend the protection of many individual liberties, also claiming that all persons will secure the opportunity to live a good life should their principles be implemented. Similarly, most theories suggest that their principles support fair opportunity. Guttman and Thompson (2004) explain,
These points of convergence provide the initial content for the substantive principles of deliberative democracy. Although other theorists sometimes seek such convergence, deliberative democrats are better situated to achieve it because they do not try to appropriate merely what they, from their own perspective, regard as valuable in rival theories. Although they do not purport to be neutral among all first-order theories, deliberative democrats do not require that competing first-order theories be rejected. Substantive principles have a different status in deliberative democracy: They are morally and politically provisional in ways that leave them more open to challenge and therefore more receptive to democratic discretion (p. 137-138).

Deliberative democracy is different from other theories because it contains within itself the means of its own revision, with its provisional status inviting ongoing challenges to its own and others theories or principles.

Hicks (2002) furthers this understanding by arguing that, “At the core of any account of deliberative democracy is a commitment to public reason: that legitimate decisions will be supported by reasons that all governed by those decisions can accept without having to negate their deeply held beliefs and values, or at least by reasons that cannot reasonably reject, because such rejection would entail forcing others to sacrifice their convictions” (p. 241). Public reason, as an ideal, is foundational to a deliberative account of what democracy ought to be as it provides the basis on which those who disagree can continue to cooperate and still devise legitimate laws together. Reason, in this sense, refers to the common reason, understood as a means of formulating plans, putting ends in order, and making decisions accordingly (p. 241). Public reason sets a threshold on what counts as evidence for moral claims and what sorts of moral claims can justify political proposals, holding that citizens and officials should base their claims
on publicly available evidence. Reason also dictates that individuals ought to be politically reasonable; meaning, citizens are willing to collaborate with others in proposing fair terms of social cooperation and have the commitment to act on these terms. As politically reasonable persons, they would think it unreasonable to use political power to repress any conception of the good and the life-plans it generates that differs from their own.

The combination of the four principles (reason-giving, accessible, binding, dynamic), coupled with principles of reciprocity, outline a form of government in which free and equal citizens justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present but open to challenge in the future (Gutmann and Thompson, p. 6). This is based upon a historical understanding that ordinary citizens debating together can reach better decisions for society than experts acting alone. In pursuing this aim, deliberative democracy serves four interrelated purposes: the legitimacy of collective decisions, encouraging public-spirited perspectives on public issues, mutually respectful processes, and the ability to correct past mistakes (Gutmann and Thompson, p. 9-11). This serves in direct contrast to an aggregate democracy, and is better accounting for justifications around policy issues. In aggregate democracies, officials put decisions through an analytic filter, such as cost-benefit analysis, to determine optimal outcomes. While such an approach may be utilitarian in nature, it is not necessarily democratic. Deliberative democracy theory would seek to empower citizens, circumventing the non-democratic approach of aggregation, by substantiating a sphere in which constituents and politicians can converse about issues of general interest. This approach necessitates a fully functioning and well-equipped public sphere.
Evolution of the Public Sphere

Historical Development of the Public Sphere

As deliberative democracy requires an accessible and dynamic space for public discourse, it becomes pertinent to conceptualize a realm in which these conversations can take place. Such spaces needed to be able to encapsulate the four principles of deliberative democracy theory, but likely none more important than ensuring accessibility to public discourse and debate. Habermas accommodates for this space in his formulation of the public sphere. As a scholar, Habermas is concerned with the emergence of public bodies, argumentation, and rhetoric in the face of democratic structures in a post world war society - one that saw the potentially damaging capabilities of hostile democratic structures. William Outhwaite explains, “Jurgen Habermas, who retired in 1994 from his post as Professor of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Frankfurt, is the leading representative of the second generation of the neo-Marxist critical theorists often known as ‘The Frankfurt School’”(p. 228).

Habermas was a student of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer after their return to Frankfurt following their exile from the United States. Like them, he rejects the Marxist philosophies of history, one in which the account of the development of capitalism and the rise of the working class is taken to show that the collapse of capitalism and its replacement by socialism is inevitable, or even probable. Mark Poster (1981) explains that, “Habermas was extending a line of thought initiated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the Dialectic of Enlightenment (1994). In that book Horkheimer and Adorno attempted to differentiate critical theory from the scientific tradition in which Marx had initiated it” (p. 460). Horkheimer and Adorno argued for a radical critique of the culture of capitalism rooted not in the workplace, as Marx had conceptualized, but in the legitimating ideology of science. Their experience of
German Fascism, characterized by the harmony of political domination and scientific culture, resulted in their pessimism about the future of class struggles. Yet, Habermas felt that his mentors had painted themselves within a pessimistic academic corner, one in which they can criticize reality but offer no alternative.

Therefore, Outhwaite (1998) explains that Habermas’ theory can be best understood as what he would identify as a “reconstruction” of what is presupposed and implied by human communication, cooperation, and debate (p. 228). Poster (1981) furthers, “Critical theory was in jeopardy because it had discovered a connection between technology and culture. Technology had become a source of ideology; the successes of the production system transformed it into its own justification; matter was transmuted into ideas” (p. 461). This revelation was something that Habermas worked to reverse, locating his critique in Weber’s theory of action as the basis for separating technology from culture. Weber distinguishes between purposive-rational action and value-rational action. Frédéric Minner (2020) expounds upon Weber’s interpretation, explaining that purposive rationality stands as the pragmatic example of meaningful intentional action (p. 238). He quotes Weber in Economy and Society, examining action through what happened and what would have theoretically happened had individuals acted in accordance with the purposive rationality model. For example, “[E]xplanation of the course taken by a stock exchange panic will first establish what would have happened if action had not been influenced by irrational emotions, following which these irrational components are introduced as “disturbances”. […] The construction of rigorously purposive-rational action therefore in these cases furthers the self-evident clarity of a sociology whose lucidity is founded on rationality” (p. 238). In accordance with this principle, if the action taken does not conform to this model, then other explanations ought to be taken into account, such as irrational behavior.
For Weber, value-rational agents act in accordance with values to which they strongly adhere. Minner (2020) furthers, “They act without taking into account the predictable consequences of their actions; they follow their convictions and perform actions that are commanded by duty, dignity, beauty, religious directives, piety or the importance (the value) of a cause” (p. 252). This type of action is determined by a belief around the intrinsic value of personal behavior and involves a conscious and coherent formulation of the end that the action targets. Value-rationality is particularly interesting for Weber as much of his focus centers around deontology, or a duty based ethical system. Yet Weber seems to contend two things that are not inherently incompatible: either agents act according to duty (as their only aim) or they act so as to actualize an ideal (piety, beauty) for its own sake. Regardless, both cases see agents act in non-consequentialist terms as they do not evaluate the consequences of their actions for themselves or others beyond the anticipated results of their actions. This terminology can be confusing as the domain of normativity is constituted both of an axiology (values) and deontology (norms).

This is a dichotomy that Habermas employed to develop a distinction between technical action and symbolic interaction. Gisela Hinkle (1992) contends that Habermas attributes distinctive modes of rationality and distinctive claims to legitimacy in each. She explains, “The scientific/technical relies on factuality and correctness, the moral/legal on social appropriateness, norms and trust, and the aesthetic on personal integrity, sincerity, and trustfulness” (p. 319). This is an essential feature of modernity, as these domains of culture with their own distinctive rationalities coexist in addition to the precognitive and intuitive domain of a practical lifeworld. Yet, for Habermas, the process of humanization is found using language and communication, therefore arriving at symbolic interaction. Colin Calleja (2014) explains, “Following George
Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, Habermas sustains that the development of speech and self-consciousness are steadfastly bound to one another and are only possible in a social context” (p. 123). For Habermas, the ultimate model of action must be constructed through linguistic interaction, must be built on truth between actors, as if we assume that people generally lie then language would lose its mission and communication would be impossible, and discourse must be made possible, with validity claims needing to be explicitly defined and distortions cleared.

Habermas contended that historical materialist explanations of the development of productive forces needed to be augmented by an account of the evolution of normative structures, understood in a wide sense to include a variety of societal formations, such as the family or the state (Outhwaite, p. 230). Habermas (1975) explains that historical materialism proceeds from the assumption that productive forces and relations of production do not vary independently of each other, but rather from structures that (a) internally correspond, (b) produce a finite number of developmental stages in their structure so that (c) the successions of the modes of production reveal a developmental logic (p. 290). Outhwaite furthers,

In late capitalism, again, a traditional Marxist account of capitalist crisis which focuses on the economic contradictions of the capitalist system needs to be modified to account for the role of the modern interventionist welfare state and the resultant displacement of crisis tendencies from the economic sphere to the political and cultural domains. Instead of the economic crises which remain the fundamental problem, what we experience are incoherent state responses, leading to what Habermas calls rationality crisis which weaken state legitimacy; these state interventions also lead to an erosion of individual motivation and a loss of meaning (p. 230).
Therefore, Habermas worked to draw out the diagnosis of contemporary capitalist crises. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), he traces the conflict between the rationalization of world-views in early modernity, such as the now fragmented and differentiated spheres that increasingly coexist in tension, and the restriction of a newly obtained sphere, open in principle to rational debate as bureaucratic market structures come to dominate the modern world (Outhwaite, p. 230).

In Volume 2, Habermas contends the development of modern societies lost its structure forming significance (p. 196). Culture, as processes of discourse and communicative interaction, lost the formal properties that enabled it to take on ideological functions. The modern form of understanding encourages competitions between forms of systemic and social integration. Systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration, even in those areas in which a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced; meaning, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization. In other words, no sooner are human social engagements opened up to rational discussion with a view to their modification than they are rigidified into the autonomous subsystems analyzed but not criticized by sociological systems theory (Outhwaite, p. 231). Using the example of the press, Habermas exemplifies this transition from a public organ concerned with formulating and organizing public opinion to a primarily commercial apparatus, one that must align itself for the most part to the interests of its advertisers (Hohendahl, p. 90). This typifies this form of colonization as now constituents can no longer rely on public organs for public opinion formation or a functioning marketplace of ideas; rather, now the formation of culture has become a commodity that is marked by its lack of rational discourse among recipients. For Habermas, the process of “uncoupling” the autonomous market and administrative systems means that the lifeworld
simply becomes one subsystem among a multitude of others. The colonization of the lifeworld is a direct result of the expansion of markets and administrations, resulting in the removal of subsystems from rational evaluation and becoming seeped into the state.

As such, Habermas goes on to characterize different spheres of influence that constituencies must navigate technocratic politics through: the private sphere, the public sphere, the technical sphere. He outlines this model in reference to both social theories, of which he was deeply immersed, and the history of Western modernity. For Habermas, the democratic project does not simply mean universal suffrage and majority rule, though he does accept the legitimacy of majority voting systems under time constraints; rather, Habermas is concerned for the extent and quality of public discussion of political issues as for the details of institutional arrangements (Outhwaite, p. 235). He argued that the rationality of political legislation does not depend only on how elected majorities work within parliament, but also on the level of participation and education, on the degrees of information and the precision which controversial issues are articulated within the discursive character of a non-institutionalized opinion formation within the public sphere. Though Habermas pays attention to the private sphere, turning his attention to the structure of the family and its activities, its operations are localized within an immensely limited sphere of influence.

The greater concern for Habermas centers around the formation of a public sphere, as emergent from feudal times into the modern world. In his seminal work *The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article*, Habermas (2019 [1964]) outlines his conception of the public sphere as, “[F]irst of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (p. 50). Citizens
behave neither like businesses or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy; rather, the public sphere comes into being when citizens are able to confer in an unrestrained fashion. This is to say that individuals can gather with the freedom of assembly, freedom of association, and the freedom to express and publish their opinions in an unrestricted arena of public discourse about issues of general interest. Habermas then breaks the public sphere into different genres of discourse. The political public sphere, as the genre of discourse this paper is primarily concerned with, is the realm of the public sphere in which public discussion deals with objects directly related to activities of the state. This, however, creates a distinction between the technical sphere and the public sphere as a political public sphere is one in which political discourse is governed by public bodies and citizens; whereas, the technical sphere is discourse or commentary that descends directly from the state itself. At any point members of the governing state begin to intercede in these conversations, the sanctity of the public sphere is at stake.

This conception of a functioning public sphere, one unburdened by the colonization of administrative structures, is crucial to the actualization of a deliberative theory of democracy. The capitalist crisis of reason marks a lack of utility for symbolic interaction, one in which language and communication substantiate a functioning lifeworld, and the rise of a hyper-capitalist state in which public opinion formation is always tethered to the interests of the elite, thus enforcing a particular form of technical action from the state. Understanding the public sphere as a realm of social life that is guaranteed to all citizens acting unlike professional people but as unrestrained constituents become paramount towards a transition towards deliberative democracy. For example, deliberative democracy can never become reality if the first characteristic of reason-giving is functionally impossible when the court of public opinion is
governed by financial interests of the political elite, thus skewing not only how people access information, but also how they come to conceptualize and discuss issues ailing society. Access, too, becomes an issue when news agencies lock information behind paywalls or subscriptions. A major concern of my work is that aggregation of democracy becomes akin to autocracy, with constituents being left out of the very policy conversations that determine the formation of the society they live in, or even a realm that makes these conversations possible. Importantly, it becomes pertinent to understand collective identity formation in the face of such a coercive political information system. Outhwaite explains, “As Habermas notes in one of his more recent contributions to this topic, a crucial question is “whether political communities can construct a collective identity beyond the limits of a nation and thereby satisfy the legitimacy conditions of a post national democracy” (p. 236).

*Constitutive Rhetoric*

Modern rhetoricians have developed a theory for constructing identity amongst populations outside of the nation state framework, though not necessarily exclusive from it. Karl Wallace argues in *Rhetoric and Politics* that the fundamental business of rhetoric “is inseparable from the proper function of a political society” (p. 195). Wallace understood this relationship between rhetoric and politics as a twofold charge. First, the theoretical and critical task of rhetoric is to formulate the major premises of argument particular to a free and democratic society, with rhetorical theory being responsible for disclosing the ideals, values, methods, and procedures animating the public use of reason within democratic debate and discussion. Second, and particular to rhetorical pedagogy, speech teachers are to inculcate future citizens with the moral and ethical virtues to fully and equally participate in democratic deliberation (Hicks, p. 223).
Maurice Charland provides additional context to this constitution in his seminal writing *Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois* (1987). He tracks Burke’s proposition that “identification” is an alternative to “persuasion” as a key term of the rhetorical process. Persuasion implies the existence of an agent who is free to be persuaded, but Charland calls this into question by positing that rhetorical theory’s privileging of an audience’s freedom to judge is problematic as it assumes that audiences, with their prejudices, interests, and motives are given. Charland explains, “In other words, rhetorical theory usually refuses to consider the possibility that the very existence of social subjects (who would become audience members) is already a rhetorical effect” (p. 133). Regardless, much of what rhetorical critics consider to be a product or consequence of discourse, including social identity, religious faith, sexuality, and ideology is already beyond the realm of rational or free choice, beyond the realm of persuasion. The identification of social identity can occur spontaneously, intuitively, and unconsciously. Such identifications are logically prior to persuasion as these characteristics are essential to the nature of any given subject. Therefore, theories of rhetoric as persuasion cannot account for the audiences that rhetoric addresses.

What is significant about constitutive rhetoric from Charland’s perspective is that it positions the reader towards political, social, and economic action in the material world and it is in this positioning that its ideological character becomes significant. For Charland’s analysis, the positioning of subjects as historical actors is imperative and must be understood as a two-step process. He posits, “First, audience members must be successfully interpellated; not all constitutive rhetoric’s succeed, Second, the tautological logic of constitutive rhetoric must necessitate action in the material world; constitutive rhetoric must require that its embodied subjects act freely in the social world to affirm their subject positions” (p. 141). Audiences are
“always already” subjects; meaning, if one were to disregard the point at which a child enters language, but restrict ourselves to “competent” speakers within a culture, we can observe that one cannot exist but as a subject already deeply embedded within a narrative. This is an ontological necessity: one must already be a subject in order to be addressed or spoken to. However, this position does not presume that one’s subject orientation is fixed at the moment they enter language, but that the development of new subject positions, of new rhetoric’s, is possible at particular moments in history. To be an embodied subject is to experience and act in an already textualized world, though this world is not seamless and a subject position’s world view can be laced with contradictions (p. 142). New constitutive rhetoric’s can be understood as working upon previous discourses, upon previous rhetoric’s.

Charland’s position recognizes the dynamic, contested, and layered nature of social identity so that the individual can be constituted within numerous subject positions simultaneously, which may intersect and create tensions. Hill explains that three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric emerge in this theory: the positioning of a collective subject, a transhistorical subject, and the illusion of freedom, which may seemingly exist in tension with principles of deliberative democracy theory. First, the notion of a collective subject refers to constitutive rhetoric’s ability to situate an individual into a subject position that enables the transcendence of traditional barriers between individuals and groups. Hill refers to the constitution of individuals as “the people” to serve as a point of identification and interpellation for the audience implied by a constitutive narrative. Second, constitutive rhetoric detaches itself from temporality by constituting a transhistorical subject. Hill defines this in saying that “Within the discursive narrative, subjects exist apart from any historical, geographical, or social context. The narrative appears as an always-existing reality” (p. 31-32). Third, this position gives subjects
an “illusion of freedom” within the ideological narrative. This implies that constitutions simultaneously provide subjects with freedom from previous subject positions while constraining their freedom within new constitutions. Ideology, then, provides individuals with a network that functions epistemically, shaping their identity by determining how they view the world. Constitutive rhetoric’s seek to disrupt ideologies by highlighting contradictions and bringing them into conflict with the material world: once an ideology has been rendered inadequate, the subject can be (re)constituted into a new subject position.

The constitutive position provides two key insights for deliberative democracy theory and the formation of the public sphere. First, constitutive rhetoric understands individuals as diverse bodies that constitute specific points in history and are defined by narratives that serve as a point of identification and interpellation. Individuals in the lifeworld are able to identify with these narratives, construct new positions, and potentially reach solidarity with others. This is why the formation of notions like “the people” are pinnacle for those living within democratic contexts as they should be able to, at least to some degree, identify issues ailing society and work with others to overcome these problems. Second, it recognizes that the world itself is full of contradictions that need work to overcome. In the case of this thesis, some of those contradictions become evident in the formation of a public living within a “democracy” but exist under a state whose interests of the elite outweigh the needs of the “people” who feel the direct implications of policies they have no choice over. Deliberation would seek to actualize constitutive rhetoric in that, by uncoupling elite interests from public discourses, disrupting ideologies and highlighting contradictions becomes easier as constituents govern the conversations around issues of societal interest. The ability to create such a narrative and constitute a body of individuals working towards cohesion is paramount for the formation of the public sphere. While much of the
literature analyzes constitutive rhetoric from the lens of written literature, much of contemporary discourse and narrative building occurs within digital spaces. Therefore, and in continuation with Habermasian tradition, it becomes pertinent to conceptualize the evolution of the public sphere into the digital public sphere.

*Digital Public Sphere*

For Habermas, the traditional understanding of the public sphere, coupled with the ambitious promises of a functioning sphere in relation to democratic principles, is not fulfilled in contemporary societies due to a structural transformation as the mass media emerged as a major but deficient forum of public debate (Shafer, p. 2). He criticized that mass media, commercialized media in particular, does not further deliberative ends. In order for the contemporary news cycle to function, it has to drastically reduce complexity in coverage so that only a fraction of all issues, actors, and arguments can be brought to the forefront of the marketplace of ideas. Shafer (2015) explains,

> This is problematic, according to Habermas, because the mass media’s ways of selecting and presenting issues are biased by economic pressures and political preferences. As a result, mass media are seen as a strongly power-influenced (“vermachtet”) forum of communication which privileges powerful and institutionalized actors while excluding smaller institutions and civil society – effectively undermining the public sphere (p. 2).

The advent of online media is a second structural transformation of the public sphere, with the rise of individual websites and search engines in the early 1990s, the increasing availability of information online, and growing online audiences. This was thought to revitalize the public sphere and restore its functionality, with many viewing the digital public sphere as the possible savior of democratic values.
As explained by Cohen and Fung (2021), the enthusiastic embrace of digital technology’s democratic promises grew at a singular political-economic moment: the end of the Cold War. American democracy-promotion became linked to the internet freedom agenda, with a dominant global role of American technology companies and growing criticism of gatekeeping by dominant and concentrated corporate media (p. 24). Democratic promises seemed inevitable as they appeared to flow from the very nature of digital technologies as this tech would enable virtually costless communication at a scale that eludes centralized control. Low costs would reduce the need for gatekeepers, vastly expand opportunities for participation, informal communication, exploration, persuasion, and increase the diversity of perspectives in circulation. Digital information and communication technologies seem to have considerable promise to enable movements and protests. This promise is especially salient to self-styled democrats who focus on the potential of digital technologies to support a public sphere in which free and equal persons are more fully enabled to use the common reason in public, political engagement (Cohen & Fung, p. 25). Unfortunately, the reality of the digital public sphere is that democracy has not improved, but likely has degraded over time.

Price (2013) explains that the impact of social and digital media in political discussions and activities is often assessed in terms of either its utopian or dystopian potential (p.519). The promise of social media centers on its highly interactive and personal realm of information and communication. Web 2.0 platforms (X, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) have become increasingly part of everyday life, with constant evolutions in areas of network, access, and mediums. This has transformed how people are able to connect, with online offerings usually involving personal reflections on everyday musing and conversations. Yet, governments are also able to adopt the role of watchdog in monitoring citizens. For example, the “Great Firewall of China” has
extensive internet controls and filtering, which includes three generations of controls. The first level entails cyber-attacks against opposition websites, software controls, domain-name regulation, and close ties to Chinese governance. The second and third levels, more broadly, include policies and regulations for information control, censorship, and surveillance (Price, p. 525). In the US, section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act permits the US government to engage in mass, warrantless surveillance of Americans’ international communications, including phone calls, texts, emails, social media messages, and web browsing (Taitz 2023, para. 2.).

Price (2013) furthers, “As Morozov contends, the innovations of social media may work in favor of freedom of expression by making it easier for us to express ourselves, but at the same time they also tend to work in favor of surveillance by making more of our private information public” (p. 525). Justifications for filtering and security regulations often appeal to the potential for social media to be utilized for offensive or illegal content, to spread malware or fraud, or hacking and the promotion of extremism. These justifications have grown to both intrigue and worry scholars examining the system of democracy in a highly globalized, technological world. As explained by Chambers and Gastil (2020), “Deliberative democratic theorists and researchers have particular concern about the health of the digital public sphere—its structure, denizens, business models, influences, regulations, and logic. Technological changes are reshaping public life more quickly than theorists are amending their conceptions of deliberative democracy.” (p. 3). The changing shape of the digital public sphere, the interplay of explicitly deliberative and non-deliberative practices within political systems, and opinion formation within clusters are becoming increasingly contingent upon background operations of algorithms and algorithmic sorting, a topic that will be expounded upon in the next chapter. Importantly, just as the physical
spaces we occupy have profound impact on the ways in which we understand political engagements and interactions, similar effects directly stem from the digital spaces we meet, exchange information, and communicate with each other (Chambers & Gastil, p. 4).

Unfortunately, the harm that stems from such a massive information ecosystem is the unprecedented ability of nefarious actors to control and manipulate data, thus people, to suit their own political ends.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal brought forth some of these major concerns into conversation surrounding data privacy. Cambridge Analytica was a British political consulting firm that claimed to offer services of strategic communication based on data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis techniques (Peruzzi, Zolloo, Quattrociocchi, and Scala 2018, p. 1). The collection of personally identifiable information of at least 87 million Facebook users began in 2014 through the Facebook app *This Is Your Digital Life*, developed by the Global Science Research in partnership with Cambridge Analytica (Afriat, Dvir-Gvirsman, Tsuriel, and Ivan, p. 115). Global Science Research and Cambridge Analytica used this data to identify users’ political beliefs and personality characteristics to determine which users to target and how to influence their actions or thoughts about policy. Facebook was fined and its stock plummeted during this crisis, with Zuckerberg being summoned to testify before the US senate. This scandal is an example of how cyberspace allows for a form of information warfare against constituencies around the world as influence campaigns, misinformation, and power grabbing tactics allow for political actors to exert control in both explicit and implicit ways.

The design of social media platforms directly contributes to this phenomenon. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tik Tok have an over reliance on algorithms as sorting tools for content. At their core, social media platforms are businesses that make decisions based on
financially driven motives. Specifically, they derive profit from having users stay on their platform, typically maintained by having users engage with content that they find align with their worldview or find entertaining. This manifests itself through systems such as viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, and saving posts. As explained by Sang Ah Kim (2017), “The longer a user stays engaged, the more exposure advertisements receive. An individual instance of exposure is called an impression. Advertisers want as many potential customers to see their ads and therefore seek out platforms that promise a high number of impressions on their ads” (p. 148). Therefore, social media platforms have an incentive to keep users engaged so they can maximize their profits from hosting advertisements. To accomplish this, platforms make their news feeds interesting and relatable to users by sorting their data with algorithms to push forward certain kinds of content, while suppressing others. Algorithms predict what we may find interesting and then populate our feeds with that content. This process fundamentally transforms the public sphere by situating users into different echo-chambers of ideology and interest, disrupting the fundamental processes of the marketplace of ideas.

Habermas’ concern with the commercialization of the media, thus impacting the public sphere, unfortunately is not solved with the emergence of the digital public sphere; rather, these concerns become exacerbated. While seemingly promising for democratic theory and practice, the reality has seen the exploitation of social media by governments to curtail information, wage cyber warfare, and surveil their own constituencies. This has led to deliberative democratic theorists to worry about the formation of the digital public sphere. Cambridge Analytica brought many of these concerns to the forefront of conversations around social media as an organizing tool. The very design of social media platforms directly contributes to these concerns, putting their focus on the accumulation of capital and weaponizing users' data against them. At the heart
of these issues, and the mechanism by which social media companies are able to accomplish this feat, are the structural formations of feeds as designed by algorithms. Algorithms predict what we may find interesting and flood our feeds with that content, accumulating our data information to be weaponized by companies, governments, and other individuals. Unfortunately, many of the promising features of social media platforms for democracy have fallen short by their very design.
Algorithms of Oppression

One of the immediate harms that arises from social media systems overreliance upon algorithms are systems tendencies towards exacerbating biases. In her book *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, Safiya Noble (2018) explains that, “While we often think of terms such as ‘big data’ and ‘algorithms’ as being benign, neutral, or objective, they are anything but” (p. 1). For example, while Google was in the midst of a federal investigation for an alleged wage gap, where women are systematically paid less than men in the company’s workforce, James Damore, an engineer who worked on the Google search infrastructure at the time, published an “anti diversity” manifesto. This document argued that women are psychologically inferior to men and are incapable of being as good at software engineering, among other false and sexist assertions (p. 2). This manifesto was publicly supported by some working at Google, underscoring the reality that those who are developing search algorithms and architecture are openly willing to promote sexist and racist attitudes at work and beyond. Noble coins the term “algorithmic oppression” to highlight cases of algorithmically driven data failures that are specific to people of color and women in order to denote how racism and sexism are structurally embedded within the design of contemporary algorithmic systems. When the curators of public platforms promote biases in their interpersonal life, those biases will naturally emerge in the systems they develop for public consumption.

In addition to systemic harms that exist in the emergence and creation of algorithmic systems, algorithms also serve to segregate individuals within the digital sphere into vastly different echo chambers of ideology. As explained by Levy and Razin (2019), “An echo chamber is a metaphor based on the acoustic echo chamber, where sounds reverberate in a hollow enclosure. The term has been used to denote the phenomenon of the amplification and
reinforcement of beliefs by communication and repetition inside a closed, like-minded community” (p. 305). Echo chambers have been blamed in recent years for many of our society’s ailments, such as the Russian disinformation campaign of 2016 and radical polarization of the right. They are thought of as an engine behind phenomena such as political gridlock, constitutional crises, rises in violence, extremism, populism, and polarization (p. 304). To understand echo chambers and their influence, the authors’ framework decomposes the term into two. Chambers operate by segregating individuals with those who are like-minded in terms of preferences, beliefs, or attitudes. This indicates that individuals are influenced in a non-rational manner by the beliefs of those with whom they communicate in their chamber (p. 305).

Unfortunately, the structure and order of algorithms within social media establishes what Ulbricht and Katzenbach (2019) conceptualize as “algorithmic governance” (p. 2). This concept has emerged over the last two decades, but operates upon an idea that has been present within mainstream media extending throughout the twentieth century: digital technologies, coupled with mainstream media, structures the social world in particular ways (p. 2). Operating upon a technodeterminist paradigm, various economic, cultural, and political contexts shape the design of algorithms as well as accommodating their operation. Politicians are able to capitalize upon this operation and utilize it for their own purposes. For example, politicians have used Twitter as a space for political communication and gaining votes for various campaigns (Aharony, 2010). Trump famously used the platform to accomplish a multitude of things before and during his presidency. He was effectively able to weaponize Twitter as a space for right-wing populist discourses as an instrument of power politics throughout his time on the platform, as well as carry out foreign policy via public discussion. However, it has become common practice for politicians to flock towards social media platforms in order to spread their message. Obama
utilized social media platforms throughout the election cycle of 2008, and many prominent politicians, such as Ilhan Omar and Alexandria Osasio-Cortez, use various platforms to engage with voters in the status quo (Evans, 2019). While social media seemingly provides a space for useful engagement, the aforementioned harms of predatory algorithms situates voters in a precarious position.

Authors Riemer and Peter (2021) explain the phenomenon of algorithmic audiencing, or a mechanism that social media platforms, such as Facebook, interfere with freedom of speech by algorithmically determining the audiences for each message (p. 409). The authors explain, “To drive user engagement and segmentation for better marketability through targeted advertising, social media platforms appropriate speech as content for their own purposes, presenting users with the kind of content that their algorithms deem will keep them most ‘engaged’ (p. 410). Algorithmic audiencing interferes with speech by severing the direct relations between speakers and audiences. Messages are categorized by an algorithm that amplifies their circulation to certain kinds of audiences, while suppressing them for others. In a deliberative democracy, the public sphere needs to operate in ways that uphold freedom of speech so that the marketplace of ideas can flourish; however, the contemporary setup of the digital marketplace fundamentally disrupts this process by sorting audiences through their general interests. While it would intuitively make sense to have users consistently engage with content that aligns with their world view or interests, algorithmic audiencing presents a novel form of interference as it curtails the fair and free expression of ideas as algorithms routinely distort the distribution of messages by selecting audiences for particular messaging (Riemer & Peter, p. 410).

The prevalence of algorithmic audiencing serves as a direct mechanism to force like-minded individuals into groups that reinforce shared narratives, namely echo-chambers (Cinelli
et al., p. 1). Cinelli et al. (2021) contend that constituents' mechanism for information retrieval has dramatically shifted, with a newfound prevalence on instantaneous information gathering and formation of opinions. Platforms provide direct access to unprecedented amounts of content, while being designed for algorithms to feed, mediate, and influence the content promotion to account for the users’ preferences and attitudes (p. 8). The authors explain, “Such a paradigm shift affected the construction of social perceptions and the framing of narratives; it may influence policy making, political communication, and the evolution of public debate, especially on polarizing topics” (p. 5). Users tend to prefer information that adheres to their worldview, fundamentally disrupting the mechanisms outlined by communicative action, ignoring dissenting information, and forming more politically polarized groups around shared narratives. When polarization is high, misinformation tends to proliferate. Further, selective exposure to viewpoints dominates consumption, with different platforms influencing these dynamics in unique ways.

Reimer and Peter (2021) contend that algorithmic audiencing contributes to the fragmentation and segmentation of interests and social groupings on the platform, resulting in increased political polarization and tensions (p. 417). This occurs due to algorithms amplifying messages that are extreme, outrageous, and contentious as they tend to also be the most engaging. Consuming such content influences how ideologically polarized individuals naturally become, over time being driven into social groupings, or echo-chambers, that are shaped by politically charged content. The authors explain that, “There is evidence that Facebook has known for years that its algorithm pushes users to increasingly extreme content driving political polarization; internal research showed that 64% of users joining extremist groups were found to do so as a result of its newsfeed algorithm” (p. 417). This indicates that algorithms not only serve
to situate individuals into political groups predicated upon ideological leaning, but also
weaponize those leanings to further entrench biases and polarization for the sake of long-term
monetization. Audiences are now formed by algorithms; meaning, algorithmic content
distribution leads to the creation of new social connections and groupings (p. 417). Algorithmic
audiencing largely occurs as a background process, but organizes and shapes speech in ways that
interfere with the free and fair exchange of ideas by amplifying or suppressing messages
according to financially driven motives. Unfortunately, this means that social media accounts
largely do not know who will be the audience for their message, but those who know how to
craft messages that play well with news feed algorithms are able to gain far larger audiences than
those with similar messaging who don’t (p. 417).

Algorithms and social media platforms, which have become integral components of
contemporary information ecosystems, pose an acute danger to deliberation and democracy.
These digital technologies are designed to maximize user engagement and satisfaction by
tailoring content recommendations to individual preferences, creating "filter bubbles" or "echo
chambers." This results in the reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs and the isolation of
individuals from diverse perspectives. Consequently, the public sphere, once envisioned as a
space for informed and rational deliberation, is increasingly fragmented, and citizens are exposed
to a limited range of viewpoints. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and disinformation
is facilitated by algorithmic amplification, undermining the reliability of information in the
digital age. This phenomenon erodes the foundation of democracy, which necessitates an
informed and deliberative citizenry. As algorithms continue to drive the content we encounter on
social media, society must grapple with the urgent challenge of mitigating their negative impact
on public discourse and, by extension, the health of democratic processes. Unfortunately, the status quo sees different actors utilize this landscape to their advantage.
Politicians and Social Media

Young people increasingly turn to social media platforms for news and political information, with 50% of citizens between 18-24 years using Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, X, and Snapchat to access and discuss news in different countries (Marquart & Moller, 2019, p. 196). Citizens who share and post political content have a high level of political interest, but others still passively consume political information shared by their peers and are likely to be influenced by those interactions as a result of algorithmic audiencing. Specifically, following politicians has a massive impact on how constituents understand politics and political issues in general. As explained by Marquart and Moller (2019), “Actively curating politicians into one’s personal news feed appears an accepted mode of seeking out political information for young citizens…Another important indicator for following politicians in our data is peer talk within young citizens’ social networks at school or university, potentially due to the function of social recommendations” (p. 202-203). Legacy media, those who traditionally encompassed the public sphere, has lost influence as primary information sources and are replaced by direct communication with political actors who can share their information without journalistic interference. The emergence of social media has provided politicians and political parties new ways to connect with the electorate, and they have increasingly adopted and used these platforms for political communication.

According to Price (2013), “Such media use is being extended as politicians develop specific habits on Twitter and Facebook. Lawless, however, understands the use of social media by members of the US Congress as merely new ways to transmit the usual messages, with likely use in ‘classic incumbent activities of advertising, position-taking, and credit-claiming’” (p. 252). Digital technology offers new ways to communicate with constituents, yet its use alone is
insufficient for the transmission of new political information and knowledge. Use of social media has expanded during election campaigns, which have often been dubbed as “Twitter elections”, such as the 2008 election of Obama or the 2016 election of Trump (Yang, Macdonald, & Ounis, p. 183). The limitations of this political strategy are immense, from limited characters available to transmit political news or agendas to a clear lack of engagement with constituents on behalf of the politicians who use social media to simply push forward a particular agenda.

Unfortunately, the existence of algorithmic sorting poses a direct problem to the functionality of the public sphere. As algorithms serve to segregate individuals within the digital sphere into different echo chambers of ideology, it becomes easier for politicians to push forward certain kinds of agendas towards their constituents with little interference from those on the opposing aisle. For deliberative democracy, this system is particularly harmful as useful dialog and engagement becomes more difficult, with most conversations taking place within monitored comment sections. This research contributes towards communications understanding the relationship between politicians and social media. Therefore, the goal of this project is to add literature towards the understanding of the effects that politicians have on online spaces, specifically examining political strategy, user engagement, and interactions when faced with an upcoming 2024 presidential election.

To better understand the implications of politician’s use of social media as a form of the digital public sphere, I propose the following research question:

RQ1: How do conservative politicians seeking election in the upcoming presidential election frame the Israel-Hamas War on X, formerly Twitter?
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Framework

This thesis draws upon Andre Brock’s (2012; 2018) Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) as the primary methodology for analyzing X, formerly known as Twitter, as a space in which politicians seeking election espouse political ideology through online posts and constituents seeking to garner understandings of respective ideologies come to engage digital discourse. Secondarily, this paper operates upon the theoretical foundations of a post-structuralist Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). Unlike the linguistic or social theoretical foundations of other discourse analysis, this thesis assumes that there is not a point of reference, no single truth, and no ultimate reality, but rather a subjective, relative, reality that is of human creation (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Khan and MacEachen (2021) track Foucault's understanding of discourse through “The Archaeology of Knowledge” (1972) and “The Order of Discourses” (1981) to arrive at a functioning definition of a discourse: an individualizable set of statements, or the general domain of utterances which have some effects in society, which seem to form some kind of grouping as according to a regulated practice, implying the unwritten rules, regulations, cultural and value structures that produce particular utterances and statements (p. 5). Discourse, then, is a complex set of group practices which try to keep certain kinds of statements in circulation and others out through existing power practices. Arribas-Ayllon and Walderdine (2017) explain:

When referring to ‘discourse’, Foucault does not mean a particular instance of language use – a piece of text, an utterance or linguistic performance – but rules, divisions and systems of a particular body of knowledge. Discourse approximates the concept of
‘discipline’ in two ways: it specifies the kind of institutional partitioning of knowledge we find in medicine, science, psychiatry, biology, economics, etc. But it also refers to techniques and practices through which objects, concepts, and strategies are formed. (p. 114).

It is through the latter understanding of ‘discipline’ that this paper approaches discourse analysis.

With this definition and these principles in mind, I utilize the methodologies of Brock’s (2018) Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). While first actualizing the methodology in 2012 as a way to study Black Twitter, in 2018 Brock provides a more comprehensive understanding of CTDA, which he defines as, “[A] multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture” (p. 1012). The model operates as an analysis of information technology material and visual design with specific inquiry into the production of meaning through information technology practice (p.1013). Brock expresses concern with what he characterizes as “innumerable instrumental/quantitative ICT analyses” (p. 1014), which he sees as a cultural limitation of social science ICT studies; therefore, this thesis will use qualitative analysis of conservative discourse taking place on X surrounding the upcoming 2024 US presidential election.
Data Collection

The intended selection of statements for this discourse analysis will have a two-fold approach: a selection of X (Twitter) posts from politicians vying for the upcoming election and an interpretation of those posts to denote possible strategies for garnering votes. The application of CTDA works as a “plug-and-play” mindset, with two requirements: 1. The theory should draw directly from the perspective of the group under examination; 2. Critical technoculture should be integrated with Christian’s (2007) cultural continuity perspective (p. 1016-1017). Christian proposes that analysts investigate historically and geographically constituted people as value-laden creators. This allows the analysis of individuals as uniquely immersed within and influenced by their respective culture.

In order to satisfy the first requirement, and in order to provide as realistic a political landscape leading into the upcoming election as possible, this paper analyzes pundits from the GOP. Discourse coming from the GOP will cover the following members: Mike Pence, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, and Nikki Haley. The GOP, while having similar platform standards stemming from the overarching party they represent, have strikingly different approaches to online dialogue and strategy; therefore, identifying the differing strategies will substantiate part of this project. I am choosing posts that stem from August to December 2023 to encompass a substantial amount of time heading into the primary, before a GOP nominee is put forth to oppose the democratic incumbent. The perceived GOP frontrunner Donald Trump is not included in the analysis of this paper. As this research is exclusively drawn from X as a platform, analyzing his public facing content would require pulling data from Truth Social, which is outside of the methodological parameters outlined throughout this section. While Trump has been unbanned from X, he has chosen not to return to the platform.
Data from this period was garnered using the Sprinklr data gathering system. The Sprinklr system utilizes SiteCatalyst to capture data and bring it back to the Sprinklr platform, allowing researchers to compare web performance, social engagement, and web traffic to map out a seamless attribution model that systematically organizes data from the designated keywords put into the software. In the case of this project, a preliminary screening was conducted to gather tweets from the desired politicians by inputting the following code for each politician:

POLITICIAN X HANDLE AND ("Immigration" OR "Israel" OR "Gaza" OR "Gun Control" OR "Abortion" OR "Election" OR "Primary" OR "Debate"). Sprinklr provided a spreadsheet that outlines every tweet from the desired account, allowing for quick systemization of the content and the original link of the post the data was taken from. To identify themes, the general content of the messages was analyzed in order to parse out keywords that pertain to different themes of political interests. For instance, if a message contained heavy language surrounding immigration, that tweet was flagged and categorized underneath the theme of “Immigration” using a spreadsheet. Each politician had their own spreadsheet assigned to them for the sake of data collection and coherence. Each message that was flagged was then slotted into their respective section underneath the politician's name, using color coding to separate the messages based on the content present. The coding process separated the tweets into their respective categories for ease of analysis later on. After this initial systemization, I then went through the posts, using the links, and determined the most salient theme among those that were pulled. Over the designated time frame, the GOP politicians had the most discussion surrounding Israel and Gaza. After this process had been completed, I compiled a final spreadsheet that includes each of the individual politicians, sorting their tweets by content and sectioning the designated comments underneath the appropriate original post.
In order to satisfy the second requirement, I view these individuals as not only immersed within political culture, but also as value-laden representative creators of that culture. Politicians obviously hold a unique position in the creation of political culture as they are not only the ones who put forward the legislation to make political wills a legal reality, but also maintain the ability to bring these political wills to the general consensus in an effort to win over voting blocks towards their political whims. Therefore, studying politicians in online spaces satisfies the second requirement posed by CTDA.

After the coding process had been completed, these tweets were analyzed for use of language, strategy, and implications for future policy platforms. I deliberately looked at posts from August 2023 to December 2023 for the sake of timeliness and relevance due to the rapidly developing primary race heading towards the summer and the fall of 2024, when the election will be decided. While some nuance will inevitably be lost due to the limited number of politicians selected from the GOP, the goal will be to paint a relatively representative picture of the varying strategies and discourses housed within the respective GOP politicians on X. For Brock (2016), CTDA is specific to the inquiries into the computer mediation of discourse, focusing on structure, meaning, interaction, and social behavior. Digitally mediated discourse may be shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems (p. 6). In addition, the platform of X will be explicitly considered in terms of platform affordances and limitations, coupled with how echo-chambers are likely to form in digital spaces. As of now, the extent of the benefits or limitations of this platform is not explicitly known given the fairly recent acquisition of the platform by Elon Musk, but will be explored throughout the course of this project.
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

This section focuses on representative examples of differing tweets and strategies for each of the politicians surrounding the Israel-Gaza conflict. Conflict in the region erupted on October 7th, 2023 when gunmen from Hamas carried out a surprise attack on southern Israel, crossing over from Gaza and rampaging through nearby communities (Reuters, 2023). Hamas killed almost 1200 people, primarily civilians, and took over 240 hostages back to Gaza. On 13th of October, Israel told residents of Gaza City to evacuate and begin moving south. Israel bombed al-Ahli al-Arabi Baptist hospital in Gaza City on the 17th, causing heavy casualties and sparking mass outrage in the Arab world. From the beginning of the conflict to February 2024, the death toll in the Gaza Strip has surpassed 28,000, with more than 67,600 Palestinians wounded. This conflict has remained a key issue for politicians to voice their support or condemnation over, dominating the political discourse over the last 6 months. The coding process indicated multiple strategies that each individual politician utilized during this conflict; therefore, each politician will have their messaging examples divided into subsections to highlight these differences.
Mike Pence

From August to December of 2023, former Vice President Mike Pence made a total of 73 tweets. Of these tweets, 37, or roughly half, specifically focused on the Israel-Hamas conflict. Pence’s digital discourse has two thematic approaches: general stances and detached voice. The following sections will analyze this discourse chronologically.

General Stances

Mike Pence tweeted on August 18th, “Under our administration we made it clear, if the world knew nothing else the world knew this: America stands with Israel! We moved our embassy to Jerusalem, we recognized the Golan Heights, and we took decisive steps to make it clear that Israel would have the ability to defend itself by itself”. There are a few things that stand out with this tweet. First, the inclusion of the language “our administration” is particularly interesting as it tethers Pence to Trump, which not only is a stance that almost serves to undermine his election campaign as Trump was his superior during this decision and is running for re-election, but also is antithetical to his attempts to distance himself from his former boss.

Jill Colvin of the Associated Press reported in March of 2022 that,

Pence called out Trump by name, saying his former boss was “wrong” to insist that he had the power to unilaterally overturn the results of the 2020 election — a power vice presidents do not possess. In a separate speech before top Republican donors, Pence urged the GOP to move on from Trump’s 2020 grievances and declared ‘there is no room in this party for apologists.

Pence over the last year has worked hard to travel around the country, deliver policy speeches, raise money for midterm candidates and visiting early-voting states, so it is interesting to note
that his online presence as early as August recognizes his relationship with Trump in a positive light.

Secondly, the decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem was significant as it recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The move took place in 2018, upsetting many in the Arab world, Western allies, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas calling it a “slap in the face” while claiming that the US could no longer be regarded as an honest broker in any peace talks with Israel (Farrell, para. 6). This was a move that many other countries refrained from due to its controversial nature and implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but signaled the US unwavering support for Israel’s sovereignty and historical claims to Jerusalem. This stance was one of the cornerstones of the Trump administration, and Pence seems to remain politically aligned with this position. Finally, the claim that Israel ought to defend itself “by itself” underscores a commitment to Israel defending itself without the help of outside aid. This position reaffirms a strong relationship between the US and Israel, with the US position that Israel is an autonomous state and must safeguard from outside actors. While Pence has attempted to distance himself politically from Trump, his stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict mirrors that of the former president.

After the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, Pence shifted his rhetoric from being retrospective towards focusing on condemning Hamas and espousing support for Israel. From October 7th to October 14th, Pence tweeted a total of 21 times. On the 8th, he wrote, “Now is the time for all of us to speak with one voice and say that America Stands with Israel!” This tweet is in line with most of the rhetoric he produced in this time frame. “America Stands with Israel” signifies a clear message of unwavering support from the US in favor of Israel, which is echoed in a tweet from the 9th that reads, “Standing With Israel Means Standing with Israel Until the
War is Over and Hamas is Crushed”, and on the 11th when he posted, “We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause. Your values are our values. And your fight is our fight. We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, and good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny”.

These tweets reflect a strong and unwavering support of Israel in the face of a Hamas attack. Pence’s commitment to “Standing with Israel Means Standing with Israel Until the War is Over” serves a dual purpose. The first half of the statement is indicative of his historical stance on the US and Israel relationship: the US must stand with Israel. “We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause” reinforces this idea. Pence likens US values, presumably around freedom and independence, to the current political situation surrounding Israel. In the case of Palestine, Karin Laub of the Associated Press reported in 2018 that, “Palestinian Christians [in the West Bank] say U.S. Vice President Mike Pence’s brand of evangelical Christianity, with its fervent embrace of modern-day Israel as fulfillment of biblical prophecy, lacks their faith’s compassion and justice, including for those who have endured half a century of Israeli occupation”. Pence has historically not been in favor of recognizing the Palestinian state, ignoring the plight of Palestinians who have been suffering under Israeli persecution, even going so far as to claim on October 14, “Hamas did not invade Israel to free Palestine, they invaded Israel to kill Jews”. The second half of the statement serves as an implicit condemnation of Hamas, and Palestine by extension. Hamas, while obviously independent of the Palestinian state, allows for conservative rhetoric to center around Israel’s demand for a free and independent state, completely cutting off any rhetorical ability for a peaceful resolution to exist with the Palestinians.
“We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, and good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny” asserts that Israel’s cause aligns with American values of right over wrong. This emphasizes a moral and ideological bond between the US and Israel, framing an alliance between the two as not only a strategic alliance, of which an arms deal exists between the two, but also a relationship of shared values and beliefs. In framing this as a moral argument, Pence is able to denote a principled stance on what his foreign policy has historically been when he was in office, while continuing his stance if he were to gain office again. “Liberty over tyranny” is an obvious nod to democratic values. Pence’s rhetoric emphasizes individual freedom and self-governance, framing Hamas as an outsider who is threatening democratic values and the sovereignty of the state. This framing contends that both the US and Israel have a shared commitment to democratic governance, individual freedoms, and rule of law. Implicitly, this would suggest that Pence’s support, and the US by extension, is not supporting Israel as simply a matter of geopolitical stability, but rather supporting Israel is a firm commitment to democratic values in the geopolitical arena. While these tweets are indicative of Pence’s platform, they remain general stances held by the GOP in general. None of these stances reflect personal experiences, future policy platforms, or any proposed commitments to the state of Israel; rather, they all echo historical principles that Pence is remaining aligned with.

Detached Voice

While some of Pence’s tweets are from the first person, there are 15 tweets that are either quoting him from a public appearance or interviews in which he was speaking about the conflict. This is indicative of his online persona being crafted by his social media staff, devoing the rhetoric on the platform of his own personal voice. On October 7th, Pence’s twitter posted, “Mike Pence, in Iowa, says 'America stands with Israel' following Hamas Attack ‘This is what
happens when you have a president like Joe Biden who spends the last two and a half years projecting weakness on the world stage,’ - Des Moines Register”. This tweet quotes an article by Stephen Gruber-Miller from the Des Moines Register, detailing Mike Pence’s condemnation of the attack on Israel. The article unfolds the first days of the conflict, providing the lives lost and responses from the geopolitical community. Gruber-Miller quotes Pence’s argument that, “I say to you with a heavy heart: This is what happens when you have a president like Joe Biden who spends the last 2½ years projecting weakness on the world stage” (para. 10). Interestingly, the tweet’s quoted article includes a photo of former President Trump walking up a stage with an American flag in the background. The inclusion of this photo adds to the disconnect between Pence trying to distance himself from Trump while simultaneously shedding light on him and their connection. However, while the distancing strategy falters, the emerging critiques of President Biden from Pence remain a constituent theme within his rhetoric on the election trail.

On October 8th, Pence’s account tweeted, “Pence criticizes Biden for Iran strategy after Israel attack | The Hill”. This tweet is quoting The Hill’s Sarah Fortinsky’s article that explains, “Former Vice President Mike Pence (R), a 2024 presidential candidate, on Sunday criticized President Biden for his strategic positioning on Iran and suggested the administration’s policies have “set the conditions” for the Hamas attacks in Israel on Saturday” (para. 1). The article details the Biden administration's pledge to offer funding to Iran, which the Iranian leaders responded by contending that they would use the funding for “what was best for their people” (Fortinsky, para. 3). Biden’s administration has spent its duration attempting to bring Iran back into the nuclear deal, lifting sanctions on the country, and paying $6 billion in a ransom for hostages. Pence is quoted in the article saying that the combination of these factors, “set the conditions for this unprecedented terrorist attack by Hamas against Israel” (Fortinsky, para. 4).
Though the Biden administration has maintained unwavering support for Israel in the wake of the attack by Hamas, Pence’s claim is that Iran is behind the attacks, has funded Hamas, and has publicly applauded the attacks from the organization on Israel. Therefore, Pence’s claim is that Biden has been funding the attacks on Israel through the form of aid to Iran.

On October 13, Pence’s X account posted, “Mike Pence files to run in New Hampshire, slams Donald Trump for criticizing Israel’s Netanyahu - Washington Times”. This tweet is referencing an article from the Washington Times written by the Associated Press that details Pence officially filing for the New Hampshire’s state capital race for February of 2024. The Washington Times reported that, “In remarks to the press following the signing of the paperwork, Pence slammed his former running mate, former President Donald Trump, for lashing out at Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu days after Hamas’ deadly attack”. At a rally earlier in the week, Trump said that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu had let down the US before the killing of top Iranian general Qassem Solermani in 2020 (para. 2). Trump additionally criticized Israeli leaders, claiming they needed to “step up their game” and referred to terrorist organization Hezbollah as “very smart” when referencing fears that Israel had about a possible large-scale attack from the north. In response to this rally, Pence argued that, “To refer to the terrorist organization Hezbollah as ‘very smart,’ I think is incomprehensible to me,’...’Hezbollah is not very smart. They’re evil and they’re waiting across that border in Lebanon to see if America and the allies of Israel will shrink from this moment”. Unlike moments in which Pence references the beneficial things that the Trump administration accomplished or posting photos of Trump on his X, this is a strong condemnation of the former President and a clear attempt to distinguish himself in the upcoming election cycle.
A large part of Pence’s online presence is clearly not from his own voice; rather, it is evident that a hired team posts different news articles that reference or center around Pence on his campaigning trail. These articles have three primary themes that Pence focuses on in the public sphere: America’s commitment to Israel and condemnation of Hamas, condemnation of the Biden administration, and condemnation of former President Trump. The detached voice from posting these articles makes it evident that Pence is likely not running his X account, or at least is not posting every single tweet that is under his name. For constituents, this creates a possible disconnect with Pence as the possibility for engagement, or feeling connected in some way, likely decreases when it is known that Pence is not the one responsible for the rhetoric his account is producing during the primary season. Though, it is obvious from the selected articles that the Pence campaign is trying to distance him from Trump, albeit somewhat unsuccessfully, and establish his own stances for possible policies.
Chris Christie

From August to December of 2023, former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie made a total of 72 tweets. Of these tweets, 21 (around 30%) specifically focused on the Israel-Hamas conflict. Though Christie statistically speaks about the conflict less than that of his peers, his unique contribution to Conservative dialog details primarily his experiences traveling to Israel in the time period selected for analysis. Christie’s digital discourse has two thematic approaches: condemnations of previous presidents, and firsthand travel experiences in Israel during the conflict. The following sections will analyze this discourse chronologically.

Condemnations of Previous Presidents

On October 7th, the day of Hamas’ attack on Israel, Chris Christie tweeted the following indictment of the Biden administration:

Biden’s appeasement of Israel’s enemies has invited this war against
Israel. Appeasement anywhere never works. We must do whatever it takes to support the
State of Israel in its time of grave danger, and we must end the scourge of Iran-backed
terrorism. This terrorism is funded by Biden’s idiotic release of $6 billion to the
Iranians. The Hamas war against Israel is now the second war started under Biden’s
failed presidency, first by Russia in Ukraine and now by Hamas in Israel. Both could
have been deterred by strong American leadership. Under my presidency, America will
restore the deterrence Biden has foolishly given away.

This tweet begins Christie’s rhetorical strategy of condemnation against his political opponents. Christie argues that Biden’s administration has appeased the enemies of Israel, directly linking the current administration’s actions to the creation of Hamas. This framing suggests Biden's policies have directly contributed to growing hostilities in the region. Like Pence, Christie
frames the $6 billion dollar ransom for hostages as “idiotic”, furthering the conservative argument that Iran (through Biden) is funding terrorist efforts in the region. Unlike Pence, who was quoted in an article making this argument which his account retweeted, Christie provides a direct condemnation of Biden when arguing, “[W]e must end the scourge of Iran-backed terrorism.”

Interestingly, Christie likens this conflict with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Though these conflicts are clearly different, in both their emergence and geo-political implications, Christie frames them as failures of Biden’s strength in the international arena. Christie frames this argument as a second war under Biden’s administration, “first by Russia in Ukraine and now by Hamas in Israel”. This strategy implicitly argues that Russia is acting akin to a terrorist organization, which is a vastly different approach to the hegemonic power than the former president. For example, one of Trump's recent declarations is that he would encourage Russia to do “whatever the hell they want” to NATO members who don't meet their spending guidelines on defense (Sullivan, para. 1). Therefore, unlike the former president who openly supports Russia’s aggression, Christie is likening that aggression to actions carried out by a terrorist organization. As a result of this framing, Christie is establishing a clear difference between his future conservative policy platform from those of the GOP in the past. Christie’s argument reflects a clear pro-Israeli stance, explicitly critiquing the Biden administration while implicitly creating a delineation from the most recent conservative president, with a clear policy position.

In addition to Christie's implicit critique of Trump, there are also direct condemnations he made in the selected timeframe. On October 12th, Christie retweeted a video of Trump’s address in Florida. In the video, Trump claims that Hezbollah is “very smart”, while slamming representatives from Israel for disclosing a fear they have around their northern border. Christie
posted in response, “When one of our most important allies is at war and defending their women and children from terrorists, it’s a time to support them. All decent Americans understand this. But not Donald Trump. What does he do? He praises the murderers and attacks Israel over petty personal grievances. Americans are among the thousands killed. Many are still missing. Now is the time to support Israel and get our people back — not complain about lost elections”. This tweet frames the US relationship with Israel as, “the importance of supporting allies, particularly during times of war”. He asserts that this is a relationship that all decent Americans ought to understand, beginning the implication that Trump is not a decent American who does not care about US allies. This implication transitions into a direct condemnation, claiming that Trump is praising the attacks on Israel and the murderers who carried them out. Christie’s strategy here echoes Pence. Trump's framing of Hezbollah as “very smart” has drawn criticism from both sides of the political aisle, with members of the conservative party who are trying to clearly distinguish themselves from him adding to this discourse.

Unlike Pence, who focuses particularly on Trump’s argument that the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu had let down the US before the killing of top Iranian general Qassem Solermani, Christie instead frames his argument around lives lost. This strategy has two prongs: an emphasis on women and children and an emphasis on American lives. By claiming that all decent Americans understand that the lives of women and children should be protected, and then arguing that American lives are being lost, Christie is further establishing his position as a strong leader who would reorient political values if he were to win the presidency. His strategy is reinforced in a tweet later on October 12th, arguing that Trump, “[I]s someone who cares not about the American people, not about the people of Israel, but about himself”. The combination
of anti-Biden and anti-Trump rhetoric works to solidify Christie’s approach in crafting messages that distinguish him from other conservative politicians.

*First Hand Travel Experiences*

On November 9th, Christie posted a video of himself in a town hall style meeting in which he announced on X that, “Tomorrow night, I'm leaving to go to Israel because I want to see for myself. I'll be meeting with Israeli officials and with survivors of the Hamas terrorist attack. If you want to be president, you can't be afraid to go and see what's happening on the ground around the world”. Of the candidates selected for this thesis, Christie is the only one to actually travel into the region during the conflict. This tweet doubles down on his emphasis around the importance of the victims in the conflict. In focusing on the lives lost during the war, Christie is able to position himself as empathetic and responsive. Christie also asserts that a potential candidate should not be afraid to witness the effects of war first-hand, arguing that, “If you want to be president, you can't be afraid to go and see what's happening on the ground around the world”. This strategy implies that the other candidates who are not traveling to Israel are lacking the willingness or courage to engage with a US ally, yet positions himself as someone who is not afraid to confront challenges head-on. Curating this discourse on X allows Christie to update his audience in real time on his journey, amplifies his message, and creates a digital timeline for him to reference in future presidential debates.

On November 11th, Christie tweeted an article from NBC, highlighting, “Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie will be visiting Israel on Sunday, making him the first Republican presidential candidate to travel to the country since the outbreak of the war…The former New Jersey governor said he was invited by Israel's foreign ministry and plans to talk to families of the hostages, members of the Israel Defense Forces and government officials” (Barnett et al.,
para. 1 & 7). Christie said that his ultimate goal of the trip would be to learn, explaining that he is going to ask a lot of questions and listen to responses in an effort to hopefully become a better candidate, in turn a better president. This establishes a distinction from Pence’s strategy. Whereas Pence produces fairly generic rhetorical positioning around the Israel-Hamas war, Christie clearly wants to emphasize his presidential strategies: issuing statements, giving interviews, and convening with allies.

To further this connection, Christie provided frequent updates that detailed his journey from November 12th to the 21st. On the 12th, he posted:

Today, I toured the Kfar Aza Kibbutz in the Gaza envelope with the Speaker of the Knesset, Amir Ohana. I came here to see with my own eyes what took place on October 7 and there are few words that can capture the brutality of it — dozens of men, women, and children murdered in their homes by Hamas. It’s one thing to talk about these atrocities from the comfort of thousands of miles away. It’s another to see them firsthand. To listen to people on the ground, and to see the destruction and despair.

This tweet reinforces his emphasis on the protection of lives in the region, specifically focusing on using words like “brutality” and “murder” to highlight the carnage of the warzone. In seeing this firsthand, he expresses the difficulty of capturing the brutality of the attack and how dozens of men, women, and children were murdered in their homes by Hamas. He underscores the importance of being “here to see with my own eyes” to see the atrocities firsthand, to see the people on the ground, and to see the destruction and despair. Christie’s strategy is to bolster his credibility by showcasing his willingness to experience the atrocities of war firsthand, providing a lens distinct from his political rivals. “It’s one thing to talk about these atrocities from the comfort of thousands of miles away” is certainly an attempt on his part to diminish the dialog of
his political contenders and bolster his own image. Included in the tweet is a photo of Christie (and staff) alongside Amir Ohana in front of buildings obviously targeted in the attacks, establishing a visual connection of Christie to US allies and giving the perception of presidential power.

Later in the day of the 12th, Christie posted another photo of himself and company in front of a more visually destroyed building, with soldiers pointing off screen. The tweet reads, “I want the people of Israel to know that there are hundreds of millions of Americans who stand with them, who understand the atrocities that were committed, and why in the future we need to stand absolutely shoulder to shoulder with Israel”. This implicitly connects to some of Christie’s earlier rhetorical strategies, specifically around his critiques with Biden. These critiques imply that the current administration is not standing shoulder to shoulder with Israel by failing them in a significant way, presumably through Biden’s relationship with Iran. His positioning of himself as a strong candidate in other tweets, coupled with his wanting the people of Israel to know that there are millions of Americans who stand with them, reiterates a commitment of his potential administration to the Israeli government. This connection emphasizes the importance of a continued solidarity in the alliance, underscoring a strong desire for continued relationship between the US and Israel if Christie were to be elected.

An additional component of Christie's online strategy is detailing interactions with Israeli citizens he had while in the region. On the 13th, he posted, “Yesterday in Israel, I met with a young woman who told me she was hiding in a bomb shelter during the attacks. Hamas found the shelter and murdered everybody inside. She survived because she was covered by dead bodies”. This adds to his previous dialog around the brutality of the conflict experienced by the civilians, sharing a specific encounter a young woman had to survive a harrowing encounter.
This narrative provides a particularly graphic representation of what citizens in the region experienced during the attack, having to use bodies as cover to hide from Hamas as they mercilessly killed everyone else inside. On the 21st, Christie posted, “When I was in Israel, I met directly with family members of those who are being held hostage by Hamas. They gave me a dog tag that reads, ‘Bring them home now’. Bringing these hostages home is imperative”. Christie details the stories of those who suffered firsthand and details the stories of the families left behind. As a result, Christie is able to position himself as having a relationship with the victims, families, and government of Israel.
Ron DeSantis

From August to December of 2023, Governor of Florida Ron DeSantis made a total of 81 tweets. Of these tweets, 35 (43%) specifically focused on the Israel-Hamas conflict. The remaining 46 tweets from DeSantis focus exclusively on election campaigning. DeSantis’ digital discourse has three thematic approaches: Anti Biden, Xenophobia, and Chaos of Western Civilization. The following sections will analyze this discourse chronologically.

Anti Biden

On October 7th, the day of Hamas’ attack on Israel, Ron DeSantis tweeted, “Israel is now under attack by Iranian-backed Hamas terrorists. Iran has helped fund this war against Israel and Joe Biden’s policies that have gone easy on Iran have helped fill their coffers. We are going to stand with Israel as they root out Hamas and we need to stand up to Iran”. This tweet begins DeSantis’ rhetorical strategy against the Biden campaign. DeSantis frames this argument by linking Biden and Iran together, a strategy reminiscent of both Christie and Pence; however, while Christie and Pence highlight specific instances of the Biden Administration’s perceived failures, namely the Iranian hostage deal, DeSantis opts to focus on a more generalized rhetorical approach of “policies that have gone easy on Iran”. His approach serves a dual purpose: a direct condemnation of Biden and an indication of political animosity towards Iran through his campaigning. This is reinforced on October 9th when DeSantis retweeted a Wall Street Journal article that argued Iran helped to plot the attack on Israel, with DeSantis asking, “Now will the Biden Admin take responsibility, stop lying, and finally admit what has been obvious - Iran directly supported Hamas’ heinous attack on Israel?”. This direct indictment of Biden contrasts Christie’s strategy of framing the current president as idiotic. Instead, DeSantis suggest Biden’s policies directly funded a terrorist organization.
This argument was furthered on October 10th when DeSantis posted, “The Biden Administration was well aware of the risk that sending taxpayer dollars to the Palestinians would ultimately end up helping Hamas. Yet Biden sent the money anyway. This cannot stand. America must immediately cut off any and all foreign aid flowing to Hamas and freeze any money that Biden has made available to Iran, a state sponsor of terrorism”. The mention of Palestine is particularly interesting here as DeSantis is the first candidate to directly link Hamas to Palestine. Whereas Pence argued that Hamas did not invade Israel to free Palestine, thus implicitly connecting the two, DeSantis is arguing that supporting Palestine is akin to funding terrorism in the middle east. DeSantis criticizes the Biden Administration’s decision to send aid to the region, arguing that despite the knowledge that sending aid to Palestine would ultimately fund Hamas, Biden has elected to waste US taxpayer dollars on the conflict. “Yet Biden sent the money anyway” is obviously a condemnation of the current foreign policy approach, with DeSantis advocating that America must immediately cut off all foreign aid and freeze any funds that are currently available to Iran. This reflects DeSantis’ stance against terrorism in previous posts, while continuing the argument that Iran (and Biden by extension) have become state sponsors of terrorism in the region.

On October 13th, DeSantis retweeted a video of his appearance on Fox News in which he is questioned by Harris Faulkner about a decision to start sending planes into the regions to rescue US citizens. DeSantis responds by saying that, “People weren’t able to get out, and you heard that, and then the administration, finally, yesterday, said, ‘We can maybe fly you to Europe and just dump you there’. But people want to come back to the United States… There are definitely hundreds of Floridians there and I don’t want to sit and wait to see them dumped in Europe”. This is a clear condemnation of Biden’s response to the war, specifically highlighting
fault with how the administration has handled trying to remove US citizens from the region. Interestingly, DeSantis has decided to circumvent the decision of the President to not send planes into the region by establishing a state response to send Floridian aircraft to rescue his local constituents. In doing so, DeSantis’ retweet of the video reads, “We are not going to sit and wait for the Biden Administration to rescue Floridians in Israel. We’re taking action and bringing them home”. This is an attempt to show conservative voters that he has the strength or commitment to protecting US citizens while casting Biden as weak. DeSantis' attempt also highlights immediacy with the conflict, showing that the Biden administration is lacking in its response time to protect US lives in Israel. Whereas Biden is trying to rescue citizens by sending them to Europe to get out of the region, DeSantis is planning to circumvent the president having planes from Florida directly land in the region.

This show of strength was furthered on November 30th when DeSantis posted, “We sent planes over to Israel right in the aftermath of October 7th and we saved over 700 Americans. Biden failed those people and we stepped up and got it done”. This is another condemnation of Biden, outright calling him a failure when attempting to save US citizens in Israel. Additionally, this establishes a comparative between Biden’s approach as President and DeSantis approach as a candidate: the President established a program that fails to save Americans or ships them off to Europe; Destantis established a program that saved Americans and brought them back home. DeSantis' rhetorical strategy against Biden has attempted to frame him as a weak President who funded a terrorist organization, refused to apologize, and neglected the American citizens who were stranded in Israel following the aftermath. This is acutely seen in his November 16th post, arguing, “That Joe Biden doesn’t have the moral conscience to have his Ambassador to the UN veto this nonsense that doesn’t even condemn Hamas while he is dining with Xi in San Francisco
shows you who he seeks to placate. This ends in my admin…” DeSantis' strategy to write an executive order to send planes is an obvious attempt to appear presidential, demonstrating his presidential strategies should he gain office.

Xenophobia

Another facet of DeSantis’ rhetorical approach during this election cycle centers around xenophobic remarks surrounding those who live in the Gaza region. Xenophobia, typically characterized by a dislike or fear of outsiders, exemplifies in how DeSantis frames education and the US border. On October 14th, he posted, “We should not import people from Gaza to our country. Neighboring Arab nations should open their borders and absorb them”. This creates a clear political line for what DeSantis is and is not willing to accept when it comes to the region: US citizens should return to the US to avoid the carnage of the war and local inhabitants should turn towards neighboring countries. DeSantis is a fan of closing US borders, arguing that our border crisis is deserving of cutting out those who are seeking asylum in South America, while simultaneously arguing that Arab nations ought to accept citizens from the Gaza strip. He even argues later in the day that, “It is not our role to be absorbing people from Gaza. And apart from this situation, if people with anti-Semitic, anti-American, or other toxic views are trying to come into our country, they should not be admitted”. His stance asserts that the US role is not to absorb people suffering from the conflict, despite previous assertions that the war is largely occurring as a result of US funding. DeSantis’ argument implicitly assumes that all individuals from the region maintain anti-Semitic or anti-American views, despite the initial clause of “apart from this situation ” in the sentence.

On the 15th, DeSantis posted, “As President, the number of people I will bring in from Gaza is zero”. This tweet is referencing a speech he gave on the election trail, in which he
explained, “You are starting to hear some people say, people on the left say, that if people, Palestinians Arabs, are leaving Gaza, that the United States should bring in potentially hundreds of thousands of people from Gaza. I can tell you this, as President, the number of people we will bring in from Gaza is zero”. This kind of messaging serves a dual purpose in conservative rhetoric. First, this indicates that DeSantis is doubling down on anti-immigration policies, regardless of the role he views the US had in creating the current conditions for the war. DeSantis is a strong advocate for the US closing its borders in general, and he is using the Israel-Hamas war to serve as another vehicle for this political stance. Implicitly, DeSantis is signaling a firm commitment to focusing on US citizens by attempting to keep foreign citizens from entering the borders. Explicitly, DeSantis is contending that the US should take a step back from potential calls to take care of the global populace. Second, DeSantis is attempting to further stratify conservative ideology from his opponents on the left. Though Trump remains the frontrunner for the GOP, DeSantis is joining Pence and Christie in connecting Hamas to Palestine. On the 15th, he argued, again, that the US should not be absorbing any refugees, and that, “Every Republican presidential candidate should follow suit”. This line of argument serves to connect the conservative platform against the DNC and position DeSantis as the frontrunner of the party who is creating a call to action.

His call to action, not accepting refugees, has also served as a point of critique against other conservative candidates, namely Nikki Haley. He posted on the 17th, “The last thing we should do is import the toxic pathologies from the Middle East into our country through Gaza refugees. Nikki Haley thinks we can distinguish between a Hamas terrorist and a supposed Gaza ‘freedom lover’ — that is absurd”. The framing of “toxic pathologies” reinforces earlier ideas that individuals from the region hold anti-American attitudes, allowing DeSantis to argue that
every individual from the region is a potential “Hamas terrorist”. This centers on his critique of
Haley in particular, who has maintained a less antagonistic stance on accepting refugees from the
region. Later on the day of the 17th, he posted, “No Gaza refugees, period. It’s a fools errand to
think we can separate a terrorist from a ‘freedom lover’ in Gaza”. While this tweet does not
directly indict Haley, it does implicitly attack her when viewed in combination with the previous
text. DeSantis even goes so far as to call Haley’s call as a “fools errand”, which establishes a
clear attack on Haley who is a “fool” and “absurd” for attempting to distinguish between those
who might pose a threat to the US and those who do not.

DeSantis posted on the 31st, “No Gaza refugees. No taxpayer money to Hamas. Cancel
student visas for foreign students celebrating terrorists”. While this tweet echoes previous
statements, the inclusion of canceling student visas for foreign students is particularly
concerning. This stance reflects a zero-tolerance approach to individuals who may be
sympathetic to the plight of refugees in general, and from Palestine in particular. Whereas his
previous arguments have been exclusionary of refugees in particular, the focus on students
indicates that DeSantis is focusing on an ideological component of the war that he does not want
to enter into American classrooms. Essentially, anyone who recognizes that Palestine has
suffered under the persecution of Israel or threatens the argument that Israel has claims to
Palestinian land should not be allowed to voice those opinions inside the classroom if they are
not from America. This is particularly concerning as this rhetoric is not only xenophobic in
nature, but also works to threaten freedom of speech within college spaces. DeSantis is being
opportunistic in his strategy, indicating the kind the president he plans to be: one who utilizes
executive orders to further his political will.

Chaos of Western Civilization
Xenophobia is one part of DeSantis’ larger critique of chaos plaguing Western civilization. On the 25th, DeSantis posted, “You and I both see it on the news - these times are incredibly dangerous. Our country is being invaded. Israel is at war. We shouldn't have to wait for a terrorist attack to take our border seriously. Join me to end the chaos. No more excuses”. This framing contextualizes the world as an inherently dangerous place, specifically for the US and its allies. DeSantis’ argument that “our country is being invaded” and “Israel is at war” couples these issues together in the public sphere and frames the problems facing the western world as “chaos”. This statement reemphasizes the need to take border control seriously, both within the confines of the southern border of the US and within the confines of an Israel at war. DeSantis’ aim is to spark concern with his audience, making them wary of those who are trying to cross the border and spread potentially dangerous ideologies. The additional concern around not wanting “to wait for a terrorist attack to take our border seriously” frames the southern border as a possible entry way for the chaos that the Gaza strip is currently experiencing. DeSantis is arguing that constituents should “join me to end the chaos”, with “no more excuses” acting as an implicit condemnation of the Biden administration.

By cross applying the analysis of the issues facing the US and facing Israel, DeSantis is able to reinforce a desire to support Israel in this conflict. He furthered this claim on the 17th, posting, “Israel is a special country because our entire Western civilization was birthed in the Holy Land. We are based on the Judeo-Christian tradition. You would not have the United States of America if you did not have the thousands of years of history that is represented in the Bible”. His particular emphasis on “thousands of years of history that is represented in the Bible” indicates that he views the US and Israel stemming from a relational history, one that establishes the contemporary western world. DeSantis additionally highlights the perceived influence of
Judeo-Christian values on the formation of American identity, framing Israel as not only a foundational culture for western civilization, but also as a source of inspiration for a continued relationship between the two countries. Therefore, the framing of “chaos” faced by Israel and faced by the US substantiates a generalized chaos facing the western world. DeSantis positions himself as the key candidate to combat this chaos, lead Americans back to the values that their history originates from, and strengthen the borders needed to protect the citizens of America and Israel.
Nikki Haley

From August to December of 2023, former Governor of South Carolina Nikki Haley made a total of 112 tweets. Of these tweets, 67 (roughly 60%) specifically focused on the Israel-Hamas conflict. The remaining 45 tweets from Haley focus on election campaigning, immigration, and abortion. Haley’s digital discourse has two thematic approaches: Condemnation of the UN and Condemnation of Hamas. While some tweets did mention former president, Haley’s core rhetorical emphasis did not include mention of Trump. The following sections will analyze this discourse chronologically.

Condemnation of the UN

Nikki Haley served as the 29th United States ambassador to the UN for almost two years, operating as the basis for her rhetorical strategy when discussing the current state of the geopolitical organization. Focusing on the UN allows Haley to showcase her history as an international ambassador for the US, a position that other conservative candidates have not held. Haley posted on October 8th, “At the UN, I introduced a resolution denouncing Hamas. America was the only member of the Security Council to vote for it. This is what Israel is up against: a world that denies the evil in front of them. We did not bow to world pressure then—we won't now”. Haley is referencing a motion she introduced at the UN towards the end of 2018, one that she characterized as an opportunity for the UN member states to put themselves on the side of “truth and balance” (Schwirtz, para. 2). In what the New York Times characterized as a “major blow” for Haley at the end of her UN tenure, the resolution failed to meet the two-thirds majority standard required for it to pass and Haley left the UN on a legislative failure. Almost six years later, Haley highlights that “America was the only member of the Security Council to vote for it.” This strategic positioning of US morality on the international stage suggests that America is
the only hegemonic power to recognize an evil that is opposing Israel. The addition of “We did not bow to world pressure then-we won’t now” serves as an indication for her proposed policy platforms, recognizing a desired relationship with Israel that would see the destruction of Hamas after the terror attacks regardless of the international community’s support.

On October 12th, Haley posted, “At the UN, I saw how Israel was criticized. It will be worse this time. The battle in Gaza will be hard & long, but it’s necessary. America cannot waver. Much of the civilized world stands w/ Israel when she gets hit. We must continue to stand with Israel when she hits back”. This tweet frames the international community as refusing to aid Israel, leaving America as its most prominent ally on the geopolitical stage. Interestingly, the argument that “much of the civilized world stands w/Israel” implicitly contends that other members of the UN, specifically the members of the security council when referencing the previous tweet, are not civilized nations. Haley is a strong advocate for Israel defending itself against outside adversaries, while contending that the US “must continue to stand with Israel when she hits back”. She argues that the battle in Gaza, referencing the Israel-Hamas war, is a necessary war in which the US cannot waver in its support. This argument is furthered in a tweet she posted on October 16, explaining that , “I saw Hamas’ terror tunnels in 2017. At the UN, I warned about Hamas' determination to murder civilians. The world turned its back on Israel then—we can't now”. While non-unique in conservative discourse, her indictments of the international community and the UN add a perspective that Christie, Pence, and DeSantis do not have access to. Haley is using the Israel-Hamas war to underscore her expertise in geopolitics, engendering herself within conservative politics through showcasing her previous position at the UN. This indicates what kind of presidential strategy she plans to pursue: indicting the UN and
turning the US more domestic in its political concerns as she showcased the international community has abandoned US allies.

These indictments evolved into direct condemnations on October 24th, with Haley posting, “The Secretary General of the UN should know nothing justifies beheading babies, burning people alive, and raping young girls. He owes the people of Israel an apology. This is disgusting and disqualifies him from leading the UN”. This tweet is in response to a statement from UN Secretary General Anonio Guterres that argued, “Hamas attacks did not happen in a vacuum, the Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation” (Haaretz, 2023). Unlike previous tweets that generally attack the motives of UN member states, Haley is applying direct condemnation on one of the most prominent members of the organization. Her statement adds to the previous suggestion that “I saw how Israel was criticized”, diminishing the plight of the Palestinian people in favor of supporting a US ally. She demands an apology from Guterres on behalf of the Israeli people, going so far as to call for his removal from his post. Haley frames Hamas as an extension of Palestine, arguing that “nothing justifies beheading babies, burning people alive, and raping young girls”. Despite the UN’s call for a ceasefire in the region, Haley makes her stance unequivocally known on November 25th, explaining, “UNESCO, UNRWA, UN Human Rights Council, you've been warned... A Haley administration will always have Israel's back”. This sends a clear message to not only her potential voters, explaining what her explicit stance on Israel will be upon election, but also to the international community at large, showing that a Haley administration will support Israel’s ability to retaliate regardless of the UN’s support.

Condemnation of Hamas
Haley’s frames Hamas as a bloodthirsty terrorist organization determined to see the
destruction of Israel. She posted on October 7th:

Hamas has declared war on Israel on the Jewish holiday of Shemini Atzeret and the 50th
anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. Make no mistake: Hamas is a bloodthirsty terrorist
organization backed by Iran and determined to kill as many innocent lives as possible.
The reports out of Israel are horrific with a stunning number of dead and wounded and
should be universally condemned. Israel has every right to defend its citizens from terror.

We must always stand with Israel and against this Iranian regime.

This tweet serves as the foundation for much of her rhetoric surrounding Hamas over the course
of the 6 month cycle. She adds on October 8th that, “The hate [of Jews] you see from Hamas is
the same that fueled the Nazis”. The focus on Iran is a similar rhetorical approach to other
conservative candidates, though Haley largely excludes Biden in this conversation. She
expresses horror at the lives that have been lost in the region, which she argues ought to be
“universally condemned”. Haley reconfirms Israel’s need to stand against Hamas, and adds that
they should additionally stand “against this Iranian regime”.

Haley begins to increase her volatility against Hamas, calling for complete destruction of
the group. On October 9th, she posted, “At least 9 Americans have been killed in Hamas’ war
against Israel. This is personal. Hamas terrorists don’t distinguish between Israelis & Americans,
between grandmothers & soldiers. They are bloodthirsty murderers who chant ‘death to Israel,
death to America’. Finish them”. Her emphasis on “at least 9 Americans” serves as an implicit
call-to-action for American citizens to support Israel in the conflict, emphasizing that Hamas
does not distinguish between Israelis and Americans. She additionally frames Hamas as
indiscriminate in the individuals that they targeted during the invasion, explaining that there is no
difference between soldiers and grandmothers. This contextualization adds to her initial argument that Hamas is a bloodthirsty organization who espouses a violent ideology, one that chants “death to Israel, death to America”. In coupling the two countries in this narrative, Haley is seeking to underscore the immense threat that Hamas poses to both Israeli and American lives if no response is initiated. Haley concludes with an explicit call-to-action, claiming that, presumably, Israel and the US need to “finish them”. This is a more direct call than previously analyzed politicians as she is calling for a complete eradication of the group.

Haley’s call-to-action evolves in a later post on the 9th, arguing that the battle in the Gaza Strip is one of good vs. evil. She bulletpoints potential US policies, claiming that the following needs to happen immediately:

- Provide Israel with all arms and intelligence it needs to defend itself and destroy the terrorists in its midst.
- Place all regional governments, particularly the government of Lebanon, on notice that they must not allow the use of their territory to engage in this battle.
- End American taxpayer support for all Palestinian entities or United Nations-backed entities that side with Hamas or fail to denounce antisemitic activity.
- Freeze Iranian access to the $6 billion in Qatari banks and send that money to Israel instead.
- Reimpose and enforce sanctions on Iran and on purchasers of Iranian oil.

Therefore, Haley not only contends that Hamas needs to be finished, but also provides an outline of US action that ought to be taken to help in the effort. She is initially calling for the US to increase military aid into the region, though not to increase US military soldiers or infrastructure. These actions would serve to bolster Israeli anti-terrorism resources, reflecting a commitment to provide Israel with an increased ability to protect its citizens. Secondly, Haley is calling for the US to put all regional governments on notice to not enter into the conflict. This would put
increased pressure into the region, serving as a warning for local governments to not aid Hamas or interfere with Israel’s attempt to protect its borders. Third, she is calling for the Biden administration to cease using taxpayer dollars for Palestinian or UN entities that directly support Hamas or fail to denounce anti-Semitic activity. Though she is unspecific in the targeted organizations that Biden is funding who contribute to Hamas, her fourth policy outline is specific to Iran. Like other conservative politicians, Haley specifically targets the $6 billion dollar deal that Biden made with Iran while calling for sanctions to be placed on the country. Haley is the only member of the GOP up for election to explicitly outline a policy plan on X that aims at the destruction of Hamas. This is significant as it showcases her presidential strategy, pushing forward policy agendas that would further restrict Iran and Palestine.

Haley additionally uses Hamas as a vehicle for arguing against potential future conflict in the Middle East. She posted on November 7th, “To achieve peace, the most important thing America can do is help Israel eliminate Hamas. Victory will stop a broader war in the Middle East and warn Russia and China not to mess with our friends and allies. No ceasefire. No pause”. Haley’s positioning of the US in this tweet indicates that America has an obligation to aid in the achievement of peace. This is obviously due to the relationship between Israel and America, doubling down on Haley’s commitment to protect US allies against “evil” enemies. For Haley, victory in this conflict would serve to foster stability and protect against future wars for the region. The contention that victory would “warn Russia and China not to mess with our friends and allies” is another international commitment from the Haley administration, providing a warning against other hegemonic powers from interfering with US allies. This is a vastly different approach from Christie, Pence, and DeSantis who largely steer clear from talking about China or Russia, with the exception of likening Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to that of Hamas’
attack on Israel. Haley calls for no ceasefire in the Gaza region, reconfirming her stance against
the UN’s call for a pause of conflict in the region. Under this same tweet, she couples this call
with photos of a destroyed home, trash scattered around the ground, and blood on the floor of a
room with a child's crib to demonstrate the devastation of conflict experienced by citizens.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

This thesis examined conservative politicians' discourse surrounding the Israel-Hamas War from August to December of 2023 in order to gauge the differences in political strategy as represented on X. I used Sprinklr to garner the digital data of Mike Pence, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, and Nikki Haley, identifying thematic differences present in their speech and difference in strategy in the conservative block. Pence’s digital discourse has two thematic approaches: general stances and detached voice. Pence generally follows the agreed upon conservative stance on Israel as a vital ally, referencing the Trump administration's policy approaches to the country and explicitly arguing that the US continues to stand with Israel in their time of conflict. This strategy provides broader insight into the conservative movement as a collective, with all analyzed politicians maintaining a strong stance on Israel’s protection; however, this strategy provides minimal insight for publics to understand what separates Pence out from his political competition when facing a presidential election. While some of Pence’s rhetoric seems to come from him directly, a considerable portion of his public discourse is referencing either public appearances he made or articles written about him during the selected time period. These posts are completely devoid of his voice, opting to quote other materials found online. The implications of this strategy for the public sphere is that it may discourage meaningful interaction and dialog among constituents, with them opting to prefer politicians who take more pronounced stances on world affairs.

Christie’s digital discourse has two thematic approaches: Anti Biden and Anti Trump, and first hand travel experiences in Israel during the conflict. His critique on Biden centers around the current administration’s dealings with Iran, specifically citing the $6 billion ransom
deal, which Christie claims has laid the foundation for Hamas in the status quo. Christie argues that Biden’s appeasement of Iran during his presidency has invited the war against Israel to take place. Further, he argues that the failure of the Biden administration has allowed for increasing global conflict to stir, citing both the Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine wars for justification in questioning Biden’s global strength as president. This narrative leverages international events as Biden’s failures, attempting to publicly discredit him and undermine his authority in the public sphere. Christie linkens the actions of Russia to the terrorist organization Hamas, serving as the foundation for his critiques on Trump. Unlike Trump, who has publicly encouraged Russian aggression against NATO members, Christie is attempting to establish his political platform on themes of strength against perceived enemies of the global order. He takes this platform forward through his first hand travel experiences, showcasing his claim that a strong president is one who does not fear seeing the tragedy of war firsthand. These experiences demonstrate what kind of president that Christie is positioning himself to be in the public sphere: a president who does not fear coming firsthand to aid US allies, who does not fear the cruel realities of war, and who does not fear posturing US strength domestically and abroad.

DeSantis’ digital discourse has three thematic approaches: Anti Biden, Xenophobia, and Chaos of Western Civilization. DeSantis mirrors Christie in his critique of Biden, focusing specifically on the relationship between the Biden administration and Iran. Unlike Christie, who simply condemns Biden for the ransom deal, DeSantis opts to diminish Biden’s reputation in the public sphere by claiming Biden is a liar whose easy policies on Iran has directly funded Hamas, of which Biden has attempted to skirt responsibility. He furthers this condemnation by claiming Biden’s decision to fund the Palestinians with taxpayer dollars has helped Hamas, calling for an immediate end of the funding to both Palestine and Iran. Additionally, his decision to take
unilateral action, such as sending planes from Florida to Israel, mimicked a presidential order in that he made a decision without the approval of either hierarchical powers. This action works to portray him as a decisive leader when compared to Biden. DeSantis additionally calls for the borders to be closed to individuals from the Gaza region as he claims the Arab nations shoulder the responsibility of those seeking asylum. Another version of a presidential order comes from his claim that the number of individuals he will bring in from the area is 0, excluding the ability for congressional hearings to take place in order to determine a course of action for the nation. DeSantis is writing these pseudo-edicts as an indication of what kind of president he plans to be: one who is not afraid to use presidential power to further his own political will as he believes that the US needs a strong president to respond to the rising chaos of western civilization.

Haley’s digital discourse has two thematic approaches: Condemnation of the UN and Condemnation of Hamas. These strategies couple together to position Haley as a prominent member of the international community within the public sphere. Haley was in the UN for two years, giving her a perceived authority in condemning actions that the UN has made during the Gaza conflict. For example, Haley argued that the UN Secretary General owed Israel an apology for claiming that their actions against Palestine served as the foundation for the emergence of Hamas. Haley consistently reaffirms US allyship to Israel, arguing that the international community has constantly failed them at the United Nations. One such failure was the UN’s failure to pass her 2018 resolution to denounce Hamas, which Haley argued meant that the UN was not on the side of truth and balance for Israel. For Haley, the same ideology that flows through Hamas stems from the Nazis. This ideology undergirds a hate of both America and Israel, leading Haley to call for a complete destruction of Hamas. In response, Haley outlines a variety of policy platforms that she believes that the US should undertake in order to protect
Israel and destroy Hamas. Haley writes policies on X to indicate what kind of president she intends to be: a president who will rollback funding to Palestine, who will completely cut funding to Iran, and who will fully support Israel in its ability to defend itself.

Examining conservative politicians’ rhetorical strategies is critical for understanding the contemporary composition of the digital public and the role of deliberation. The unfortunate reality of digital election cycles is that politicians do not attempt to engage in deliberation at all; rather, they position themselves as presidential material through mechanisms like writing virtual presidential orders, creating policy, or showcasing their past political histories. Conservative politicians wield significant ability to influence how the public come to think about different issues, yet fail to engage either one another or their constituents. For the ideal of a democracy based in deliberation to come into fruition, these politicians, or the platforms they utilize, would create spaces for politicians and constituents to engage respectfully on matters of general concern. Instead, these politicians fully embrace the aggregation model of democracy. This results in their rhetoric becoming increasingly inflammatory surrounding Biden, Hamas, Palestine by extension, and one another in order to secure votes. A connecting thread between all of the analyzed politicians is a determination to protect Israel, but the byproduct for the public is an increasingly antagonistic understanding of Palestine. Politicians are turning the public sphere into a battleground of ideologies, fundamentally disrupting its functionality for discourse. Pence, Christie, DeSantis, and Haley are individuals in places of considerable power and have opted to pretend they are the president, mimicking different presidential functions instead of attempting to substantiate a generalized conservative movement heading into the primary.

As a result, the trajectory of the public sphere in future elections is not promising. For democracy to function properly, it needs a flourishing public sphere that is grounded in public
deliberation, not aggregation of ideas. When the public sphere is hindered, several issues for democracy arise. A healthy public sphere allows for the free flow of ideas and information, but politicians skew these conversations to become more antagonistic. This means that voters come to expect hostility in leaders of government. Diverse viewpoints become lost, diminishing the capacity for voters to have quality decision-making processes when entering into election cycles. Algorithms ensure that the accountability of politician’s aggression is minimal, often emphasizing content that gets engagement or comes from prominent individuals regardless of the implications to democratic structures. Society begins to experience a weakened social cohesion as the rhetoric from our leaders becomes more stratifying, often encouraging constituents to embrace radical viewpoints to secure votes. The compounding effects of these harms in future elections pose a grave threat to the functionality of the public sphere in general, and democracy in particular. If nothing is done to curtail this trajectory, US democracy risks becoming an ideal of the past rather than a political reality of the future. Democracy is contingent on a functioning public sphere as the arena for discourse, yet this research indicates that the public sphere is on a downward spiral for political conversations. Academics must take this threat to democracy seriously as more authoritative governing systems tend to eliminate free speech, and academics historically have experienced these effects through persecution.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis tracks the history of deliberative democracy theory, the public sphere, and the emergence and difficulties of the digital public sphere. I am interested in questions surrounding
public bodies and discourse, with an acute concern for the trajectory of democratic structures in the twenty-first century. The study analyzed Mike Pence, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, and Nikki Haley on X, formerly Twitter. My posed research question sought to explore how conservative politicians seeking election in the upcoming presidential election frame the Israel-Hamas War on X, formerly Twitter? The results of the study explored thematic rhetorical strategy from each politician, developing an understanding of the differences and similarities that present in the conservative movement as espoused by their leaders. Unfortunately, this study also indicates that the functionality of the public sphere is increasingly becoming hindered by digital political strategy. This raises concern for the future of political elections in coming cycles, and the stability of democracy as a system for future generations of American citizens. This thesis has 2 primary contributions: a bridging of deliberative democratic thought with the use of social media platforms as the contemporary public sphere, and an understanding of how conservative politicians frame the ongoing Israel-Hamas war for their constituents.

This study is limited in a few significant ways. First, the exclusion of Trump from the results presents a blind spot for understanding conservative culture. Trump has been winning state elections across the nation, likely resulting in him securing the GOP nomination for the 2024 election cycle. As a result, the exclusion of Trump means that likely the most prominent conservative posts are not included in the presented data. Second, the exclusion of replies from X users in the comments section means that this study cannot accurately interpret the effects that this rhetoric has on constituencies in general. While analyzing what rhetorical strategies politicians are using provides an accurate description of how these politicians want their constituents to think about issues of global importance, the results cannot accurately interpret what effects this rhetoric is actually having on those populations. Third, this thesis examines
discourse exclusively around the Israel-Hamas conflict as it was statistically the most referenced issue in the selected timeframe; however, this thesis lacks a generalized understanding of the conservative movement across a variety of contexts. Elections consist of politicians speaking across a multitude of problems; therefore the scope of interpretation is limited by selecting a single topic area.

Future research ought to address each of these limitations in order to develop a more thorough understanding of the conservative block. Trump exclusively posts content on Truth Social, giving researchers the ability to track the development of his rhetorical strategies surrounding not only Israel-Hamas, but also other contexts he deems important. Future research ought to additionally analyze how constituents are responding to posts from Donald Trump, Mike Pence, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, and Nikki Haley as they collectively comprise the contemporary conservative voting bloc. Though understanding how politicians speak on issues is important for understanding the trajectory of democracy, additionally contextualizing constituents' responses allows for researchers to understand how voters interpret this content.
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