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How nationalist rhetoric drives polarization over climate change in the US

Robert Schertzer[a] and Eric Taylor Woods[b]

[a]Department of Political Science, University of Toronto, Canada; [b]School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores how American politicians – on both the right and left – use nationalist rhetoric to frame climate change. We undertake a contextual content analysis of all speeches by Republican and Democratic presidential nominees during the 2016 and 2020 elections. We show that nationalism was among the most prominent frames for these nominees when referring to climate change, whether they supported positions that were 'skeptical' (ie Donald Trump) or 'activist' (ie Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden). Nationalism was so prevalent that it structured the terms of the climate change debate, with the candidates dividing over which position was better suited to strengthen the identity and power of the American nation. Embedding the climate change debate in a struggle over American nationhood is indicative of a wider, problematic process of 'nationalist polarization,' where elites draw from competing conceptions of the nation's identity to drive polarization over a policy problem.

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In the US, the Republican and Democratic parties are increasingly polarized over climate change. Republicans tend to take a more 'skeptical' position while Democrats tend to take a more 'activist' position (Dunlap and McCright 2008, Chinn *et al.* 2020). The positioning of these political parties – and their related political communication – has played an important role in polarizing the American public over the issue (Krosnick *et al.* 2000, McCright and Dunlap 2011, Guber 2013, Unsworth and Fielding 2014, Merkley and Stecula 2018). In this article, we explore how these parties talk about climate change and how this fuels polarization over the issue.

CONTACT Eric Taylor Woods e.woods@leeds.ac.uk
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Party affiliation is clearly a driver of increasingly polarized positions on climate change. Scholars have shown that individuals take cues on climate change from 'their' party elites (Krosnick *et al.* 2000, McCright and Dunlap 2011, Guber 2013). In a wider environment of political and affective polarization, identifying an issue with a party position and cultivating negative sentiment for the opposing party can shape public attitudes (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, Iyengar *et al.* 2019). However, this explanation says little about the precise *mechanisms* that elites use in their communication practices to move audiences to support their positions.

Here, a growing body of research points to the importance of cultural frames in climate change communication (Nisbet 2009, Hoffman 2015). This research is buttressed by the literature in political psychology showing that individuals' opinions on climate change are primarily shaped by cultural cognition, rather than rational judgement (Kahan 2013). Building on this insight, scholars have shown that individuals are more likely to support elite positions on climate change if they are perceived to share cultural values (Hindman 2009, Newman *et al.* 2018, Oleskog Tryggvason and Shehata 2024). It is thus unsurprising that the climate change debate has become intertwined with cultural issues that have little to do with science or policy (Hoffman 2015, Smith and Howe 2015). This also helps to explain why these debates have seemingly become so intractable: climate change has become a policy issue *and* a cultural issue.

These findings suggest that partisan elites have, at least in part, fueled polarization over climate change by infusing their messaging with culture. Here, we aim to better understand how this process is occurring by unpacking the *content* of the cultural frames that Democratic and Republican elites use when discussing climate change. What cultural cues beyond party affiliation are elites sending to their intended audiences to signal they are cultural allies, and why are these cues so powerful that they can short-circuit rational debate? To help guide our investigation, we build on what we know about party affiliation and climate change by incorporating insights from work on the intersection of identity politics and communication studies, focusing on the role of nationalism in today's politics.

Political communication research is increasingly recognizing the role of identity (Kreiss *et al.* 2024). Among the most salient forms of identity in the US is the longstanding cleavage in American political culture between exclusive and inclusive conceptions of American national identity (Lieven 2012, Gerstle 2017, Schertzer and Woods 2022, Uslaner 2022). Recent work has documented how this cleavage has been taken up by the Republican and Democratic parties in their messaging – with the former propelling a more exclusive conception and the latter a more inclusive conception (Lieven 2016, Schertzer and Woods 2021, Woods *et al.* 2024). This dynamic is feeding a process of 'nationalist polarization,' where partisans use competing nationalisms to frame each other as an 'un-American' threat to the nation (Woods *et al.* 2024).

'Nationalist polarization' can be seen as a stronger form of affective polarization that 'supercharges' animus to an opposing party by framing its elites and supporters as baleful outsiders who pose an existential threat to the nation. As with other forms of polarization, nationalist polarization can impact policy debates, whereby they turn on the question of which policy position truly represents the nation's identity and interests. For example, we saw this play out in the 2020 presidential election in relation to the policing of Black communities (Woods *et al.* 2024). These findings point to the possibility that climate change debates are also being impacted by a process of nationalist polarization, such that partisan elites are using competing conceptions of American national identity as cultural content to frame the issue.

This expectation builds on an emerging set of literature exploring the intersection of nationalism and climate change politics. This literature tends to focus on how the political right uses nationalism to feed climate skepticism and stymie international collaboration (Lockwood 2018, Kulin *et al.* 2021, Fiorino 2022, Huber *et al.* 2022, Gruber 2024). However, a more recent scholarship has examined how nationalism is also being used by the political left to defend climate action, notably through an activist 'green nationalism' (Diprose *et al.* 2016, Conversi and Friis Hau 2021). Scholars have even begun testing the effect of using nationalism to frame climate change, with mixed results showing that in some cases it can inhibit support for climate action (Bogado 2024) and in others stimulate support (Mason *et al.* 2024). In short, nationalism is clearly being used to cultivate climate skepticism *and* activism (Conversi 2023). What remains unclear, is how nationalism impacts the climate change debate as a whole. To properly understand how nationalism is driving polarization over the issue and hindering policy action, we need comparative research that traces how *both* skeptics and activists use nationalism in their messaging. This is what we do here.

In this article, we compare how Republican and Democratic presidential nominees in the 2016 and 2020 elections used nationalist rhetoric when discussing climate change. Our research is guided by two related questions. First, to what extent did these presidential candidates use nationalist rhetoric to frame their depictions of climate change? Second, to what extent did they differ in how they used nationalist rhetoric to cultivate support among climate skeptics and activists? By addressing these questions, we aim to shed light on how partisan elites are driving polarization over climate change policy.

Analytical framework

We approach nationalism as a political religion: we define it as a meaning-making ideological movement that centers moral communities, called nations, as the principal source of belonging and identity in the modern

world (Mosse 1975, Smith 2003, Hayes 2016). From this perspective, nationalism's aim is both cultural and political; it seeks to defend the nation's ostensibly unique identity and autonomy in a world that is perceived to be marked by myriad threats (Hutchinson 2013). The construction and defence of this identity is driven primarily through relations with perceived outsiders: nationalists identify who 'we' are (the ingroup) by identifying who 'we' are not (the outgroup) (Barth 1969, Schertzer and Woods 2022: Ch. 2).

Over time, characteristics associated with national identity can become so widely institutionalized that they are reproduced relatively unconsciously through 'banal' signaling in media and iconography (Billig 1995), and through 'everyday' practices (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). This phenomenon is particularly true of political communities like the US, where the belief that 'we' constitute a nation was institutionalized within a state over a relatively long period of time (Malešević 2019). When nationalism has been institutionalized in this way, it typically manifests as a taken-for-granted system of meaning.

Even though nationalism's core tenet – that the nation's identity and autonomy should be defended above all else – is institutionalized in the US, this does not mean that Americans agree on the nature of their national identity. Nations are 'zones of conflict' (Hutchinson 2005); they are riven by internal struggles over the meaning of national identity. In the US, there is a long-running internal struggle between exclusive and inclusive conceptions of American identity. This struggle is most visible in 'culture wars' over race, religion, and immigration (Wright 2011, Uslaner 2022, Smith and King 2024). For example, in the 2020 presidential election, the #BlackLivesMatter protests became a vector for contestation over America's identity – with Biden arguing that they exemplified America's (inclusive) identity, and Trump arguing that they were un-American attacks on America's (exclusive) identity (Woods *et al.* 2024). This example also highlights how nationalism pervades the right *and* left in the US. Critically, when contestation over national identity aligns with partisan affiliation in this way, there is greater potential for nationalist polarization (Woods *et al.* 2024, see also Uslaner 2022). Our study is designed to examine if this process is playing out in the climate change debate.

To examine whether nationalist polarization is present in partisan climate change communication, we use a three-part research strategy, identifying 1) climate change communication; 2) the use of nationalist rhetoric through references to the American ingroup and outgroups; and 3) how that nationalist rhetoric seeks to construct American national identity by focusing on its main referents.

Identifying how climate change is discussed

Climate change is best understood as a 'wicked' policy problem that is multicausal, highly interdependent, and has taken on a moral dimension

(Rittel and Webber 1973, Peters 2020). It is among the most complex of wicked problems today because it requires communities to make changes now for future generations, with actions required at both the nation-state and transnational level (Levin *et al.* 2012).

An underlying objective of our study is to explore how nationalism can shape the framing of such complex policy problems. This focus is particularly important for understanding policy debates over climate change in the context of ever-increasing politicization and polarization. In this respect, we must be rather precise in how we explore the role of political communication in the 'debate' – or more accurately, the problem definition and agenda setting phases – over climate change. As past research has shown, political communication is shifting away from the science of climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, Nisbet 2011). Today, the problem definition and agenda setting around climate change tends to focus on the impact and policy response (Feldman *et al.* 2017). Here there is a growing split over what policy interventions are needed (Pew Research Centre 2024) – which we think is shaped in part by the infusion of nationalism into the debate. Building on these insights, we follow the emergent practice of looking at how political communication frames three dimensions of climate change: its causes, impacts and policy actions. Each reference to climate change in our data is therefore coded to one of these three dimensions.

Identifying the use of nationalist rhetoric

At first blush, identifying nationalist rhetoric might seem straightforward. One could look for common words and phrases that may indicate the speaker is invoking nationalism, such as 'nation,' 'country,' or 'us.' However, identifying nationalism in its institutionalized form is complicated because it is so widespread that it is often used implicitly. For example, former President Barack Obama's frequent references to 'Main Street,' particularly when he juxtaposed it to 'Wall Street' in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, was loaded with a dense complex of symbols and myths of an America that is comprised of people who are predominantly blue collar, native-born, English-speaking, and live in small towns. Trump's frequent references to the 'heartland' conjures a similar conception of the 'true' America. Accordingly, identifying how actors use nationalism requires a nuanced analysis of its context.

The identification of nationalist rhetoric is also complicated by the centrality of outgroups in this process. As we mentioned, nationalism simultaneously looks outward and inward – when it identifies who 'they' are, it is also identifying who 'we' are (and vice-versa). Paying attention to these dynamics is especially important when studying the use of exclusionary nationalist rhetoric by American politicians, who generally avoid

explicit, racialized references to the nation's identity (ie avoiding direct references to whiteness). Instead, they tend to imply 'our' whiteness by focusing on non-white outgroups. To further complicate matters, exclusionary nationalists also tend to use coded language or 'dog-whistles' (Haney-López 2014, Rowland 2021). We can see both these tendencies, for example, in Trump's nationalist rhetoric (Schertzer and Woods 2021, 2022). Thus, we cannot appreciate the use of nationalist rhetoric if we only focus on references to 'us.' We also need to focus on references to 'them.' We seek to capture these dynamics in our analysis by relating the use of indicative nouns (eg America, China, United Nations, etc.) and pronouns (eg us, we, our, them, they) to the context in which they were uttered.

Identifying how nationalist rhetoric constructs national identity

Once we identify nationalist rhetoric in the candidates' climate communication, we then map how they use it to define American national identity. To do so, we use a coding schema comprising five main referents that nationalists use to construct national identity. These referents include 'people,' 'history,' 'religion,' 'territory,' and 'place in the world' (see Table 1). These referents are based on a wide reading of literature on national identity, particularly Armstrong (1982) and Smith (1986), alongside our own work in this area (Schertzer and Woods 2022). We readily acknowledge that these five referents are not an exhaustive list of how national identity can be defined, but we do suggest they are the most common. These referents are also not necessarily discreet – when speaking about one referent (eg the nation's history) others will often also be invoked (eg the nation's territorial homeland, or the characteristics of its people). Nevertheless, this schema moves beyond a simple binary observation of the presence/absence of nationalist rhetoric; it enables a more fine-grained analysis of *how* nationalism is used to define national identity.

This more fine-grained analysis also helps us identify potential cleavages. This is because there are numerous ways a speaker could use these referents to construct national identity. For example, in the US, they might seek to construct an inclusive conception of the 'people' by referring to classical liberal principles, such as political equality and individual rights, while emphasizing that anyone can belong. Alternatively, they might seek to construct a more exclusive conception of the 'people' by referring to the ethnic characteristics of the dominant group. Similarly, a speaker might refer to the nation's 'territory' as belonging to all citizens, while another speaker might refer to the nation's 'territory' as the ancestral homeland of the dominant group (see Schertzer and Woods 2022, Woods *et al.* 2024).

Table 1. Five referents of national identity used to trace nationalist rhetoric in presidential speeches.

Five Referents of National Identity		
People – *how the nation's membership is framed.* References to the members of the nation, including: • their shared characteristics • the conditions for group membership • what unites them as a group • what distinguishes them from other groups • their relationship to the state	**History** – *how the nation's past and future are framed.* References to the past and future of the nation, including: • the origins of the nation • the key moments or stages in the development of the nation that have shaped its characteristics and place in the world • the trajectory of the nation's development – including narratives of progress or decline • the relationship between the nation's past, present and future	**Religion** – *how the nation's relationship to religion is framed.* References to the religion of the nation, including: • the relationship between religion and its place in the social and political life of the nation (including secularism) • the role of religion in the origins of the nation and in shaping the characteristics of the members of the nation • the role of a deity/deities in the fortunes of the nation
Territory – *how the nation's territory is framed.* References to the territory of the nation, including: • the relationship between the nation and the state's territory • the role of the unique geographic features and environment of the territory in the origins, history, and development of the nation and its characteristics • the relationship between the territory (and its integrity or violation) in the sovereignty of the nation • how the territory shapes the nation's place in the world	**Place in the World** - *how the nation's place in the world (and its relationship with other nations) is framed.* References to the nation's place in the world, including: • the relationship to other nations and nation-states, notably its stature and relative standing in the international community • the relationship between the nation and its allies and enemies • the unique features and characteristics of the nation compared against other nations (often highlighting the characteristics that give it a superior standing) • the mission or purpose of the nation in the international community	

Methods

For this study, we captured all speeches and public remarks from the Democratic and Republican candidates who eventually won their party's nomination during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016, and Joe Biden and Donald Trump in 2020). We included speeches from the day each candidate declared their intention to seek their party's nomination to election day (576 days for Clinton, 511 days for Trump in 2016, 558 days for Biden, and 504 days for Trump in 2020). Our database consists of all public remarks, including

speeches at political rallies, addresses during campaign stops, press conferences, and media interviews – totaling 892 speech events (Table 2). We accessed these speeches through The American Presidency Project, a widely cited online archive hosted at UC Santa Barbara. To analyze the speeches, we followed a variant of qualitative content analysis that involved four key stages. We used textual analysis software for all coding (NVivo). We started by applying an initial codebook to a twenty percent sample to refine our framework and codebook. We then compiled our complete dataset through keyword searches to identify candidate references to the causes, impacts and policy actions related to climate change. The search included the following indicative terms using the stem and derivatives: climate; environment; global warming; natural disaster; hurricane; flood; sea; ocean; wildfire; heatwave; temperature; Green New Deal; energy; solar; wind; pipeline; oil; gas; fracking; drilling. These search parameters produced a subset of 532 speeches that we could plausibly expect to contain a portion dedicated to discussing climate change. Three coders then reviewed each potential reference to determine if the portion of the speech with these keywords discussed climate change. This review reduced the number of speeches that included references to climate change to 288. To explore the use of nationalist rhetoric, the authors then applied the refined codebook to these 288 speeches, with each author reading and coding every speech and reference (while also applying codes for other potentially related frames that may be expected such as partisan attacks, economic considerations, international relations, etc.).[1]

While candidate speeches are an ideal source for content analysis, there are specific challenges related to identifying nationalist content since it is often implied or communicated via coded language. To manage these challenges, we used an interpretivist approach to content analysis sensitive to the context that we have developed through our research into nationalist myths and symbols in political communication (Schertzer and Woods 2021, p. 22;, Woods *et al.* 2024). Our coding process followed a deliberative and collaborative approach seeking intercoder consensus (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). Following compilation of the dataset, both authors coded all mentions of climate change. We did this by applying the framework and codebook,

Table 2. Presidential speeches discussing climate change.

Candidate	Speeches	Speeches with climate change reference (%)	Climate change references (avg/ speech)	Avg % of words in speech on climate change
Clinton 2016	88	46 (52.3%)	95 (2.1)	3.8%
Trump 2016	77	54 (70.1%)	106 (1.9)	2.2%
Biden 2020	61	39 (63.9%)	133 (3.4)	4.9%
Trump 2020	666	149 (22.4%)	469 (3.1)	3.0%

examining each paragraph with a climate change reference to determine the context and message being delivered. Each author took half of the references as the first coder. The authors then switched and reviewed each other's codes, so that every speech and mention of climate change was coded by both authors, flagging disagreements and questions for discussion at regular meetings. This is a labor-intensive process that does not fully address subjectivity. However, the deliberative and collaborative process is well suited to unpack the complex and contextual nature of the messaging (Guba and Lincoln 1994, Schertzer and Woods 2022: Ch, 3;, Woods *et al.* 2024). In addition, casting a wide net that includes all speeches over the campaign period – and coding all references to climate change rather than a sample – helps to mitigate subjectivity and selection bias.

Findings: Nationalism is a key frame for both republicans and Democrats when they discuss climate change – but they draw from competing understandings of the nation

In this section, we present our findings, focusing on answering our two research questions: whether the candidates employed nationalist rhetoric when discussing climate change, and, if so, whether there were significant differences in how they used nationalist rhetoric. We start with a broad, descriptive overview of trends in the candidates' rhetoric, followed by a more detailed account of how each candidate employed nationalist rhetoric.

Climate change was a significant policy issue for both Republican and Democratic nominees in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. As Table 2 shows, while we might expect the issue to be more prevalent in Clinton and Biden's speeches, Trump's 2016 campaign had the highest proportion of speeches where the causes, impact or policy actions related to climate change were mentioned (at 70%). While Trump engaged less with climate change in the 2020 campaign, he still regularly spoke about the topic (with references appearing in just under a quarter of his speeches).[2] Meanwhile, Clinton and Biden broached climate change in a majority of their speeches, with nearly five percent of the text in Biden's campaign speeches devoted to the topic.

These references to climate change in the speeches of both Democratic and Republican nominees highlight some of the similarities in how both sides approached the issue. All nominees overwhelmingly focused on policy actions they felt were needed – or not needed – to address climate change (see Table 3). There were also mentions of the causes of climate change (which generally referred to the role of human activity) and its impacts (which generally involved discussions of extreme weather events or the actions of other nations impacting the US). But, in most instances, references to climate change were related to the desired policy action.

The nominees used a variety of frames to stake out their respective policy positions. An economic frame was the most common (Table 4). Generally, this took the form of arguing about how climate policy interventions would either stimulate or negatively impact the job market. This economic focus was closely followed by (and very often combined with) a nationalist frame: nationalist rhetoric was the second most prevalent way candidates framed the climate change issue. Indeed, for Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020, it was the most common frame. Interestingly, while we might expect a high level of partisanship when discussing climate change, direct partisan attacks lagged behind the use of nationalist frames (by large measures for Clinton and Trump in 2016 and Biden in 2020). Similarly, other expected frames when discussing the policy of climate change, such as international agreements, the role of government, health impacts, and human and social rights, were significantly less common than the economy and nationalism.

These findings show nationalism was among the most common frames for all nominees when discussing climate change, but we also need to know more about *how* the candidates employed nationalist rhetoric. Here we see some structural similarities.

These similarities were most evident in the *focus* of the candidates' nationalist rhetoric. For each nominee, when they used nationalism, they overwhelmingly focused on the American nation (see Table 5). This tendency to focus on the ingroup when adopting a nationalist frame is

Table 3. Climate change focus by candidate – percentage of references to different dimensions*.

Candidate	Causes	Impact	Policy Action
Clinton 2016	23%	20%	78%
Trump 2016	1%	4%	97%
Biden 2020	11%	35%	80%
Trump 2020	5%	6%	95%

*Totals can equal more than 100% because of multiple foci.

Table 4. Main frames when discussing climate change in 2016 and 2020 campaign speeches – percentage of references to climate change using frame*.

Frames	Clinton 2016	Trump 2016	Biden 2020	Trump 2020
Economic	53%	87%	46%	57%
Nationalism	55%	73%	65%	45%
Partisan Attack	28%	28%	32%	45%
International Relations	14%	4%	4%	10%
Health	5%	–	13%	3%
Role of Government	3%	–	5%	4%
Anti-elite Populism	5%	6%	2%	2%
Defense and Security	2%	3%	1%	2%
Rights and Social Justice	1%	–	7%	–
2nd Amendment Gun Rights	1%	–	–	3%

*Totals can equal more than 100% because multiple frames can be present in one reference.

Table 5. Focus of nationalist rhetoric when discussing climate change in 2016 and 2020 campaign speeches – percentage of references*.

	'Us'	'Them'
Clinton 2016	100%	11%
Trump 2016	85%	17%
Biden 2020	94%	13%
Trump 2020	85%	29%

*Totals can equal more than 100% because multiple frames can be present in one reference.

understandable: nationalism seeks to cultivate and defend 'our' nation's identity and autonomy. But as we noted above, nationalism also relies upon the construction of symbolic boundaries with outgroups. We see an element of this process in Trump's invocations of nationalism through his recurring claim that other nations were nefariously impeding American power through international climate agreements. But both Democrats and Republicans tended to focus on 'us' – the American nation. This finding cuts against the inherently global nature of climate change. The presidential candidates clearly interpreted the issue of climate change through the prism of the American nation: America – its people, its homeland, its place in the world – are the main referents, not the global-level problem of climate change. Tellingly, we could only find a handful (approximately six, all from Biden and Clinton) of references to climate change that framed it as a *truly* global problem without reference to America – that is presenting it as 'an existential threat to the health of our planet and to our very survival' (Biden, 14 July 2020).

The candidates also relied on a similar set of referents in their nationalist rhetoric. When they used nationalist frames to discuss climate change, they referred most often to America's 'place in the world,' its 'territory' and its 'people' (see Figure 1). In addition, when invoking nationalism, the candidates largely focused on the policy actions related to climate change (Table 6). Among these referents, the nation's 'place in the world' was the most common. Thus, while we did not see overt discussions of climate change as a global-level problem, both Democratic and Republican candidates recognized it is deeply tied to America's relationship to other nations (often through discussions of its international obligations and international standing). Here, again though, the referent was how the issue and policy response would impact the nation.

While the nominees all focused on these three referents, with more sporadic engagement with history and religion, they diverged significantly in how they used them to construct American identity. As we noted above, each of the five main cultural referents of national identity can be used in

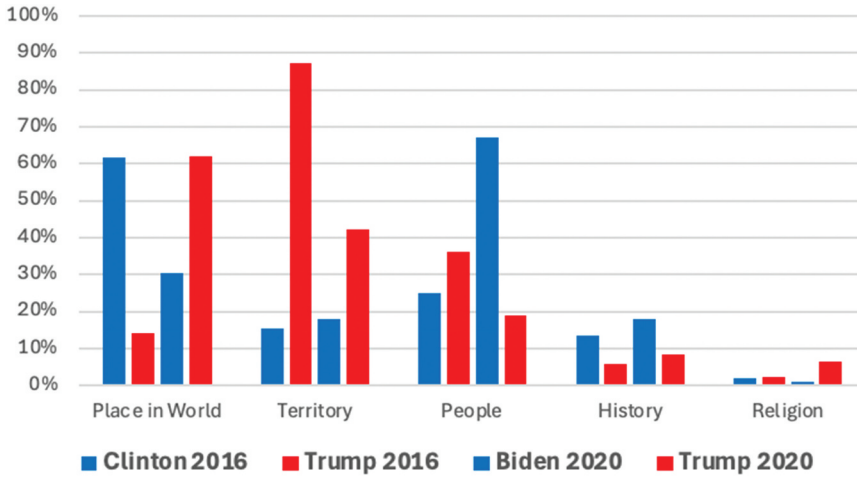

Figure 1. Nationalist referents used by candidates when discussing climate change – percentage of nationalist frames*. *Totals can equal more than 100% because multiple frames can be present in one reference

Table 6. Democratic and Republican nominees' use of nationalist referents to frame climate change – number of references in speeches*.

	Clinton 2016 and Biden 2020			Trump 2016 and Trump 2020		
	Cause	Impact	Policy	Cause	Impact	Policy
Place in World	8	11	56	2	8	184
Territory	1	14	18	4	13	186
People	6	25	62	0	2	85
History	2	11	20	1	1	29
Religion	0	2	0	1	2	21

*Multiple frames can be present in one reference.

competing ways. This is precisely what the Democratic and Republican candidates did in their respective campaigns.

This split was most evident in how the candidates framed the relationship between climate change and America's place in the world (see Table 7). Clinton and Biden tended to draw from a set of nationalist ideas that America needs to lead the world in solving the climate change crisis – that America can 'save our planet' (Clinton 28 July 2016), and that by signing the Paris Agreement it would get 'back into the business of leading the world' (Biden 14 July 2020).[3] Both Clinton and Biden also envisioned that leadership on climate change meant strengthening America's standing and power in the international community. As Clinton said, 'climate change is real, it's urgent, and America can take the lead in the world in addressing it … America can develop new clean energy solutions. We can transform our economy. We can rally the world to cut carbon pollution. And above all, we

Table 7. Competing conceptions of America's place in the world to frame climate change – excerpts from presidential campaign speeches.

Place in the World	
Clinton 2016 and Biden 2020	Trump 2016 and 2020
• America can 'save our planet' (Clinton July 28, 2016) • 'We shaped a global climate agreement' and now America has 'to hold every country accountable' (Clinton July 28, 2016) • We can make America 'the clean energy superpower of the 21st century' (Clinton Feb 02, 2016) • 'When Donald Trump thinks about renewable energy, he sees windmills somehow causing cancer. When I think about those wind-farms, I see American manufacturing – and American workers – racing to dominate the global market.' (Biden July 14, 2020) • 'I know that climate change is the challenge that's going to define our American future – and I know meeting this challenge will be a once-in-a century opportunity to jolt new life into our economy, strengthen our global leadership, and protect our planet for future generations.' (Biden July 14, 2020) • 'We're going to get back into the Paris Agreement – and back into the business of leading the world.' (Biden July 14, 2020) • 'the United States must lead the world to take on the existential threat we face – climate change. If we don't get this right, nothing else matters.' (Biden July 11, 2019).	• 'Every policy decision we make must pass a simply test: does it create more jobs and better wages for Americans? If we … remove destructive regulations, unleash the vast treasure of American energy, and negotiate trade deals that put America First, then there is no limit to the number of jobs we can create and the amount of prosperity we can unleash' (Sept 15, 2016) • 'Our military is depleted, and we're asking our generals … to worry about global warming. We will spend what we need to rebuild our military … our military dominance must be unquestioned … by anybody and everybody.' (Apr 27, 2016) • 'We want the United States to compete and win in the 21st century. And that means we will not allow our Nation to be hamstrung by wasteful Washington regulations … Biden wants to massively reregulate the energy economy, rejoin the Paris climate accord, which would kill our energy totally … ' (July 15, 2020) • 'The Paris Accord was good for other countries. It wasn't good for us. All the while, they expected you to stay on the sidelines, silence your voices, and surrender the future of our Nation.' (Aug 13, 2019) • 'What we won't do is punish the American people while enriching foreign polluters. Because I can say it: Right now – and I'm proud to say it: It's called "America First." Finally, it's called America First. My job is to represent the people of Pittsburgh, not the people of Paris.' (Oct 23, 2019)

can fulfill our moral obligation to protect our planet for our children and our grandchildren' (Clinton 11 October 2016). Biden adopted similar messaging: 'I know that climate change is the challenge that's going to define our American future – and I know meeting this challenge will be a once-in-a century opportunity to jolt new life into our economy, strengthen our global leadership, and protect our planet for future generations' (Biden 14 July 2020). At times, both Clinton and Biden also adopted a more bullish, even exclusionary tone, in their nationalist framing of how responding to climate change could strengthen America vis-à-vis other nations. Among Clinton's most favored lines on climate change was that it presented an opportunity for America to assert its power – that America could become 'the clean energy superpower of the 21st century' (Clinton 2 February 2016).

Biden, on occasion, adopted a similarly strident message: 'When Donald Trump thinks about renewable energy, he sees windmills somehow causing cancer. When I think about those wind-farms, I see American manufacturing – and American workers – racing to dominate the global market' (Biden 14 July 2020).

In contrast, Trump's position in the 2016 and 2020 campaigns was that overly strict environmental regulations to combat climate change threaten America's place in the world. Trump's messaging in both campaigns consistently reiterated that he was going to put 'America First' when it came to environmental and climate change policy (23 June 2020). He largely adopted a two-pronged strategy using this nationalist framing. First, Trump attacked international climate agreements as favoring foreign nations. In 2016, he promised to 'cancel all wasteful climate change spending from Obama-Clinton, including all global warming payments to the United Nations' (26 October 2016). In 2020, he continued with a similar message, 'the pro-China Paris Climate Accord, it's pro-everything, it's pro-everybody but us … It's an anti-America deal' (21 September 2020). Trump's exclusionary nationalist message was also rooted in the idea that international collaboration threatened Americans: 'What we won't do is punish the American people while enriching foreign polluters. Because I can say it: Right now – and I'm proud to say it: It's called "America First." Finally, it's called America First. My job is to represent the people of Pittsburgh, not the people of Paris.' (23 October 2019).

The second prong of Trump's use of this frame was to focus on how removing environmental regulations and increasing domestic energy production would secure American interests, security, and prosperity in the world. Here he depicted his opponents as part of a global pact seeking to keep Americans down: 'the wealthy donors who want to shut down American energy – they are donating to Hillary Clinton' (30 September 2016). He would often add that 'every leading Democrat has pledged [sic] abolish the American oil, coal, and natural gas industries … we're sitting on great wealth. They want to take it away from us' (15 August 2019). Trump, in contrast, asserted that his energy policies eschew international pressure to reduce carbon emissions: 'I withdrew from the one-sided, energy-destroying Paris climate accord. It was a disaster … it would have made us a noncompetitive nation' (29 July 2020) and so 'thanks to our bold regulatory reduction campaign, the United States has become the number one producer of oil and natural gas anywhere in the world, by far. With the tremendous progress we have made over the past 3 years, America is now energy independent' (4 February 2020). This last point was central to Trump's vision for America's place in the world, which was to increase, not decrease, natural resource extraction in traditional sectors like oil and gas to 'protect our security and our economy' by 'boldly embracing American energy independence' (21 January 2020).

The Democrats and Republicans were also polarized when referring to climate change's impact on the American people (see Table 8). For Clinton and Biden, climate change represented a threat to the American people that demanded immediate policy interventions. When framing the impacts, they adopted an inclusive conception of the nation: 'the impacts of climate change too often fall disproportionately on communities of color' (Biden 1 November 2020). At the same time, Clinton and Biden saw opportunities for the American people in responding to climate change – that the nation could 'meet the challenge of the climate crisis by unleashing American ingenuity' (Biden 27 October 2020) and 'create an economy that works for everyone' by focusing on clean energy jobs (Clinton 15 September 2016). Indeed, the Democrats argued that a strong policy response that combats climate change was the only thing that was aligned with the spirit of the American people: 'to ignore the facts, to deny reality, to focus only on the technology of the last century, instead of inventing the technologies that will define this century – it's just plain un-American.' (Biden 14 July 2020).

Table 8. Competing conceptions of the American people to frame climate change – excerpts from presidential campaign speeches.

People	
Clinton 216 and Biden 2020	Trump 2016 and 2020
• 'We do need to create an economy that works for everyone, not just those at the top. There's something wrong when Latinos are 17 percent of our country's population but hold only 2 percent of its wealth . . . So we're going to make, in my first 100 days, the biggest investment in new, good-paying jobs since World War II, jobs in infrastructure, manufacturing, technology, innovative, clean energy.' (Clinton Sept 15, 2016) • 'We can – as we have so many times in our history – begin anew . . . We can deal with the existential crisis of climate change. We can be what we are at our best. One people, one nation, one America.' (Biden Sept 21, 2020) • 'The impacts of climate change too often fall disproportionately on communities of color. We'll make sure these communities benefit from hundreds of billions in federal investments in infrastructure and climate change' (Biden Nov 1, 2020) • 'I'm also releasing a slate of environmental justice policies . . . we have to make sure that the first people to benefit are those who have been hurt the most by centuries of structural disparities.' (Biden July 14, 2020)	• 'American hands will rebuild this nation – and American energy, mined from American sources, will power this nation. American workers will be hired to do the job. We will put new American steel into the spine of this country. I will fight for every neglected part of this nation – and I will fight to bring us all together as One American People. Imagine what our country could accomplish if we started working together as One People, under One God, saluting One American Flag.' (Sept 14, 2016) • 'the amazing energy workers and construction workers. These are talented people. The craft workers who make America run and who make America proud . . . and no one in the world does it better than you.' (Aug 13, 2019) • 'the incredible people who fuel our factories, light up our homes, power our industries, and fill our hearts with true American pride. That's you . . . I like energy people . . . I will never stop fighting for you because I know that you are the ones who are rebuilding our Nation. You are the ones who are restoring our strength. You are the ones renewing our spirit. And you are the ones who are making America greater than it has ever been before.' (Oct 23, 2019)

By contrast, Trump argued that environmental regulations and policies threatened his vision of the 'real' American people. Trump regularly argued that he was protecting these real Americans, particularly blue collar workers involved in the extraction of natural resources – that he was 'fighting for you' against 'Washington and Wall Street insiders [who] don't believe in hiring more police, producing more American energy . . . ' (30 September 2016). Trump centered these workers as key players in the national story – that 'American hands will rebuild this nation – and American energy, mined from American sources, will power this nation' (14 September 2016), but that the left and global elites threatened to destroy the energy and natural resource industry in the name of fighting climate change. In this respect, Trump framed his fight to stop environmental regulations as a battle to save the nation: 'with your [energy workers] help, we're not only unleashing American energy, we're restoring the glory of American manufacturing, and we are reclaiming our noble heritage as a nation of builders again, a nation of builders.' (13 August 2019).

This polarized use of nationalism to frame climate change was also apparent in the way Democratic and Republican nominees depicted the nation's relationship to its territory (see Table 9). For Democrats, policy interventions were necessary to 'protect the beautiful environment' (Clinton 24 October 2016). In the view of the Democratic nominees, climate change therefore required aggressive policy interventions like developing clean energy. These measures were necessary to save the territory from the ravaging impacts of climate-driven disasters like wildfires and floods – and critically, by taking such measures, they would protect the people and rectify the wrongs of the past that disproportionately impacted 'Black, Brown and Native American communities' (Biden 14 July 2020). In short, for the Democrats, climate change needed to be addressed in order to safeguard America's homeland for all Americans.

For Trump, the nation's territory was presented differently: as a resource to be exploited for the nation's benefit. In Trump's vision, 'American steel will send new skyscrapers into the clouds . . . we will put new American steel into the spine of this country' (30 September 2016) and 'together we're restoring this nation's industrial might, and we are doing it with American iron, American aluminum, and American steel . . . the steel industry is back . . . we're opening up mines in Minnesota, the great state of Minnesota. They have magnificent mines that have the best iron ore in the world, and President Obama closed them down.' (15 August 2019). From this perspective, Trump argued that environmental regulations jeopardized the ability of America to capitalize on its inherent right to extract its resources. Hence, he claimed that he 'ended the war on American energy . . . you go to places like China, they don't have oil and gas . . . but we have this unbelievable . . . the greatest resources . . . fracking made it possible . . . and

Table 9. Competing conceptions of American territory to frame climate change – excerpts from presidential campaign speeches.

Territory	
Clinton 2016 and Biden 2020	Trump 2016 and 2020
• We will 'do more to invest clean energy like wind and solar to hold down energy costs to create more good jobs here in New Hampshire and to protect the beautiful environment of this state.' (Clinton Oct 24, 2016) • We 'made solar energy the same cost as traditional energy, weatherized more than a million homes – and we will do it again – bigger and faster and smarter. And, as we do this work, we need to be mindful of the historic wrongs and the damage that America's industrial rise in the 20th century inflicted on the environment in poor and vulnerable communities – so often Black, Brown, and Native American communities. Polluted air. Polluted water. Toxins raining down on communities that bore the environmental and health burdens, but shared none of the profits.' (Biden July 14, 2020) • 'Let's create new markets for our family farmers and ranchers – and a new, modern day Civilian Climate Corps to heal our public lands and make us less vulnerable to wildfires and floods … We can live up to our responsibilities, meet the challenges of a world at risk of a climate catastrophe, build more climate-resilient communities, put millions of skilled workers on the job, and make life markedly better and safer for the American people all at once.' (Biden July 14, 2020)	• 'We will rebuild our roads, bridges, tunnels, highways, airports, schools and hospitals … American cars – made in Michigan – will travel the roads, American planes will soar in the skies, and American ships will patrol the seas. American steel will send new skyscrapers into the clouds … we will put new American steel into the spine of this country.' (Sept 30, 2016) • 'Together we're restoring this nation's industrial might, and we are doing it with American iron, American aluminum, and American steel … the steel industry is back … we're opening up mines in Minnesota, the great state of Minnesota.' (Aug 15, 2019) • 'Pennsylvania is the home of American energy … also, the birthplace of a thing called the American Constitution' (Sept 22, 2020) • 'I ended the war on American energy … you go to places like China, they don't have oil and gas … but we have this unbelievable … the greatest resources … They were going to close it up … That's what the Paris accord would have done. It would have taken away our wealth.' (Aug 13, 2019) • 'the United States has among the very cleanest air and drinking water on Earth – anywhere on Earth. And we're going to keep it that way … we're at a very, very good point environmentally right now … what we won't do is punish the American people while enriching foreign polluters.' (Oct 23, 2019)

now we're the number-one … energy producer in the world … They were going to close it up … That's what the Paris accord would have done. It would have taken away our wealth' (13 August 2019).

Nevertheless, Trump conceded some environmental regulation was needed to protect America's homeland: 'As we celebrate our Nation's founding, we're reminded once more of our profound obligation to protect America's extraordinary blessings for the next generation and many generations, frankly, to come. Among the heritage we must preserve is our country's incredible natural splendor that is the shared obligation that brings us together today. We have some incredibly talented people that know environment and what we're doing probably better than any people on Earth' (8 July 2019). But Trump's environmental policy was circumscribed:

'from day one, my administration has made it a top priority to ensure that America has among the very cleanest air and cleanest water on the planet' (8 July 2019). His priorities in response to climate change were clear, and he would adopt 'an America-First energy plan' (22 September 2016) to 'unleash an American Energy Revolution' (1 September 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis in this article was guided by two related questions: do Republican and Democratic presidential nominees use nationalist rhetoric to frame climate change and do they do so differently? Our findings answer both questions. Republican and Democratic presidential nominees embraced nationalism to frame their positions on climate change. Indeed, the nominees largely presented their messaging on the cause, impact, and ideal response to climate change through the prism of the American nation. Most of the time, the referent when discussing climate change was not the issue itself, but rather its impact on the nation. Despite this shared focus on the nation, the candidates drew from starkly different conceptions of the American people, its territory, and its place in the world, to make a case for what was in the nation's best interests. Clinton and Biden framed climate change as an existential threat to the nation, but also as an opportunity for America to lead the world and enhance its superpower status through bold policy action that built upon the ingenuity of its people. For Trump, climate change does not pose a threat to the nation, rather it is the efforts by Democrats and their allies to combat climate change that poses the true threat by constraining America's power, increasing its dependence on other nations, and putting 'real' Americans out of work. In short, both Democratic and Republican candidates used nationalism to frame their policy positions on climate change, irrespective of whether those positions were skeptical or activist. This is how partisan elites are using nationalist rhetoric to shape polarization on climate change.

Two important implications flow from these findings. Firstly, the fact that presidential nominees used *competing* nationalisms to frame their positions on climate change suggests that the debate was primarily a struggle over American identity – making it especially difficult, if not impossible, to resolve. Secondly, and relatedly, nationalism plays an important role in shaping the definition of climate change as a policy problem in a way that inhibits collective action. We elaborate on these two implications below.

Our findings that the climate change debate is being framed by partisan elites as a debate over American identity points to how nationalism is being used as a mechanism to drive polarization. This is an underexplored process. Party affiliation has been – up to this point – largely singled out as the main mechanism driving polarization of climate change (Merkley and Stecula

2018, Chinn *et al.* 2020). This makes sense: in an age of political and affective polarization in the US (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, Iyengar *et al.* 2019), we would expect to see partisanship structuring the debate over climate policy. However, we show that partisan elites are not only sending cues to their supporters through their party affiliation. They are also sending cultural cues by using nationalist rhetoric. In doing so, they are framing the climate change debate as a struggle over the American nation, rather than simply as a policy debate between partisans. This was particularly apparent in the ways in which Democratic and Republican nominees attacked each others' respective positions on climate change. Here, the nominees often used nationalism to frame their attack (eg when Biden claimed that Trump's climate skepticism is 'un-American'). This suggests that the use of nationalist rhetoric is an important part of the explanation for how the Democratic and Republican parties are driving polarization on climate change among the American public. As such, our study contributes to a body of work that explores how cultural frames are used in climate change communication to convey to target audiences that a given position is based on shared values (see Hindman 2009, Newman *et al.* 2018, Oleskog Tryggvason and Shehata 2024). We add substance to this insight by unpacking how party elites use nationalist rhetoric to convey a sense of cultural allyship.

The use of nationalist rhetoric in climate change communication – and the tendency for Republicans and Democrats to use competing nationalisms – begs further consideration of the relationship between nationalism and political polarization. Our findings build on previous work that the left and right in the US are polarizing on nationalist grounds – that partisans are using competing nationalisms to frame each other as threats to the nation (Uslaner 2022, Woods *et al.* 2024). What we have shown here is that party nominees are clearly using competing nationalist worldviews to frame climate change in a way that propels polarization between skeptics and activists. By uncovering and tracing this process, our analysis can thus contribute to understanding how parties and partisanship are shifting in contemporary politics – from vehicles that aggregate interests and build coalitions toward quasi-religious, meaning-making enterprises that play to their respective followings and polarize views on key policy challenges, like climate change.

This leads to a second set of implications that relate to how nationalism can shape the social construction of climate change as a policy problem. Public policy scholars have long known that processes of social construction – particularly related to the identification of a problem and agenda-setting during debate over the issue – affect the related politics, policy designs and policy outcomes (Head 2019, Peters 2020). What we have shown here in relation to climate change is that nationalism plays a role in these processes of social construction: the left and right are presenting competing conceptions of the problems associated with climate change, devising and

prioritizing different responses, and driving skeptical or activist positions – *largely* through prisms of nationalism. Indeed, as we show, for Donald Trump the policy problem is not climate change per se, but rather mitigation actions he sees as threats to the national interest.

The diverging ways the left and right construct the problem of climate change in the US is likely contributing to the broader dynamics of polarization on the issue. Most Americans accept that climate change is happening today (Leiserowitz *et al.* 2024). But there are clear and growing splits by party affiliation over how to respond. For example, Republicans strongly support the extraction of fossil fuels, but since Biden's time in office they are increasingly opposed to green energy initiatives (Pew Research Centre 2024). One of the takeaways from our study, then, is that it can help us understand polarization over climate change by seeing how the process of problem identification starts from competing positions on the nature and interests of the nation.

This finding that competing nationalisms are shaping the social construction of climate change policy is troubling because it can reinforce a series of problematic dynamics. Perhaps most serious is the potential for nationalism to 'short-circuit' rational debate and inhibit consensus-building, both of which are essential to making progress on climate action. Infusing the policy debate on climate change with cultural meaning – particularly by drawing from competing nationalisms – turns it from a discussion rooted in scientific fact and a cost–benefit analysis of policy actions into a symbolic conflict over the very meaning of the national community and what it needs to survive and thrive. Such conflicts are highly resistant to rational debate and resolution. Meaning is communicated and received through culture and emotion, not through ratiocinative discourse (Alexander 2003).

In a related manner, framing policy issues through a nationalist lens can further feed public distrust in institutions and scientific evidence. We know that populist attitudes shape opposition to climate change because they feed distrust of political institutions and scientific expertise (Huber *et al.* 2022). The nationalist frames we have documented here can reinforce similar dynamics. As Natalia Bogado (2024) has shown through survey experiments, even the invocation of pro-environmental nationalist frames can stimulate a reactionary, ethno-culturalist response that leads people to be skeptical of climate science and mitigation measures. Here we have shown how both the left and right are using nationalist frames to defend and oppose climate action. In this respect, the way the left and right are using nationalism could also be stimulating distrust by tapping into powerful emotions that can inhibit rational cognition by framing the opposing side as a threat to the nation (for example, by saying they are working with malign foreign actors). Sowing this type of distrust through nationalist cues is particularly evident in the communication of the right, with Trump's tendency to infuse his attacks on international climate agreements with a message that it will benefit foreign powers and

destroy the American way of life. But the tendency we saw where both Republican and Democratic candidates infused their messaging with competing nationalisms is also problematic – it can feed a powerful distrust on both sides, inhibiting the reception of challenging information or evidence and narrowing the available window of compromise necessary to build coalitions.

At the same time, there is some common ground here: nationalism was a central frame for both Republican and Democratic candidates. To what extent does this shared emphasis on the American nation point to a potential route to build consensus and take collective action on climate change? Can nationalism's power be 'captured' and used to stimulate support for climate change policy? Here a recent experimental study that showed how framing climate action as 'patriotic' can increase support for climate action among both left-wing and right-wing individuals in the US provides valuable insights (Mason *et al.* 2024). This suggests that it may not be the presence of nationalist rhetoric on its own that blocks support for climate change action, but that the precise content of framing matters. Perhaps the troubling finding in our study, then, is not the centrality of nationalism in climate discourse, but rather the bifurcation of nationalist discourse between the right and left and mutual targeting of the other side as inherently 'un-American.' Of course, nationalism has an inherent logic that is based upon maintaining boundaries with perceived outgroups. As Bogado warns, even 'pro-environmental nationalism is still nationalism' (Bogado 2024, p. 688). At its core, nationalism thus poses significant challenges in dealing with a 'super-wicked' policy problem like climate change, which requires international collaboration to solve (Levin *et al.* 2012). The logical next step, then, is additional research to further unpack the precise ways that different nationalist frames inform public support for or against climate action, paying attention to the content of the frames over varied contexts and periods of time. Our findings here – showing how presidential candidates on the left and right are using competing nationalist frames to drive polarization between climate skeptics and activists in the US – should help inform this future work.

Notes

1. The full codebook and a detailed description of the coding process is available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KPZKFP.
2. The significantly lower percentage of Trump's 2020 speeches touching on climate change likely reflects his much higher number of speaking events during the campaign due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in near daily media briefings. We include these speaking events here following the long-standing view that the line between governing and campaigning in the US is blurred as part of what Sidney Blumenthal (1982) called the 'permanent campaign' - an observation that is even more true today than it was in 1982.

3. All references to candidate speeches indicate the date of delivery. The full text can be found through the American Presidency Project (https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/).

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