

# Political Rhetoric Typology in the 2022 US State Legislative Elections

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## Abstract

This study examines political campaign videos from winning candidates in contested state legislative races during the 2022 US election, and compares typology of political topics and personal characteristics communicated by each candidate. 172 candidates were selected for the study across forty-three states. Transcripts of each candidate's video were categorized pertaining to political/societal topics, personal characteristics/attributes, mentions of national narratives, and mentions of bipartisanship or mending the political divide. Key findings show Republicans were 9.6 times more likely to invoke national political narratives whereas Democrats were 4.3 times more likely to reference phrases of bipartisanship. Further, the most commonly mentioned political topics for Democrats were education, abortion rights, and gun violence/safety compared to that of Republicans being education, taxes, and law enforcement. Additionally, the study suggests Republicans focus more on ascribing personal characteristics in their campaign videos whereas Democrats focus more on emphasizing societal outcomes.

## Keywords

Political Rhetoric, 2022 US Elections, US State Legislatures, Bipartisanship, Nationalization

## 1. Introduction

Ahead of the 2024 US primary and general elections, Americans' trust and confidence in mass media is lacking due in part to concerns over disinformation, misinformation, and agenda-driven communications (either fundamentally political or financially incentivized) through media outlets, public figures, and/or those posing as such. Based on a Gallup poll conducted from September 1 - 16, 2023, only 7% of Americans have "a great deal" of trust and confidence in the

media with 27% reporting “a fair amount” of trust in mass media. Meanwhile, 28% of US adults reported having “not very much” confidence and 38% reporting having “no trust or confidence at all” in mass media. According to Gallup, “this is the first time that the percentage of Americans with no trust at all in the media is higher than the percentage with a great deal or a fair amount combined,” (Brenan, 2023). Additionally, emerging technologies with the ability to influence online political communication networks further add to the US public’s information anxieties with looming primary and general elections. A poll from Morning Consult-Axios conducted August 10 - 13, 2023, shows 53% of US respondents indicated they think misinformation spread by artificial intelligence will impact who wins the 2024 US presidential election (Morning Consult-Axios, 2023).

When discussing possible interventions to take networks into account to help combat fake news and misinformation, authors Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weather all explain in their book *The Misinformation Age*, “One possible intervention concerns the relationship between local issues and issues that are more abstract, in the sense of being disconnected from individuals’ everyday experiences. The more local our politics is, the less chance for it to be dominated by distorting social effects of the sort that have emerged in recent years,” (O’Connor & Weatherall, 2020: p. 176). While research and datasets regarding recent trends in nationalization of localized politics are limited, reports of this phenomenon have surfaced far ahead of the 2024 election cycle with the *New York Times* citing several mayoral candidates endorsed by abortion rights groups such as Emily’s List and campaigning on the issue while having seemingly little to no jurisdiction over access to or laws regulating abortion (Epstein, 2023). Explanations for the nationalization of state and local elections vary and range from invocations of various politically-charged identities to shifts in the economy and in geographic mobility to changes in political parties, and party platforms (Hopkins, 2018). The changing media environment has also impacted the type of political news (whether local or national) Americans receive. A 2011 George Washington University study found that 99% of respondents in a typical media market never visited websites dedicated to local news (Hindman, 2011). With so few Americans consuming local news coverage, they are less engaged in local elections. This result is supported by a 2016 report from researchers at Portland State University who found that voter turnout for mayoral elections in 15 of the 30 most populous US cities was less than one in five (20%) of eligible voters (Gorecki, Hawke, Jurjevich, Keisling, & Rancik, 2016). Another study conducted in 2021 by MIT Sloan researchers found that a decrease in local news coverage can lead to Americans voting for the same political parties across national and local elections (Angelucci, Cage, & Sinkinson, 2021). These reports and analyses supporting the notion of the local US political landscape becoming increasingly nationalized underscores the importance of conducting an analysis on local political rhetoric to further examine the state of rhetoric among today’s state lawmakers.

While there are several landscapes available to serve as the foundation for said analysis, academics and political operatives have shown that statehouses operate as the frontlines of political experimentation where roadmaps of political inevitability may lie. *Computational Propaganda*, a book published in 2019 as part of Oxford University's Digital Politics series discusses case studies around the globe that explore efforts relating to political manipulation in digital politics. When referring to the origins of political manipulation tactics, author and political researcher Dan Arnuado states, "municipal and state elections are often harbingers of what is to come on a national scale. They are where political campaigns test out new tactics in local environments: there is less scrutiny and they are often able to get away with more" (Woolley & Howard, 2019: p. 141). In his book, *Laboratories of autocracy: A wake-up call from behind the lines*, author and former chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party David Pepper states, "In recent decades, state legislatures have atrophied as broadly representative bodies and become easily captive to narrow interests. In the past decade, like laboratories, they have engaged in numerous "dry runs" of extreme and anti-democratic measures—dabbling in a variety of anti-democratic laws, learning from one another, sharing their work, testing the courts, assessing outcomes," (Pepper, 2021: p. 8). Professor of Political Economy and Political Science at Stanford University, Andrew B. Hall, stated in his November 2021 policy brief in Stanford's Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR), "Many of the most important and most contentious issues lie squarely in the control of state legislatures, including pandemic management, health care, education, gun control, and abortion. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 2020 election, there is considerable alarm among bipartisan election administration experts that extremist state lawmakers are threatening to interfere with the administration of national elections," (i.e. presidential elections). The policy brief also emphasizes that state legislative elections do impact legislators' behavior, compelling them to be more visible (e.g. producing an online video campaign ad) when they have to run for reelection and potentially giving voters more opportunities to influence the policy process by creating more electoral pressure on lawmakers running for reelection (Hall, 2021). State legislative elections also contain implications for national discourse and influence the nature and degree of American political polarization. A February 2022 SIEPR working paper titled, "Polarization and State Legislative Elections," by Hall and fellow Stanford researchers Cassandra Handan-Nader and Andrew C.W. Meyers found that candidates running for state legislative office holding more extreme ideologies had a distinct advantage compared to their more moderate counterparts. The paper, which examined 84,000 state legislative candidates from 1992 to 2020, found that polarization in state legislatures has been substantially increasing over recent decades with more extreme candidates enjoying electoral advantages previously experienced by more moderate candidates. This has national implications since the majority of sitting congress members were previously state legislators (Handan-Nader, Meyers, & Hall, 2022).

Given this existing correlation between state and federal lawmakers, mapping

the rhetoric of state legislators may provide indicators, from a political communication standpoint, that measure the nature and degree of American polarization to produce insights for potential forecasts of rhetorical environments in future presidential campaigns and elections. Therefore, the analysis provided in this paper will focus on state-by-state elections for the state's respective House of Representatives/Assembly or State Senate to provide insights and a potential baseline metric to further study the nationalization of local political actors as well as sample metrics detailing the variety of political issues and rhetoric communicated by each winning candidate in their respective campaign video. The analysis will shed additional light on the propensity of Republican or Democrat candidates for state legislative office in prioritizing reflecting their personal characteristics or legislative aspirations or accomplishments.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study reviews political campaign videos from a total of 172 winning candidates seeking election (or reelection) for representation in contested general election races across 43 state legislatures during the 2022 election cycle in the United States. Of the candidates selected in the study, 86 are running as registered Republicans and 86 candidates are running as registered Democrats—split evenly within each state featured in the study. While this study will explore rhetoric that may reflect candidates' political ideologies, it will not seek to thoroughly define and assign the vastness of ideologies associated with the political left and right. Instead, it will refer to the “Democrats” and “Republicans” selected for this study exclusively as those who participated in the 2022 US general election as candidates representing the Democrat or Republican political party. However, a brief description of each party, from an ideological standpoint, may establish useful context for the forthcoming rhetorical analysis. In that matter, we will largely define the Democratic Party of the 21st century as being a group coalition often referred to as the “big tent” party which ideally operates to advance the aggregate policy preferences of its diverse constituencies. While the Democratic Party is fundamentally thought of as a group coalition, the Republican Party of today is largely described as an ideological vehicle seeking to advance policy preferences that support notions of small government and preservation of American culture traditionalism (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016). The candidates selected for the study were based upon publicly released campaign videos promoting their candidacy during the 2022 election cycle.

States were selected based on fulfilling the requirement of representing two Republican candidates and two Democratic candidates per state with publicly available campaign videos published during the course of the 2022 election cycle (including primary and general election cycles). Only videos that were seemingly unprompted were considered, excluding candidate forum pre-formatted interviews. While subjects in the study include both representatives from their respective state senate and state house/assembly, candidates with more localized jurisdiction (state house/assembly) were given priority during the selection

process.

### State Legislative Omissions

- Four states (Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia) did not conduct state legislative elections in 2022,
- Nebraska was excluded due to their legislative races being non-partisan and inconsistent with the Democrat/Republican subject criteria in the study,
- Delaware was excluded due to lack of available republican campaign videos that met the subject criteria,
- And Rhode Island was excluded due to lack of subjects to fulfill subject criteria.

Information regarding the political candidates selected for the study along with details organizing the 2022 state legislative elections was obtained via Ballotpedia, and campaign ads and videos were obtained using the database via Google's Ad Transparency Center and through various political campaign Facebook pages associated with the candidate (Ballotpedia, 2022; Facebook, 2022; Google, 2022).

After the subjects were selected, they were then matched with their corresponding campaign videos which were then extrapolated into records consisting of mentions related to societal or political issues, phrases reflecting national rhetoric and narratives, mentions of bipartisanship or mending the political divide, and personal characteristics or attributes ascribed by or on behalf of the candidate running for office. The records were then analyzed by state and political party (Democrat/Republican) into the aforementioned categories and processed into the forthcoming results to highlight rhetorical distinctions between political parties, demonstrate the priorities of rhetorical emphasis for each party, and characterize personal attributes based on the candidate's description.

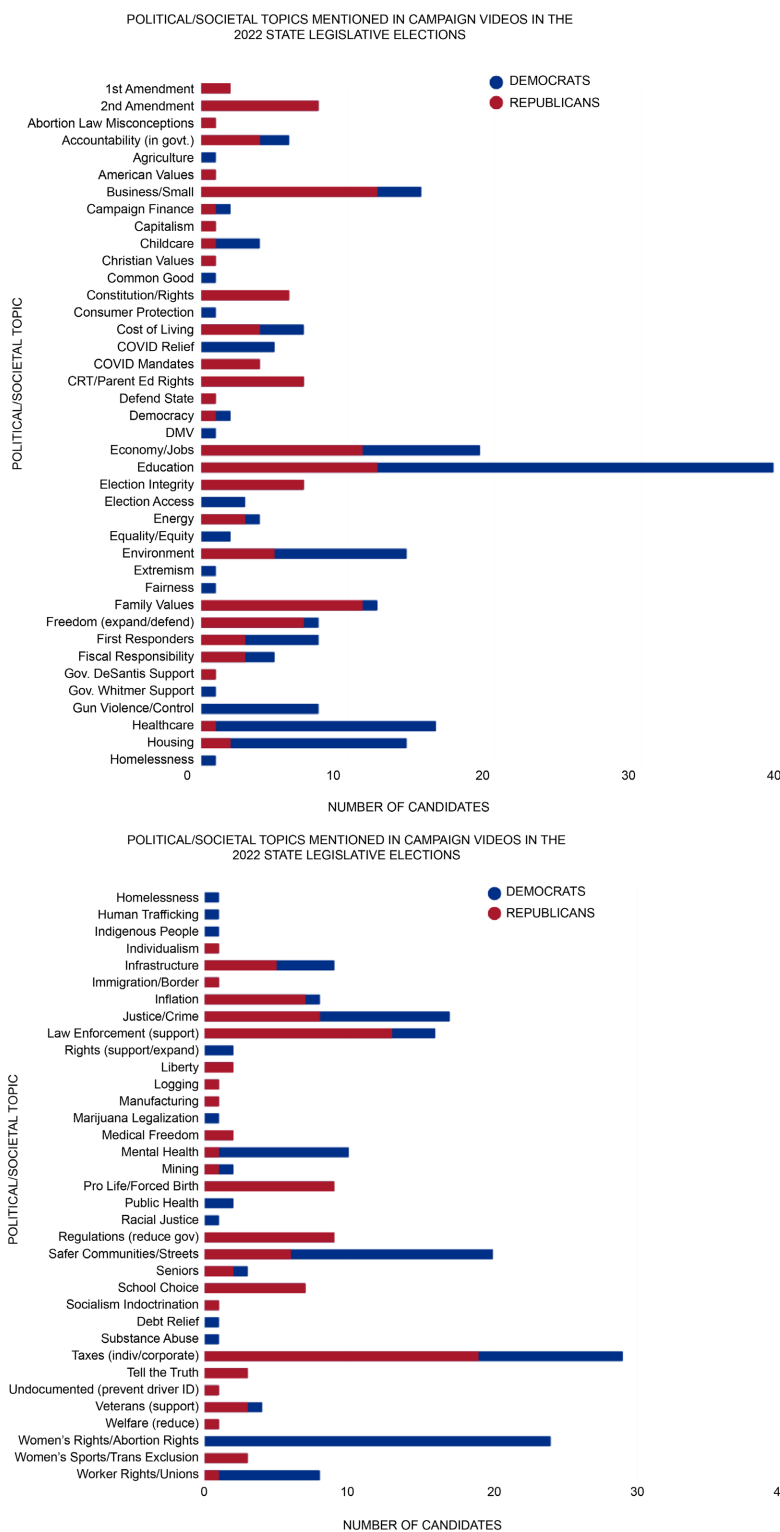
## 3. Results

The analysis of this study recorded political rhetoric within each video in the study and categorized the topics into the following four categories: 1) political/societal topics 2) personal characteristics/attributes 3) mention of national political rhetoric and 4) mentions of bipartisanship or mending the political divide.

### 3.1. Political/Societal Topics

As shown in **Figure 1**, the study recorded 74 unique political/societal topics mentioned in campaign videos from 172 total winning Democrats/Republicans who ran in contested state legislative races in 2022. The topics recorded reflect explicit mentions—from an endorsement to a description—by or on behalf of the candidate as it relates to a particular topic. This included verbal mentions or text-on-screen within the campaign video.

In **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**, frequency in political/societal topics mentioned during the campaign videos are demonstrated as word clouds where text size reflects the number of total Republican and Democrat candidates, respectively.



**Figure 1.** Stacked row chart displaying the political/societal topics (e.g. supporting agriculture, addressing cost of living, etc.) mentioned (verbally or via text-on-screen) during the campaign videos selected for the study. The chart represents a comparison between Democrats (blue) and Republicans (red) who ran in contested state legislative elections in 2022. The X axis represents the amount of candidates who mentioned a given topic while the Y axis represents the topics mentioned.



**Figure 2.** Political/societal topics mentioned (verbally or via text-on-screen) during the campaign videos selected for the study. The word cloud represents an analysis of 86 winning Republican candidates who ran in contested state legislative elections in 2022 where the size of the text is proportional to the total number of Republican candidates who mentioned the given topic.

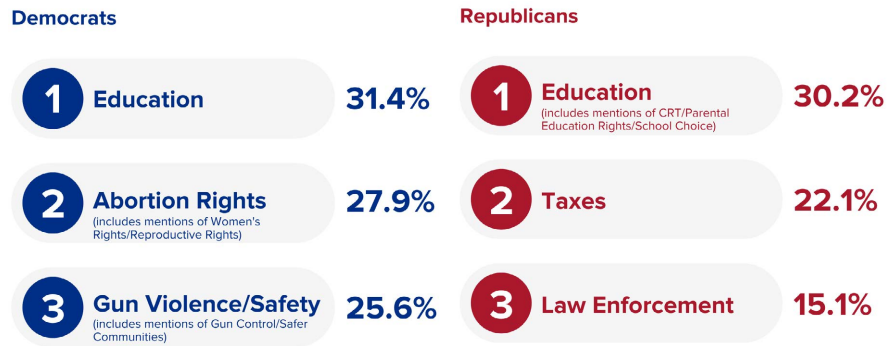


**Figure 3.** Political/societal topics mentioned (verbally or via text-on-screen) during the campaign videos selected for the study. The word cloud represents an analysis of 86 winning Democrat candidates who ran in contested state legislative elections in 2022 where the size of the text is proportional to the total number of Democrat candidates who mentioned the given topic.

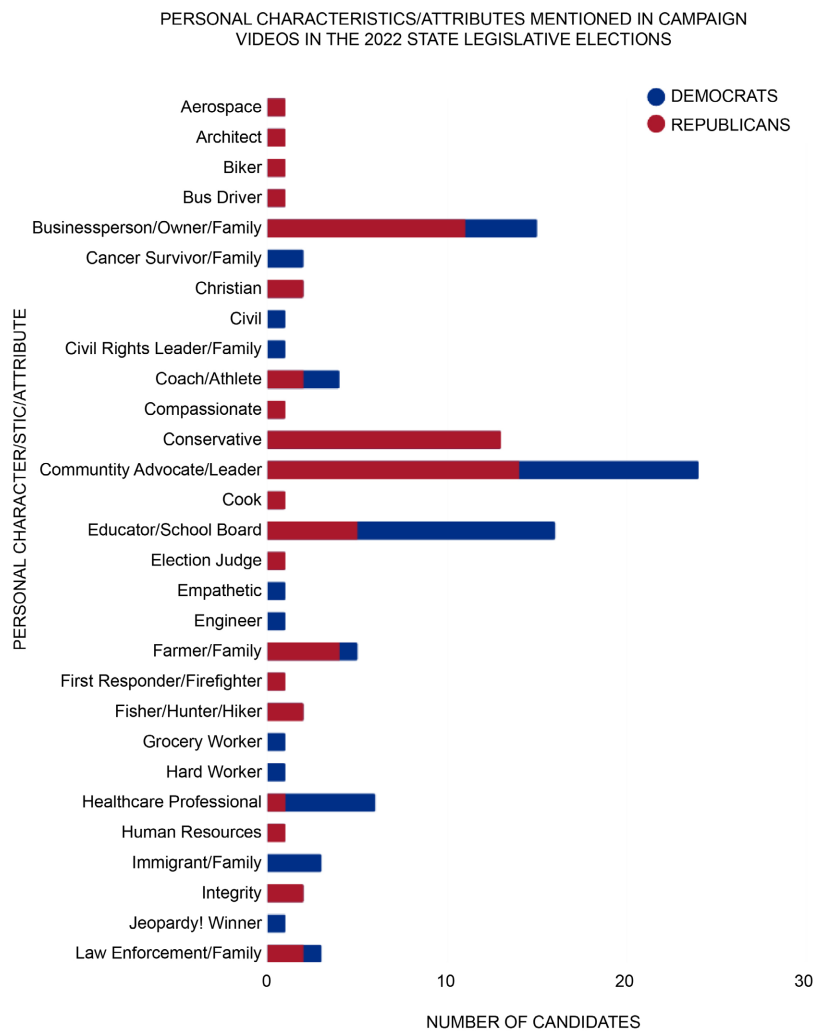
**Figure 4** reflects the three most commonly mentioned (in terms of # of candidates) political/societal topics mentioned by Democrats and Republicans in the campaign videos selected for the study.

### 3.2. Personal Characteristics/Attributes

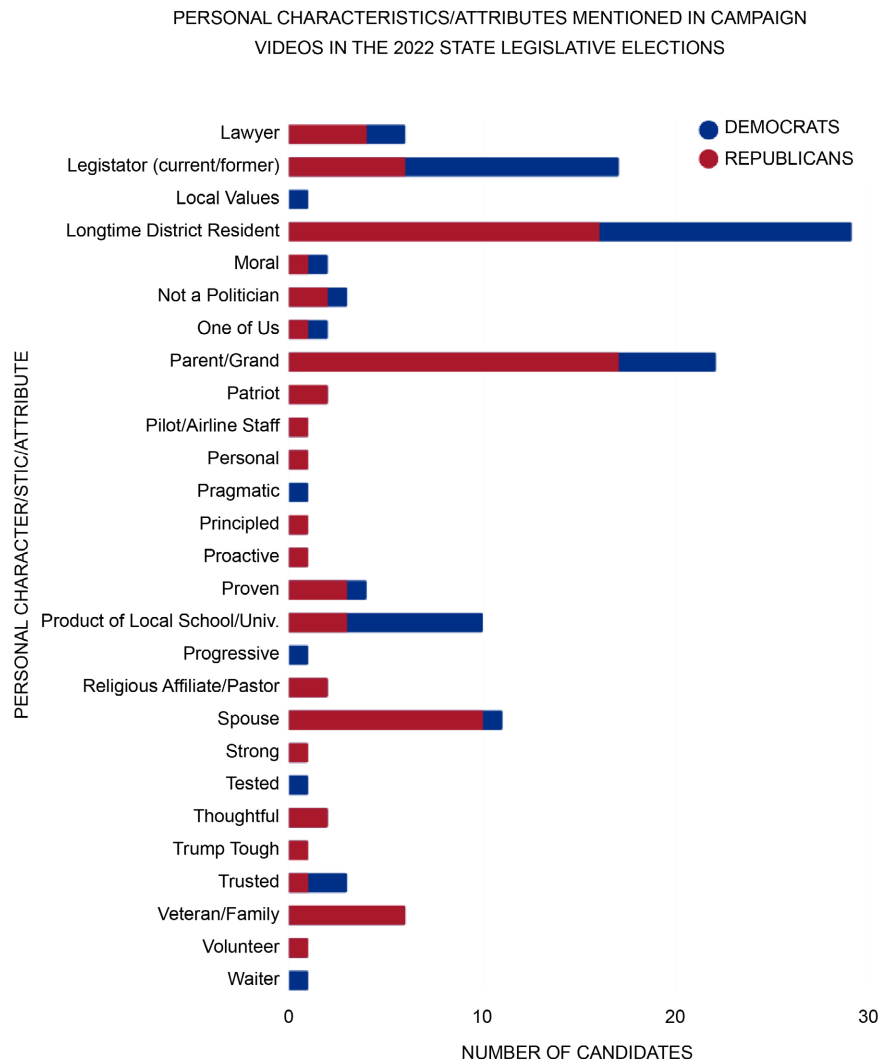
As shown in **Figure 5**, the study recorded 56 unique personal characteristics/attributes mentioned in campaign videos from 172 total winning Democrats/Republicans who ran in contested state legislative races in 2022. The personal characteristics/attributes recorded reflect explicit mention by or on behalf of the candidate as it relates to the candidate. This included verbal mentions or text-on-screen within the campaign video.



**Figure 4.** The top three most commonly mentioned political/societal topics mentioned in campaign videos for the Democratic and Republican candidates in contested state legislative elections in 2022. The percentage reflects the fraction of total Democrats or Republicans, respectively, who mentioned a given political/societal topic. While candidates often made inferences during their videos (i.e. mentioning their support for the 2nd Amendment to signal their reluctance to support gun reform efforts), the results in **Figure 2** reflect verbatim rhetoric with clarification of any inferences used to tally the results (i.e. Republican mentions of parental education rights as being counted as an “education” topic).







**Figure 5.** Stacked row chart displaying the personal characteristics/attributes (e.g. a former farmer, being described as “thoughtful” or “trusted” leader) mentioned (verbally or via text-on-screen) during the campaign videos selected for the study. Characteristics/attributes considered also included mention of a familial attachment to a given characteristic e.g. “a wife of a veteran” or “having children who currently serve in the military or in law enforcement.” The stacked row chart reflects a comparison between Democrats (blue) and Republicans (red) who ran in contested state legislative elections in 2022. The X axis represents the amount of candidates who mentioned a given personal characteristic/attribute while the Y axis represents the personal characteristics/attributes mentioned.

In **Figure 6** and **Figure 7**, frequency in personal characteristics/attributes mentioned during the campaign videos are demonstrated as word clouds where text size reflects the number of total Republican and Democrat candidates, respectively, who mentioned a given personal characteristic/attribute in their campaign video.

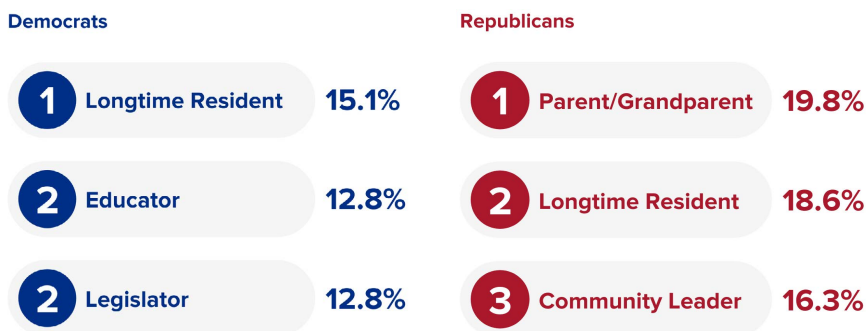
**Figure 8** reflects the three most commonly emphasized (in terms of # of candidates) personal characteristics/attributes mentioned by Democrats Republicans in the campaign videos selected for the study.



**Figure 6.** Personal characteristics/attributes mentioned (verbally or via text-on-screen) during the campaign videos selected for the study. The word cloud represents an analysis of 86 winning Republican candidates who ran in contested state legislative elections in 2022 where the size of the text is proportional to the total number of Republican candidates who mentioned the given personal characteristic/attribute.



**Figure 7.** Personal characteristics/attributes mentioned (verbally or via text-on-screen) during the campaign videos selected for the study. The word cloud represents an analysis of 86 winning Democrat candidates who ran in contested state legislative elections in 2022 where the size of the text is proportional to the total number of Democrat candidates who mentioned the given personal characteristic/attribute.



**Figure 8.** The top three most commonly mentioned personal characteristics/attributes mentioned in campaign videos for the Democratic and Republican candidates in contested state legislative elections in 2022. The percentage reflects the fraction of total Democrats or Republicans, respectively, who mentioned a given personal characteristic/attribute.

### 3.3. National Narratives

This refers to when a candidate mentions a national political narrative or references rhetoric that reflects a nationalized talking point. There were 13 mentions of national narratives/rhetoric from 12 different political candidates with 10/12 being Republicans. The entire list of national rhetoric used is as follows via verbatim (with some phrases being mentioned multiple times across candidates):

- “Biden’s inflation”
  - ◆ This phrase was mentioned several times by Republican candidates
- “Defend against the liberal agenda”
- “Fighting liberal bureaucrats from controlling education”
- “Stand up to establishment”
- “Make a red wave”
- “Show Democrats we are tired of what they are doing in D.C.”
- “The federal government is out of control”
- “Stand up to the woke mob”
- “Stood up to Biden’s unconstitutional mandates”
- “Fight back against Biden’s agenda”
- “Stand up to Donald Trump”
- “Stand up to the NRA”

\*The above two phrases relating to Donald Trump and the NRA were mentioned by the same candidate.

### 3.4. Mentions Supporting Bipartisanship or Ending Divisiveness

This metric was measured by capturing mentions such as “reaching across the aisle,” “working across parties,” “putting country over party,” or other references indicating support of bipartisanship or seeking to mend the political divide.

- The study found 17/172 or 9.9% of candidates mentioned supporting bipartisanship and/or mending the political divide.

## 4. Key Findings

- Education was the most commonly mentioned topic with 30.8% of all candidates in the study mentioning it in their campaign video,
- The most discussed issue topic for Democrat candidates was education (largely supporting funding and resources for public education) with 31.4% of Democrat candidates mentioning it in their campaign video,
- The most commonly discussed issue topic for Republican candidates was education (including mentions of critical race theory/parental education rights/school choice) with 30.2% of Republican candidates mentioning it in their campaign video,
- Democrats and Republicans referred to the same political/societal topic in 36.49% (or 27/74) of total mentions of topics recorded,
- When ascribing personal characteristics/attributes to the candidate (or their campaign), Democrats were most likely to invoke the fact that they are a res-

- ident followed by being an educator or current/former legislator,
- When ascribing personal characteristics/attributes to the candidate (or their campaign), Republicans were most likely to invoke the fact that they are a parent or grandparent followed by being a resident then community leader,
  - Republican candidates were 9.6 times more likely than Democrats to refer to national narratives during their campaign videos (11.6% of Republicans compared to 1.2% of Democrats),
  - And Democratic candidates were 4.3 times more likely to emphasize bipartisanship/reaching across the aisle/ending divisiveness during their campaign videos (15.1% of Democrats compared to 3.5% of Republicans).

## 5. Additional Observations

- While Education was a popular topic among both parties, candidates often spoke in vague terms about “improving our education system” or “making sure students get a good education,”
- When discussing environmental issues, Democrats often spoke about addressing climate change, Republicans spoke about protecting public lands, and both mentioned clean air & water,
- Democrats tended to talk about what they are going to do if elected into office; Republicans tend to emphasize personal characteristics,
- When describing making society safer, Democrats spoke about “safer communities” and Republicans refer to “safer streets” or “safer neighborhoods,”
- Both Republicans and Democrats spent portions of their videos describing scenes, climates, and situations that (based on the inference) call for a specific type of leader i.e. themselves to meet the moment.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings in this study offer an array of insights into the 2022 political rhetoric emphasized across the United States by elected state lawmakers in a post 2020 election political environment. They suggest, among many things, that Republicans focus more, comparatively, on ascribing personal characteristics or attributes (e.g. being a grandparent or spouse) in their campaign videos whereas Democrats focus more on mentioning proposals influencing societal public outcomes (e.g. increasing funding for public schools). When discussing topics that are political or societal in nature, the most common topic among both parties was education, with Republicans often referring to their support of school choice (i.e. charter schools) or invoking national narratives such as concerns over critical race theory, whereas Democrats invoked rhetoric that spoke to increasing support for the public school system, teachers, and school safety measures. Following education, the next most emphasized societal/political topics among all candidates in the study involved tax reform (including individual and corporate), women’s rights/reproductive rights, safer communities/streets (or gun violence prevention), and the economy/job growth. Additionally, the results in

this study reflect a rhetorical priority of Democrats to mention reproductive/abortion rights and legislative proposals to curb gun violence during their campaign videos, and a rhetorical priority of Republicans to discuss taxes, supporting law enforcement, being business-friendly, and supporting school choice or a parental education bill of rights. While Democrats and Republicans at times spoke in reference to the same political/societal topic (e.g. education, public safety), they either adopted seemingly opposing policy positions and/or framed their positions in terms historically associated with their respective political party and its modus operandi. Furthermore, the findings in this study show Republicans significantly more likely to invoke national narratives as part of their electoral communication strategy whereas Democrats were more likely to use language referring to unity, bipartisanship, and compromise. The insights and metrics tracking electoral political speech provided in this study shine a brighter light on the political contributions regarding the nationalization of local politics as well as rhetoric that may serve to calm or lessen affective polarization and/or partisan escalation. This rhetorical typology of state legislative elected officials provides insights that reflect the national political conversations taking place across the country along with a snapshot of where Republicans and Democrats are focusing their attention, communicatively, leading up to the 2024 US elections. While this snapshot provides such insights, a more expansive rhetoric typology that takes into account previous election cycles (i.e. 2020, 2018, 2016 etc.) and continues to track, analyze, and compare rhetorical trends in online political campaign videos following 2022 is paramount to better understanding the American political environment, especially given the tendency for state lawmakers to run for federal offices, thus increasing their political and rhetorical influence in America.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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