
Political Rhetoric Team, 2015-2016

The Political Rhetoric project focuses on determining the ideology of a politician based solely on a written text or a transcript of a speech. Rather than trying to determine ideology based on a politician's voting or public perception, we want to directly examine the texts they have produced. This project is a joint venture between the SNaPP Lab and STAIR Lab at William & Mary, and thus draws upon the expertise of both groups.

The SNaPP Lab specializes in understanding political communication, and how people discuss their ideological beliefs with others. Meanwhile, the STAIR Lab works extensively in textual analysis - sorting through large blocks of text to find patterns within the words themselves. They specialize in automating these procedures, using machine learning rather than going through the text by hand.

We spent a great deal of time thinking about what sources would be appropriate to use. We wanted to avoid speeches given in a formal setting such as the floor of Congress, since those tend to contain a great deal of procedural language (e.g. "Mr. Speaker, I yield the balance of my time...") In general, we wanted to begin with speakers that were consistently conservative or liberal, and specifically people that had run for President (since a presidential campaign entails a great deal of

speechmaking.) Eventually, we settled on Mike Huckabee, Rick Santorum, and Ted Cruz from the right, and Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren (the exception in that she never ran for President) and Howard Dean.

In addition to finding speeches, we also needed "anchor texts" - a large body of conservative and liberal texts that the notebook could use to learn about ideologically-tinged language. Eventually, we settled upon Rush Limbaugh (who has transcripts of years of consistently right-wing radio shows) and *The Militant* (an online socialist newspaper that has also been publishing for years. However, it is important to note that this methodology is flawed - Limbaugh's transcripts are of spoken texts, while the *Militant* texts are written. Since there is a large difference between spoken and written texts, this could lead to error, and we are currently working on ways to adjust our methodology.

The notebook was created by Professor Van der Veen, and is written in the Python language. In order to process the texts, they first need to be in a .txt format, and all extraneous parts like "[audience applauds]" need to be removed. The notebook then analyzes the texts, determining what words are most commonly used. Articles such as "the" are not considered. The words are then compared to the words of the anchor

texts, and a rough estimate of the speaker's ideology can be determined. Finally, the program produces a graph showing each person's ideological position in relation to one another.

In addition to analyzing spoken texts, we are also currently working on using the notebook to analyze books. By purchasing Kindle texts of campaign books written by presidential candidates over the last sixteen years, we have vastly increased the amount of available text to work with.

What should I expect as a team member?

As a member of the lab, basic knowledge of computer coding is recommended, though not required. [Resources for learning code - [CodeAcademy](#) and the [R Module on the SSRMC website](#)] However, you should be knowledgeable about recent American elections, as well as major political figures. Strong writing and communication skills are essential, as much of our work consists of making this research accessible to the general public. Other than that, all you need is enthusiasm and a willingness to learn!

Videos:

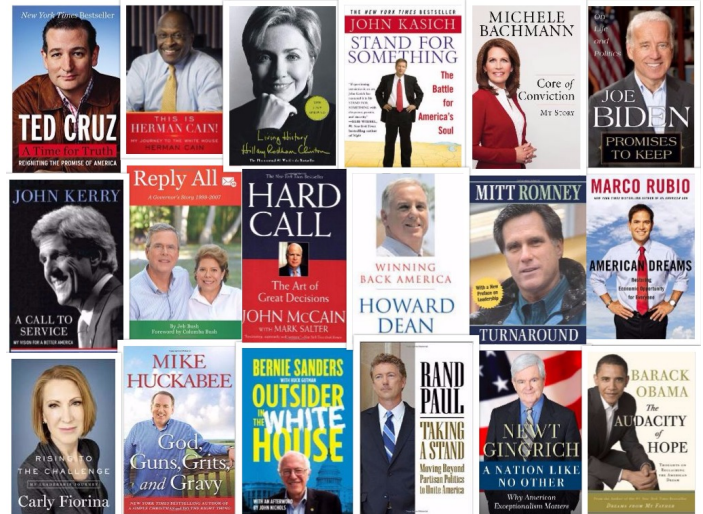
If you're interested in seeing some of the videos we have used, check these out!

1. Senator Ted Cruz at CPAC in 2014: <https://youtu.be/6uk8a0FapUw?t=11m16s>
2. Senator Elizabeth Warren at the DNC in 2012:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBtj5dR3dA&feature=youtu.be&t=7m>

Books:

Here is a sample of some of the books we have used to expand our body of written text:



People:

Faculty: Jaime Settle, Maurits Van der Veen (<http://stair.wm.edu/>)

Students: Jonah Abraham, '18, Jacob Nelson, '18, Caitlin Becker, '16 (S.T.A.I.R.)