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**Contemporary American Conservatism in Historical  
Perspective:  
A Comparative Analysis of the Conservative Political  
Discourse in 1960-1980 and 2011-2020**

Master's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2024

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024

Jolana Sedláčková

## References

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the indicators of a conservative backlash in presidential campaign discourse by contrasting the conservative rhetoric of 1960-1980 with that of 2011-2020. Grounded in a theoretical framework of Backlash Politics, the thesis examines the rise of conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s and its resurgence in the twenty-first century through the lens of a Critical Discourse Analysis. Through an analysis of conservative presidential candidates' public statements in the periods 1960-1980 and 2011-2020, the thesis explores the resurgence of American conservatism by identifying enduring themes in conservative discourse. The dominant themes in conservative discourse, such as individual liberties, limited government, free market principles, traditional family values, and national security concerns, are scrutinized to identify similarities as well as differences between the 20th and the 21st-century discourse. By examining campaign press releases and statements issued during the presidential campaign by five conservative presidential candidates from each period, the thesis reveals the employed factors of Backlash Politics. The conservative political discourse in 1960-1980 grieved for the return to the founding principles and calls for institutional reshaping to prevent an authoritative government. The conservative presidential candidates in 2011-2020 placed a significant emphasis on issues such as abortion, limited government, and the threat of "the other," while instilling a sense of nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s and using a "take back America" narrative. Additionally, the rhetoric employed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century tends to be dramatic language, escalating the intensity of emotions and urgency, aimed to mobilize against an "oppressive" government showcasing the criteria for evidence of a conservative backlash. The analysis delves into the impact of the 1960-1980 discourse on the 21<sup>st</sup> century discourse of conservative presidential candidates offering findings and insights into the cyclical nature of conservative waves in American politics.

## **Abstrakt**

Tato práce zkoumá ukazatele konzervativního odporu v diskurzu prezidentských kampaní tím, že kontrastuje současnou konzervativní rétoriku let 1960-1980 s tou od roku 2011-2020. Tato práce, ukotvená v teoretickém rámci tzv. „Backlash politics“ (Reakční politiky) zkoumá vzestup konzervatismu v 60. a 70. letech 20. století a jeho obnovení ve 21. století optikou kritické analýzy diskurzu. Analýzou veřejných prohlášení konzervativních prezidentských kandidátů v období 1960-1980 a 2011-2020 zkoumá tato práce obnovu

amerického konzervatismu identifikací trvalých témat v konzervativním diskurzu. Dominantní témata v konzervativním diskurzu, jako jsou individuální svobody, omezená federální vláda, principy volného trhu, tradiční rodinné hodnoty a obavy o národní bezpečnost, jsou zkoumána za účelem identifikace podobností a rozdílů mezi diskurzem 20. a 21. století. Tato práce odhaluje použité faktory reakční politiky prostřednictvím analýzy tiskových zpráv a prohlášení vydaných během prezidentské kampaně pěti konzervativních prezidentských kandidátů z každého období. Konzervativní politický diskurz v letech 1960-1980 toužil po návratu k zakladatelským principům a volal po institucionální přestavbě, aby zabránil autoritativní formě vlády. Konzervativní prezidentské kandidáty v letech 2011-2020 kladli výrazný důraz na témata, jako jsou potraty, omezená federální vláda a hrozba "jiného", zatímco vnesli do diskurzu pocit nostalgie po 60. a 70. letech a nebo použili narativu "získat Ameriku zpět". Kromě toho se rétorika použitá ve 21. století často sklání k dramatickému jazyku, eskalující intenzitě emocí a naléhavost s cílem mobilizovat proti "útlakové" vládě, což ilustruje kritéria pro prokázání existence konzervativního odporu. Analýza zkoumá dopad diskurzu let 1960-1980 na diskurz konzervativních prezidentských kandidátů ve 21. století a nabízí zjištění a poznatky o cyklické povaze konzervativních vln v americké politice.

## **Keywords**

Conservatism, conservative backlash, Backlash politics, Critical Discourse Analysis, presidential candidates discourse

## **Klíčová slova**

Konzervatismus, konzervativní odpor, reakční politika, Kritická diskurzovní analýza, diskurz prezidentských kandidátů

## **Název práce**

Současný americký konzervatismus v historické perspektivě: Analýza konzervativního politického diskurzu v letech 1960-1980 a 2011-2020

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	8
Literature Review .....	12
American Conservatism.....	12
Discourse Analysis in Political Science .....	16
Theoretical Framework .....	17
Backlash Politics .....	17
Backlash Politics in Discourse .....	19
Methodology .....	20
Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Method.....	20
Electoral Corpus and Case Selection.....	22
Data collection and analysis.....	23
1 Discourse analysis .....	25
1.1 Conservative ideology in discourse.....	25
1.2 Dominant Themes in Conservative Discourse .....	26
1.3 Presidential candidates in 1960-1980.....	29
1.3.1 Limited Government .....	30
1.3.2 Threat of “the other” on national security .....	34
1.4 Presidential candidates in 2011-2020 .....	38
1.4.1 Limited Government .....	41
1.4.2 Opposition to abortion .....	44
2 Discussion and Findings .....	49
2.1 Dominant enduring themes in conservative discourse.....	49
2.1.1 Limited Government .....	51
2.1.2 Separation of powers .....	53
2.1.3 Distrust in Government .....	54



2.1.4 The threat of "the other" on national security .....	57
2.2 Key findings from the comparative analysis .....	60
3 Recommendations and Future Research .....	61
3.1 Limitations.....	61
3.2 Areas for further research in the study of conservative discourse .....	63
Conclusion .....	66
Shrnutí .....	68
List of References.....	68

## Introduction

The election of Barack Obama as the president of the United States, promising a post-racial and liberal society, has coincided with a significant resurgence of conservatism in the United States. In parallel fashion to the 1960s and the 1970s, a conservative backlash emerged in response to Barack Obama's presidency, characterized as a backlash against the "Third Reconstruction,"<sup>1</sup> the strong liberal growth and social changes. The contemporary conservative backlash echoes the powerful conservative resurgence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was triggered by "what many conservatives viewed as the excess of the immoral, licentious sixties,"<sup>2</sup> a period often referred to as the "Second Reconstruction" challenging the traditional American mores, religion, and ethical values. The election of Donald Trump with strong pro-American and "take back America" rhetoric marks a culmination of the rise of Conservatism in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century United States.

The resurgence of conservatism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not a unique or isolated phenomenon as evidenced by many conservative eras in the past such as the conservative Victorian era, followed by the liberal period at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reaching its peak in the 1920s, and subsequently the conservative years of the 1930s to the 1950s. Instead, it reinforces the validity of drawing parallels between the examined periods within the framework of backlash politics extending backward throughout history. The comparison between the 20<sup>th</sup>-century and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservative backlash is necessary to recognize the periodic appearance of waves of conservative and liberal sentiments.

By juxtaposing the conservative resurgences in the past, it is possible to identify the common elements within conservatism, including resistance to racial equality, the use of apocalyptic rhetoric, and a profound distrust of democracy.<sup>3</sup> The failure to recognize the conservative resurgence due to scholar's and journalists' focus "almost exclusively on the new left, civil rights, and the decline of American liberalism"<sup>4</sup> led to the misunderstanding of the rise of modern American conservatism in the past and the risk of its repetition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, Race, Reform and Rebellion (Macmillan Education UK, 1984), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-17657-1>.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph F. Young, *Dissent: The History of an American Idea* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 482, <https://nyupress.org/9781479806652/dissent>.

<sup>3</sup> John S. Huntington and Lawrence Glickman, "America's Most Destructive Habit," *The Atlantic*, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/conservative-backlash-progress/620607/>.

<sup>4</sup> Huntington and Glickman.

Although Trump may be seen as the pinnacle of American conservatism that has been brewing for a long time during the period of the hope for the multiracial society, his rhetoric is deeply rooted in the counterrevolutionary tradition, exhibiting similarities with the past conservative movement. The values and rhetoric embodied by Donald Trump merely personified the occurring themes of the contra-revolutionary dynamic in the United States. Other conservative candidates in the 21st century also frequently reference politicians and presidents from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, asserting a common set of values. This deliberate connection raises a question as to what extent do the values of conservative politicians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century genuinely align with the opinions and values of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s American political icons, or whether they are merely leveraging them to gain voter support.

This thesis investigates the indicators of a conservative backlash in presidential campaign discourse by contrasting the conservative rhetoric of 1960-1980 with that of 2011-2020. Grounded in a theoretical framework of Backlash Politics, the thesis examines the rise of conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s and its resurgence in the twenty-first century through the lens of a Critical Discourse Analysis. The thesis uses Critical Discourse Analysis to identify the most dominant prevalent themes in conservative political discourse, in order to shed light on contemporary conservative rhetoric and draw parallels with the past. Then, it examines the recurring themes in the discourse of conservative presidential candidates, such as individual liberties, limited government, free market principles, traditional family values, and national security concerns, that are scrutinized to identify similarities as well as differences between the 20th and the 21st-century conservative discourse.

The research addresses the following questions: To what extent does the political discourse of 2011-2020 in the United States mirror that of 1960-1980? How does the conservative rhetoric employed in the United States during the 1960-1980 interact with that of the twenty-first century? Additionally, the study investigates the similarities and differences between the political discourse of 1960-1980 and that of 2011-2020, exploring how the parallelism of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century discourse to conclude whether a conservative backlash is present in the United States. With the objective to examine whether the nation is presently undergoing a conservative backlash, the thesis investigates the discourse contributing to the emergence of modern conservatism, providing a nuanced comprehension of how conservative politicians employ rhetoric to shape policies and acquire political influence. I created this thesis with the intention of processing available data, such as

presidential campaign statements and press releases, to generate a relevant study identifying recurring trends in conservative discourse. My initial hypothesis was that elements in the speeches of conservative presidential candidates throughout history periodically repeat. Thus, these speeches may reveal a recurring cyclical phenomenon. If my hypothesis is correct, I will find parallels between the years 1960-1980 and the political landscape in America in the 21st century in the conclusion of this thesis. To determine whether there is a conservative backlash, I selected three main factors within the framework of Backlash Politics: rhetoric with emotive elements and nostalgia, taboo-breaking, and institutional reshaping.<sup>5</sup> By dissecting the evolution of conservative concepts and strategies in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, this research strives to provide valuable insights into the intricacies of American politics and contribute to ongoing discussions on conservative influence in the contemporary context.

In this thesis, I investigate how the conservative rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s influenced the conservative rhetoric in the 21st century. Through discourse analysis, I identified the most frequently occurring themes in both discourses and compared the words and metaphors used by presidential candidates when discussing these topics. My focus was on the differences and similarities in the discourse of the years 1960-1980 and 2011-2020. Notably, the presidential candidates in the period 1960-1980 expressed a longing for a return to the founding principles and called for institutional reshaping to prevent an authoritative government. In their campaign discourse, presidential candidates used rhetoric with a hint of nostalgia, referring to the American Revolution and the founding principles. The conservative presidential candidate's discourse also questioned institutions and the current democratic processes. Within the framework of backlash politics, the 1960-1980 period discourse lacks a dominant element of taboo-breaking.

In contrast, conservative discourse in the 21st century fulfills all three criteria for triggering a backlash. In comparison to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most evident difference was a more explicit, dramatic, and descriptive language breaking taboos, particularly in the context of abortion. In terms of emotion and nostalgia, the conservative presidential candidates of 2011-2020 invoked the values of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and warned about the taking

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<sup>5</sup> Karen J. Alter and Michael Zürn, "Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22, no. 4 (November 1, 2020): 10, [https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120947956/ASSET/IMAGES/LARGE/10.1177\\_1369148120947956-FIG2.JPEG](https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120947956/ASSET/IMAGES/LARGE/10.1177_1369148120947956-FIG2.JPEG).

away of individual freedoms. By employing a combination of angry, urgent rhetoric, while portraying the government as an oppressor threatening their individual liberties, the conservative presidential candidates use their power to mobilize the voter base and shape the institutional narrative

To comprehend the depth of conservative presidential campaign discourse, the structure of the thesis is designed to provide a systematic analysis of the main themes in conservative political discourse. The subsequent section within the included talks about the literature on conservatism in the United States, the application of discourse analysis in political science, the theoretical framework, and the methodology of critical discourse analysis. It also clarifies the rationale behind the selection of cases and corpora, as well as the procedure for data collection and analysis. The thesis is laid out into three chapters, Discourse Analysis, Discussion and Findings and Recommendations, and Future Research.

The first chapter is subdivided into four subchapters. First, the chapter defines American conservatism and conceptualizes conservative ideology for the purpose of the analysis due to the fact that there is not an autonomous definition permeating conservatism throughout history. The chapter then identifies the ten dominant themes in conservative discourse that are based on the definition of conservatism. The first chapter continues with the analysis of the dominant values within the conservative political discourse of the two distinct periods: 1960-1980 and 2011-2020. Each part describes the results derived from the discourse analysis of conservative campaign statements made by presidential candidates. Moreover, it explores nuances of the most dominant themes and elements.

The second chapter reviews the findings and presents the most dominant enduring themes that permeate both periods as the most frequently referenced values, which are “Limited government,” “Separation of powers”, “Distrust in government,” and “The Threat of the ‘other’ on national security.” Each section includes at least one of the three elements associated with the Backlash Politics framework, such as emotions and nostalgia, taboo-breaking, and challenges to procedures and institutions associated with the dominant script. The chapter then summarizes the key findings in terms of the theoretical frameworks and produces implications for the ongoing academic debate. The third chapter provides recommendations for future research in the field of conservative discourse and offers limitations of the study.

## Literature Review

### American Conservatism

American conservatism in the United States has a complex historical context and the historical literature of American conservatism has seen significant growth in the past two decades, with a wide range of scholarship on subjects such as libertarianism, southern agrarians, and Christian conservatism.<sup>6</sup> The roots of American Conservative thought can be traced from the late 1700s to the present day. While conservatism began as an intellectual tradition, it has developed into a social movement and political force that emerged in the postwar years and has been shaped by various factors. The development of American conservatism can be traced from the Federalists in the 1790s to the rise of conservatism during the Cold War. The literature on postwar conservatism highlights important themes such as anticommunism, opposition to environmentalism, and the new class critique.

However, the history of American conservatism goes beyond the postwar period. A vast amount of literature focuses on the 1960s and 1970s in America, with an emphasis on conservatism and a general response to the liberal currents threatening the status quo. The rise of conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s was a significant development in American history and historians have highlighted various factors that contributed to this rise. George H. Nash's book *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* presents a comprehensive history of the conservative intellectual movement in America since 1945. First published in 1976, it is considered the authoritative treatment of the subject of communism. Nash examines the tensions and alliances between different factions within conservatism that had been largely independent of each other, such as libertarians, traditionalists, and anti-communists.<sup>7</sup> Nash describes the creation of conservatism as an alliance between the three distinctive independent and “partial contradictory intellectual currents”<sup>8</sup> and recognizes William F. Buckley as the joining force. While Nash’s work “remains unchallenged”<sup>9</sup> in the realm of conservatism, Jennifer Burns, Kim Phillips-Fein, and Donald T. Critchlow reveal the limitations of Nash’s interpretation. One common

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<sup>6</sup> K. Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (December 1, 2011): 733, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jar430>.

<sup>7</sup> George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 3rd ed. (Washington D.C.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” 729.

<sup>9</sup> D. T. Critchlow, “Rethinking American Conservatism: Toward a New Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (December 1, 2011): 752, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jar390>.

limitation, acknowledged by the three authors, is Nash's preference for traditionalist voices, which were given more prominence in his work as compared to the other two intellectual currents.

Burns follows up on Nash's thoughts in her review of Nash's book. Burns views the definition of conservatives that Nash proposed as too broad because he followed "a big tent definition of conservatism"<sup>10</sup> and would allow anyone to characterize themselves as a conservative. This expanded scope reflected conservatism as the "distinctive American blend that it was"<sup>11</sup> and enabled further research withstanding the shifts in definitions of conservatism later on. Burns, however, critiques Nash's treatment of intellectual history which she describes as "old fashioned"<sup>12</sup> and exposes the limitations of his traditional method. In Burns' opinion, his approach is notably lacking the consideration of enough material factors, including their social context. Burn's retrospective review of George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* views Nash's antiquated approach as deficient because American conservatism as an ideology would benefit from a multifaceted approach.<sup>13</sup> Donald T. Critchlow conducts further research into the intellectual roots of American conservatism and suggests new areas of research for the field. He challenges the assumptions made by Nash and explains the idea of limited government that is central to the conservative ideology. He further calls for the framing of conservatism "within a context of liberal politics"<sup>14</sup> as suggested by Phillips-Fein.

Phillips-Fein shares Burn's concerns and follows up on Nash's thoughts in her work "Conservatism: A State of the Field". Phillips-Fein "suggests further research in the intellectual roots of American conservatism"<sup>15</sup> and questions whether conservatism truly began in the postwar years as stated by Nash. She finds that one of the most important problems in the field of American Conservatism is the idea of linking the Right to its origins. She sees the backlash shift to the right as a result of "the rise of the black power, the growing militancy of the antiwar movement, and the challenges of feminism and gay rights."<sup>16</sup> This idea is also shared by Scott whose article "The Conservative Voice in Radical Rhetoric: A Common Response to Division", published in 1973, argues that radical rhetoric in response

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Burns, "In Retrospect: George Nash's 'The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945,'" *Reviews in American History* 32, no. 3 (2004): 454.

<sup>11</sup> Burns, 454.

<sup>12</sup> Burns, 459.

<sup>13</sup> Burns, 459.

<sup>14</sup> Critchlow, "Rethinking American Conservatism: Toward a New Narrative," 754.

<sup>15</sup> Critchlow, 752.

<sup>16</sup> Phillips-Fein, 726.

to division often carries a conservative voice, as seen in movements like Gay Lib, Women's Lib, and Black freedom.

Patrick Allitt's book *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* traces the development of American conservatism throughout history and examines the connections between conservatism and the nation's history. He sees the 1960s conservatism "as much a matter of activism as of theorizing"<sup>17</sup> and similarly to Nash sees William F. Buckley as the "face and voice of American conservatism."<sup>18</sup> While setting American conservatism in the context of world history, Allitt argues that American conservatism has evolved in response to perceived threats and challenges throughout history with its core elements that include skepticism about human equality and fears for the survival of civilization.

Conservative values are the primary theme of Paul Gottfried's book *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right*. The book analyzes the centrality of value rhetoric in the post-Second World War conservative movement. Gottfried argues that the conservative movement's focus on values has protected the movement from scrutinizing its own actions or returning to "an older and more genuine conservatism."<sup>19</sup> Additionally, he implies that the conservative movement has a "general tendency to move leftward"<sup>20</sup> to align with prominent individuals in the public eye. This highlights the tensions within conservatism between adhering to traditional values and accommodating more left-leaning positions for broader public acceptance.

Although the literature on American conservatism is significant, there has been a historical omission in the attention given to American conservatism, despite its significant role in twentieth-century politics and culture. Alan Brinkley in his article "The Problem of American Conservatism" primarily focuses on the lack of attention given to American conservatism in historical scholarship and explores the reason for this omission. He also gives attention to the definition of conservatism and recognizes that, unlike other ideologies, it does not have a "secure and consistent internal structure"<sup>21</sup> resonating with George Nash's perspective. Brinkley is not the only one to point out the problem of locating the Right in

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (Yale University Press, 2009), 191.

<sup>18</sup> Allitt, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Edward Gottfried, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of The American Right* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007), x, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230607040>.

<sup>20</sup> Gottfried, x.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *Source: The American Historical Review*, vol. 99, 1994, 414, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2167281?seq=1&cid=pdf->.



American Conservatism. He refers to the insufficient consideration of American conservatism as a challenge within American historical scholarship, describing it as a “problem of finding a suitable place for the Right”<sup>22</sup> within the overall historiography of the United States.

Currently, we also encounter literature directly addressing populist or conservative thinking in the contemporary political scene and media. These works point to the rise of conservatism in the present time, particularly through the statements of former President Donald Trump and previous presidents, whose expressions and positions can be considered conservative. Following up on Brinkley’s idea, Julian Zelizer looks back to the historical scholarship of American conservatism and calls to move away from “our search for the reasons why so many citizens identified with conservatism.”<sup>23</sup> He believes that we should not only view conservatism as a “replacement to liberalism,”<sup>24</sup> but rather examine its interaction with liberalism. Zelizer argues that “by abandoning the sense of inevitability that shapes our current narratives of the Right, historians can start moving closer to the fault lines and transformations that have shaped contemporary politics.”<sup>25</sup> In his work, Zelizer’s statement suggests that in the study of conservatism and its history, there is a need to change the way historians approach the subject. According to Zelizer, rather than seeing conservatism as an inevitable political ideology and seeking to understand the reason why many people have identified with conservatism, historians should focus on exploring the underlying causes and significant changes that have influenced the development of conservative political thought and movements in the present day.

In other words, Julian Zelizer is advocating for a more nuanced and critical examination of conservatism, identifying the gap in the study of American conservatism. In studying this topic, I would like to continue Zelizer’s idea and go beyond surface-level explanations while acknowledging that conservatism, like any other political ideology, has evolved over time in response to various factors and events. As many sources indicate we are in a period of conservative reaction. These sources, however, only label the current state as conservative based on some social changes, but with insufficiently supported evidence. It is essential to demonstrate the causes of the conservative backlash along with the changes in

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<sup>22</sup> Brinkley, 99:410.

<sup>23</sup> Julian E Zelizer, “Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Source: Reviews in American History* 38, no. 2 (2010): 389, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40865368?seq=1&cid=pdf->.

<sup>24</sup> Zelizer, 388.

<sup>25</sup> Zelizer, 389.

the conservative political ideology.

## Discourse Analysis in Political Science

The method of Critical Discourse Analysis has been used in political science, to show how much discourse matters and how necessary it is for political scientists to explore the dynamics between the “power of discourse as opposed to material explanations.”<sup>26</sup> Hansen uses discourse analysis in understanding foreign policy because she sees language as a social phenomenon. Rather than as a “private property of the individual” she views discourse “as a series of collective codes and conventions that each individual needs to employ to make oneself comprehensible.”<sup>27</sup> Hansen adopts a poststructuralist perspective, considering discourse as a subjective way of framing meaning and interpreting events, rather than as objective, historical truths. In her opinion, language is not inherently political. One has to reproduce “particular subjectivities and identities”<sup>28</sup> in order to make language political. Hansen views identity as a product of discourse, politics, relationships, and social interaction highlighting the role of political discourse in establishing or creating an identity of an individual and a group of people.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from the foreign policy issues, researchers all over the world confirm the power of language in the hands of politicians. The United States is not an exception in this regard. So far, there has been more emphasis on the analysis of presidential addresses and other governmental speeches as done by Savoy in a study on “Text clustering: an application with the State of the Union addresses,”<sup>30</sup> where the author defines the presidential style and finds similarities in their speech on the level of chronology and party affiliation. In a study conducted by Kubát and Čech, the authors conduct a quantitative analysis of all US Presidential Inaugural Addresses intending to discover how political and historical events influence the president’s speech.<sup>31</sup>

The present studies are increasingly focusing on electoral campaigns rather than on presidential speeches. In a more recent study, Savoy goes even further in the analysis of the

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<sup>26</sup> Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006), 22

<sup>27</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Savoy, "Text Clustering: An Application with the State of the Union Addresses," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 66, no. 8 (2015): 1645–54.

<sup>31</sup> Miroslav Kubát and Radek Cech, "Quantitative Analysis of US Presidential Inaugural Addresses," *Glottometrics* 34 (2016): 14-.

style and the rhetoric of the 2016 US presidential primaries, and defines rhetoric as “the art of effective and persuasive speaking, the way to motivate an audience.”<sup>32</sup> Paul F. Boller’s book on presidential campaigns maps the electoral speeches From George Washington to George W. Bush while answering a question to what extent is the current style of campaigning political development.<sup>33</sup> While there have been many studies that are concerned with the conservative or republican discourse in US presidential primaries or public debates, there is no evidence of an attempt to compare the current discourse with the past discourse to identify features that are of a cyclical nature.

## Theoretical Framework

### Backlash Politics

Literature provides different perspectives and insights into the dynamics of the concept of conservative backlash. This thesis builds on the theoretical framework of backlash politics as defined by Karen J Alter and Michael Zürn, examining the similarities of the rise of conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s and comparing it with the current conservative backlash. While authors define backlash differently, some focus on politically conservative reactions, cultural stereotypes, or the complexity of ideologies, it is not possible to overlook that the subject of backlash is essentially marginalized as a subject within the social sciences.

Alter and Zürn's Theory of Backlash Politics identifies triggers or causes for backlash, emphasizing its prevention through addressing retrograde objectives and grievances. In their article “Theorising Backlash Politics,” Alter and Zürn define backlash politics as a political category that enters mainstream public discourse once it reaches a certain threshold.<sup>34</sup> This categorization requires having a retrograde objective, extraordinary goals, tactics and means.<sup>35</sup> The Theory of Backlash Politics proposes the identification of triggers or causes in a backlash, enabling the prediction, of whether a backlash will happen

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Savoy. "Text clustering: an application with the State of the Union addresses." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 66, no. 8 (2015), 144  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/illc/fqx007>.

<sup>33</sup> Paul F. Boller Jr., *Presidential Campaigns: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison,” 739.

<sup>35</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison,” 743.

or not.<sup>36</sup> According to Alter and Zürn, we can prevent backlash before it escalates into a fundamental social and political change, simply by identifying the triggers or causes and addressing the retrograde objectives and complaints effectively. In other words, addressing specific concerns and grievances can potentially prevent them from developing into a backlash. The authors identify three triggers that often help bring about a backlash, they include emotive elements, taboo-breaking, and challenges the dominant narrative.<sup>37</sup>

According to this theory, backlash is not directly triggered by structural changes and specific policy changes, it is rather an answer to a political opportunity.<sup>38</sup> The authors identify that emotions, particularly anger and resentment, play a crucial role in influencing people's desires and priorities. Since emotions make individuals more receptive to populist appeals and less receptive to rational arguments, they are inherently shaping political dynamics and subsequently fueling a backlash. Another triggering emotion can be a perceived grievance, such as a status loss perception making people more inclined to seek changes in the social hierarchy. These negative emotions combined can fuel or reinforce the dynamics of backlash and they can make people more prone to material and popularized appeals.<sup>39</sup> Emotions that employ a sense of nostalgia are also employed to idealize the object. In conservative discourse, an emotive element with a dose of nostalgia is a widely used technique in an interpretation of reality and in emphasizing specific aspects of the past.

Another cause that can trigger a backlash is the breaking of taboos, which can lead to a sequence of political events, shaming, resentment, indignation, and ultimately, polarization and political conflict. If a taboo is broken during a liberal time, it can set in motion a series of political reactions or discourse centered around the perceived deviance.<sup>40</sup> This means that people or politicians can publicly criticize or condemn the previously taboo behavior as an attempt to enforce social norms. This again can lead to emotional escalation, polarization, and backlash.

One important aspect of backlash politics is that backlash discussions are centered

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<sup>36</sup> Alter and Zürn, "Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison," 744.

<sup>37</sup> Karen J Alter and Michael Zürn. "Conceptualizing Backlash Politics." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (forthcoming). iCourts Working Paper Series No. 174. SSRN, November 6, 2019, 10. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3481735>

<sup>38</sup> Alter and Zürn, "Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison," 745.

<sup>39</sup> Alter and Zürn, "Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison," 749.

<sup>40</sup> Alter and Zürn, "Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison," 749.

around the context of legal ruling and policymaking to reshape the dominant narrative. With the trigger that lies in “institutional shaping,”<sup>41</sup> rhetoric centers around the “fundamental core principles and institutions”<sup>42</sup> in an attempt to change the status quo to adopt counter-measures.<sup>43</sup> Following up on recent rulings on the national level, many discussions revolve around the idea that judges should not be involved in policymaking as it contradicts local values.<sup>44</sup> It is also important to point out the federal versus local level rules debate that creates conflict between the federal or constitutional norms and the preference of state or local actors.

Despite the given characteristics, the authors intentionally refrain from characterizing backlash as a regressive phenomenon. To elaborate, they do not necessarily view backlash as a step backward or a negative reaction to progress. They propose a framework in which they consider backlash to have distinct goals associated with a particular direction of change, rather than merely labeling it as “inherently regressive.”<sup>45</sup> As the backlash theory suggests, rather than focusing on the study of the causes of backlash, it is even more important to explore and understand the dynamics and “the strategies backlash movements employ to escalate backlash politics.”<sup>46</sup> This nuanced approach allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the complexities of conservative backlash.

## **Backlash Politics in Discourse**

As far as the discourse is concerned some studies study the phenomenon of backlash politics in public discourse. Jocelyn M. Boryczka in her paper book *Citizens: Women, Virtue, and Vice in Backlash Politics* provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical and contemporary debates over women's education and sex education. Boryczka emphasizes the impact of the gendered virtue-vice dualism on societal suspicion and backlash politics. In her study, Boryczka “tracks how civic virtue shifts from the male public to female private life and defines women’s explicit relationship to politics as moral guardians but suspect

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<sup>41</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Conceptualizing Backlash Politics.” 13.

<sup>42</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Conceptualizing Backlash Politics.” 13.

<sup>43</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Conceptualizing Backlash Politics.” 13.

<sup>44</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison,” 750.

<sup>45</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison,” 742.

<sup>46</sup> Alter and Zürn, “Theorising Backlash Politics: Conclusion to a Special Issue on Backlash Politics in Comparison,” 751.

citizens”<sup>47</sup> and thus contributes to the ongoing debate on republican backlash politics in the area of sex education. Highlighting the way traditional moral assumptions continue to shape public dialogue and policy decisions, ultimately impacting women's legitimacy as full citizens and hindering broader societal engagement with social policies.

The discourse on backlash also penetrates the politics of Multiculturalism. Roger Hewitt offers a comprehensive examination of the backlash against multiculturalism and racial equality policies in the United States and the United Kingdom, highlighting the complex interplay between race-related politics. Hewitt considers the societal responses to multicultural policies as critical and underscores the resistance to civil rights and affirmative actions with regard to the societal shifts required by these movements. Hewitt also points out tensions within white working-class communities, which were exploited by right-wing political strategies.

Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal's *White Backlash* delve into a similar examination in regard to the political and social impact of large-scale immigration in the United States. They highlight a growing white backlash, driven by anxieties over demographic and cultural changes brought about by immigration. This backlash is reflected in shifting political preferences and orientations, particularly among white Americans, towards more conservative and restrictive immigration policies. The authors explore how these attitudes have influenced the political landscape, affecting party affiliations and policy decisions, and contributing to a deepening racial divide in American politics.

## **Methodology**

### **Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Method**

This thesis will use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary research method, which centers on examining the social aspects of communication and how language is harnessed to attain particular objectives. In this thesis, CDA will be referred to not only as a resource for critical research but also as an element of social practice used in combination with the theory of political backlash to explain the way people use language to achieve power and dominance. Given its multidisciplinary character and utilization both as

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<sup>47</sup> Jocelyn Boryczka, *Suspect Citizens: Women, Virtue, and Vice in Backlash Politics* (Temple University Press, 2012), 10

a theory and a method,<sup>48</sup> critical discourse analysis is adequate for dissecting the rhetorical patterns and structures of conservative media and politicians, particularly in statements that exhibit signs of power, dominance, and inequality. In analyzing a specific discourse, it is necessary to examine not only the content of the speech act and the discursive tools used, but also what is not said by the speaker, such as entailments and presuppositions, and it must take into account the social context in which it is generated. The power of language lies not only in the words spoken or written but also in the effect it has on the audience.

By controlling the narrative “we are able to influence people’s minds, e.g. their knowledge or opinions,”<sup>49</sup> and indirectly shape their perceptions and subsequently influence their minds and actions. According to Dijk, “vital for all discourse and communication is who controls the *topics* (semantic macrostructures) and topic change.”<sup>50</sup> This connection between information, beliefs, and actions highlights the importance of the role and power of politicians in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors, because the power the speaker gives to the subject may have implications for the interpretation of reality and the world. In other words, the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) takes into account not only the language but also the context within which the language is presented, as well as the relationship between language and power.<sup>51</sup> The use of CDA as the method of discourse analysis, therefore, enables a more comprehensive understanding of the pressing social issues such as dominance and inequality.<sup>52</sup> CDA is, therefore, employed in this thesis to gain a nuanced understanding of how individuals in power interpret reality providing insight into the construction of political statements.

To achieve an understanding of the relationships between discourse and power, this thesis focuses on dominant themes in the public discourse of the 1960-1980 and 2010s and compares them with the current political discourse. In search of the shared topics regarding conservatism, I will look at the discourse as reflective of the political views, ideas, and objections of the conservative backlash. To find out what kind of narrative dominated the discourse in the period of 1960-1980 as well as 2011-2020, I analyze the voices of the conservative political power elites, i.e. presidential candidates, who have control over the

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<sup>48</sup> Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 122, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020>.

<sup>49</sup> Teun A Van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin, 2015, 355, <http://www.hum.uva.nl/~teun/cda.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Van Dijk, 356.

<sup>51</sup> Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Teun A. Van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin, 2015, 352, <http://www.hum.uva.nl/~teun/cda.htm>.

public political discourse in terms of context, the structures of text, and talk itself.

## **Electoral Corpus and Case Selection**

For this purpose, I analyze American presidential candidates who are one of the most influential political figures in American society. Politicians, particularly presidential candidates, belong to the most influential social groups and institutions. As a result, they have exclusive access to public discourse, enhancing the power and influence of their discourse.<sup>53</sup> Their statements are directed towards people and represent their and their party's views. In terms of media coverage, presidential candidates receive a disproportional amount of exposure to convey their message and introduce themselves to the general public during their presidential campaign. Since media serves as the primary source of information for the public, this plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and inherently contributes to the overall formation of public opinion on specific issues.

The selection of the researched conservative presidential candidates was based on three criteria. The studied candidates had to meet at least one of the criteria. First, they publicly identified as conservatives; second, during their campaign, they were endorsed by conservative party representatives; and third, their core beliefs aligned with the conservative ideology. In the research, I have included different types of conservatives in order to achieve variation. To achieve a comparison of the 1960s and 1970s with the current political conservative discourse, the first analysis consists of records collected in the years between 1960 and 1980 of the chosen conservative politicians. The researched presidential candidates in the first part of the analysis are Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Gerard Ford, and Ronald Reagan. The second part of the analysis consists of public statements collected in the period of the years 2011 to 2020 and the chosen conservative politicians are Mitt Romney, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump.

The analysis will use the style of orally presented and written messages, such as prepared statements by the candidates, and press releases that differ from the oral dialogue in debates. The thesis operates with the assumption that the public statements are certainly authored, at least in part, by a team of speechwriters, thus not showing a spontaneous unprepared personal way of interacting, but rather reflecting on the main values that the candidates seek to present to the public and assume a definite attitude towards specific social

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<sup>53</sup> Van Dijk, 365.



issues. My primary sources therefore include forms of recorded communication that serve as the politician's self-presentation to the general public.<sup>54</sup> I am particularly interested in politicians' public statements and press releases that were made during the campaign period before the presidential election, as well as statements on issues made during their presidency in the chosen time periods.

In the age of new media, the forms of communication to the public have changed. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the focus of the public shifted to politicians' social media platforms while the modern political campaign had to adjust accordingly to this change. Politicians found a way of using social media to divert “from topics that are potentially harmful to them by tweeting increasingly about unrelated issues.”<sup>55</sup> To analyze the 21<sup>st</sup>-century political discourse in terms of content, it also requires examining the statements that were posted on social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This is mainly the case of Donald Trump, whose tweets are considered an official form of communication and are included among official documents, statements, press releases, and debate transcripts. This thesis therefore considers Trump's tweets as a form of communication towards the public reflecting the president's sentiments on various issues.

From a stylistic point of view, the electoral corpus under examination is homogenous and shares common primary objectives, such as ideas presentation and voter persuasion. The topics and form of presentation are directly and fully controlled by the presidential candidate allowing them to clearly articulate their ideas regardless of whether performed orally or in writing. Presidential candidates articulate their representation of a larger number of individuals and institutions because their main aim is to influence a proper representation within the electorate. The dissection of their political discourse contributes to the research of backlash politics and the political science field in general due to the power of discourse to influence not only the public's perception of reality but also the formation of collective identity.

## **Data collection and analysis**

My primary data were collected from the American Presidency Project which serves

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<sup>54</sup> Richard L. Merritt, “The Emergence of American Nationalism: A Quantitative Approach,” *American Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1965): 321.

<sup>55</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky, Michael Jetter, and Ullrich K.H. Ecker, “Using the President's Tweets to Understand Political Diversion in the Age of Social Media,” *Nature Communications* 11, no. 1 (December 1, 2020): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-19644-6>.

as the most comprehensive collection of resources pertaining to the study of the President of the United States due to its non-profit and non-partisan nature. The website is hosted at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and collects documents from *Messages and Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, and *The Public Papers of the Presidents*. They also collect materials provided by the White House media office, the Government Printing Office, and the National Archives (NARA). The data collected, such as public statements, press releases, and where available, tweets, are analyzed in the QDA Miner program that allows for dissecting the statements by topics and color coding them into visible parts to achieve comprehensive research. For my research, I identified ten main topics that represent the conservative movement over time.

By adding a relevant code to statements addressing a particular subject, I was able to dissect and recognize specific patterns in both researched time periods and compare them. Juxtaposing the modern American conservative wave of the 1960s and the 1970s with that of today, I aim to find “easily observable surface structures”<sup>56</sup> such as the use of specific words to describe the “other” by the conservatives, denial of systemic racism and discrimination, pro-life and “take back America” rhetoric in both media and conservative politicians in the 1970s and the present time. I examine the conservative political discourse reactions and responses toward social changes and propositions for the future without jeopardizing the existing status quo.

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<sup>56</sup> Van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 2015, 359.

## 1 Discourse analysis

### 1.1 Conservative ideology in discourse

Since the creation of the United States as a nation and world superpower, conservatism has played an important and pivotal role in the development of American politics. The concept of conservatism as an ideology is rather complex and multilateral, with various interpretations based on historical, geographical, and temporal contexts. While there is not an autonomous definition permeating conservatism throughout history, some traditions and elements represent a common conservative framework while allowing for the inevitable mutation of the ideology reflecting on the current way of life. Generally, conservatism “is defined in terms of universal values such as justice, order, balance, moderation”<sup>57</sup> and reaches all kinds of political life in regard to economy, society, and religion. In terms of society, the core of conservatism rests on the preservation of the fundamental elements of society and the value of existing institutions, while accepting necessary changes on secondary issues to preserve the fundamental elements of society.<sup>58</sup> In connection to the theoretical framework of backlash politics, the appropriate ideology was articulated by Huntington, who defines conservatism as an “ideology arising out of a distinct but recurring type of historical situation”<sup>59</sup> employed in order to defend established order and institutions. This definition corresponds to the idea of conservatism as being a recurring element in American history defined by the theoretical framework of backlash politics.

This thesis defines American conservatism as a political and social philosophy that advocates for the preservation of traditional standards, institutions, and societal structures emphasizing the belief that individuals should enjoy freedom free from the constraints of arbitrary force. Conservatives typically support limited government and a strict interpretation of the Constitution. Socially, conservatives defend traditional moral and cultural norms, highlight the importance of family and family values, and oppose practices such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and certain gender-related issues.

The conservative discourse reflects the logic of conservative ideology that aims to ensure the continuity of the social order between past, present, and future in the face of changes perceived as threats. The discourse articulates calls for conservation and centers on

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<sup>57</sup> Samuel P Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology." *The American Political Science Review* 51, no. 2 (June 1957), 455.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel P Huntington, 457.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel P Huntington, 455.

defending the institutional status quo and the rejection of changes that endanger continuity. Simultaneously, another trait of the conservative political discourse is the proposition of changes that are presented as necessary to ensure the continuity of the social order.

To justify the choice of presidential candidates in this thesis, it is necessary to point out that Republican candidates exhibit more signs of conservative discourse than their Democratic counterparts. This can be visible in their discourse elements such as economic ideology, liberation, division into us versus them, and references to other prominent conservative candidates, particularly references to Ronald Reagan. Democrats, for example, focus more on policy and democratic issues, such as education, while Republicans concentrate on and emphasize Republican values, such as the defense of the nation, the defense of morality, and other Christian values. This characteristic is not unique to the American conservative discourse but is a globally recognized discourse labeled as conservative.

However, in the United States where one of the central values of the nation is individuality and individual autonomy, Jelen finds that conservative activists emphasize the existence of competing rights, such as to advance their conservative agenda. This is one of the reasons why conservatives are able to demand to enact laws that reflect a particular set of moral or ethical values. By asserting that individual freedoms are in danger, conservatives demand that the legal system enforce behaviors that align with moral beliefs for the greater good of society and open a broader discussion about the role of government in people's lives and the relationship between law and morality.

## **1.2 Dominant Themes in Conservative Discourse**

For the purpose of the research objective, I have identified the ten most prominent values of conservatism based on the definition of conservatism. The research is centered on selected sources of conservative discourse and aims to discern the most dominant prevailing values within the conservative political discourse of the two distinct periods: 1960-1980 and 2011-2020. The conservative themes identified for this Critical Discourse Analysis are tenfold.

The first prominent value of conservatism is "Individual liberties and responsibilities" which corresponds to the traditional conservative attitude toward individual freedom and autonomy. This value emphasizes the importance of freedom to make individual choices while underscoring the importance of corresponding individual responsibilities, such as the

legal framework and order maintenance. The rule of law and an individual's adherence are inherently tied with individual liberties in order to achieve a just and well-functioning society. Conservative speakers often find resonance in the principles embedded in the U.S. Constitution, especially in relation to the First and Second Amendments.

The second value tied with conservatism is "Limited Government" which is connected to the value of preserving individual liberties and refers to the principle of power distribution, advocating for restricted powers of the federal government. In the conservative perspective, the federal government serves mainly for the protection of the nation and should not infringe on people's lives. The main idea is that the federal government should allow local governments to implement their own policies and legal framework.

The value of "Separation of powers" also refers to the struggle for power distribution between the three branches of American government; the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branch. Analogical to the value of limited government, equal distribution of powers in the form of checks and balances is a way to protect the nation from one overly powerful central authority resulting in potential tyranny. In the conservative context, this theme is used as a criticism of the power of the judiciary that could cause a disbalance and as a result undermine democratic principles.

The next value determined as one of the most important for the Conservative politicians is "Traditional family and Christian values," which encompasses all parts and levels of American life, such as marriage, gender roles, sexual orientation, or education. This theme draws up on the traditionalist branch of conservatism and underscores the belief that it is necessary to preserve and protect the traditional societal structure based on traditional family and Christian values. While the resurgence of fundamentalism in the 1970s influenced modern conservatism in terms of "a normative view of 'traditional' middle-class constructions of family, community, and morality," (Brinkley 423) religion serves as a moral and ethical foundation for the society.

Christian values also play a significant role in the conservative stance on the "Opposition to Abortion, because it is associated with their belief in the sanctity of human life. The pro-life rhetoric is not only founded in religious, moral, and ethical norms, seeing the termination of pregnancy as reflective of moral values, but also in terms of human rights emphasizing the rights of the unborn.

Another core value within the conservative ideology is "Fiscal conservatism" which employs rhetoric involving the deregulation of government spending, reduction of the

national debt, or lower tax rate. This value is an extension of the idea of limited government in the economic sector aligning with free market principles.

The concerns of the economy also include the theme of working-class concerns also permeates the conservative ideology. The conservative discourse thus reflects the importance of job stability along with the overall views on the nation's economic prosperity and limited government intervention.

The theme of "Distrust in government" incorporates all the above-mentioned values reflecting the philosophy of skepticism towards the expansion of government and the use of power of the elites. This value has its background in historical precedents and the rhetoric of the Founding Fathers who feared a big government might result in tyranny. The distrust in centralized government aligns with the idea of the prevention of the abuse of authority and seeing the power elites as a threat to personal freedoms. The problematic aspect of the distrust in government is that if the pursuit of safeguarding liberties is taken to an extreme, it might result in the erosion of democracy instead of keeping the democratic institutions in check.

Along with the threat to the nation from the inside, the conservatives are also concerned with the external force that can pose a threat to the nation by undermining national security and endangering the American cultural identity, traditional norms, values, and mores. The value of the "Threat of the other on national security" is viewed in contrast with the nation's unity and cohesion highlighting nationalist and patriotic concerns about the preservation of the dominant culture against specific foreign groups or elements. The discourse of American exceptionalism is tainted by the Vietnam War and its mismanagement as well as the toll on American service showing to the public that the United States does not always act justly and win. This perception resonated throughout the public and suggested that the present was unsatisfying, and the future could be in peril.

The civil rights movement in the 1960s disrupted the former consensus that white racial superiority and male dominance across society was normal, understood, and accepted. The civil rights movement and notions of personal liberation granted many Americans new lexicons and tactics to seek justice, inclusion, and equality. However, the conservatives also used their language to interpret their grievances for the status quo represented in this thesis by the theme of "Denial of systemic racism and discrimination of minorities."

The ten conservative values serve as a basis for the research of conservative discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The following chapters will describe the discourse analysis of

conservative political discourse in the period of 1960-1980 and 2011 and 2020.

### **1.3 Presidential candidates in 1960-1980**

The first part of the discourse analysis consists of the identification of the most prominent conservative values of the period by marking the presence of explicit and implicit accounts of intertextuality in public statements of conservative politicians during their presidential campaigns. Within the context of public discourse that serves as a self-presentation of the speaker, intertextuality is employed not only to identify and dissect specific thematic quotes in the text but also to offer its possible interpretations and additionally comment on its influence on the construction of reality. The discourse of conservative politicians analyzed in this part is Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Gerard Ford, and Ronald Reagan. As each candidate is represented by their statements, it is possible to analyze the similarities and differences reflected in the text. The analysis considers the style as well as the content and the intertextuality with its possible interpretation.

This thesis explores the resurgence of conservative thought and its evident manifestation in the discourse of presidential candidates while observing and responding to the significant shift in the definition of conservatism over time. The discourse of American conservatives embodies the conservative ideology that is based on libertarian, anti-communist, and traditional values. Since the original libertarian economic-centered argument against the New Deal, the conservative Republican discourse has evolved into the anti-communist Cold War era rhetoric exhibiting signs of limited government.

Table 1 reports on the most common themes discovered by the analysis of the researched political statements. In the period 1960-1980, the highest number of accounts of the main theme belongs to the category of “Limited Government”. The second highest account is in the category of “Fiscal conservatism” and the third most frequently occurring theme is “Threat of the other on national security.” While the theme of “Support for traditional family values constitutes a cornerstone of conservative ideology, conservative presidential candidates in the period 1960-1980 mention this theme very rarely as it extends into other researched values and indirectly influences their rhetoric.

Themes	Conservative presidential candidates 1960-1980					
	Goldwater	Wallace	Nixon	Ford	Reagan	All
Limited government	4	7	11	3	9	34
Threat of the other on national security	2	1	4	0	5	12
Fiscal conservatism	1	1	2	3	4	11
Distrust in government	3	3	0	0	3	9
Individual liberty and responsibility	6	0	1	1	1	9
Separation of powers	1	2	1	1	1	6
Opposition to abortion	0	0	0	1	2	3
Support for traditional family values	0	0	1	1	1	3
Working-class concerns	0	1	0	1	0	2
Denial of systemic racism and discrimination of minorities	0	2	1	1	2	6

Table 1

### 1.3.1 Limited Government

The theme expresses a conservative perspective on the role of the government in United States society. The topic of limited government in the political discourse of the 1960s and 1970s explicitly refers to the size and power of the federal government. In most instances, the speaker calls for the need to reduce the size of the government to save money and make the bureaucratic process less difficult. Data depicted in Table 1 indicate that all five researched conservative presidential candidates advocate for limited government in their statements and assert their skepticism about the ability of the government to properly manage all layers of society. The theme of limited government in conservative political discourse from 1960 to 1980 includes three key aspects: a concern for the government’s effectiveness, worry about the departure from founding principles, and a fear of an uncontrollably powerful government leading to tyranny.

Firstly, speakers suggest that the over-expanding government needs to be regulated or limited in order to be effective. Specifically, throughout the period, the government is mentioned in connection with the word “bureaucracy” which carries a distinctly negative connotation referring to a large “body of unelected government officials.”<sup>60</sup> The term is employed to express disapproval of the government’s complicated processes, which create difficulties in accomplishing tasks, and also serves as commentary on the number of officials, whose salaries are funded by American taxpayers, this is best described in a

<sup>60</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “bureaucracy,” accessed December 31, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bureaucracy>.



statement by George Wallace: “My friends, bureaucracy — you pay for that.”<sup>61</sup> Another example comes from Barry Goldwater’s statement, who characterizes the government as a “sprawling octopus of bureaucratic interference”<sup>62</sup> using a vivid metaphor to suggest a widespread influence or government reach and regulation. This statement further describes the intrusive involvement of the government in people’s lives.

Also, the following statements, made by Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, share a grievance about the complexity and inefficiency of the government apparatus.

*“Americans, who have always known that excessive bureaucracy is the enemy of excellence and compassion, want a change in public life—a change that makes government work for people.”*<sup>63</sup>

*“And many Americans today, just as they did 200 years ago, feel burdened, stifled and sometimes even oppressed by a government that has grown too large, too bureaucratic, too wasteful, too unresponsive, too uncaring about people and their problems.”*<sup>64</sup>

Statements by Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon share a view that the government should work more effectively for people and should be responsive to their needs. In another instance, Nixon emphasizes the potential negative consequences of an overly powerful government:

*“We say that the way to progress in America, the best way, the proved way, the way to go forward into a bright new future, is **not through expanding the size and the functions of government**, but by increasing the opportunities for millions of individual Americans. This, we believe, is the answer.”*<sup>65</sup>

While expressing concern for government efficiency and ability, the discourse also provides commentary on how the government’s expansion is hindering progress. The speaker suggests an optimistic outlook on the future but emphasizes the belief in limited government

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<sup>61</sup> George Wallace, “Speech at Serb Hall, Milwaukee, Wisconsin” (26 March 1976).

<sup>62</sup> Barry Goldwater, “Wanted: A More Conservative GOP,” *Human Events*, February 18, 1960.

<sup>63</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Election Eve Address ‘A Vision for America,’” The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285591>. Accessed January 3rd 2024

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Election Eve Address ‘A Vision for America,’” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285591>.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Nixon, “The Need for Leadership: An Address in Greensboro, NC, by Vice President Richard Nixon,” The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273968>.

and individual opportunities to best achieve progress. Another example of the perceived ineffectiveness of the government is Reagan's statement suggesting that the federal government has expanded its role beyond what was originally intended:

*"The federal government has taken on functions it was never intended to perform and which it does not perform well. There should be a planned, orderly transfer of such functions to states and communities and a transfer with them of the sources of taxation to pay for them."*<sup>66</sup>

Reagan notes that it is necessary to decentralize certain government functions in order to achieve goals.

Secondly, within the conservative discourse, the theme of limited government is justified considering the founding principles of the United States. To demonstrate this, I have chosen the following statement by Ronald Reagan that suggests that the Founding Fathers intended for a minimized power of the centralized government. The speaker sees expanding the government is a contradictory act against the founding principles of the nation and, therefore, must be actively opposed.

*"But beyond that, 'the full power of centralized government'—this was the very thing the Founding Fathers sought to minimize. They knew that governments don't control things. **A government can't control the economy without controlling people.** And they know when a government sets out to do that, it must use force and coercion to achieve its purpose. They also knew, those Founding Fathers, that outside of its legitimate functions, **government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector of the economy.**"*<sup>67</sup>

This passage also suggests the contrast between the government-run economy and the economy run by the private sector, implying that the economy is much more sufficient when not obstructed by the government as it is reliable in its use of "force and coercion to achieve its purpose."<sup>68</sup>

Thirdly, it is not only the size of the government that concerns conservatives, but also the power that it holds. In his statement, Ronald Reagan is highlighting not only the that

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<sup>66</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255827>.

<sup>67</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255827>.

<sup>68</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address on Behalf of Senator Barry Goldwater: 'A Time for Choosing,'" The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/207647>.

the government “has grown so big and powerful,”<sup>69</sup> but also noting that the government “**is beyond the control** of any president, any administration or Congress.”<sup>70</sup> In conservative discourse, the government is not only described as big or powerful within the text, but with the use of metaphors with negative connotations. To mention an example, Nixon describes government with the term “Big Brother” which was coined by George Orwell to symbolize a totalitarian regime in his novel *1984*:

*“too long we have **had government by Big Brother**, rather than through the full participation of the people.”*<sup>71</sup>

Using this metaphor, the speaker is associating the government with the idea of an invasion of privacy or even overextending its authority. This deliberate reference implies a government that exists for the sole purpose of surveillance rather than serving American citizens. In this example, the government is inherently outweighed by the people, setting the contract of the people and the government as a contract against each other, rather than one intertwined institution working together to make living better. In many instances, the government is seen as “dictating” people’s lives, instead of allowing them to have liberty as well as responsibility:

*“A government has a role, and a very important one, but the role of government is not to take responsibility from people, but to put responsibility on them. It is **not to dictate to people**, but to encourage and stimulate the creative productivity of 180 million Americans.”*<sup>72</sup>

In both examples, the speaker perceives the American government as authoritative and expresses a desire for a more democratic system with citizens more involved in the decision-making process.

These instances show that in their discourse, Conservatives benefited from the breakdown of a consensus concerning the governmental system that defined the dominant

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<sup>69</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251302>.

<sup>70</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit."

<sup>71</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit."

<sup>72</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Chicago," The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/256651>

culture and resulted in the disillusionment of the American people. Instead of a governmental system that possesses design and integrity, Conservatives in the period 1960-1980 presented the system as corrupted, and elected officials as “untrustworthy lawyers” who placed their own interests above those of the nation.

As the researched texts are from statements that are likely to be prepared beforehand, it is necessary to see the references as intentional statements with a specific purpose. In essence, the statement’s purpose is to contemplate the size, purpose, power, and control of the government reflecting conservative values, while setting the relationship between the government and the citizens in opposition, thus furthering the idea of distrust in government. The theme of “Limited Government” is by far the most prominent aspect in the discourse of conservative presidential candidates in the years 1960-1980, especially during the presidential campaign of Richard Nixon, who explicitly or implicitly mentions the theme of “Limited Government” 11 times in his statements as evident in Table 1.

The studied discourse conveys the conservative perspective that deems it necessary to regulate the expanding nature of the government to align with the founding principles of the United States represented by the Constitution. Conservatives argue that the principles were established in order to protect the nation against an authoritative government with the purpose of controlling its citizens rather than maintaining their liberties. The intentional use of metaphors such as “Big Brother” to describe the government carries negative implications and underscores the lack of trust in the government and democracy, another characteristic of conservative discourse.

### **1.3.2 Threat of “the other” on national security**

The theme of the “Threat of ‘the other’ on national security” is another most frequently occurring category. It refers to a threat that disturbs the peace of the nation and the world. The conservative political discourse in the 1960s and 1970s is reflecting the present political landscape at the time. Drawing upon the Vietnam War and the Cold War, the speakers highlight Communism as the “only significant disturber of peace”<sup>73</sup> threatening not only American values but also the free world. The conservative discourse revolving around this theme is divided into two parts; one that refers to a threat from the outside, and one that fears a threat from within in the sense of “anarchy” of specific groups.

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<sup>73</sup> Barry Goldwater, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/216657>.

The first part as identified in the conservative discourse regarding the “Threat of ‘the other’ on national security” is the idea of Communism as the primary source of instability in the world. Aligning with the anti-communist conservative values and anti-communist rhetoric in the era, the conservative politicians are calling for a declaration of communist countries as enemies as they pose a fundamental threat to the world. As evident in the statement of Barry Goldwater, the criticism of the current government lies in the inability to distance the United States from the countries run by communist governments as they are “enemies of every man on earth who is or wants to be free.”<sup>74</sup>

*The Republican cause demands that we **brand communism as a principal disturber of peace** in the world today. Indeed, we should brand it as **the only significant disturber of the peace**, and we must make clear that until its goals of conquest are absolutely renounced and its rejections with all nations tempered, communism and the governments it now controls are enemies of every man on earth who is or wants to be free.*<sup>75</sup>

In this context, Goldwater underscores the power of rhetoric reflecting the concept of American exceptionalism. The proposed rhetorical approach not only shapes the United States foreign policy but also ensures the position of the United States as a superpower acting as a protector for countries that are under metaphorical “forces of tyranny”<sup>76</sup>

Additionally, in their campaign statements conservative, politicians address not just Communism but also the nation’s choices confronting the decision-makers in case of a potential conflict. As demonstrated in the following statements, the recurring theme among conservative politicians is their criticism of the Democratic party’s actions, specifically not prioritizing the renouncement of Communism. Conservative presidential candidates articulate their demand to stand up against the “tyranny” of Communism, highlighting the potential of war and the danger of communism to freedom:

*“I believe that we can win victory for freedom both at home and abroad. I believe that we can be strong enough and determined enough to win those victories without war. **I believe that appeasement and weakness can only bring war.** I’ve asked and will continue to ask:*

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<sup>74</sup> Barry Goldwater, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination, at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco."

<sup>75</sup> Barry Goldwater, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco."

<sup>76</sup> Barry Goldwater, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco."

*Why Not Victory—why not victory for sound, constitutional principles and government—why not victory over the evils of communism?”<sup>77</sup>*

*“The Communists proclaim over and over again that their aim is the victory of communism throughout the world. **It is not enough for us to reply that our aim is to contain communism**, to defend the free world against communism, to hold the line against communism. The only answer to a strategy of victory for the Communist world is a strategy of victory for the free world.”<sup>78</sup>*

*“(…) the challenges confronting us, **the erosion of freedom taken place under Democratic rule in this country**, the invasion of private rights, the controls and restrictions on the vitality of the great free economy that we enjoy. These are the challenges that we must meet and then again there is that challenge of which he spoke that we live in a world in which the great powers have aimed and poised at each other horrible missiles of destruction, nuclear weapons that can in a matter of minutes arrive at each other’s country and destroy virtually the civilized world we live in.”<sup>79</sup>*

The statements of different conservative politicians show the appeal of “victory over communism.” The speakers are portraying the United States as the only nation that can defend the world against “forces which threaten the peace and the rights of free men everywhere,”<sup>80</sup> implying it is a moral imperative for the United States to do so. The need for victory and renouncement of communism is tied to morality. The speakers explicitly urge not only the elite ruling class but also the citizens to participate in the fight for their liberties by advocating for a morally right national security policy:

*“If you and I have the courage to tell our elected officials that we want our national policy based upon what we know in our hearts is **morally right**. We cannot buy our security, our **freedom from the threat of the bomb by committing an immorality** so great as saying to a billion now in slavery behind the Iron Curtain, “Give up your dreams of freedom because*

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<sup>77</sup> Barry Goldwater, „Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination“ The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/278508>.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Chicago."

<sup>79</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address at the Republican National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285597>.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Chicago."

*to save our own skin, we are willing to make a deal with your slave masters.” Alexander Hamilton said, “A nation which can prefer disgrace to danger is prepared for a master, and deserves one.” Let’s set the record straight. **There is no argument over the choice between peace and war, but there is only one guaranteed way you can have peace—and you can have it in the next second—surrender.**”<sup>81</sup>*

By drawing upon historical comparisons, such as overcoming slavery, conservative politicians are positioning the United States as the primary force to save the world from communism citing that “the United States has an obligation to its citizens and to the people of the world never to let those who would destroy freedom dictate the future course of human life on this planet”<sup>82</sup> It is clear that they are advocating for a stronger policy towards communism that is guided by moral principles because they fear that compromising the nation’s morals may result in the nation’s freedom in peril.

Subsequently, in the conservative rhetoric, the threat to national security is not only portrayed to have a form of “communist tyranny” but also “liberal anarchy.” The discourse of conservative politicians in the period 1960-1980 demonstrates a common theme which is based on blaming liberalism and the actions of the Democratic party as a threat to the existence of the United States. While pointing out the problematic issues with certain foundational principles, the speakers are expressing the sentiment that certain policy changes are eroding the stability of the United States. This is evident in the statements:

*“Our system is **under attack**: the property system, the free enterprise system, and local government.”*<sup>83</sup>

*Never before in our history have Americans been called upon to face **three grave threats to our very existence**, any one of which could destroy us. We face a disintegrating economy, a weakened defense, and an energy policy based on the sharing of scarcity.”*<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address on Behalf of Senator Barry Goldwater: 'A Time for Choosing,'" The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/207647>.

<sup>82</sup> Ronald Reagan, Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251302>

<sup>83</sup> George Wallace, "Speech at Serb Hall, Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (26 March 1976)

<sup>84</sup> Ronald Reagan, Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251302>

Apart from the evident criticism of the Democratic party leadership and their “direct political, personal and moral responsibility,”<sup>85</sup> the conservatives perceived the domestic unrest connected to the Civil Rights movement as “anarchy” posing an imminent threat to public safety and the nation. Wallace minimizes the upheaval in the streets blaming “the liberals and the left-wingers in both national parties” and characterizes the protesting groups as “a few anarchists, a few activists, a few militants, a few revolutionaries, and a few Communists.”<sup>86</sup> From the perspective of the speaker, the situation is viewed as a danger to national security and implies a strong call for intervention to restore order.

In the 1960s and 1970s conservative political discourse, the theme of “The threat of the other on national security” recognizes ‘the other’ on two levels. One level is positioning Communism as the primary danger to the global peace and the American values calling for the government to renounce Communism and label communist countries as enemies, because they are a threat to freedom worldwide. By employing the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, the conservative politicians are able to justify the moral obligation to protect other nations from the communist “tyranny.” The second level of ‘the other’ is the perceived threat from within, portraying groups protesting on the streets as “liberal anarchy.” The conservative politicians call for the restoration of order while distancing the Republican party from the unrest that threatens the principles, values and security of the nation.

The analysis of the discourse in the period of 1960-1980 explores presidential campaign statements of conservative politicians, including Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Gerard Ford, and Ronald Reagan, aiming to understand their rhetoric on the key conservative values. The examination identifies the common themes and emphasizes the theme of “Limited Government” and the “Threat of ‘the Other’ on National Security,” while recognizing the use of specific elements such as metaphors and negatively or emotionally charged words to describe the threats to the nation.

#### **1.4 Presidential candidates in 2011-2020**

The second part of the discourse analysis consists of the identification of the most

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<sup>85</sup> Ronald Reagan, Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251302>

<sup>86</sup> George Wallace, "Speech at Serb Hall, Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (26 March 1976)



prominent conservative values in the period of 2011-2020 to identify conservative values and specific elements in the discourse connected to the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This part analyses the key conservative political figures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The discourse of conservative politicians analyzed in this part are Mitt Romney, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump. The thorough examination of each candidate's statements allows for the identification of the nuances of the text referring to the politics of backlash in terms of the use of emotions, grievances, or taboos.

The political landscape during the period of 2011 and 2020 was very turbulent both domestically and internationally. In the presidential election that took place in 2012, Barack Obama was re-elected as the president of the United States and defeated the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney who was a conservative Republican. During the presidential years of Barack Obama, the United States government experienced a partial shutdown as a result of a rift between Congress and the Obama administration. Later on, the Republicans gained victory in the midterm elections, especially in the US Senate, and solidified their control over Congress. In the next presidential election in 2016, Donald Trump secured the Republican nomination and consequently won and defeated Hillary Clinton. However, the House of Representatives impeached President Donald Trump during his presidency citing the abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. Although the impeachment did not follow through in the Senate, it contributed to further polarization of the American public. In the studied period, one more presidential election took place with Joe Biden defeating the incumbent President Donald Trump. There were also other events that took place in the period of 2011-2020. One example is the death of George Floyd, which not only led to widespread Black Lives Matter movement protests around the country but also triggered an investigation into police misconduct and systemic racism resulting in calls for police reform. On a global scale, another issue was COVID-19 which had not only health impacts but also economic, education, healthcare, and privacy consequences. Due to imposing public health measures such as federal mask mandates, lockdowns, and vaccination, public adherence to such pandemic measures in the United States varied and, in some places, resulted in protests against government-imposed mandates infringing on their individual freedoms.

The rising political polarization and shifts in society shaped the political discourse as it mirrored the political landscape of the United States. The election of Barack Obama in 2012 held a promise that the United States was not constrained by the issue of race and systemic racism. However, looking back to the period that followed Obama's first term, we

can see that a conservative resurgence was underway. This new stream of modern or contemporary conservatism emerged during the Obama administration with the candidacy of Mitt Romney and climaxed with the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States.

This thesis explores the conservative rhetoric spanning the years from 2011 to 2020, often invoking past American values that need to be revived in order to save America. Presidential candidates frequently emphasize values embodied by the presidents from the 1960s and 1970s, including Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, and John F. Kennedy—undoubtedly a period notably of a conservative backlash based on the adherence to moral and religious values. This analysis uncovers how the presidential candidates in the 2011-2020 timeframe envision the America they aim to restore. Attention is given mainly to whether the proclaimed values correspond to the historical conservative ideals or whether these phrases function merely as rhetorical tools to gain electoral support.

Table 2 serves as a report on the most frequent conservative themes appearing in the discourse in the period 2011-2020 and demonstrates the theme of “Limited Government” as the most prominent feature in the period, mostly articulated by Mitt Romney. As reported in Table 2, the theme of “Opposition to Abortion” as well as “Threat of ‘the other’ on national security can be mostly found in the discourse of Donald Trump indicating his populist features. The conservative value of driving the “Distrust in government” is a theme that appeared most frequently in Donald Trump’s rhetoric denoting an expanding political divide and growing discontent with the government’s actions.

Themes	Conservative presidential candidates 2011-2020					All
	Romney	Cruz	Paul	Rubio	Trump	
<b>Limited government</b>	9	4	1	3	2	<b>19</b>
<b>Opposition to abortion</b>	3	3	1	1	8	<b>16</b>
<b>Threat of the other on national security</b>	4	3	3		6	<b>16</b>
<b>Fiscal conservatism</b>	8	3	2	1	1	<b>15</b>
<b>Individual liberty and responsibility</b>	1	5	2		5	<b>13</b>
<b>Separation of powers</b>	3	7	0	0	3	<b>13</b>
<b>Distrust in government</b>	1	1	5	2	6	<b>15</b>
<b>Support for traditional family values</b>	3	3	0	1	2	<b>9</b>
<b>Working-class concerns</b>	1	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>

Table 2

### 1.4.1 Limited Government

In the 2010s, the conservative discourse had one prominent feature, which was the call for a more limited government. Conservative politicians in their speeches not only emphasize the need to empower the state governments, but their rhetoric carries a strong emotion because the government is portrayed using “the us and them” narrative. This narrative implies a lack of trust in the government’s intentions and insinuates that the government does not act in the people’s best interest. This dichotomy, portraying the government as indifferent towards people is evident in the critique of its perceived disconnect from the people, discontent with the government’s expansion, and accusation of overreach in specific matters.

Within the presidential campaign discourse, Conservatives are positioning themselves alongside the people, remarking on the evident neglect of the government toward its citizens. This interpretation is evident in a statement by Mitt Romney: “This President puts his faith in government. We put our faith in the American people.”<sup>87</sup> The government is portrayed as consistently seeking to centralize power in Washington while trying to take liberty and responsibility away from individuals and subsequently local governments and states and make decisions on behalf of people.

The following statement also serves as a critique of the government, as it misinterprets the government as unelected while overlooking the fact that people have the power to vote their representatives into Washington to represent their will.

*“This President’s first answer to every problem is to **take power from you**, your local government and your state so that so-called “experts” in Washington can **make those choices for you**. And with each of these decisions, we lose more of our freedom.”<sup>88</sup>*

The underlying implication is that the people’s individual liberties are attacked and that the gradual loss of freedom is inevitable if the power lies in the hands of the “so-called ‘experts’ in Washington,” further feeding into the distrust in government.

Moreover, the government is depicted as being in opposition to the people, as if the two were mutually exclusive, or even obstructing opportunities for individuals. The

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<sup>87</sup> Mitt Romney, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in Stratham, New Hampshire" The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/290352>

<sup>88</sup> Mitt Romney, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in Stratham, New Hampshire" The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/290352>

underlying idea is that individuals are better able to achieve their goals and opportunities with a smaller government that does not impose excessive regulatory constraints. This is evident in statements such as:

*“And so if we need to call on the strength of America, you don't strengthen government, you strengthen the American people.”*<sup>89</sup>

Conservative political candidates are significantly blaming the government for the lack of opportunities for individuals. Limited government is portrayed as directly proportional to the amount of liberties and opportunities

Furthermore, many conservative speakers justify their call for a more limited government by their strict interpretation of the Constitution which limits the powers of the federal government. Conservatives are accusing the government of not respecting the Constitution if being expanded.

In the following example, Romney gives a specific reference to the Constitution, emphasizing the principle of federalism as stipulated by the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment, implying that states should be given the autonomy to address local needs.

*“I will insist that Washington learns to respect the Constitution, including the 10th Amendment. We will **return responsibility and authority to the states** for dozens of government programs - and that begins with a complete repeal of Obamacare.”*<sup>90</sup>

However, the conservative presidential candidates not only criticize the power of the federal government in comparison to the states but also the overreach into the healthcare and education system. Conservatives in the post-Obama presidency include their grievances about the Affordable Care Act, which is commonly known as Obamacare. Their statements express their strong opposition against the health care reform citing high costs and decreased quality of care as well as invasion of people's privacy:

*“Imagine health care reform that **keeps government out of the way between you and your doctor** and that makes health insurance personal and portable and affordable.”*<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Mitt Romney, Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, DC The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/277832>

<sup>90</sup> Mitt Romney, Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in Stratham, New Hampshire The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/290352>

<sup>91</sup> Ted Cruz, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia" The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/309868>

n terms of a perceived government intervention in certain areas of people's lives, similar rhetoric is used for education reform. In this example of Ted Cruz's speech, emotionally charged words like "dictate" or "assault" are used, suggesting that the federal government acts in fact against the citizens rather than in favor of them.

*"Instead of a **federal government that seeks to dictate school curriculum** through Common Core...[applause]...imagine repealing every word of Common Core."*<sup>92</sup>

*"Instead of a **federal government that wages an assault on our religious liberty**, that goes after Hobby Lobby, that goes after the Little Sisters of the Poor, that goes after Liberty University, imagine a federal government that stands for the First Amendment rights of every American."*

Cruz goes even further and describes the disagreement in the involvement of government in education as "the civil rights issue of the next generation"<sup>93</sup> referring to the struggle for Civil rights in the 1960s while misinterpreting Civil rights as a conservative issue in the past.

This overreach is also evident in the statements of other conservatives, such as Marco Rubio who is highlighting the "*family – not government – is the most important institution in society*", expressing a belief system that family and faith are the authentic American values. The following statements follow the same narrative of the government being in opposition to traditional values.

*We believe that **faith and family, not government and bureaucracy**, are the true American way. We believe that children should be taught to love our country, honor our history, and always respect our great American flag.*<sup>94</sup>

In this example, the speaker urges to prioritize family and faith over government and the expanding bureaucracy as they represent the essential components of American identity. The statement also promotes patriotic values and implying that the core of American way of life

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<sup>92</sup> Ted Cruz, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia"

<sup>93</sup> Ted Cruz, Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia

<sup>94</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020," The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/332477>

lies in traditional family and Christian values, rather than in government and bureaucracy.

Conservative presidential candidates in their discourse frequently emphasize the need to limit the federal government and advocate for a more power to state government. In their campaign statements, Conservatives argue that due to the power of centralized government, people's individual liberties are under attack. The critique revolves around the perceived indifference of the federal government towards the people, positioning the government into the opposition with the people. Another recurring theme is a perceived excessive government intervention, particularly in healthcare and education, characterized as assault on people. Conservatives justify their beliefs through a strict interpretation of the Constitution and the patriotism underscoring the narrative of true American roots and values.

#### **1.4.2 Opposition to abortion**

The traditional conservative and Christian values are also the basis for the second most frequent theme in the conservative discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is the conservative's opposition to abortion. The conservative rhetoric surrounding abortion centers around four primary concerns; the issue of morality, legality and the distribution of funding and power.

In the conservative perspective, abortion as a human rights issue which is most evident in their rhetoric. Conservative politicians are portraying themselves as the defenders of people's rights and liberties, especially the ones that cannot protect themselves. Their stance on abortion can be understood through both explicit and implicit statements. In an instance of the latter, Cruz in his statement, "[f]reedom means that every human life is precious and must be protected,"<sup>95</sup> suggests that the concept of freedoms is connected to the protection of human life in all its forms. Therefore, those who advocate for freedom should naturally endorse freedom in all sections of life, logically connecting the two as indivisible. This is exemplified by Donald Trump, who states that "We believe that every child is a Sacred Gift from God!"<sup>96</sup>

Conservative discourse presents abortion as the government's failure "to protect the rights of the most defenseless in our society: unborn children."<sup>97</sup> Conservatives see the

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<sup>95</sup> Ted Cruz, "Remarks to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/317845>

<sup>96</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Tweets of November 1, 2020," The American Presidency Project.

<sup>97</sup> Marco Rubio, "Rubio Campaign Press Release - Planned Parenthood Gets Over \$500 Million in Tax Dollars. De-Fund It Now," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/326121>.

government as the main protector of person's freedoms and consider it the government's duty to safeguard the fundamental rights in all living creatures, even more so with the unborn. In regard to abortion, the speakers blame the government for undermining the fundamental values and morals and essentially advocate a federal government "that works to defend the sanctity of human life"<sup>98</sup> and aligns with a particular moral and religious perspective. This discourse once again adds to the growing distrust in government.

Moreover, Conservatives perceive abortion as an erosion of American values not only in terms of freedoms and rights but also in the matters of funding. The issue of federal funding is a pertinent issue that was raised already by Mitt Romney in 2011, as well as Conservatives such as Donald Trump in 2016. Donald Trump in his OpEd on The Culture of Life articulated his stance on the taxpayer funding of reproductive health organizations and abortion providers such as Planned Parenthood, framing it as an "insult to people of conscience at the least and an affront to good governance at best."<sup>99</sup> He further juxtaposes the argument of abortion as an issue of privacy with private funds that "should subsidize this choice rather than the half billion dollars given to abortion providers every year by Congress."<sup>100</sup> This statement implies that if abortion is defined as a private matter, it should also be financed as such making financial responsibility also private. The government is at fault for imposing financial contributions on those who find abortion morally or ethically objectionable.

In addition, Conservatives in their 21<sup>st</sup>-century discourse are attacking not only the Democrats or the government for allowing abortion but also Planned Parenthood which is presented as an organization with a "complete disregard for the sanctity of human life."<sup>101</sup> What is more, Planned Parenthood is described as a "degenerate business that benefits from the taking of innocent life,"<sup>102</sup> making the reproductive health organization look not only financially but also morally corrupt. Conservatives in their statements pledge to "investigate these allegations, prosecute criminal wrongdoing, and defund the organization

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<sup>98</sup> Ted Cruz, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/309868>.

<sup>99</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Trump Campaign Press Release - DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC. OPED - The Culture of Life,"

<sup>100</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Trump Campaign Press Release - DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC. OPED - The Culture of Life,"

<sup>101</sup> Rand Paul, "Statement by Senator Rand Paul on Planned Parenthood," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/317022>.

<sup>102</sup> Ted Cruz, "Statement by Senator Ted Cruz on Planned Parenthood," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/314981>.

altogether.”<sup>103</sup> To further describe this rhetoric that conveys the belief that abortion takes innocent human lives; it is necessary to point out the statement by Ted Cruz in 2015 that expresses a strong position and argues that organizations should not be given any public financial support:

*“No organization that profits from terminating innocent human life should receive one penny of taxpayer money and those who are engaging in these likely criminal activities must and will be held to account.”*<sup>104</sup>

The speaker asserts that public funds should not be used on activities perceived as unethical or immoral. This statement not only expresses an opposition to public funding for Planned Parenthood, but also deems abortion morally objectionable and potentially illegal.

While some conservative speakers are concerned with the legality of the issue, others simply label abortion as a “problem”:

*“Yet, it speaks well of our country that almost all Americans recognize that abortion is a problem. The law may call it a right, but no one ever called it a good.”*<sup>105</sup>

The speaker essentially suggests that despite the legal recognition, people do not necessarily consider abortion as inherently good. The conservative perception of the legality of abortion is that the legal status of abortion does not automatically equate to societal moral approval or endorsement. Labeling abortion as a general problem takes the partisanship away from the matter extending it into a moral and bipartisan issue:

*“And in the quiet of conscience, people of both political parties know that more than a million abortions a year cannot be squared with the good heart of America.”*<sup>106</sup>

Positioning abortion in opposition to “good” asserts a moral evaluation, making a clear distinction between right and wrong in the eyes of American society, regardless of party affiliation.

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<sup>103</sup> Ted Cruz, "Statement by Senator Ted Cruz on Planned Parenthood,"

<sup>104</sup> Ted Cruz, „Cruz Campaign Press Release - ICYMI: Ted Cruz in USA Today: End Planned Parenthood funding,“ The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/315020>

<sup>105</sup> Mitt Romney, “Remarks at the Values Voter Summit in Washington, D.C.,” The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/298941>

<sup>106</sup> Mitt Romney, „Remarks at the Values Voter Summit in Washington, D.C.“



Furthermore, in the campaign discourse, Conservatives perceive abortion as an issue of disconnect between people and the government. They are referring not only to the federal funding of abortion but also to the landmark Supreme Court decision in 1973 that affirmed women's right to abortion on the federal level.<sup>107</sup> Within the conservative discourse, it is possible to identify nuances that interpret the case ruling as exceeding its authority by reflecting the government's decision. Trump interprets the ruling as a divergence from the will of the people and attributes it to a non-originalist judicial interpretation of the Constitution:

*“The Supreme Court in 1973 based their decision on imagining rights and liberties in the Constitution that are nowhere to be found.”<sup>108</sup>*

The perceived discontent with the ruling is justified by the argument that the decision does not align with the preferences of the people. Conservatives promise to align with the preferences of a significant portion of American population and pledge to “return the issue of abortion back to the states,”<sup>109</sup> by nominating judges “who know the difference between personal opinion and the law.”<sup>110</sup> This is exemplified by Donald Trump's statement that is expressing concern with the pattern of the judicial branch exceeding its authority:

*“Roe v. Wade gave the court an excuse to dismantle the decisions of state legislatures and the votes of the people. This is a pattern that the court has repeated over and over again since that decision. Perhaps Roe v. Wade became yet another incidence of disconnect between the people and their government.”<sup>111</sup>*

Using statements as presented indicates that Conservative politicians perceived strong judicial power as an act of imbalance within the American government, potentially leading to the erosion of the democratic process.

Besides the most visible elements, there is a notable change in conservative rhetoric

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<sup>107</sup> *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)

<sup>108</sup> Donald J. Trump, „Trump Campaign Press Release - DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC. OPED - The Culture of Life,“

<sup>109</sup> Mitt Romney, “Statement by Mitt Romney on the March for Life Participants,“ The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/299843>

<sup>110</sup> Mitt Romney, “Remarks at the Values Voter Summit in Washington, D.C.”

<sup>111</sup> Donald J. Trump, „Trump Campaign Press Release - DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC. OPED - The Culture of Life,“ The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/314424>

in the year 2020, particularly in the rhetoric of Donald Trump, who increasingly used emotionally charged and descriptive language to describe abortion. Trump expressed his concern about the perceived shift in America's "culture of life" to a current "culture of death"<sup>112</sup> in the United States, citing the impact of missed "chance to enjoy the opportunities offered by this country."<sup>113</sup> Trump is using strong emotive language in connection to abortion, suggesting that Democrats are in favor of "ripping babies straight from the mother's womb"<sup>114</sup> in reference to late-term abortions. Explicit mentions are made to the "execution of children after birth"<sup>115</sup> which refers to the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act, passed in the House of Representatives, that mandates healthcare requirements for a child born alive after an abortion procedure and establishes guidelines for criminal prosecution in case of an unsuccessful abortion.<sup>116</sup> By emphasizing the graphic nature of his statements, he is appealing not only to the reason of the audience but more importantly their emotions in order to evoke a strong response. By using such strong descriptive language about the perception of the violent abortion process, the discourse employed by Trump surpasses specific taboos or norms for appropriate behavior that have so far been prevalent in society and is subsequently changing the political discourse.

The element of "Taboo breaking and new political strategies," defined by the theory of Backlash Politics, is best described within the theme of "Opposition to Abortion. "In the period of 2011-2020, there were 16 cases of the theme. Also, the discourse surrounding abortion practices has become very descriptive in terms of the imagery of the act of abortion, particularly with the statements of Donald Trump, who in his campaign statements emphasized the death of innocent children. Trump is using strong language to describe the perceived violence in connection to abortion, describing abortion as "ripping babies straight from the mother's womb"<sup>117</sup> or "execution of children after birth."<sup>118</sup> Using this discourse in presidential campaign speeches demonstrates the intentional "rejection of parts of the

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<sup>112</sup> Donald J. Trump, „Trump Campaign Press Release - DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC. OPED - The Culture of Life,“

<sup>113</sup> Donald J. Trump, „Trump Campaign Press Release - DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC. OPED - The Culture of Life,“

<sup>114</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020,"

<sup>115</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020,"

<sup>116</sup> Congress.gov. "H.R.26 - 118th Congress (2023-2024): Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act." January 25, 2023. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/26>.

<sup>117</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020,"

<sup>118</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020,"

dominant social script.”<sup>119</sup> As this element already reached the public discourse threshold and led to changes in current policies, it is possible to evaluate that the rhetoric played a role in reshaping the existing rules, showcasing the power of speech of the presidential candidates.

The conservative discourse of presidential candidates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is based on traditional conservative and Christian values. Their statements that oppose abortion can be divided into four parts based on their main concerns. Conservatives frame abortion as human rights issue and emphasize the importance of defending the rights of the unborn, rather than the rights of women. The arguments are based on the imperative of protecting human life that is the core of American values and describes the act of abortion as well as the funding and providers as immoral and corrupt. Conservatives tend to criticize Planned Parenthood pledging to investigate, prosecute and defund the organization. Another focal point is the legal status of abortion that in Conservative view does not necessarily mean the societal approval. Conservatives perceive the landmark Supreme Court Decision in the case of *Roe v. Wade* as a pattern of disconnect with the people’s will and an overstep in judicial authority. As evident in the provided examples, the conservative discourse regarding abortion is becoming increasingly descriptive and emotionally charged in search of a strong emotive response from the audience, achieving conservative backlash goals. While abortion is one of the most frequent themes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century conservative rhetoric, it demonstrates the nuances of moral, legal and societal aspects within political discourse that add to the overall conservative backlash.

## **2 Discussion and Findings**

### **2.1 Dominant enduring themes in conservative discourse**

In the political discourse spanning 1960-1980 and 2011-2020, the main themes presented in Chapter 2 are the core of the conservative discourse. This chapter analyzes the most prominent enduring themes and discrepancies between the periods 1960-1980 and 2011-2020 found in the political statements and debates. To identify the most dominant themes, I have counted the frequency of the topics mentioned in statements in both time periods and collected them in Table 3.

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<sup>119</sup> Karen J Alter and Michael Zürn, “Backlash Politics: Introduction to a Symposium on Backlash Politics in Comparison Forthcoming in the *British Journal of International Relations on Backlash Politics in Comparison*,” 2019, 12

The Table 3 reveals that the most prominent value persisting until the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the theme of “Limited Government” which permeates both periods as the most frequently referenced value. In the initial studied period, the theme of “Limited Government” was by far the most frequent one, with 34 counts of cases, showcasing a considerable gap compared to other prevalent themes. However, the second studied period shows the most prominent themes were employed in comparable frequencies in comparison to other themes. For example, the “Threat of the ‘other’ on national security” occurred only three times less than the most dominant theme “Limited Government.” The second most frequent value in both studied periods is “The threat of the ‘other on national security” which has been heightened mostly in the discourse of Donald Trump. Another interesting is the change in the frequency of cases in the theme “Opposition to Abortion” which is almost nonexistent in the political discourse of the 1960s and 1970s.

This chapter demonstrates the results of the analysis reported in Table 3 and not only describes the dominant key themes that are enduring in both studied periods but also debates the changes in the rhetoric about the identified themes, as well as discusses the similarities and differences in all the values. This chapter describes the four themes where it is possible to find the three necessary elements that define conservative backlash according to Alter and Zurn’s theory of Backlash Politics. The three elements that are important companions of backlash politics are emotive elements, taboo-breaking, new political strategies, and challenges to procedures and institutions associated with the dominant script.<sup>120</sup> While there are similarities in the elements used by conservative politicians in the period 1960-1980 and 2011-2020, this chapter shows that the period of 2011-2020 meets all these criteria to be characterized as a period of conservative backlash. The four most frequently appearing themes are further analyzed to demonstrate the existence of the necessary elements of backlash.

Themes	Conservative presidential candidates												
	1960-1980						2012-2020						
	Goldwater	Wallace	Nixon	Ford	Reagan	All	Romney	Cruz	Paul	Rubio	Trump	All	
Limited government	4	7	11	3	9	<b>34</b>	9	4	1	3	2	<b>19</b>	
Threat of the other on national security	2	1	4	0	5	<b>12</b>	4	3	3	0	6	<b>16</b>	

<sup>120</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit” The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251302>

Fiscal conservatism	1	1	2	3	4	<b>11</b>	8	3	2	1	1	<b>15</b>
Distrust in government	3	3	0	0	3	<b>9</b>	1	1	5	2	6	<b>15</b>
Individual liberty and responsibility	6	0	1	1	1	<b>9</b>	1	5	2	0	5	<b>13</b>
Opposition to abortion	0	0	0	1	2	<b>3</b>	3	3	1	1	8	<b>16</b>
Separation of powers	1	2	1	1	1	<b>6</b>	3	7	0	0	3	<b>13</b>
Support for traditional family values	0	0	1	1	1	<b>3</b>	3	3	0	1	2	<b>9</b>
Denial of systemic racism and discrimination of minorities	0	2	1	1	2	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
Working-class concerns	0	1	0	1	0	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>

Table 3

### 2.1.1 Limited Government

The concept of “Limited Government” is the prevailing value that endured in the top position into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As described in Chapter 2, each period has its own understanding of what limited government means for the current political landscape. Both studied periods perceive the government as too powerful and less effective when it becomes too large. I have identified three common critiques of the government that appear in both periods. The conservative presidential candidates portray the government as dominating or dictating people’s lives, obstructing opportunities for individuals, and hindering prosperity. The following statements are examples from both studied periods:

*1960-1980*

*“As your nominee, I pledge to restore to the federal government the capacity to do the people's work without dominating their lives.”<sup>121</sup>*

*“We saw again the pioneer vision of our revolutionary founders and our immigrant ancestors. Their vision was of free men and free women enjoying limited government and unlimited opportunity.”<sup>122</sup>*

*2011-2020*

*“To preserve opportunity, we must shrink government not grow it.”<sup>123</sup>*

*“If you share my belief that we need to scale back government so that we can expand*

<sup>121</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit” 2

<sup>122</sup> Gerald R. Ford, Remarks in Kansas City Upon Accepting the 1976 Republican Presidential Nomination The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/242431>

<sup>123</sup> Mitt Romney, "Remarks in Bedford, New Hampshire," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/298291>.

*prosperity, then I need your vote.*"<sup>124</sup>

Although the theme of "Limited Government" persisted into the 21<sup>st</sup>-century discourse, there are also significant differences in the understanding of the government power as well as discrepancies in the interpretation of how the government should be limited, especially in what areas of life. While conservative political candidates in both eras are concerned with the growing government and consider it powerful, yet less effective, examples from the 20<sup>th</sup> century oftentimes include pledges to restore the government as viewed by the founders, thus employing an emotive element of nostalgia. The conservative politicians during the period 1960-1980 tie their argument for a limited government with the founding principles that are contradictory towards a powerful government, fearing uncontrollable government resulting in an authoritative regime or even tyranny from the government. They criticize the "ever increasing concentrations of authority in Washington."<sup>125</sup> While expressing their concern for the powerful government, they highlight their indignation with the ineffectivity, promising an effective government that does not invade people's privacy.

The campaign discourse in 2011-2020 includes grievances against the government that are portrayed as in opposition to the people. It is as if the two were mutually exclusive and there could be either government power or power for people. In comparison to the initial studied period that already suggests the government as being in opposition to the people, in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century discourse, there is a distinct "us and them" dynamic. This perspective portrays the two as mutually exclusive, allowing the candidates to distance themselves from the government. For example, Trump in his statement: "We believe that faith and family, not government and bureaucracy, are the true American way,"<sup>126</sup> emphasizes faith and family in contrast with government and bureaucracy, suggesting a preference for individual values and liberties rather than the government, which represents the overall nature of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century rhetoric.

Additionally, conservative candidates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are putting greater emphasis on the role of government in protecting the freedom of individuals rather than on fixing the functioning of the country to achieve effectivity, as seen for example in the statement:

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<sup>124</sup> Mitt Romney, "Remarks in Bedford, New Hampshire."

<sup>125</sup> Barry Goldwater, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination."

<sup>126</sup> Mitt Romney, "Remarks in Bedford, New Hampshire."

*“They outpromise us in what they say the Federal Government will do, but they cannot outperform us and they cannot outpromise us as far as the results are concerned and the objectives which we will achieve.”<sup>127</sup>*

However in the years from 1960 to 1980, one of the issues was that the government too much dominated human lives. They tried to address, or rather promise, the streamlining of government actions to reflect societal attitudes. However, they did not advocate for the transfer of power directly into the hands of the people as intensively as we see today.

The ongoing discourse on “Limited Government” persists into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and carries on the perception of government as too powerful, especially in regulating people’s lives and not allowing them the liberty of opportunities. The rhetoric claims that due to the lack of government effectiveness, progress cannot be achieved. The conservative presidential candidates in the 1960-1980 period placed emphasis on the ideals of the nation’s founders evoking a sense of nostalgia for the past, implying that it is necessary to return to or restore the founding values to prevent tyranny from the government. Similarly, the conservative presidential candidates in the 2011-2020 period underscore the need for transferring power from the government to the people in order to protect individual freedom. Expressing this in their discourse, they intentionally instill a sense of urgency regarding the danger or a threat that is coming from within and can potentially impede on people's liberties.

### **2.1.2 Separation of powers**

The discourse that implies a potential threat from within is also frequently connected to the separation of powers, particularly in reference to judicial authority. As asserted for example by Cruz, judges should not “dictate policy, but instead follow the Constitution.”<sup>128</sup> Conservatives in both periods share a common viewpoint, portraying the Supreme Court as overstepping the boundaries of its judicial power by creating legislation. Conservative candidates in both periods employ identical rhetoric in reference to the judicial branch, especially to express criticism of judicial decisions deemed as “lawless” or as instances of “judicial activism.” Both Wallace and Cruz argue that the judicial branch is not suitable to make laws. Both Reagan and Romney expressed concern about judicial activism, with

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<sup>127</sup> Richard Nixon, "The Need for Leadership: An Address in Greensboro, NC, by Vice President Richard Nixon," <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273968>.

<sup>124</sup> Ted Cruz, "Remarks to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/317845>.

Reagan pledging to nominate judges who know the difference between personal opinion and the law. This is echoed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by Trump, who expresses the need to appoint “justices who believe in enforcing the law, not enforcing their own political agenda.”<sup>129</sup> Romney, while also underlining the importance of appointing judges who adhere strictly to the Constitution, frames the issue as though “a fundamental principle of democracy is at stake” due to the actions of “a few folks in black robes” that jeopardize democracy. This rhetoric shows that anything else than the original interpretation of the Constitution is considered “judicial tyranny” by Conservatives in both eras and it is viewed as eroding democratic principles. The discourse is tainted by the use of pejorative words to describe the judges. In this narrative shared by both periods, there is an enduring perception that the Supreme Court is creating policy instead of adhering to the Constitution, posing a potential threat to American democracy.

### **2.1.3 Distrust in Government**

The element of American democracy being threatened from within adds to the growing distrust in government that materialized in an attack on the symbol of American democracy, the Capitol in Washington D.C. An angry mob encouraged by President Trump entered the Capitol and threatened the democratically elected politicians. Although the rhetoric implying that the government is not to be trusted has been employed already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the frequency of such a topic dramatically increased in comparison to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century discourse with 16 instances of the theme employed in the discourse. Conservative politicians in the 1960-1980 period described the government as “out of touch”, “controlling” or “sick,” while the 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservative politicians accuse government officials of incompetent leadership and view government as being “directed by out of touch politicians,”<sup>130</sup> who “do nothing but talk.”<sup>131</sup> These statements are not limited to the criticism of political class, but also call for a collective effort to “reclaim our government from a permanent political class that enriched itself at your expense.”<sup>132</sup> This echoes the “take back America” narrative intending to mobilize people against a perceived

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<sup>129</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/342196>.

<sup>130</sup> Rand Paul, “Rand Paul Campaign Press Release - The Party of Tomorrow,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/316666>.

<sup>131</sup> Rand Paul, “Rand Paul Campaign Press Release - The Party of Tomorrow.”

<sup>132</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/332477>.



threat to their liberties. While employed more frequently in the period 2011-2020, the statements express strong criticism of Congress and suggest that it violates people's rights in the United States.

Speakers in both periods emphasize the “brokenness” of the government as a presage of the destruction of the nation. For example in one of his speeches, Paul implies that the political system is severely dysfunctional by saying “Washington is horribly broken. I fear it can't be fixed from within,”<sup>133</sup> the speaker is expressing his lack of confidence in the government and its ability to repair itself. He is calling for a collective effort to demand change as “We the people must rise up and demand action”<sup>134</sup> implying that external public pressure is necessary in order for the government to act in favor or with people in mind. Reagan also sees the crisis of the country as a “failure of our leaders to establish rational goals and give our people something to order their lives by.”<sup>135</sup>

Another common feature is the use of dramatic language that indicates emotional intensity and conveys a sense of urgency and a high level of distrust. Speakers use the term “tyranny” to imply that they perceive the government's actions as oppressive or potentially dictatorial. This is exemplified in the statement by Wallace:

*“Never before in the history of this nation have so many human and property rights been destroyed by a single enactment of the Congress. It is an act of tyranny. It is the assassin's knife stuck in the back of liberty.”*<sup>136</sup>

In the statement, strong terms such as “tyranny” or “assassin's knife” evoke powerful imagery and aim not only to express a strong personal conviction but also to mobilize people who share the concern.

It is possible to identify a similar choice of language used by Trump:

*“We stared down the unholy alliance of lobbyists, and donors, and special interests who*

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<sup>133</sup> Rand Paul, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in Louisville, Kentucky," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/310591>. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/310591>

<sup>134</sup> Rand Paul, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in Louisville, Kentucky"

<sup>135</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255827>.

<sup>136</sup> George C. Wallace, "Speech by George C. Wallace - 'The Civil Rights Movement: Fraud, Sham and Hoax' (1964)," University of Groningen.

*made a living **bleeding our country dry**, that's what we've done. We broke down the doors of Washington back rooms where deals were cut to close our companies, give away your jobs, shut down our factories, and surrender your sovereignty and your very way of life. And we've ended it. We took on a **political machine that tried to take away your voice and your vote. They tried to take away your dignity and your destiny.** But we will never let them do that, will we? Many times I said we would **drain the swamp.** That is exactly what we're doing right now. **We're draining the swamp.**"<sup>137</sup>*

His language reflects a belief in a situation that is urgent and requires immediate attention in order to protect the nation's identity and values as well as the freedoms of individuals. He refers to the government metaphorically as a "political machine" implying inhuman, machine-like capabilities and diminishing the participation of people by taking away their voice, and vote, consequently eroding their dignity and destiny. The speaker asserts that there is an ongoing effort to "drain the swamp," symbolizing the process of eliminating corruption from the government.<sup>138</sup>

The theme of distrust in the government is not a novel phenomenon, as it is possible to see its manifestation in the 20th century. However, the political discourse of the 21st century demonstrates a significant amplification of this theme. Through an analysis of the discourse of conservative presidential candidates in 1960-1980 and 2011-2020, a shift in language is evident, as it signifies an increasing level of frustration and disillusionment, coupled with calls to reclaim the government and the narrative of "take back America." In the 21st century, the discourse reflects a concentrated effort to mobilize the public against a perceived threat to their freedoms represented by an "oppressive" government. This narrative, more prevalent in the period from 2011 to 2020, criticizes Congress and the government, suggesting that it violates the rights of the people in the United States. Conservative political candidates employ dramatic language, escalating the intensity of emotions and urgency. They aim to mobilize the public against the government, justifying it with a deep-seated concern for the state of American democracy. Reflecting on this discourse with hindsight, we can discern that the attack on the Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021, was a manifestation of the culmination of a deepening distrust in the American government. Therefore, this attack can be considered a direct consequence of the emotional

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<sup>137</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020."

<sup>138</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 2020."

and dramatic discourse, highlighting the power of the rhetoric employed by conservative political candidates. This finding also contributes to the wider discussion on conservative backlash, as the conservative rhetoric materializes into tangible actions.

#### **2.1.4 The threat of "the other" on national security**

In both periods, 1960-1980 as well as 2011-2020, the theme of “The threat of "the other" on national security” is the second most frequent value overall. The analysis of this theme identifies “the articulation of a "Self" that represents the national identity and multiple "Others", which are entities that the speaker perceives as different or threatening.”<sup>139</sup> The national identity portrayed by the speakers is a "Self", while the “Other” or "Others" have “radically different identities than the self”<sup>140</sup> and are therefore interpreted as threatening to the national identity. In both periods, the force that threatens the American identity constituted of culture, values and liberties does not only come from within but also from outside. While the political discourse of presidential candidates understandably includes various aspects of foreign policy views in the era, they share the same two grievances. The first concern revolves around the threat posed from the outside and manifested in the form of a physical attack, disturbance or invasion. The second concern is the threat of a different ideology that can potentially change American culture and values. Conservative presidential candidates in both researched periods refer to “the other” when describing an imminent danger of something “un-American” that poses a danger to destabilize the United States.

In the period of 1960-1980, conservative presidential candidates referred mostly to a threat of communism that was threatening the United States not only from the outside in the form of a nuclear attack from the Soviet Union but also from the inside by threatening the current American values and installing socialism in the United States. Communism is seen as the source of the potential destruction of American values in terms of:

*“(…) the erosion of freedom taken place under Democratic rule in this country, the invasion of private rights, the controls and restrictions on the vitality of the great free economy that we enjoy.”<sup>141</sup>*

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<sup>139</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 6.

<sup>140</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 6.

<sup>141</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address on Behalf of Senator Barry Goldwater: 'A Time for Choosing,'"

Victory “over the evils of communism” is seen as a “victory for sound, constitutional principles and government.”<sup>142</sup> In the perceived fight against communism, speakers often mention the need to uphold the founding values:

*“In essence, what I am saying tonight is that our answer to the threat of the Communist revolution is renewed devotion to the great ideals of the American Revolution (...).”<sup>143</sup>*

By evoking a sense of nostalgia for the past, especially the time of American Revolution and the founding principles, the conservative presidential candidates in the period 1960-1980 portray the past as superior to the present. Also, for the conservative presidential candidates, it is not only the American values that need to be preserved but an emphasis is put on the idea of peace in the world. As emphasized by Reagan, the national security is conditioned by peace in the world:

*“We cannot buy our security, our freedom from the threat of the bomb by committing an immorality so great as saying to a billion now in slavery behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>144</sup>*

The justification for combatting Communism is based on the imperative to do what is morally right, presenting the United States as the country that can bring peace to the world, often juxtaposing war and peace.

In the period 2011-2020, the dichotomy between war and peace can no longer be found as the conservative context predominantly shifts inward and reflects the prioritization of problems faced solely by the country, rather than on the obligation to uphold moral principles in the world. The threat mentioned by the conservative political candidates intensifies because, in their speeches, they do not focus only on a single threat. Instead, they address many threats that are challenging American values from out and within. Externally and internally, the country is threatened by “high-risk refugees,”<sup>145</sup> “ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs,”<sup>146</sup> as well

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<sup>142</sup> Barry Goldwater, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination,"

<sup>143</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Chicago," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/256651>.

<sup>144</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address on Behalf of Senator Barry Goldwater: 'A Time for Choosing,'"

<sup>145</sup> Rand Paul, "Sen. Rand Paul Introduces Legislation to Secure the Homeland," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/316651>.

<sup>146</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Inaugural Address," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/320188>.

as druggies, drug dealers, rapists and killers are coming across the southern border.”<sup>147</sup> Other descriptions of immigrants include “terrorists”<sup>148</sup> and “violent Jihadists,”<sup>149</sup> who “are intent on replacing moderate Islamic governments with a Caliphate.”<sup>150</sup> The speakers employ an interpretation that aims to change the public perception to the idea that immigrants will change our society’s values and that American liberties are at stake. Paul says “As president, I will do everything I can to guard America and the ideals upon which our nation was founded,”<sup>151</sup> creating a sense of urgency that Americans are in fact in danger.

This topic is most prominent in Trump’s speech, who often talks about the threat coming from Mexico with illegal immigrants, giving identity “through reference to something it is not”<sup>152</sup> when he portrays them as drug dealers, killers, implying that we (Americans) are not. Paul also creates this distinction with “innocent Americans.”<sup>153</sup> The inherent idea is that this problem could be resolved by building a strong border. In their speeches, conservative presidential candidates pledge to protect and secure the borders or change the immigration system to one that “puts America first”<sup>154</sup> or “defend America from these haters of mankind.” An example of this is Trump’s statement, which promises to change the status of immigration processes in order to ensure the conservation of the current values and conditions of American citizens.

*“We will have strong borders. And I’ve said for years, without borders we don’t have a country. Don’t have a country. Strike down terrorists who threaten our people, and keep America out of endless and costly foreign wars.”*<sup>155</sup>

By attacking existing processes, the speakers seek to achieve an institutional reshaping that targets fundamental principles and procedures in demand of change. While usually

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<sup>147</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Tweets of June 20, 2015," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/346650>.

<sup>148</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/342196>.

<sup>149</sup> Mitt Romney, "Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, DC," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/277832>.

<sup>150</sup> Mitt Romney, "Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, DC,"

<sup>151</sup> Rand Paul, "Rand Paul Campaign Press Release - The Party of Tomorrow," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/316666>.

<sup>152</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 6.

<sup>153</sup> Rand Paul, "Rand Paul Campaign Press Release - The Party of Tomorrow," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/316666>.

<sup>154</sup> Ted Cruz, "Remarks to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/317845>.

<sup>155</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/342196>.

defending the status quo, this is an example of conservatives adopting change as a “form of unusual counter-measures.”<sup>156</sup>

The theme of “The threat of the other on national security” has been a prominent and recurring theme in conservative political discourse in both researched periods: 1960-1980 and 2011-2020. The theme is characterized by the articulation of a distinct national identity, which represents the “Self” and a description of various different identities (“the others”) that are perceived as threatening to the “self.” In the period of 1960-1980, the other was solely the threat of Communism, while in the period 2011-2020 faced more intense and multifaceted threats. In comparison to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century rhetoric that was focused on building peace in the world as a morally necessary thing to do, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more inter-centric focusing mostly on the elimination of the threats posed to American citizens, culture and values. The discourse of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservative candidates is strengthened with the purpose of driving an immediate reaction and mobilizing the audience. The proposed solution to build stronger borders and change immigration systems signifies an attempt at institutional reshaping, another element of backlash politics.

## **2.2 Key findings from the comparative analysis**

This thesis compares the conservative rhetoric of 1960–1980 with that of 2011–2020 in order to examine the signs of a conservative backlash in presidential campaign speeches. The thesis, which is based on the Backlash Politics theoretical framework, uses a Critical Discourse Analysis to explain how conservatism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and how it has resurfaced in the 21st century. The thesis uses Critical Discourse Analysis to identify the most prominent themes in conservative political discourse to shed light on current conservative speech and make historical comparisons. Next, it looks at the recurrent themes in conservative presidential candidates' speeches, which are carefully examined to find parallels between the conservative discourse of the 20th and 21st centuries in terms of ten identified themes appearing in the text.

The conservative political discourse of 2011-2020 in the United States mirrors the 1960-1980 mainly in the emphasis on the need to protect individual liberties and opportunities. The American democratic principles, such as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches are all under scrutiny and positioned in opposition to the people.

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<sup>156</sup> Alter and Zürn, "Conceptualizing Backlash Politics." 13.

Importance is placed on limiting the power of government as opposed to individual liberties and progress. The fear of “tyranny” in the form of an overly powerful and uncontrollable government and judicial activism permeates the discourse of 2011-2020 that emphasizes the need to shrink the government and mobilize to protect the freedom of people.

This rhetoric is echoed in reference to the need for a separation of powers, accusing the government judges to employ their own political agenda, instead of the adherence to the constitutional principles. By expressing this in their speech, they purposefully create a sense of urgency about the threat or danger that originates from inside as well as outside that has the ability to restrict people's freedoms.

The audience is invited to “reclaim the government”<sup>157</sup> using the rhetoric that employs a sense of emotions, urgency, nostalgia, and rejection of the dominant narrative and fundamental procedures while emphasizing a common American identity and values that need to be preserved. The emotional nostalgic rhetoric often emphasizes the need to go back to the values of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s referring to the conservative politicians, allowing for a subjective interpretation of the history in order to target the dominant principles of the existing system.

The initial hypothesis that the elements in the speeches of conservative presidential candidates throughout history periodically repeat was true as the study revealed a recurring cyclical phenomenon of the pattern of using elements identified by the Backlash Politics Theory. The patterns observed in the presidential campaign speeches are emotive language with an emphasis on nostalgia, urgency, and resentment, rejections of the dominant script as a form of taboo-breaking, and employment of transformative rhetoric with the aim of institutional reshaping. The parallelism provides evidence that the United States is undergoing a conservative backlash in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **3 Recommendations and Future Research**

#### **3.1 Limitations**

This thesis analyzes a political discourse, specifically statements by conservative presidential candidates in two periods 1960-1980 and 2011-2020. The study primarily

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<sup>157</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Trump Campaign Press Release - DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC. OPED - The Culture of Life," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/314424>.

analyzes press releases and speeches by conservative politicians during their presidential campaigns, representing a rhetorical style directly prepared to present the candidate and their ideas. In other words, the study focuses on the values that the candidate aims to convey to the public. The thesis identifies common themes and topics that most frequently appear in the texts and speeches, finding similarities in thematic focus within conservatism of both researched periods. The discourse analysis involves observing how often politicians refer to certain topics in their campaign statements, along with examining the ways politicians refer to specific subjects, the challenges they highlight, and the significance of these topics in their political campaigns. Conservatism can appear in many forms in society, and this paper focuses solely on the campaign discourse of presidential candidates with the justification that it is observed by many people, therefore, has a high possibility of influence.

The first problematic aspect of the study is the selection of candidates. The definition of conservative candidates is quite broad, encompassing both moderate candidates and those considered truly conservative. This results in a more frequent and unequal selection of conservative presidential candidate's speeches to exemplify specific issues. However, if we take for example, Donald Trump, who criticized for shifting from conservatism to populism after his 2016 victory, it exemplifies the challenge of categorizing candidates within conservatism. Conservatives are divided on this issue as some no longer consider him a conservative, but a populist because he uses conservative "buzzwords" to get voters. Conservative presidential candidates' statements are compared regardless of their level of conservative views. Democratic candidates may also hold conservative views may add another layer of complexity to the discourse of conservatism that is not included in the thesis.

In addition, the researched presidential candidates are not extensively introduced because the author presupposes that the audience is broadly familiar with the history of the United States and the selected presidential candidates. Also, it is also not necessary to describe each candidate because the discourse is analyzed as detached from the person and examined as representative of a broader sense of conservatism, rather than individual political views.

Furthermore, it is necessary to note the absence of female candidates in the research on the rhetoric of conservative presidential candidates. Although women with conservative views ran for the presidency in the Republican primaries in the period from 2011 to 2020, this was not the case in the years 1960 to 1980. Therefore, women were excluded from the study as a comparison of their discourse would not have been possible during the earlier



period. Future research should consider including female candidates, albeit for different political positions.

While one could argue that conservative thinking evolves, making it inappropriate to compare the two periods, such as 1960-1980 and 2011-2020, it is evident that candidates in both eras converge on thematic focus. Conservative candidates from 2011 to 2020 frequently reference presidents from the 1960s to 1980 and their values. It is therefore appropriate to examine whether these values are genuinely shared or merely leveraged for voter support.

Moreover, it should also be mentioned that the thesis does not delve frequently into the topics of discrimination against minorities, race, or sexuality, which are also the basis for a conservative backlash. This is because these themes rarely surface in presidential speeches. In the period from 1960 to 1980, these topics may not have been addressed by the presidents at the time because they could have been unpopular or it raised uncomfortable questions. Therefore, the presidential candidates preferred not to identify with the topic. The absence of discussions on these topics in the speeches may be attributed to the candidates' ability to shape their discourse in the presidential campaign statements according to their desired presentation.

Finally, it is possible that a closer examination of spoken discourse, such as debates, would yield more information on minority issues, including racial and sexual minorities. In the same way, the topic of women's rights does not appear in the discourse of the two studied periods, even in connection with abortion, because conservatives see abortion as a human rights issue, not as a women's rights issue. I believe that Democratic liberal candidates might have explored these topics more extensively and they could have raised more questions. Thus, a comparison of how conservative politicians approach these issues would be intriguing.

The thesis acknowledges that limitations can be found within the selected periods, the selection of candidates, and the absence of discussions on some critical topics associated with conservative discourse in the campaign statements of conservative presidential candidates. These considerations underscore the need for detailed analyses for a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of conservative discourse and the power of presidential candidate discourse.

### **3.2 Areas for further research in the study of conservative discourse**

This section proposes a number of possible directions for further research in the study of

conservative discourse due to the power the politicians hold over the public. There is a need to continue to study the materialization of political discourse in order to hold politicians accountable. In light of this idea, it is appropriate to further scrutinize and compare the discourse with the tangible actions and decisions taken by the candidates, especially in the period 2011-2020. This could include an examination of conservative politicians in Congress, such as an assessment of whether their votes align with their conservative discourse. A closer examination of specific conservative groups within Congress, such as Tea Party members, could provide insights into how political discourse translates into tangible actions. This could add value to the framework of conservative discourse with the discovery of to what extent the discourse is reflective of the ideological commitment and turns into reality, or if it merely serves as a populist tactic to gain votes.

Another avenue for conservative discourse research should involve continuous monitoring of the development of a political environment in America. This includes scrutinizing how the American public is impacted or influenced by the words of conservative politicians and to what extent society adheres to the appeals. In light of the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 attack on the Capitol in Washington D.C., it is imperative to monitor the conservative discourse to identify the elements that evoked a violent public response. In light of the Backlash Politics framework, this approach is crucial in identifying the rhetoric patterns in conservative rhetoric in order to mitigate the degree of strength of a potential conservative wave and prevent further erosion of public trust in the government and the state apparatus, avoiding a further polarization of society.

As a next second option for further research, it would be appropriate to also look and compare the discourse against the real steps or choices that these candidates are making. Alternatively, conservative politicians in Congress, whether they vote on laws in accordance with conservative thinking or take a closer look at conservative groups in Congress, such as the Tea Party members. This could add value to the framework of conservative discourse with the discovery of to what extent the discourse is reflective of the ideological commitment and turns into reality, or if it merely serves as a populist tactic to gain votes.

The thesis focuses exclusively on conservative candidates, therefore, it would be advisable in future research to also explore the differences between conservative candidates and liberal candidates. As conservatism is not solely confined to Republican candidates, another possible direction is to look at the alignments between those politicians who identify as conservative and those who identify as liberal. This approach could reveal are

commonalities in values as well as serve as a representation of societal trends and shifts as evidence of a conservative backlash.

Reconnecting with the theory of backlash politics, the purpose of this thesis was to show the rhetoric that is connected to conservatism, to the rise of conservatism in the United States. The aim of the thesis is to identify speech patterns and elements within the discourse of conservative presidential candidates to understand the factors contributing to the resurgence of conservative values. By uncovering the dynamics of these occurrences, it is possible to formulate strategies to scale back a backlash in the United States.

## Conclusion

The election of Donald Trump reflects the rise of conservatism in the United States in the 21st century and the onset of the so-called Conservative Backlash. Political and ideological backlash is not an isolated phenomenon but is consistent with the historical cycles of conservative and liberal sentiments that we can observe throughout history, which always bring about political transformation. As soon as the tactics used in the conservative backlash discourse appear in the mainstream political discourse, it can be stated that the society goes through a conservative backlash, for example, by using elements that are typical for conservatism, for example, apocalyptic rhetoric, fear of freedom and deep distrust in democracy. To test this claim this thesis uses a structured approach to create a systematic analysis of persistent themes that appear in conservative discourse. Divided into three chapters, the work clarifies the intricacies of the discourse of the conservative presidential campaign using critical discourse analysis

In the first chapter, the thesis sets up a definition of conservative ideology in the United States and to define an understanding of conservative discourse at work. Based on the delineation of the definition of conservatism, the chapter continues by identifying ten dominant themes in conservative discourse that are explored in the thesis. It then conducts an in-depth analysis of the dominant values in conservative political discourse during two distinct periods: 1960-1980 and 2011-2020. In the discourse analysis of politicians' speeches in the period 1960-1980, it emerges that the most frequent topic is "Limited Government," which includes three key aspects: a concern for the government's effectiveness and a call for the return to founding principles, and a fear of an uncontrollably powerful government leading to "tyranny." The second most appealing theme is "Threat of 'the other' on national security" which refers not only to a threat from the outside but also from within in the sense of "anarchy."

The result of the discourse analysis in the years 2011-2020 shows that conservative candidates in this period in most statements emphasize the theme of "Limited Government." Rhetorical patterns include the use of the "us and them" narrative, which implies a lack of trust in the government's intentions and insinuates that the government does not act in the people's best interest. The second most frequent theme is the conservative opposition to abortion revolves around the issue of morality, legality, and the distribution of funding and power, representing the element of taboo-breaking in backlash politics. Each section clarifies results derived from a discourse analysis of campaign statements made by conservative

presidential candidates and examines nuances within the most dominant themes and elements.

The second chapter synthesizes the findings of the discourse analysis and emphasizes the persistent themes that permeate both periods, focusing on the most frequently mentioned values and similarities and differences. These include “Limited Government,” “Separation of Powers,” “Distrust in Government,” and “The Threat of ‘the other’ on national security.” Each section shows commonalities and diversions within both periods. Each theme integrates at least one of the three elements associated with the Backlash Politics framework—emotion and nostalgia, breaking taboos, and challenging the practices and institutions associated with the dominant script. The chapter concludes by summarizing key findings in theoretical frameworks and contributing implications to the ongoing academic discourse.

The third chapter looks ahead and provides recommendations for future research in the field of conservative discourse and acknowledges that limitations can be found within the selected periods, such as the selection of candidates and the absence of discussions on some critical topics associated with conservative discourse in the campaign statements of conservative presidential candidates. This structure serves to reveal the multifaceted layers of the conservative discourse of the presidential campaign and contributes to the wider discussion on conservative backlash, as the conservative rhetoric materializes into tangible actions.

Based on the theoretical framework of Backlash Politics, this thesis contrasts the conservative rhetoric of 1960-1980 with that of 2011-2020. Through critical discourse analysis, it examines recurring themes such as individual liberties, limited government, and national security concerns, shedding light on contemporary conservative rhetoric and drawing parallels with the past. By juxtaposing the two periods, the thesis reveals common elements of conservatism and further points to the intensification of rhetorical patterns in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as defined by Backlash Politics. This research using critical discourse analysis provides valuable insights into the intricacies of American politics. By addressing key questions about mirroring political discourse, the interaction between conservative rhetoric, and explores the similarities and differences between 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century discourse. Identifying conservative resistance contributes to a nuanced understanding of how rhetoric shapes policy, influences voters, and gains political power.

The thesis recommends continuing to monitor conservative discourse against the

actions and choices of candidates so that the discourse reflects ideological commitment and does not serve as mere populism. Future research should also consider examining the differences between conservative and liberal candidates and acknowledge the periodic nature of conservative and liberal sentiments throughout history. This thesis underscores the importance of recognizing the conservative resurgence and contributes to the understanding of its implications for managing the potential challenges and mitigating the power of conservative waves in the current political scene.

## **Shrnutí**

Tato práce na základě teoretického rámce „Backlash Politics“ staví do kontrastu konzervativní rétoriku z let 1960-1980 s rétorikou z let 2011-2020. Prostřednictvím kritické analýzy diskursu zkoumá opakující se témata, jako jsou individuální svobody, omezená vláda a obavy o národní bezpečnost, osvětluje současnou konzervativní rétoriku a ukazuje paralely s minulostí. Postavením těchto dvou období vedle sebe práce odhaluje společné prvky konzervatismu a dále poukazuje na zintenzivnění rétorických vzorců v 21. století, jak je definuje Backlash Politics. Práce je rozdělena do tří kapitol a objasňuje nejdůležitější hodnoty v diskurzu kampaně konzervativních prezidentských kandidátů pomocí kritické analýzy diskursu. Práce se zabývá zrcadlením politického diskursu ve 21. století a zkoumá podobnosti a rozdíly mezi diskurzy 20. a 21. století. Identifikace konzervativní reakce přispívá k pochopení, jak rétorika utváří politiku, ovlivňuje voliče a je prostředkem pro získávání politické moci. Práce doporučuje i nadále sledovat konzervativní diskurz prezidentských kandidátů a politiků, zejména proto, aby fungoval jako kontrola, zda politici odráží ve svých krocích ideologii konzervatismu nebo zda neslouží jako prostředek pro získání hlasů. Budoucí výzkum by měl také zvážit zkoumání rozdílů mezi konzervativními a liberálními kandidáty a potvrdit tak, že se Americká společnost nyní nachází v konzervativní vlně. Tato práce podtrhuje, že je důležité se věnovat tématu konzervativních reakcí, aby došlo k pochopení příčin této reakce pro zmírnění jejich důsledků v rámci konzervativních vln ve Spojených Státech amerických.

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