

**The Platform as an Agenda-Setting Document:  
Constructing Ideal Voters and Rhetorical Communities in Canada and the U.S.**

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By saying what we will do and doing what we say, one step at a time we are moving Canada in a conservative direction. And Canadians are moving with us.

- Stephen Harper, Conservative Party Convention, June 16, 2011

In 2011, the Harper Conservatives earned their first majority government by building on their previous minority government's successes that focused on cultivating voter support using middle class voter issues and stimulus spending during the global economic crisis (Pammett & Dornan, 2011; Bittner & Koop, 2013). Due to the global recession, similar issues were also at the forefront during the American Presidential Election in 2012, where the wealth gap is even greater than in Canada. Shortly after Obama's election win in 2008, the message of hope and change became Wall Street versus Main Street. It is well documented that the top 1% of Americans receives almost 25% of all American income and, as of 2013, has more wealth than the bottom 90%. Canada still has one of the largest stable middle class populations, but the OECD has reported that Canada's income gap growing and is now "among the 10 worst in the developed world" (Warren, 2013). This economic climate has dominated government agendas globally. Research has documented how American political parties share communication and public relations advisors and strategies with their partisan counterparts in Canada, but how does each nation's middle class politics shape the partisan agendas that are presented in the party election platforms crafted by those same cross-border politicos?

Little analysis of the platform as an agenda-setting document has been conducted comparatively for both the recent American and Canadian federal elections. This study analyzes the framing language used in the platforms of those elections to assess their constructions of idealized voting groups and rhetorical communities. Automated Digital Humanities methods are used to identify the dominant issues in each party's platform; such methods as creating digital

concordances and word count frequency analyses have gained acceptance through precedent setting political science research in the past decade (see for example: Andrew, Fournier & Soroka, 2012; Dutil & Ryan, 2013; Dutil, Ryan & Grossignac, 2010; Ryan, 2012). Using digital methods, this analysis demonstrates that both the American and Canadian platforms target the largest voting blocks in their middle class bases through their platform messaging, while limiting rhetoric that constructs idealized regions or minority subject positions. Such insights provide a starting place to track the issues across other digital media and to hold leaders to account in terms of achieving their stated goals.

This paper first summarizes the strategic purposes of the platform and its uses as an agenda setting documents against which policy creation and implementation success can be measured once a party is in power. To that end, the basic method of treating words as data is described, and then its utility is demonstrated by identifying issues in digital object; in this case, the online standard PDF version of each party's platform was analyzed, specifically the national parties of the Conservatives, Liberals, and NDPs' platforms from Canada's 2011 election, and the Democrats and Republicans' in 2012. The aims of this paper are modest in that simply using textual analysis, alongside data visualization techniques (i.e. RéseauLu software), offers scholars a relatively quick and effective means of decoding the kinds of rhetorical strategies parties are using to attract voters, while attempting to maintain their base without alienating them. The partisan strategies identified in the platforms demonstrate what issues, trends, and actors are and are *not* being identified as a part of each rhetorical community and issue network. In this analysis, the middle class family is identified as a dominant idealized community forwarded in each platform.

## I. Research Questions:

1. What purposes do platforms serve in terms of informing the electorate of each party's proposed agenda?
2. Who influences the creation of political platforms?
3. Which actors and key issues are mentioned frequently in each platform to support the party's objectives of attracting voters through issues?
4. How are platforms created by each party to achieve a balance of appealing to their party supporters while attracting new voters in terms of issue networks?

## II. Summaries of American and Canadian Party Political Platform Development

The conventional wisdom is that platforms are used to excite and entice party activists with symbolic gestures that have little substantive consequences for policy or elections. We argue that both parties and groups view platforms with a utilitarian eye. As vote maximizers, parties use platform to motivate activists to vote and mobilize on behalf of the party. (Reinhardt & Victor, 2012: 2)

Partisan ideology marries practical electoral messaging within each new election platform as the influence of branding, ideology, internal party politics, financial resources, brokered support from pressure groups, and external public interests are crafted into words to strategically guide the party and simultaneously attract voters (Bittner & Koop, 2013; Marland, Giasson & Lees-Marshment, 2012; Young & Jansen, 2011). Political communication and marketing literature has described models and means for tracking and monitoring many aspects of voter political behavior that affect the platform's design, with some analyses actually dismissing the impact of the platform in terms of swaying voters (Bittner, 2013: 258), while others find the document integral to (i) ensuring democratic civil society stability (CIPE, 2012; Kingdon, 1995), (ii) agenda-setting to maintain government and party cohesion (Marland, 2012), and (iii) shaping the electorate's views of issue ownership (Andrew, Fournier & Soroka, 2013).

In political communication research, the platform is considered in terms of its effects on the campaign and the larger party mandate once in power. Since 1954, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's early work in political opinion and communication research, now described commonly as "Mandate Theory", has inspired much analysis of the link between political parties, policy issues, and democratic choice (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990: 112). The following literature review follows an historical chronology of the platform taken up in mandate theory and agenda-setting research to assess contemporary studies of the party platform.

Clarke's *Absent Mandate* (1984) first identified five dominant narratives that the media use to frame political mandates and explain election wins. The five standard narratives included mandates conferred based on (i) ideology, (ii) leadership, (iii) rejection of a failed government, (iv) generalized voter unrest, and (v) successful campaign strategies. In 1998, Mendelsohn used traditional content analysis methods to track, codify, and analyze Clarke's five standard media narratives for conferring government mandates in the coverage of six different Canadian provincial elections (Mendelsohn, 1998: 243).

Mendelsohn found that if a new leader was facing his or her first election contest, a win would result in the media framing that it as connected to the leader's personal popularity. He also identified that media interpretations for the left and right were different in that social democratic victories were framed as "fortuitous" based on the electorate being restless, while Conservative wins were framed as prospective in that the mandate was deemed "reasonable" by a public seeking stability. Mendelsohn did not follow the agendas of governments after the election periods to understand how their mandate affected their governing style or continued messaging. Overall, the platform's utility was viewed in this type of research as a part of the party's overall

attempts to frame their message and eventual mandates within a single document's consistent narrative. It is viewed as a means of winning the election.

Importantly, Mendelsohn also found in his sample that due to the Canadian news media's "instant analyses" the tendency to impose "timely and coherent narratives on complex events" led to three main outcomes:

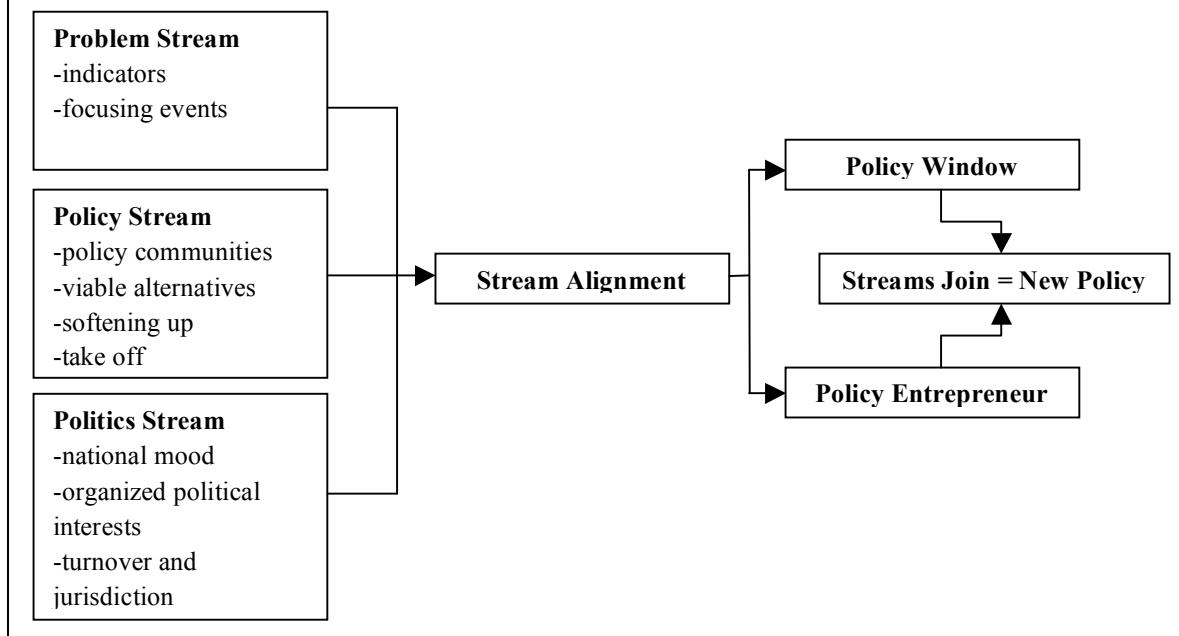
1. The news media usually depoliticized the public sphere by attributing election results to nonideological factors (e.g. leadership, rejection of a failed government, generalized voter unrest, or campaign strategy).
2. The media avoided "objective" criteria such as public opinion surveys to determine the electorate's motivations.
3. The media quickly and almost unanimously settled on one narrative to explain each election result to simplify the task of reporting. (Mendelsohn, 1998: 240)

He argued that because these patterns emerged in the samples of provincial coverage, party strategists' abilities to frame and impose narratives on their agendas were seriously constrained.

Agenda setting studies take a different approach to policy platforms. Kingdon's breakthrough work, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (1984), is one of the last most frequently cited works in the area (Rogers & Dearing, 1993); it focuses solely on American examples. Kingdon's work first linked agenda-setting practices with discussions of policy windows. He described how parties and interest groups contributed to the process of agenda setting by framing the issues to advantage their policies. In effect, government actors use carefully controlled language to adjust "policy windows" to accommodate their slated agendas. Kingdon defined "agenda" as "the list of subjects or problems to which government officials, and people outside the government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time" (Kingdon, 1984: 3). In essence, the agenda-setting process focused attention, which today is of greater importance in a highly media-saturated political environment.

To describe the agenda-setting process, Kingdon identified three sets of variables in agenda setting that he called "streams"—namely (i) problem streams, (ii) policy streams, and (iii) political streams. These three variables interacted to create openings for policy windows that political participants take advantage of to craft and create policy. For example, Tomlin, Hillmer and Hampson (2007) used Kingdon's streams model to explain foreign policy changes over time. Tomlin et al. documented how real world events such as the Cold War changed funding capacity and policies for immigration, national defense, and security over time. They created the following visualization of the "Multiple Streams Model of Policy Making" to present the *evolutionary* nature of Kingdon's model (see Figure 1 below). The model demonstrated how ideas evolve and change over time in the three different streams, and when particular factors in each stream reach a critical alignment, then new policy can be created (or it at least has a higher success rate of being created).

**Figure 1: A Multiple Streams Model of Policy Making (Tomlin et al., 2007: 27)**



In this model, platforms are a key means of establishing partisan agendas to demonstrate “issue ownership”, the practice of differentiating one’s party from its competitors through issues (see for example, Andrew, Fournier & Soroka, 2013; Bélanger & Godbout, 2010; Cochrane, 2010; Soroka, 2002; Soroka & Andrew, 2010). Lakoff’s frames analysis of the U.S. political parties, for example, analyzed partisan issue key words (2004; 2007), describing the Bush Republican’s strategies as representative of messages developed by a scapegoating, fear-mongering, strict, and punishing father figure, while the issue frames depicted in the Democrats’ representative media were that of a nurturing parent.

In 2011, Flynn studied the election platforms in Canada from 1984 to 2008, and compared them to the actions taken by parties while governing to fulfil the election commitments. He followed the platform issues to demonstrate that incumbent majority governments, and even stable minorities, indeed have the capacity to fulfill many of their election platform promises. He found that the parties were unrestrained in their abilities to advance policies through the platform, and therefore, the party's policy-making capacity was fairly advanced in that representative document, especially when they were granted a majority to translate it into policy. In his analysis, platforms are a very important piece of formulating the government's later agenda.

Each party now spends millions of dollars to secure public relations firms and senior pollsters are often the face of authority paid to deal with the media interpretations (or spin) of the polls in the “permanent campaign” news cycle (Adams, 2010; Kozolanka, 2009). In Canada, Adams (2010) noted, for instance, that since the Reform party era, the Conservative party had shared resources with the U.S. Republicans, specifically the consultant Frank Luntz since the 2006 election, to help frame controversial issues like the environment or other social conservative wedge issues. From Howard Dean’s keynote at the Liberals’ 2006 party leadership convention, to the use of cross-border public relations firms, many of the same strategies are used to attract voters in the political messaging of documents like the platform in both the U.S.

and the smaller market of Canada (see for example, Kozolanka, 2009; McDonald, 2010). Best practices are copied and traded, similar to the creation of annual reports in corporate communications.

The amount of spending on communications in the U.S. is unparalleled in politics, but to many Canadians the Conservatives' increased spending has been worrisome, especially the "more than \$23 million over the last two years on media monitoring" of its own members of parliament (Raj, 2013). During the 2008 election, the Conservative party created a massive communication centre in an Ottawa suburb spending "millions upon millions" of campaign dollars to frame and filter their party messages and refine their tactics by using focus groups and polls to understand how their messages would play with key Canadian demographics (McChandales, 2008). In one instance, the Conservatives spent \$76 000 on focus groups to understand how to sell the Afghanistan war to Canadians; the findings recommended that the mission be described as "peacekeeping" and not a "war on terror" using the framing words "hope" and "liberty" to situate the message (Woods, 2007).

This type of "key word" monitoring is the exact methodology used in this paper, and the cross-border strategies identified in the examples above present a need to compare the language in each platform to understand the rhetorical strategies put forth to attract voters and control party messages. There are many structural differences between the U.S. two-party presidential constitutional republic and Canada's multiparty Westminster parliamentary system, including political culture, history, population demographics, and government regions, but due to the two nations' continental shared histories and neighbouring borders, we know some issues are shared, like economic trade, foreign policy, and security.

We can also expect that some national peculiarities will not be shared. For instance, LeDuc et al.'s analysis (2011) significantly demonstrated that a party must lead on three key policy areas in Canada to win an election: (i) the economy, (ii) national unity, and (iii) the social safety net (e.g. education and health care). These issues will be tracked in the following study, though national unity has not been as great an issue in Canada since Harper's Quebec nationhood motion in 2006, and it certainly is not an issue in U.S. LeDuc et al.'s analysis is novel in Canada, as Ryan (2012) found that many academics and journalists alike had described the Liberals and Conservatives' efforts in exerting governance within minority positions in parliament (i.e. Clarkson, 2004; 2005; Johnson, 2006; Kozolanka, 2009; MacKay, 2005; Page, 2006; Pammett & Dornan, 2004, 2006, 2008; Russell, 2008; Wells, 2007), but few beyond Leduc et al. had examined how their efforts in the first steps of governing—that of agenda setting and issue ownership—were in fact very different. That research brought to light how the Liberals, since 2004, had created large unwieldy agendas that did not connect with Canadians, while the Harper Conservatives strictly managed their agenda setting during Canada's third period of sustained minority government, which occurred during the change to the hypermodern media era.

Despite the national differences, some similarities in tactics are also expected. For example, the platform's release date is used to strategize with or against other parties' issues. In Canada, the governing Harper Conservatives released their 2011 platform online and in print form after all of the other parties, two weeks into the campaign, in order to critique their main competitive target, in the Ignatieff-led Liberals (Pammett & Dornan, 2011). Similarly, during the 2012 U.S. election the Republican party released their platforms shortly after the Democrats, so that they could include criticism of the president's proposed agenda.

These types of examples lead to a newer body of research that is still developing in Canada: political marketing (Marland, Giasson & Lees-Marshment, 2012; Bittner and & Koop,

2013). In Marland, Giasson, and Lees-Marshment's edited work *Political Marketing in Canada* (2012), Marland's chapter on "Amateurs versus Professionals" helps answer the basic questions of what a political platform is and what purposes it serves. He describes how the Canadian political parties have professionalized using public relations experts and information technology strategists, comparing changes between the 1993 and 2006 election campaigns. Of the platform, he states:

A handful of partisans write a Canadian political party's election platform. The authors are members of, or report to, the leader's inner circle and emphasize the party membership's ideological preferences but temper these with domestic market intelligence about the electorate and cost estimates of the pledges. The crafting of this important campaign product involves reflecting on ideas generated in policy conventions, much like a publicly traded business considers the concerns expressed at a shareholders' meeting, and its own perceptions of the consumer marketplace. These might be tested using public opinion research. (65)

Marland's work summarizes the role of the platform as being at the core of the political marketing campaign during elections, offering examples from the Liberals' Redbook and the NDP's 16 member platform committee in the 2006 election. His work sides on the importance of the platform for influencing the media and voter expectations during campaigns.

In the U.S., Reinhardt and Victor (2012) had unprecedented access to the Democratic National Committee (DNC) responsible for the party platform creation process. Similar to Marland, they documented how the input of nearly 100 interest groups and individuals were involved in creating the language of the platform, rewarding groups that can mobilize voters with policy statements in the platform. Three factors supported the rewards: (i) interest group resources, (ii) loyalty to the party, and (iii) ideological similarity.

Important for this analysis, Stonecash (2012), among others (Rogers, 2004; Marres & Rogers, 2005), have redefined the political party using 'networks' as the main metaphor for party organization and to understand the relationship between political parties, interest groups, and their policy positions. Specifically, Stonecash states: "The party might best be thought of as a network of actors with policy preferences seeking to influence nominations, strategy, policy emphases, decision-making, and image. All share the goal of pushing the party in a policy direction and winning a majority" (Stonecash, 2012: 29). This network metaphor is important because it allows scholars to track agenda issues through the network.

In the Internet era, the platform is created to be an ideal vision of the network of issues to guide the agenda that a party will implement upon being elected. It is meant to differentiate each party from its democratic competitors, with each seeking to build a majority from mainly the undecided voting block who *might* read the document.

Adapting Lakoff's work to the Canadian context, Ryan's analysis (2012) of the minority government period used issue network analysis to demonstrate that the Harper Conservatives developed repetitive framing strategies to stylize their platform to attract voters, repeating the party leader's name and their top issue frames numerous times to develop "strict parent" themes, like accountability and security; these frames resonated in all aspects of their messaging (i.e. social media, throne speeches, and media coverage). The lengthy Liberal platforms instead read like Lakoff's nurturing, guiding, all-knowing protective guardian, trying to cover multiple agenda issues in detail, but fell short of conveying a clear message to voters. For example, in

2004, Martin attempted to get out in front of the Sponsorship Program scandal by creating a “democratic deficit” strategy, but the frame was not enough to return a majority government while the Gomery Commission was still investigating the issue. Similarly, in 2008, the new Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion’s attempt at a “Green Shift” frame simply did not resonate with Canadians as one of the top national issues, and the Conservatives used the issue to frame Dion as a weak leader.

In contrast, Bittner and Koop’s edited work *Parties, Elections, and the Future of Canadian Politics* (2013) offers some conflicting views of the utilitarian view of the platform. In her chapter “Coping with Political Flux”, Bittner states:

Some have suggested that in the absence of detailed information, voters are able to use tools around them in order to come to a decision [...], while others have argued that, cognitively, we do not need to have detailed information about things like party platforms or issues stances in order to make decisions because our brains process information in such a way that we use shortcuts or heuristics to make our political decisions anyway. (258)

This information offered credence to her study of voter views of party leaders and party brands, demonstrating that voters require familiarity with a party leader to be swayed to vote for a party, otherwise they have difficulty “orienting themselves in the political landscape” (279).

In a somewhat contradictory finding, Koop and Bittner’s last chapter “Parties and Elections after 2011” demonstrates the importance of platforms in changing the spectrum of ideological rhetoric in campaigns. Their study uses the invaluable Comparative Manifestos Project, started in 2010, to analyze partisan differences of standardized indices of platform issues. They found that “Harper’s argument that Conservatives are pulling the terms of Canadian political debate towards them – toward the right – should be taken seriously” (Bittner & Koop, 2013: 323), because the Canadian indices have moved to the further right with the 2011 than even during Mulroney’s Progressive Conservative government in the 1990s.

None of these works directly compare the American and Canadian platforms. This project looks at the platform as a rhetorical construct created to simultaneously attract and construct idealized voters that could be swayed by a party’s vision of its elected agenda. The analysis links agenda setting and framing literature through the critical work of “issue networks” taken from political communication research (see: Rogers, 2004; Marres & Rogers, 2005; 2008). Following from issue network theory, the rhetoric in the platform creates a list of keywords, goals, issues, and actors identified as acceptable and recognized by the party. The keywords can be followed using digital methods to track them in digital objects that represent parts of the policy streams identified by Kingdon. When we treat words as data, we have direct access to assessing digital objects messages without a filter, not as in a content analysis that recodifies words and phrases to preselected categories, which may not capture new issues developing in the political or problem streams.

### **III. Methodology: Linking Agenda Setting and Frames Analysis through Issue Networks**

The “issue network” methodology used in this paper builds on work by Marres and Rogers (2005; 2008), among others (e.g. Dutil & Ryan, 2013; Dutil, Ryan & Grossignac, 2010; Elmer, Langlois, Devereaux, Ryan, McKelvey, Redden & Curlew, 2009; Elmer, Ryan, Devereaux, Langlois, McKelvey & Redden, 2007; Elmer, Skinner & Devereaux, 2006; Rockwell, 2005; Rogers, 2004; Ryan, 2012). These works take advantage of the affordances of new digital textual analysis tools and visualization software. Basic textual analysis has become ubiquitous in today’s media, with such applications as word clouds, infographics, or media mentions being automatically and immediately tracked as data objects are posted to the Web.

The method used in this analysis can be summarized as tracking “issue units” (or, words representing issues). The words are counted using automated concordance software to analyze the partisan issues contained in digital objects, in this case the party platforms. This analysis used the freely available HyperPo and Voyeur software applications (see: <http://voyeurtools.org/>), housed on the Canadian TAPoR (Textual Analysis Portal, see: <http://www.tapor.ca>). Those tools allowed for descriptive textual analyses of the platforms, rather than a traditional Aristotelian content analysis method; the latter method instead requires the initial steps of categorizing, coding, and classifying information based on the object of research (see for example, Soroka, 2002; Soroka & Andrew, 2010). In other words, this study creates a “bag” of issues by allowing the texts to speak for themselves using newer online tools to track the words as issue units.

Issue salience is measured through the highest raw frequency values representing the most frequent issues in a set of issues:  $\{x_i, x_{ii}, x_{iii}, \dots\}$ . The top salient issues were selected and tracked to create a basket of issues by the fact they are the top issues in each partisan document, created by the political parties themselves. Using this method, the issues words from political documents in the selected samples can be plotted in terms of their partisan rise and fall over the selected periods of time. In this case, the issues demonstrate differences between the political parties between two different political systems (i.e. Canada and the United States). To make the comparison timely, the scope was limited to the two most recent federal campaigns and, in Canada, to the three national political parties that could form government.

[**NOTE:** Parts of this methodology have been excised in preparation for publication.]

By way of example, the method can be demonstrated quickly and easily by viewing Table 1 below. Simple word counts for the most frequently used words in the three Canadian English-speaking political party platforms during the 2011 election are presented in Table 1.

If we assume the parties are not trying to bury their key platform messages, following best practices in political communication, then the top repetitive frames and agenda issues they are espousing can quickly be identified in data samples of pertinent informational objects. The method allows researchers to document and record the prevalence of the top key issues selected by each political party, through either tracking single words, couplets, or repeating phrases (see

Table 1 below). The method can also be used in other digital documents to start to track the same words, including the repetitive uses of rhetoric in Throne Speeches, the media, public administration reports, or *Hansard*, to understand which linguistic frames dominated the discourse (see for example, Dutil & Ryan, 2013; Ryan, 2012).

Other interesting exploratory leads can similarly be found in the information in Table 1. For example, the frequency in use of the party brand, the party leader's name, and the key election issues, like a potential "coalition" government, which only the Conservative party's platform discussed, can be compared to see how the party's differentiated their platforms from the competitors, following the voter choice model. Each of these data points represents a framing decision made by party strategists to prepare for the election campaign, and they are analyzed in more detail below. Other tools like polling and electoral results are required to understand what effect such frames had on the public's imagination and to present the clear picture of how framing can be used to set the national agenda, but those methods are beyond the scope of this paper.

Governments continually check with private, public, and non-profit actors (e.g. Banks, Corporations, NGOs, the media, etc.), so it is difficult to reduce complex events to one cause based on rhetoric captured in documents, let alone to create predictive models of irrational shifts in markets or public sentiment. As Rogers (2004) argued, each issue brings together actors in dynamic ways, with complex implications; one day's topical issue could be off the agenda if a new issue is sensationalized in the media, or comes to be pushed by a majority of influential actors. At best, the issue network method can describe the data captured at a particular point of time to provide historical evidence, and from data sets analyzed over time, establish trends upon which to make the best decisions.

The method has been used elsewhere in "issue network" tracking, where a rhetorical term like "environmentalism," "election," or "gun control" is used to identify actors in association to one another in a stable object of investigation (e.g. hyperlinks, web pages, or databases). Private firms like Nexology in Canada and Morningside Analytics in the U.S. are using similar methods to track online political rhetoric. The members of Ryerson University's Infoscape Research Lab employ similar methods for their research (see for example, the Infoscape Research Lab's "Blogometer" in Elmer et al., 2009). U.S. government spy agencies have also notably developed automated textual analysis software with private sector actors to flag keywords in texts, telephone conversations, and on the Web, to understand possible threats to security (e.g. Gorman, 2009).

Overall, the demonstration of the practical applicability of these types of tools and methods is just a start to standardizing online media monitoring of issues via keywords for academic purposes, from the creation of party platforms through to the end of the media cycle that analyzes policies that have passed and are implemented.

#### **IV. The Canadian Party Platforms 2011**

The Canadian platforms for 2011 demonstrate some unique national characteristics set against the events surrounding a possible coalition government forming in 2008. Since 2006, the Harper Conservatives had led a minority government, battling a Liberal-led opposition. The 2011 Canadian federal election would change that situation, with the Conservatives winning their first majority with 166 seats in the House of Commons, with the new NDP opposition holding 103 seats based on their historic win, and the Liberals being reduced to 34 seats.

The election was called after the new Liberal Party Leader Michael Ignatieff proposed a motion of no confidence on March 25, 2011, based on Speaker of the House of Commons Peter Milliken's two rulings that (i) Bev Oda, then Minister of International Cooperation, and (ii) the Conservative Cabinet were in contempt of parliament, for refusing to meet opposition requests for details of the cost estimates for proposed bills. The House of Commons passed the motion, 156 to 145, agreeing with the committee's conclusions. Prior to the motion all of the opposition parties stated that they would not support the government's budget.

The Michael Ignatieff-led Liberals were the first to release their entire platform on April 3, 2011. Prior to its release, the Liberals began by releasing a plank each day to attract media attention, following the Conservative 2008 strategy; the launch worked well to at first to present the Liberals focus on middle class families versus that of the Conservatives whose main commitment was income-splitting for families with children (Jeffrey, 2011: 65). A poll released the day before the platform launched had indicated that 54% of Canadians would prefer a Liberal/NDP coalition over that of a Conservative majority (Jeffrey, 2011: 66), but the Ignatieff Liberals were attempting to distance themselves from any talk of a coalition government, and the subject was not even mentioned in the platform.

The platform was titled, "Your Family, Your Future, Your Canada" (repeated 37 times throughout the 98 page document, see Table 1 below). Table 1 below identifies the top agenda 'issue units' for all of the Canadian platforms in 2011. The issues are organized by raw frequency alone, listing the word counts taken directly from the concordance software. No checks for synonyms have been conducted and 300 common words were removed automatically (i.e. articles, prepositions, and connectives). The issue lists also include longest series of repetitive words. Where pertinent symbols are used to designate words that were chosen as examples of key trends; these issues appear later in the lists, represented by the asterisk "\*" symbol. The right arrow ">" symbol designates one of the key ownership issues required to win an election in Canada (i.e. the economy, education, and health care, see Leduc et al., 2011).

The Liberal strategy attempted to build off of economic recessions concern for the middle class, specifically middle-class families (mentioned 9 times, with "family" mentioned 68 times). The platform did not attack Harper consistently; he was only mention 12 times), as the Liberals were attempting to focus on positive Liberal priorities to contrast with the Conservatives' negative attacks. The platform did not even mention Jack Layton and NDP.

**Table 1: Top Issue Units in the 2011 Canadian Platforms**

Conservatives		Liberals		NDP	
Pages: 67 Words (Tokens): 22444 Unique (Types): 2871		Pages: 98 Words (Tokens): 15881 Unique (Types): 6382		Pages: 28 Words (Tokens): 6556 Unique (Types): 1625	
Issue	Frequency	Issue	Frequency	Issue	Frequency
we will	152	liberal	90	tax	33
tax	127	family	68	new democrats	33
jobs	112	www.liberal.ca	41	work	31
stephen harper's government	84	families	39	family	29
communities	73	your family your future your canada	37	energy	22
families	64	>economy	36	home	21
coalition	61	liberal government	30	provinces	19
ignatieff	59	a liberal government will	24	support	19
ignatieff led coalition	53	>education	18	credit	15
tax credit	48	clean resources	17	benefit	14
businesses	47	family care	17	rights	14
create jobs	40	leadership	17	development	14
research	39	tax credit	17	fund	13
infrastructure	38	*oil	13	members	13
children	35	*harper	12	costs	13
stephen harper	31	*aboriginal	10	benefits	13
workers	31	*equal opportunity	10	insurance	12
crime	26	>health care	10	programs	12
farmers	25	bringing canadians together	9	act	12
>economy	24	middle-class families	9	child	12
seniors	23	*climate change	8	employment	12

**Table 1: Top Issue Units in the 2011 Canadian Platforms (Continued)**

Conservatives		Liberals		NDP	
stephen harper's government has taken action	22	harper government	7	doctors	11
>education	21	*China	5	food	11
recession	21	*poverty	5	investment	11
environment	20	*women	5	aboriginal	11
accountability	19	*India	4	services	10
students	19	*michael ignatieff	4	change	10
terrorism	18	*conservative	3	jobs	10
women	18	*stimulus	3	access	10
youth	18	*jets	2	>education	9
a re-elected stephen harper government will	17	*afghanistan	1	*poverty	7
*aboriginal	17	*CBC	1	>economy	6
*veterans	17	*debt	1	>health care	6
*long-gun	12	*gun	1	*women	5
*liberal government	11	*senate	1	*harper	4
*action plan	10	*action plan	0	*action plan	3
*ndp	9	*coalition	0	*afghanistan	3
>health care	9	*layton	0	*jack layton	3
*afghanistan	8	*NDP	0	*senate	3
*China	6			*stimulus	3
*guns	6			*oil	2
*senate reform	6			*CBC	1
*India	4			*debt	1
*debt	4			*Liberal Party of Canada	1
*stimulus	3			*China	0
*poverty	2			*coalition	0
*oil	0			*guns	0
*CBC	0			*Ignatieff	0
				*India	0

**NOTE:** The relative frequency can be calculated as a coefficient using the following formula:  $[x_i = \sum i / n]$ .  
The arrow “>” symbol designates one of the key ownership issues required to win an election (i.e. the economy, education, and health care). The asterisk “\*” symbol represents an issue the researcher selected to track beyond the top issues in each platform.

This failure in strategy links to Jack Layton's later famous 2011 television debate quip about "Liberal entitlement", when Ignatieff openly assumed that the NDP would never form the government or the opposition. The one main notably media attack on the Conservatives "Jets, mega-prisons, and corporate gifts" was only mentioned twice in the platform, at the start and the finish.

In comparison to the Conservatives, the Ignatieff Liberals did not learn from their past mistakes and clearly focused on too many issues to differentiate themselves uniquely from the Conservatives and NDP. Some may remember how the Harper Conservatives created an attack advertisement in the 2006 election campaign that was based on a proclamation that Liberal Leader Paul Martin had previously stated, "If you have 40 priorities, you don't have any" (Wells, 2007, p. 211). In the ad, the Conservatives added a list of fifty-six subjects Martin had discussed as being included on the Liberal agenda underneath the quote to illustrate Martin's point. This critical point could be considered lost on the Ignatieff team as well due to the lack of specific ideas, while in contrast the Conservative platforms continued to basically follow the strict format of limiting their agenda that began with their 2006 Five Priorities platform, following the Newt Gingrich "Contract With America" model that clearly stated his agenda so his competition could not create wild stories or media frames that would detract from the Republican's campaign.

The 2011 Harper Conservatives' platform was titled "Here For Canada" and was 67 pages in length. It was launched on April 8, 2011, two weeks into the campaign, "too late to have any significant impact on the overall campaign dynamics" (Ellis & Woolstencraft, 2011: 30). The platform focused on five consistent Conservative themes that had been developed over the past few elections: (i) creating jobs, through training, trade, and low taxes; (ii) supporting families, through voter gifts like their Family Tax Cut, and more support for seniors and caregivers; (iii) eliminating the deficit by 2014-15, by controlling spending and cutting waste; (iv) being tough on crime: new laws to protect children and the elderly; and (v) focusing on security issues, like human smuggling and strengthening the Canadian Armed Forces. The platform also openly attacked the Ignatieff Liberals and the failed coalition government throughout.

Thematically the platform repeated and improved upon the successes of their 2006 platform in that it focused on those few repetitive agenda items to present their issue ownership strengths: keeping taxes low, creating jobs, and continuing their Economic Action Plan—basically repeating their last budget. The platform also targeted the opposition as "coalition" partners, attempting to stoke fears of government instability under their leadership, doing so to shore up its base and attract likeminded Canadians who supported their frame. Notably, the Conservative platform talked about all families, but completely avoided using the term "middle class"; instead they preferred the term "middle-income" (used twice), when they did qualify the term family. Notably, in Table 1, current hot topic issues like senate reform (mentioned 6 times) are either buried, or in the case of the changes to the CBC's negotiating framework, are not even mentioned, which demonstrates the ability to monitor the origination of key issues in data objects (in this case the provision was in the 2013 budget, not the platform).

The Jack Layton NDP platform was, like the Liberals', also focused on middle class families, titled "Giving Your Family a Break". It was released last of the platforms on April 11, 2011 and was a mere 28 pages. McGrane explained that the party's platform strategy was an attempt "to make incremental gains by targeting Layton Liberals through a market following strategy called 'copying', which entails replicating other products on the market with just enough differentiation to make a company's brand distinctive" (McGrane, 2011: 80). The platform opened with the frame, "For too long Ottawa has focused on the priorities of the well-connected" (NDP, 2011), going on to champion five priorities, like the Conservatives' strategy, with the exception that they focused on the centre-left: "hire more doctors and nurses, strengthen your pension, kick-start job creation, helpout your family budget, and fix Ottawa for good."

The NDP's document was unique in that it focused on explaining the party's main issues, without becoming negative about its perceived competition. The selected language of its top issues was also different from its competitors. For example, the document mentioned Harper only 4 times and ignored the Liberals completely, instead once again trumping Jack Layton as the next prime minister, building on the success of that tactic started in the 2008 campaign (Ryan, 2012). Notably though, the document only mentioned Layton's name three times (as compared to the 62 times in 2008).

Among all of the Canadian platforms, we can note some party specific choices on topical issues that have arisen since 2011, like the Conservatives' focus on abolishing the long-gun registry (with 12 mentions), while the Liberals stayed away from the issue, stating instead that they would work on "improving the long-gun registry" (1 mention), and the NDP completely avoided talking about the issue. Similarly, the stimulus package language that the Conservatives framed as "Canada's Action Plan" was only used by the Conservatives. The stimulus was widely viewed as a success, so the opposition parties avoided discussion of the topic, choosing to frame instead how they held the Conservatives to account in terms of passing the stimulus spending in 2009. These observations help demonstrate the utility of simple textual analysis techniques to supplement other analyses of the Canadian platforms, but the power of the data will be given even more credence in comparison to the American platforms.

## V. The American Party Platforms 2012

The word 'climate', in fact, appears in the current President's strategy more often than Al Qaeda, nuclear proliferation, radical Islam, or weapons of mass destruction. The phrase 'global war on terror' does not appear at all [...].

- The Republican Platform, 2012

There is no doubt that public relations professionals and party operatives comb over each platform in detail using new textual analysis techniques, as evidenced by such statements like the one above, from the 2012 Republican platform. The monstrous amount of party spending

purchases nuanced analyses of the election race, but as Karl Rove famously lamented during the Republican presidential loss in 2012, it is unclear how effective the spending is. Reinhardt and Victor describe how a two-party system lends itself to the platforms being positioned to “capture the person whose vote ensure greater than 50% of the electorate” (Reinhardt & Victor, 2012: 10); this creates a race to the middle. The complexity of platform creation, however, can change the character of the voting coalition based on a single word, as evidenced by the controversial DNC vote on September 5, 2012, to reinstate language from its 2008 platform concerning God and Jerusalem: “we need a government that stands up for the hopes, values and interests of working people and gives everyone willing to work hard the chance to make the most of their God-given potential” and of Jerusalem, “it is and will remain the capital of Israel.”

The GOP’s 62 page platform, “We Believe in America”, was released on August 21, 2012, in preparation for the Republican convention and formal nomination of Mitt Romney. Table 2 identifies the top issue units in the 2012 U.S. party platforms (see below). The GOP’s platform differed clearly from the Democrats in terms of social conservative issues like “abortion” (17 mentions), “same-sex” marriages (4 uses), and the framing language on controversial issues like “Obamacare” (8 mentions) and “immigrant labour” (2 uses). “Families” is a top key word (42 mentions), but the platform only uses the term “middle class” twice.

Interestingly, presidential candidate Mitt Romney and vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan were discussed only once each, early in the document, where they were highlighted as the individuals who have the character and values emblematic of the Republican party. Instead of a focus on the leaders, the repetitive framework that is used in the document is to define the party brand as different from the “current administration” (26 mentions), rarely mentioning Obama by name.

The Democrats’ platform “Moving America Forward” came out on September 3, 2012, in the lead up to the party convention and formal nomination of the incumbent president, Barack Obama. The document’s introduction clearly outlined the focus on the middle class, while targeting Romney:

We Democrats offer America the opportunity to move our country forward by creating an economy built to last and built from the middle out. Mitt Romney and the Republican Party have a drastically different vision. They still believe the best way to grow the economy is from the top down – the same approach that benefited the wealthy few but crashed the economy and crushed the middle class.

Like the use of the term “middle class” (42 times), the prioritized differences in Table 2 between the two parties could not be clearer for issues like climate change, same-sex marriage, faith, or abortion. Take for example the Democrats “same-sex couples” language versus the Republican platform language that argues that marriage is a sacred trust between a man and a woman that must be protected. The Republicans used that logic to support statements to uphold the Defense of Marriage Act: “Congressional Republicans took the lead in enacting the Defense of Marriage Act, affirming the right of States and the federal government not to recognize same-sex relationships licensed in other jurisdictions.”

**Table 2: Top Issue Units in the 2012 U.S. Platforms**

Democrats		Republicans	
<b>Pages: 32</b> <b>Words (Tokens): 26623</b> <b>Unique (Types): 3653</b>		<b>Pages: 62</b> <b>Words (Tokens): 33096</b> <b>Unique (Types): 5919</b>	
Issue	Frequency	Issue	Frequency
president	211	republican	109
obama	133	republican platform	56
president obama	116	security	53
democrats	88	energy	52
jobs	77	military	50
health	71	president	46
security	69	jobs	45
administration	68	tax	45
will continue to	62	families	42
>economy	61	>healthcare	37
families	56	>economy	36
tax	55	freedom	36
the united states	50	the united states	32
the democratic party	48	>education	31
we will continue to	44	*children	29
energy	42	the current administration	26
middle class	42	national security	21
>education	40	faith	19
women	39	abortion	17
nuclear	37	*war	17
workers	37	*women	17
businesses	36	*workers	17
military	30	the private sector	15
veterans	30	*God-given	9
>health care	27	*Obamacare	8
students	26	*immigration	7
war	24	*gun	5
president obama and the democratic party	23	*Iraq	5
republicans	20	*Iran	5
*Afghanistan	18	*poverty	5
*climate change	18	*Afghanistan	4
*Al-Qaeda	17	*Al Qaeda	4
*Iran	14	*North Korea	4
*children	17	*same-sex	4
*mitt romney	17	*God	3
*Iraq	15	*climate	2
*immigration	13	*middle class	2

**Table 2: Top Issue Units in the 2012 U.S. Platforms (Continued)**

Democrats		Republicans	
Issue	Frequency	Issue	Frequency
*North Korea	8	*September 11	1
*September 11	4	*climate change	1
*osama bin laden	3	*mitt romney	1
*same-sex couples	3	*paul ryan	1
*abortion	2	*joe biden	1
*barack	2	*obama	1
*gun	2	*barack	0
*God-given	1	*Benghazi	0
*Guantánamo Bay	1	*Guantánamo Bay	0
*joe biden	1	*osama bin laden	0
*Benghazi	0		
*God	0		

In contrast, the Democrats argued for marriage equality:

We support marriage equality and support the movement to secure equal treatment under law for same-sex couples. We also support the freedom of churches and religious entities to decide how to administer marriage as a religious sacrament without government interference. We oppose discriminatory federal and state constitutional amendments and other attempts to deny equal protection of the laws to committed same-sex couples who seek the same respect and responsibilities as other married couples. We support the full repeal of the so-called Defense of Marriage Act and the passage of the Respect for Marriage Act.

These differences demonstrate how language is used to create clear options for voters. As well, like the Canadian platforms, using textual analysis helped to identify how current hot topic issues were not yet on the agenda, as both parties did not make major statements about the Benghazi attack (occurred on September 11, 2012), gun control (a major post election issue), or Guantánamo Bay (an on-going issue). These choices reflect the unique U.S.'s unique political climate, which can now be compared to the Canadian data set in terms of its rhetorical constructions.

## VI. Comparing the American and Canadian Platforms: Visualizing Issue Networks

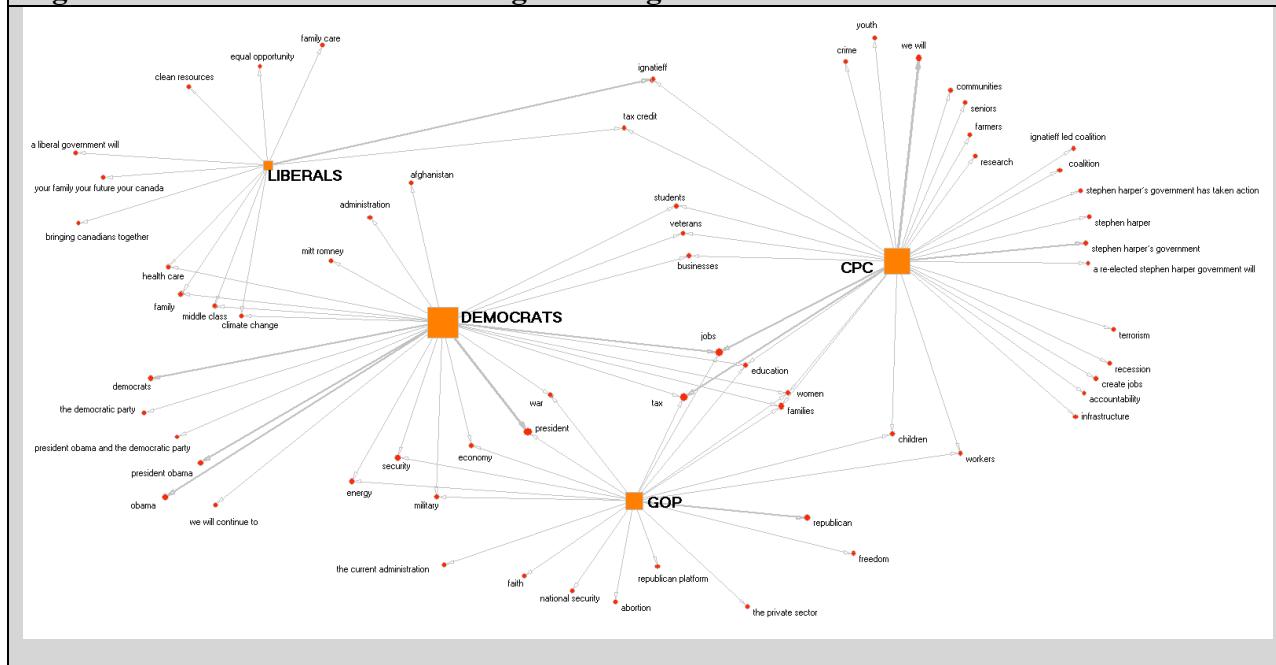
There are some very clear differences made visible through comparing the American and Canadian rhetorical strategies. The Canadian platforms did not mention God, Al Qaeda, or September 11, 2001; also issues such as abortion and same sex marriage had completely fallen

off the Canadian agendas in 2011. These differences can be more readily highlighted through the relational mapping, or visualization, of the issue networks.

Relational network maps have proved useful in revealing patterns among issue networks and their representative actors. In Figure 2 below, the RéseauLu software plots the top key issue words from each platform drawn from the same tabular data as above, but instead produces two-dimensional relational maps based on an algorithm of the linkages among the top issues for each party platform. The larger party nodes indicate where there are more links, or in this case shared words, among the issue networks. The lengths of the lines do not have any significance, and they are adjusted manually by researchers to improve the visualization.

RéseauLu reveals the top framing issues in each platform and illustrates the relations (or families) between each party. The notable exception is Figure 2 is the NDP, which did not have enough issue linkages to even appear in the visualization, which again reflects the unique language in its platform and its ideological difference from the other parties. The main keywords common among the top issues are in the center of visualization, and those words are not surprisingly “education,” “families,” “jobs,” and “tax.” Figure 2 highlights the ideological similarity between the Democrats and Liberals, as well as the Republicans and the Harper Conservatives’ platforms by clustering those parties together. This software also demonstrates that the Democrats and the Harper Conservatives had the most linkages in terms of the key issues in the data set, represented by their larger nodes; these distinctions would be a function of the length of their platforms and the number of repetitive top issues used in each.

**Figure 2: Visualization of the Linkages Among Issues in the Platforms**



Looking at the single items at the periphery, differentiations can be found among the themes of the four platforms represented: for instance, the Harper Conservatives focused on their “coalition” government opposition and their brand of “Stephen Harper’s government”, the

Republicans uniquely focused on “faith” and “the current administration”, the Democrats focused on differentiating “President Obama” from Mitt Romney, while the Liberals had the fewest differentiating features from all four parties, attempting to create their distinct brand on messages like “bringing Canadians together” and “equal opportunity”. These obvious differences in the visualization are interesting in that the data of raw frequency word counts, once again, laid bare what other analyses have brought to light, but the affordances of the technology do so in an immediate, automated fashion that can track multiple objects in the policy and media cycles.

## VII. Conclusion

This research demonstrated the power of digital humanities methods and visualizations to present the similarities and differences among partisan platforms, especially the ideological crossover in themes between American and Canadian parties. Exploratory textual analysis delivers direct access to the key actors, issues, and messages in a text, producing data trends that open a text quickly to researchers. The process also provides more questions and patterns to be explored. For instance, why are the top issue units so similar based on ideological lines across borders? Is it due to the limitation of mandate narratives, ideology, political climate, or are similar teams of public relations professionals copying successful memes from other national campaigns and leading nations into similar issue networks? Such questions can be answered by qualitative interviews and other social science methods; however, the aims of this paper were modest in that it hoped to demonstrate the utility of textual analysis in decoding platform language.

From a communications perspective, issue units were demonstrated as the key means of differentiating one party from another through their rhetorical variations. Not surprisingly, rhetorical similarities appeared the greatest along the ideological divide in terms of issue units around the middle class when comparing the American and Canadian platforms; however, differences in messaging were also evident in each nation’s unique political climate. For example, the U.S. Republican agenda focused on “abortion,” “faith,” and “freedom” in its vocabulary, which were topics completely ignored in the top issues of the Canadian agendas. Not surprisingly, the parties on the left focused on the middle class, while the right focused more on security issues—but interestingly the data bore these patterns out without manipulation.

Overall, the trend of the nuclear ‘family’ is still being sold as the national ideal in these platforms, with the top issues ignoring regional, state, provincial, ethnic, racial, or other subject position variations that make up these two nations. This evident normative standard in the platforms presents a possible limitation for agenda development; however, the unique success of Canada’s NDP and its 2012 platform could demonstrate opportunities for creating distinct party vocabularies in future campaigns, especially if textual analysis tools are used to target opposition obfuscation and the disapprobation of key demographics, which are the dominant means of avoiding the endorsement of othered communities, outside of the idealized party vision (e.g. subject positions based on gender, race, sexuality, class, etc.), because obviously the modern nuclear family has changed dramatically in both of these nations, matching the political shifts.

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