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SAYING WAY MORE THAN GAY: POLARIZED ADOPTION OF ULTIMATE TERMS IN

U.S. LEGISLATION

SHELBY E. LIMBACH

77 Pages

Due to rampant political polarization in the United States this thesis investigated the role of language in perpetuating opposing ideologies. A critical rhetorical analysis of Florida's House Bill 1557, political rhetoric, and public discourse reveals the contemporary power of ultimate terms. Within the United States terms such as "parental rights" and "Don't Say Gay" operate to further divisive discourses due to their simultaneous perceptions as god and devil terms. In the United States such buzzwords are associated with vastly different valences dependent on individual ideological value systems, which often correlate with one's political affiliations. Existing scholarship on the ideograph was used to guide this study which uncovered current methods of ideological influence in today's hyperpolarized sociopolitical landscape.

KEYWORDS: Ultimate terms; rhetoric; political communication; hyperpolarization; legislation language

SAYING WAY MORE THAN GAY: POLARIZED ADOPTION OF ULTIMATE TERMS IN

U.S. LEGISLATION

SHELBY E. LIMBACH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by the overlapping webs of influence between political science and communication studies. Politicians and the government have always been deeply dependent on and by their ability to communicate for and to their constituents and serve their wants and needs. The very nature of how the United States legal system is set up based on argumentation and precedent makes it so the tenets of communication play a huge role in how the law is shaped and used. Ideally, the law is carefully crafted to walk a delicate line between broad enough to represent a diverse society, but also narrow enough to be implemented and practiced in specific ways. This has led me to want to look at the ways in which language and rhetoric interact in the creation and implementation of legislation. Moreover, for my thesis I wanted to investigate how the nation's increasing levels of polarized and divisive public discourse changes the language employed and rhetorical methods utilized within the creation and practice of law. To do this, I evaluated what I refer to as a circulation of polarized language used within both public discourse and legislation language. By using rhetorical criticism to investigate the circulation of language between legislative/political texts and the everyday, this thesis reveals the ways society is being pushed increasingly to the ideological extremes which puts our democracy and related institutions at risk.

Coming of age alongside rapid technological advancements and increasing polarization had a considerable impact on nearly every domain of my life. This constant incorporation of divisive language becomes increasingly impactful in today's era when it at times feels like nobody can see eye to eye or have simple discussions without the feeling of walking on eggshells. Accordingly, I have chosen to use this study to investigate how polarized legislation debates and bitter public discourse interact and influence each other as we all seek to make sense

of the world around us. To do this effectively, I look to Florida's current legislative and political landscape that is operating as a litmus test regarding the direction of culture wars within the United States. These small state and local battles are tests to judge reactions and determine cultural war outcomes that will eventually be implicated for the entirety of the country.

The Rhetorical Situation

To begin, the parameters of the proposed circulation of language must be established for the purposes of this study. Over the last decade or so, the United States has faced a series of political changes from the contentious 2000 presidential election between Bush and Gore to government shutdowns and economic recessions, and more recently the rise of Trumpism and the increase in polarization, all of which has directly impacted the way in which the political process is viewed and operates. Consequently, the public has both responded to and directly influenced the democratic processes of policy creation and implementation. As political debates over candidates and proposed legislation became progressively hostile and polarized, so has public discourse.

Today the process by which legislation is drafted, debated, and transformed into law is a bit more nuanced than was depicted in *School House Rock* (Frishberg et al., 1976). The United States Constitution Article 1, Section 1 grants the legislative branch – the House of Representatives and the Senate – the power to create, implement, and amend legislation (U.S. Representatives, 2019). While in theory this process ensures smooth interactions between the will of the people and their representatives, in modern practice it can be riddled with the issues of a divided government and divided citizenry. Research has indicated that a divided government (one major party controlling the presidency, while the other holds the majority in one or both chambers of Congress) slows the legislative process down by an average of 60 days or about two

months per piece of legislation and has continued to slow in correlation with the increasing level of political divide (Hughes & Carlson, 2015). Accordingly, in periods when the legislation process stagnates, both public and political discourses become increasingly and bitterly divided. It should be noted that in these periods of stagnation, overall levels of public discontent and distrust in government systems, the press/media, and in other societal structures and institutions increase as well (Brenan, 2022; Hughes & Carlson, 2015; Jones, 2009; Saad, 2012).

In 2014, the Pew Research Center concluded its largest and longest running survey to date finding that Americans were further apart ideologically than ever before (Doherty, 2014). Within the field of political science, this ideological divide is often referred to as polarization, or in extreme cases, hyperpolarization. Scholarship notes that polarization is often characterized by political parties becoming more internally coherent and unified, while externally distancing themselves from opposing parties (Pildes, 2011). As America's political divide continues to spread into a wide range of social disputes, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to determine or find middle ground with their peers. As the middle ground continues to dissipate, individuals can be easily identified by their stances in relation to hyperpolarized debates which also indicates political association (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2006; Pildes, 2011). Further, as individuals become increasingly more ideologically polarized, they also seek out individuals equally as polarized as them (e.g., Republicans associating with only Republicans) while isolating those they perceive as outside of their ideological bounds (Doherty, 2014; Kim & Zhao, 2020; Warner et al., 2020).

Tying this into communication theory, our contemporary hyperpolarized political environment constitutes what Bitzer (1968) identifies as a rhetorical situation. These hyperpolarized debates operate as rhetorical situations which are bound and constrained by the

audiences' (i.e., voters) expectation or need for specific responses from the rhetor (i.e., politicians). Additionally, Vatz (1973) theorized that rhetoric itself can also create this impetus toward the creation of a rhetorical situation. This thesis project utilizes the circulatory nature between increasingly polarized legislation language and public discourse occurring within Florida as a rhetorical situation to be further analyzed to protect democratic institutions. By using both the perspectives of Bitzer (1968) and Vatz (1973), I identify the rhetoric of legislation debates and the selected legislation provide additional exigence within this specific rhetorical situation. This operates in cyclical nature that informs public understanding and creation of legislation. Ideally then both streams of influence would allow divisive ideas to blend for the betterment of democracy; however, the current iterations of the circulation of language showcase how these polar ideals are driving citizens further and further apart. Exigence has traditionally been treated as situation that causes pressure for a rhetor to act in some way, however within this project exigence also operates as an opportunity for rhetor to achieve political goals. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis has used sociopolitical issues surrounding education (e.g., response to the pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement, and concurrent political campaigns) as exigence or opportunities for him to create a rhetorical situation that requires his specific political brand to respond. This allows him and his political party to craft legislation and further spur on exigences in which only the Florida GOP or DeSantis himself have a response to. As a result, House Bill 1557 operates as rhetorical situation that is constrained by precedent and opportunistic exigences – which in turn spur an additional circulation between rhetorical situation(s) and points of exigency.

Florida House Bill 1557

Modern examples of polarization and divisive public discourses are currently impacting members of society and our democratic institutions in negative or harmful ways. Due to the unprecedented last few years in American culture and life (i.e., the pandemic, divisive campaign seasons, and increasing amounts of public distrust in institutions like the judicial and legislative branches), law and scholarship alike have been struggling to keep up and produce work that explains or provides potential solutions to today's issues. This thesis sought to better understand the transactional nature of current sociopolitical discourse by using rhetorical criticism to examine the co-influences or co-creation of meaning occurring within debates relating to Florida House Bill (HB) 1557 "Parental Rights in Education."

Florida is uniquely situated at the center of ideological and cultural wars happening within the United States presently. Current sociopolitical debates within Florida include a focus on discussions of sexual orientation within public school classrooms, electoral politics, and a rise in interrelated controversial sociopolitical debates. There are three main influences I can identify as potential origin points indicting how the circulation of hyperpolarized language surrounding HB 1557 has been launched into both the political and public arenas. By looking at response to the pandemic within the education system, response to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and current political campaigns, the pertinent contextualization for this bill can be evaluated. Subsequently, by pinpointing HB 1557 as a response to these specific elements of context allows my thesis to begin to lay out and examine just one exemplar iteration of the circulation of hyperpolarization occurring in contemporary legislative and public discourses.

Response to the Pandemic

Over the last few years, there has been increasing amounts of attention and scrutiny paid to the American public school system. Schools have become a centralized location for students and community members to receive not only an education, but also access to essential resources such as food, shelter, childcare, mental health advocacy, and more. However, this transition has placed additional burdens onto teachers by forcing them to work outside of their contractual hours and expectations to meet the rising needs of their surrounding communities. These compounding issues came to a head during the pandemic as in-person instruction and the ability to physically go to schools became increasingly unsafe or unavailable. These issues were especially prevalent in lower-income socioeconomic areas that struggled to then meet the technological and practical needs of home eLearning (Platzer & Freireich, 2021).

As children were sent home to have class online, the fail-safes schools provided in terms of meals, shelter, and child-care began to fall apart. Parents in many cases were forced to be more engaged or hands-on regarding their children's schooling due to COVID-19 related shutdowns and remote work. This increasing involvement and new proximity to their children's education created more awareness of content and lessons being covered within K-12 classes (Iyengar, 2021; Klein, 2021). Meanwhile, teachers were struggling to walk the line between state mandated content, supporting student development, and answering questions regarding ongoing social upheaval occurring within American society without further aggravating concerns (Price et al., 2021). As parental concern mounted, the school boards and local governments were forced to host public meetings and adequately respond to their communities on a variety of different fronts from masking to eLearning. This then left teachers, parents, and community members grappling with questions regarding what should be discussed in classrooms versus at home,

while still overcoming issues of underfunding and eLearning (Adams et al., 2021; Platzer & Freireich, 2021). These questions opened myriad opportunities for politicians to begin advocating for restrictive legislative avenues aiming at limiting classroom content and protecting parental authority.

Response to the Black Lives Matter Movement

Alongside the pandemic, the summer of 2020 was defined by civil unrest in response to the murder of George Floyd by police officers and related protests surrounding the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. As the country was grappling with the topic of racial injustice, these discussions seeped into classrooms as students and teachers alike sought to find meaning in the very publicly discussed, viewed, and protested deaths of Black individuals at the hands of police (Kingkade, 2020). As this was occurring Republican strategist Sarah Longwell reported seeing a spike in discussions regarding critical race theory (CRT) within focus groups from across the country (The Economist, 2022). This sudden spark of interest is exemplified within Fox News coverage which was found to have said CRT no less than 1,300 times within a four-month span (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Specifically, contemporary discussions regarding CRT center around its adoption into K-12 classrooms and if it operated as "cult indoctrination" or espoused "anti-American" beliefs (Meckler & Dawsey, 2021; Wallace-Wells, 2021).

Originating research pulling CRT into educational spaces was put forward by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) who argued that within the United States "the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity" (p. 48). Moreover, Crenshaw (2011) defines CRT as a theory that is "dynamically constituted by a series of contestations and convergences pertaining to the ways racial power is understood and articulated" (p. 1261). Thus, the adoption of CRT content (or

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CRT related content) within educational spaces provides the opportunity for scholars and students to look beyond traditional dominant-hegemonic influences (i.e., the white cis-heteropatriarchy) and into the critical implications of power and equity and their relationship to intersectional identities otherwise not represented (Capper, 2015; Crenshaw, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, in 2020 following the BLM movement, conservative activist Christopher Rufo began tracing the linage of CRT and co-opting it for contemporary conservative ideology's usage. Wallace-Wells (2021) overviewed several of Rufo's writings finding that through this new conceptualization "the phrase 'critical race theory' connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American" beliefs that the conservative party could use to further demonize opposing ideologies (i.e., BLM movement or liberals). Following Rufo's contributions, the appearance of CRT related debates only increased as other conservative think-tanks began advocating for legislation banning CRT starting within individual school districts and echoing all the way up to the Oval Office with demands for an executive order banning CRT nationwide (The Economist, 2022).

It remains unclear if schools have been implementing actual elements of CRT or if they are just incorporating progressive ideals to respond to changes in demographics and current social issues. Regardless, both sides of the political aisle have co-opted the original intent behind the 1970's legal theory and are now using it as a political battering ram. Upwards of 42 states have now passed some sort of restriction or ban on CRT-related language being taught in classrooms or at the workplace, including South Dakota where a ban took just five days to pass (The Economist, 2022). This ongoing political battle regarding discussions of race and classroom content began to transform and laid the groundwork for additional discourse regarding gender and sexual orientation which are now also being legislated against. Additionally, for the purposes

of this thesis, these CRT debates operate as the precedent which the exemplar HB 1557's circulation of language builds upon. Opponents of CRT in the classroom (following Rufo's conceptualization of CRT) have begun to uphold CRT as a devil term representing anti-American sentiments, while those who encourage the teaching of CRT perceive it as a god-term that represents inclusion and progress. The ability of CRT to operate as a god and a devil term concurrently highlights how sociopolitical discourses are encouraging hyperpolarization by latching onto specific phrases and using them to further divide individuals ideologically based upon perceptions of those phrases.

Response to Political Campaigns

The 2020 and 2022 election seasons within the United States exacerbated already bitter tensions. On a national level, this divide has been exemplified in the build up to and fall out from January 6th, 2021, when insurrectionists stormed the United States Capitol under the belief that the 2020 presidential election had been "stolen" and their democratic right to vote had been manipulated (Alemany, 2021). The rhetoric surrounding January 6th however has spread across the nation and has a direct impact on local 2022 midterm elections. Over a hundred Republicans that ran for state-wide offices across the United States continued to support former President Trump and related causes, expressing views downplaying the insurrection, questioning the validity of the election process, or calling for additional audits or voting restrictions going forward (Alemany, 2021; Dimock & Gramlick, 2021).

Additionally, sociopolitical fallout from the 2016 and 2020 election cycles has drastically changed the battleground of a campaign season as citizens of the United States attempt to figure out how to move forward in a post-Trump political landscape. As polarization and post-Truth era of politics continue to push Americans toward ideological extremes, political candidates are

being forced to be increasingly ideological themselves to garner enough attention to have a winning campaign. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in the Florida's 2022 gubernatorial election in which Governor Ron DeSantis was seeking to not only win re-election, but also stir up issues to further differentiate himself from Trump and other Republican candidates with the aim of running in the 2024 presidential election (Druke, 2022). These electoral politics and campaigns cannot be overlooked as they impact what issues citizens are being forced to pay attention to and take issue with. As the election cycle continues to prime voters with ideas regarding classroom content, bills like Florida's HB 1557 and others will continue to be on the forefront of American minds and subsequently easily accessible within social discourses across the country.

Circulation of Language

In a time of increasing levels of polarization and to combat the rise of "fake news," it remains critical to analyze how polarized representatives and legislators either respond to or further aggravate the public's discontent as means to pursue more extreme (or previously unpopular) legislative avenues. I acknowledge that this circulation between a legislator's attention to specific issues and public outrage can be investigated via causal links. However, within this thesis the process of the circulation itself is centered rather than the causality behind how an issue became accessible within the public or legislative realms. Within a representative democracy, legislators remain in power based on if their constituency's view them as capable of addressing their needs and concerns. Conversely, candidates and elected representatives may create or center their campaigns around specific issues that they feel capable of responding to or solving (e.g., agenda-setting in Lau et al., 2021). Subsequently, both public discourse and legislation become sites of polarized language that continually oscillates between and in relation

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to each other. As these processes continually occur over time, the ability to disentangle them for independent study becomes increasingly difficult. For this reason, this thesis will focus explicitly on how this circulation itself operates and impacts the way legislation is viewed and/or implemented within daily American life.

Several pieces of legislation could have been evaluated to display how language is currently circulating within the political and private spheres. As different sociocultural influences continue to impact ideological battles and subsequent identity construction for voters within the United States, it remains crucial to understand how current cycles of rhetorical persuasion are impacting legislation and day-to-day life. By utilizing Florida's House Bill 1557 "Parental Rights in Education," also known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, as a rhetorical artifact demonstrate how public discourse has influenced legislation and, conversely, how legislation impacts public discourse. From the floors of debate to the colloquial discussions surrounding this bill, both legislators and the public have impacted the creation and subsequent (attempts at) implementation of the law. Additionally, to conceptualize this circulation of language, Weaver's (1953) ultimate terms and Burke's (1969) god and devil terms are utilized as theoretical frameworks alongside an ideological criticism lens to showcase how this circulation of language perpetuates the movement toward ideological extremes.

To do this, this thesis will be broken into 5 chapters including this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 will summarize and contextualize existing literature and scholarly works regarding political rhetoric, hyperpolarized identification, ideological and political symbolism, and Weaver's (1953) ultimate terms and Burke's (1969) god/devil term frameworks to support this analysis. Chapter 3 introduced critical rhetorical and ideological criticism as frames needed to evaluate my selected texts relating to Florida's House Bill 1557. Chapter's 2 and 3 operate to

provide the framework needed for chapter 4's analysis of language circulating HB 1557 from the House floor to social media and the impacts this circulation has on current American sociopolitical environments. Finally, chapter 5 concludes with critical implications for how this circulation of language between public and legislative impacts American democratic institutions. Ultimately, the goal of this project was to critically examine one iteration or example of contemporary hyperpolarizing language that is circulating within American sociopolitical spaces to provide a theoretical framework for scholars to engage with to understand the current rhetorical processes by which ideology is influencing audiences.

As these issues continue to play out and the levels of polarization increase it remains imperative that scholarship continues to investigate the ways they are impacting our institutions and society at large. The United States was created with the ideal of working towards creating a more perfect union, which means that it falls upon We the People to continue to evaluate how our representatives, laws, and institutions are operating. As evident by bitter electoral stalemates, social unrest on multiple fronts, and an insurrection, the current functionality of the United States' democracy is not sustainable. This thesis aims to evaluate the circulation of polarized language within both the law and society in order to provide insight into how the current state of the Union is perpetuating the adoption of increasingly extreme ideologies and encouraging division rather than unity.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous scholarship within the realms of communication, political science, and legal studies provides ample context that this thesis builds upon to showcase the rhetorical processes by which hyperpolarization has infiltrated into the day to day, creating a circulation of divisive and bitter language. Within this section, I introduce the pertinent contextual information, operational definitions, and theoretical frameworks used to investigate the circulation between public discourse and the implementation of legislation language. This provides the foundational understandings required to thoroughly analyze the way present legislation language and public discourses are circulating which contributes and further hyperpolarizes American society and democratic institutions.

Situating the Rhetorical

Traditional forms of rhetorical analysis often centered oratory performance and persuasive appeals within communicative practices. Olson (2010) notes that for nearly a century rhetorical scholarship was synonymous with speech criticism and was predominately focused on "means of persuasion" (p. 41). However, more recent communication scholarship has noted a transformation to include more diversity (of both work and authorship) and a renewed focus on not only the discursive, but also non-discursive forms of rhetorical criticism (Makus, 1990a; Olson, 2010). This step allows rhetorical studies to transform beyond critiques of speech delivery and into the realms of investigating the persuasive nature of symbols as a communicative practice. Foss (2009) puts forward a modern definition that rhetoric as the "human use of symbols to communicate" (p. 3). Alternative definitions have also stated that rhetorical studies are concerned with processes by which systems of symbols have influence on actions, beliefs, attitudes, and values (Ehninger et al., 1971). This thesis utilizes rhetorical criticism to further

evaluate how current systems of symbols and language within the United States operate to circulate hyperpolarized ideas within the present sociopolitical arenas.

An existing critique of traditional analyses of rhetoric is the reliance placed upon a select number of widely accepted lenses resulting in methodological hegemony. Scott and Brock (1972) note the use of traditional rhetoric in academia is vital but has also been (and should continue to be) impacted by the evolution of scholarship. Contemporary scholarship can be drawn upon to supplement traditional rhetorical studies' placement as a pervasive method to evaluate influences on beliefs and behaviors within our society. While this thesis acknowledges the impact of primary rhetorical theories/theorists, it also engages with contemporary avenues of political and legal scholarship in a cross-disciplinary approach to advance rhetorical theory and center the importance of social change. In a hyperpolarized and argumentative era of American culture, it has become normalized to pit ideas and lines of thinking against each other. Thus, this thesis sought to put previously separated schools of thought in conversation with one-another to provide a better understanding of the ways symbols and language are used to persuade or inform knowledge and identity formation across multiple levels of American society.

Additionally, Olson (2010) asserts that within the United States one of the major cultural transformations that has profoundly influenced the scope and definition of rhetorical studies falls upon:

> The ongoing legacy of institutionalized inequalities across differences of economic class, race, sexuality, sex, age, and the like, which have systematically entrenched identities in the rules, procedures, and practices of law, political life, legislatures, the courts, religions, educational systems, media industries, health care, and home life in the United States. (p. 38)

This emphasizes the ongoing need for rhetorical studies, like this thesis, to investigate how political institutions (e.g., the legislative system) continue to influence the United States sociocultural practices and discourses. As major cultural transformations continue to occur, the scope and exigence for rhetorical analysis continues to expand.

Within the current sociopolitical context, there are several influencing factors that are impacting individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This thesis posits that these factors are primarily operating within a circulation of language that is steeped in ideological influences resulting in direct influence(s) on American voter's perceptions and identification practices. The following sections provide an overview and acknowledgment of the pre-existing scholarship regarding sociopolitical influences and rhetorical criticism. Specifically, by engaging in traditional rhetorical criticism alongside contemporary scholarship this thesis puts forward an understanding of how the circulation of political language and interrelated public discourses within the United States are functioning in tandem to increasingly hyperpolarized ideologies.

Political Rhetoric

Dating back to Plato's *Gorgias*, the links between rhetoric and political speech have been investigated due to the power that "too much rhetoric and too little dialogue" can have within a democratic system (Chambers, 2009, p. 324). Within democracies politicians must acquire and maintain power primarily through rhetorical strategies and interrelated actions. As sociopolitical problems, or exigencies (Bitzer, 1968; Turnbull, 2017; Vatz, 1973), continue to appear politicians must adopt strategies that benefit, meet popular consensus, and/or are upheld by their constituency (Chambers, 2009). Building off the previous section's definitional understanding that rhetoric is understood to be a means through which rhetors can best utilize language and symbols to craft persuasive responses (Ehninger et al., 1971; Foss, 2009), it can be easily seen

how political rhetoric operates squarely within the scope of rhetorical analysis as it seeks to answer questions of policy, democracy, and ideological practices.

Contemporary Political Persuasion

Contemporary political rhetoric is plagued by two distinctive features: the effects of post-truthism and media's impact on the curation of political ethos. Both features have considerable influence on the way information is spread, interpreted, and subsequently used to persuade audiences within a given sociopolitical environment. Recent avenues of scholarship have debated if current forms of political rhetoric are inherently helpful or harmful to the deliberative ideals of a democratic society (Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2022). Chambers (2009) asserts that only specific types of rhetoric, discourses labeled "vapid and vacuous" rather than substantive, hold a threat to deliberative ideals because they pull voters away from credible and relevant discourses over policy (p. 337). For this reason, understanding how political rhetoric has fluctuated from substantive debates to vapid arguments is inherently tied to the effects of both the mediazation of politics and hyperpolarization. These next sections review the existing literature on mass media, post-truth politics, and polarized identification to situate this thesis' analysis investigating divisive political language/discourses and their relationship with sociopolitical landscapes within the United States.

Media's Influence on Political Ethos

As media and online sources continue to become the dominant method of communicating information between political elites and the average citizen, the way information is curated, presented, and shared became a critical point of study. The invention and mass adoption of televisions in the United States marked a major turning point for political communication because political rhetors were forced to adopt new methods to best utilize the newest mediums

(e.g., news media, television, social media, etc.). Political rhetors who adopted successful methods of using the newest media forms have more access to sources of social and political power (i.e., voter blocks). As these channels continued to reach increasingly large mass audiences, scholars emphasized that journalists must balance their democratic roles as the public's advocates, gatekeepers, and watchdogs to uphold the tenets of free speech (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; White, 1950). These functions provide the media with the unique positionality of being a primary source of information for voters/viewers while also being a source of power or influence for politicians seeking to place their information onto the agenda (Lau et al., 2021; Moy et al., 2016).

Other studies have noted how portrayals of politicians and issues in the media had a significant impact on audience's information processing and perceptions of both politicians and political issues (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar et al., 1982; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs et al., 1997). The most widely agreed upon example of this comes from the 1960 presidential debates between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, where both general audiences and political pundits alike were found to have very different interpretations regarding the results of the debate dependent on if they listened via radio or watched it on television (Kraus, 1996; Reynolds, 1968). This presidential debate marked the beginning of a shift in voters' focus away from evaluating the politician's skill set(s) or authority and instead focused on the candidate's charisma or appearance on television (Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2022; Kraus, 1996; Reynolds, 1968; Rubin, 1967). This is important to note for the purposes of this thesis because it highlights how audience's attention has historically been trending away from evaluating credibility based on statements or policy, and instead focused on perceptions of credibility or trust generated by the rhetor themselves.

This transition is also important in consideration of political rhetoric and its connection to speaker ethos. A speaker's ethos is developed and crafted by their motives, expertise, and associations that allow the audience to perceive if the author has the good will and expertise to be considered credible (Barthes, 1977; Warnick, 2004). Historically political rhetoric has been used to garner favorable public opinion and ensure political rhetors/leaders are perceived as trusted and credible by their constituencies (Reynolds, 1968). However, Rubin (1967) argued that more traditional forms of public address (i.e., speeches or radio broadcasts) encouraged audiences to evaluate credibility based on words and debate skills, while television's visual component pulled focus onto appearance or charisma. This concept was exemplified by television viewers perception of the Nixon v. Kennedy debate, where Nixon's ability to debate policy and political experience was undercut by his sweaty appearance (Kraus, 1997; Reynolds, 1968). The current level of ideological hyperpolarization correlates with media representations and influences how individuals begin to perceive the world around them (Abramowitz, 2010; Doherty, 2014). As this transformation regarding ethos continues to develop alongside technological advancement and hyperpolarization it will continue to inform both speaker practices and audience perceptions of a speaker's (e.g., a politician's) credibility.

Additionally, Warnick (2004) expanded upon how credibility (or ethos) is determined and created within online systems. As society has moved to be increasingly online the circularity of credibility judgements has transformed to be a "self-sustaining reference system" in which the individual seeks to corroborate credibility by consulting other resources within the same network (Warnick, 2004, p. 263). Bringing this into the modern sociopolitical system, Bakshy et al. (2015) found that individuals are increasingly exposed to news, opinion, and civic information from social media sources (e.g., Facebook) that are embedded with algorithms that encourage the

creation of ideological homophily. This has been exemplified by *The Wall Street Journal's* "Blue

Feed, Red Feed" project that highlighted how ideological leanings directly primed and framed

the content made readily accessible to audiences based on the continued reliance on algorithmic

codes prominent in social media platforms (Keegan, 2019). As society continues to adopt online

sources and use social media platforms for news, the algorithmic biases toward ideological

homophily become increasingly pervasive and difficult to escape. This serves to further silo

individuals into hyperpolarized identifications to both understand the world around them and

find their sense of belonging within society.

Post-Truthism and Political Rhetoric

Following the 2016 presidential election cycle, the perpetuation of "fake news,"

mis/disinformation, and interrelated attacks on the truth has led to increasing distrust in

democratic systems (Farkus & Schou, 2020; Valdez & Lim, 2022). These features have been

commonly referred to as hallmark features of the post-truth era where facts and/or credibility

have been sidelined in favor of internal biases and falsehoods posing as beliefs. A 2016 survey

noted that individuals were more likely to like, comment, or share a "fake news" story on social

media sites, like Facebook, than a true/fact-checked story (Silverman et al., 2016). Moreover,

Cloud (2018) argues that a feature of today's political climate is that persuasive claims are no

longer grounded in reality and are increasingly impervious to empirical claims. Other scholarship

has shown how political speech is often a means to pursue or consolidate power which can erode

politicians' ethos if they place their interest in pleasing the masses rather than centering the truth

(Chambers, 2009). As post-truthism continues to transform the political landscape into an

environment where facts and credibility are commonly viewed as illegitimate or even outright

ignored, the impacts will continue to influence decision making processes for everyone involved.

Hyperpolarized Identification

The move toward increasingly ideological sources of information has forced individuals into making decisions regarding their identification based on the perceived associations of the source. As a result, it is not just individual agreement with the source, but ideological affiliation that guides decision making regarding sociopolitical issues. Studies have showcased how the process of information becoming increasingly hyperpolarized subsequently makes it easier to identify and divide individuals along these ideological lines (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2006; Pildes, 2011). Currently the American cultural and social landscapes operate in direct relation to the increasing levels of hyperpolarization within politics. A hallmark feature of political polarization is the process by which political parties externally distance from other parties while internally becoming more cohesive (Pildes, 2011). Further, as parties become progressively distant from one another, the ideological middle-ground or political center experiences a negative correlation and gradually begins to dissipate (Abramowitz, 2010; Doherty, 2014; Pildes, 2011; Sinclair, 2006). This forces individuals to then chose a "side" or political ideology, which in turn, triggers the cycle of individuals seeking out information and being siloed into hyperpolarized information streams.

Today's level of hyperpolarization is not the first time the United States has experienced this level of bitter division between major political parties. Throughout the country's history, levels of polarization have operated in cresting and waning waves over the course of generations and in response to different stimuli. Several studies have been completed investigating how political polarization can impact individuals' identification and creation of self-concept (Doherty, 2014; Kim & Zhao, 2020; Warner et al., 2020). This can be expanded upon to showcase how political affiliations can be utilized as an additional pressure point to align or

separate individuals. Burke (1969) and Hall (2000) posit that individuals seek out similar or distinguishing characteristics to place themselves among or apart from others in a society. These frameworks allow identification to operate as rhetorical persuasion by essentializing the ability to form relationships or gain status by an individual's adoption of specific characteristics that are perceived as shared qualities or else be at the risk being labelled as an "other" (Hall, 1993). This creates an environment where individuals have begun to formulate their own identity based upon perceived ideological associations and placement with others around them.

As sociopolitical influences continue to construct the boundaries for characteristics and identities around the differences between a perceived "us" (i.e., those within the same ideological camp) and the "other" (i.e., those in different/opposing ideological camps), the influences of hyperpolarization can latch on and further contribute to the divisive nature of these boundaries between identity groups. This has been found to harm interpersonal relationships and other social interactions as individuals further align or separate themselves from others dependent on subsequent agreement or disagreement with perceived ideological associations (Kim & Zhao, 2020; Warner et al., 2020). A 2022 Pew survey found that a majority of voters under the age of 50 are likely to indicate that party affiliation "reflects on the individual's character" and "says something about if they are a good or bad person" (Doherty et al., 2022, p. 30). Following particularly close and divisive election seasons, reports of individuals cutting ties with their families or longtime friends increased (Lee, 2020; Selyukh, 2016). This showcases how political affiliations and ideologies are transforming beyond the scope of just the voting booth and into public and private discourses.

Additionally, Chambers (2009) posits that political rhetoric within a democracy is rewarded by public opinion, and therefore, the rhetors (e.g., the politicians) will always seek to

persuade as many people as possible. This plays into the circulation of increasingly ideological language within political rhetoric as politicians must then also pander to these hyperpolarized ideals or risk losing the support needed to remain in office. The balance of power can be seen within the issues politicians put forward and their ability to remain easily accessible within the minds of voters (i.e., agenda setting theory). A current example has appeared within Florida's state legislature as Governor Ron DeSantis maintains popular support and gains increasing political power with every ideologically extreme bill or initiative he puts forward (Druke, 2022; Florida Governor's Office, 2022b; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Here DeSantis, and other politicians playing into hyperpolarized views, are able to maintain and garner supporters/voters by utilizing rhetoric and symbolic language that aids in the division of individuals along ideological lines. Subsequently, this perpetuates the circulation of polarized symbols, language, and identifiers amongst both the political and private spheres.

Ideology and Symbolic Power

One of the most potent applications of rhetorical analysis is in its ability to establish and reinforce broader and culturally determinant ideals. Foss (2009) states that an ideological critic "looks beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests" (p. 209). Investigating ideological frameworks allows the rhetorician to critically examine how sociocultural influences are impacting political powers. Makus (1990b) asserts that this shifts the focus of rhetorical study away from "the art of discovery" and into debates regarding "the construction consciousness that controls discourse" (p. 499). This thesis evaluates how ideologies have seeped beyond just political language and into the day-to-day discourses, which subsequently further embeds ideologies into societal understanding and individual's decision-making processes. Within this section, key scholarship regarding ideological criticism

and ideology will be evaluated to highlight how hegemonic-dominant structures are perpetuating ideals through societal adoption of ideological language.

Hall (1986) defines ideology as "the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (p. 29). Within this definition, ideology operates as a powerful tool that allows individuals to establish a unified cultural code by which they can create meaning or broader understanding of what is happening in the world around them (Foss, 2009, Hall 1982; Makus, 1990b). Moreover, Makus (1990b) posits that an "ideological moment" occurs when a cultural code has become so embedded within society that it is instantly recognized in a way that "everyone knows" without further explanation (p. 498). Essentially, this means that as an ideology permeates into a society, it gains enough symbolic power and recognition that it can then be simplified to unnuanced terms or phrases and eventually even recognized subconsciously.

Additionally, scholarship warns that the process of simplifying nuanced ideologies into easily identifiable symbols, terms, or phrases can be dangerous because it allows for the unconscious perpetuation of hegemonic-dominant ideals that are presented as fact without further question or thought (Dowery et al., 2014; Hall, 1986). Within the United States political system, this idea of ideology being used to simplify complex sociopolitical contexts to inform how individuals operate within society can be exemplified by the de facto two-party system. When there are consistently only two viable parties or ideologies to choose from, nondominant sociocultural ideologies are forced to pigeonhole themselves into one of the two major parties or risk not getting their issues represented at all. A 1965 study on American voting patterns referred

to third-party voting as "aberrant surges" that were caused by voters who were inspired by "short-term forces" rather than strong party affiliations (Sellers, 1965, pp. 19-20). This type of rhetoric reinforces the dominant ideologies that uphold or perpetuate societal inequalities by continuing to center the major parties without second thought to other avenues for societal progress (Hall, 1982; Hall, 1986).

Moreover, the years since the two-party system has further embedded itself into the ideological frameworks of American politics and current levels of political polarization have only served to reinforce ideologies further. During the 2016 and 2020 election cycles voters were often forced to pick between the "lesser of two evils" regarding candidates or risk their entire ideological associations and beliefs falling out of power (Doherty et al., 2016; Doherty et al., 2022; Sweetser, 2017). While third party candidates or platforms could have been strategically utilized to create different avenues beyond the "lesser of two evils," the ideology of the two-party system has ingrained itself so deeply into American politics it is not viewed as a viable option for voters. This causes voters to simplify or move away from more nuanced issues to instead stick with the pre-existing dominant ideal (Hall, 1982).

Creation of Ideographs

McGee (1980) theorizes that "the political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a vocabulary of 'ideographs' easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy" (p. 5). Here as political language given extra weight or symbolic meaning for individuals within a cultural or ideological bound. Subsequently, that given piece of language transforms into a symbolically larger understanding which serves to perpetuate the ideology it is now associated with. Rhetorical analyses evaluated how terms like <liberty>, <democracy>, <equality> and more (McGee (1980) uses triangular brackets < > to

indicate the presence and function of ideograph) have become representative of much larger ideological frameworks based on their usage within American culture and politics (Condit, 1980; Condit & Lucaites, 1993; McGee, 1980). Further, by examining the synchronic and diachronic structures of ideographs rhetorical critics can evaluate how ideology impacts the freedom and controlling powers of cultural consciousness (Makus, 1990b). As these phrases or words continue to embed with symbolic meaning, individuals within that ideological understanding easily recognize the term without having to think deeper which allows the symbolic meanings to further perpetuate themselves into public consciousness. Additionally, this makes it difficult for contrary or critical views/opinions of that term or phrase to be viewed as valid or accepted within society – even when provided with ample evidence or experience (Hall, 1982; Makus, 1990b).

As these hyperpolarized and divisive forms of political language continue to circulate, they become cemented into the public's psyche as ideographs and ultimate terminology that uphold ideological frameworks. In a longitudinal study of legislation within New Zealand, Wallace (2012) asserted that the perception of complex legislative goals can be substituted or directly informed by the uncritical uses of designating terms created/provided by sources that are trusted. This combined with the likelihood of individuals to look for and receive information within ideological silos (Warner, 2004) informs the understanding that as terms continue to circulate within these circles, they develop increasing amounts of symbolic power.

Ultimate Terminology

Research has evaluated the ways in which divisive and precise rhetorical processes can be utilized as a method to motivate or persuade individuals to behave in specific ways based upon symbolism surrounding self-identification practices. During the late 1950's, both Weaver (1953) and Burke (1969) began to investigate the rhetorical persuasion that occurs when a high

level of symbolism is attached to specific words or phrases. Weaver (1953) referred to these as "rhetorical absolutes" or terms in which the highest respect is applied (p. 212). Burke (1969) identifies these as "god terms" or words that individuals' have attached a high symbolic meaning to and subsequently associate with the specific phrase as if it were anointed or sanctified. Hart et al. (2018) note that ultimate terms are abstract, efficient, hierarchical, pre-emptive, and have unstable meanings which make them easy to manipulate depending on context (p. 164).

The usage of ultimate terms can also be linked to other rhetorical studies evaluating how "othering" or us vs. them mentalities are created and sustained within society. Within an American context, an example of ultimate terms being utilized to identify and separate individuals along ideological or us vs. them lines can be found within the Cold War era. From about 1950 onwards, Americans were constantly bombarded with symbols regarding the ongoing war of ideology between the United States (the protectors of capitalism and democracy) and the USSR (the communists) (Sussman, 2021). Within this period the word communism was nearly unanimously adopted as a devil term and democracy as a god term. Bryan (1991) evaluates how the rhetorical strategy of appealing to a "communist threat" operated as a key issue for American politicians crafting foreign policy with the intent of inflating American nationalism and protecting democracy and capitalist ideals (p. 492).

Furthermore, Hart et al. (2015) emphasize that while it could be easy to dismiss these terms as simply differences in semantics, the ideologies embedded in terms and labels can have high levels of consequence for those positioned in an out-group/other amid a cultural debate. Today's hyperpolarized system creates an environment where McGee's (1980) ideograph, Weaver's (1953) ultimate terms, and Burke's (1968) god and devil term frameworks are conjoined and transformed to meet the demands the of ongoing cultural wars. This thesis posits

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that as politicians, like Governor DeSantis, continue to use political buzzwords within both public discourses (e.g., media interviews or speeches) and legislation language (e.g., House Bill's 1557 or 7), the terms become embedded with different layers of symbolic and ideological power. This has been exemplified within discussions regarding the use of "woke" language in the workplace and the prevention of "CRT" lessons within K-12 curriculum (Florida Governor's Office, 2022b; Economist, 2022). Within these examples, perceptions regarding these phrases or terms are dependent upon the ideological association attached by the politician promoting the specified legislative action (e.g., HB 7 "Stop WOKE" enforces woke as a devil term ideologically). Since Governor DeSantis is currently in political power and able to pass these pieces of legislation, these phrases are adopted into the hegemonic-dominant from the ideological perspective of current Republican standpoints or agenda.

This process subsequently moves the needle on cultural wars that are impacted or "addressed" by the legislation. For example, as legislation attempts to "stop woke" language usage or prevent individuals from "saying gay," it then enforces the devil term perceptions of those terms while demonizing those who support the god term viewpoint of the very same terms. This isolates individuals on the other side of the political spectrum from those in power and perpetuates the trend hyperpolarization by forcing individuals toward the ideological poles. Individuals are forced to either uphold the hegemonic-dominant adoptions of these terms or risk being demonized and potentially face legislative action against them, without a middle ground or centrist option to choose. This is a dangerous line of thinking because it encourages hyperpolarization and makes space for continued ideologically extreme action (e.g., reversals of laws that protect against discrimination like marriage equality).

Ultimate Terms in Legislation Language

Scholarship has investigated the causal nature between public discourse and legislative language regarding abortion laws across the United States (Catanzarite, 2015; Condit, 1990). Condit (1990) investigated the linkage between public discourse and rhetoric surrounding legislative debates regarding abortion. This work developed into an understanding that specific language found in public discourse could be found in actual legislation language. As the public continued to latch onto these specific terms or phrases, they gained symbolic power as ideographs that then could be utilized by legislators as they sought to craft and pass legislation to their benefit (Condit, 1990; McGee, 1980).

Moreover, Wallace's (2012) analysis of a contested New Zealand bill found that terms had trickled into the media and had ("often without logical reason") become what he refers to as a "primary defining term" (p. 93). These primary defining terms then circulated for up to a decade (for that exemplar) within public and political discourses making them the assumed descriptors of the bill without proper investigation or linkages to actual legislative writing. This means that the public's opinion and perceptions of the legislation was crafted based on these defining terms (or ultimate terms) rather than its actual content. Another example of this is occurring within the chosen legislative exemplar of this thesis, Florida's House Bill 1557, where it has circulated more broadly as the "Don't Say Gay" bill without the word "gay" ever appearing within the legislation (Lavietes, 2022).

Understanding this process regarding how terminology, both actual legislative and popular terms, circulates is crucial to this thesis and the overall operation of our current political or legislative system(s). This process is at work within a democratic system because politicians must try to convince a majority (or as many as possible) in order to achieve policy goals and

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remain in positions of power. Chamber (2009) notes that this means the politicians will "pander and flatter, manipulate and hoodwink" to remain within public favor, meaning they too must adopt popular rhetoric to be understood/accepted by their constituency (p. 328). This circles back to the earlier sections' discussion of hyperpolarized identification because as politicians continue to be rewarded (with votes, media views/airtime, and other forms of support) by putting forward flashy and manipulative ideals, they push themselves and their followers further toward ideological poles.

Conclusion

Within this chapter, existing interdisciplinary scholarship has been explored best situate the central argument of this thesis. Specifically, this thesis uses this scholarship to further theorize that as these hyperpolarized terms continue to circulate, they begin to operate as ideographs serving specific purposes within an ideological grouping. As they gain symbolic weight at one ideological pole, the term also garners attention from the rival or opposing pole. This means that within one perspective a term may be a "god term," while the other perspective views the term as a "devil term" (Burke, 1968). Within the CRT debate exemplar, individuals on the conservative ideological pole may view "CRT" as a term with negatively valenced symbolic power (e.g., a threat to school children and democracy); meanwhile, the liberal ideological perspective views it a point of progress and inclusion that should be encouraged (or positively valenced) in educational environments. This creates the unique positioning where terms can be floated within legislative and public discourses while they are still developing symbolic power, and thus, open to a broader range interpretation dependent on what ideologies are influencing the term and/or the audience hearing the term.

Further, this shows how the frameworks of an ideograph (e.g., McGee, 1980) can be melded with ultimate terms (e.g., Weaver, 1953) to foster a sociopolitical environment where unnuanced phrases have the symbolic weight to inform followers about the ideology. The following chapter will introduce and discuss the specific lenses and methods used to examine the selected examples of contemporary hyperpolarized rhetoric regrading Florida House Bill 1557. The established framework will then be applied within chapter 4 for further analysis of how the language circulates within current discourses. The final chapter will then overview limitations and further areas of study.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

The goal of my thesis is to investigate the ways in which bitter and divisive language circulates within the current sociopolitical contexts within the United States. Traditional rhetorical analyses often follow the same methods of selecting artifacts and using them to evaluate for deeper meaning (Foss, 2009; Olson, 2010). Within this thesis, I argue that those traditional methods are still invaluable but must be further adapted to meet the new processes and demands of a hyperpolarized, post-truth society. I utilize the method of critical rhetorical criticism and ideological criticism to evaluate how ideology is being embedded and circulated within society via hyperpolarized language that appears in legislation, political rhetoric, and public discourses. This chapter will introduce how each of these sites of discourse were selected due to their relationship with Florida HB 1557. My selection of texts provides a snapshot the of discourses and rhetoric circulating around HB 1557 for further analysis. Finally, this chapter describes the process of isolating and selecting the terms (e.g., ideographs or ultimate terms) for analysis in the next chapter. By establishing this method, I hope to provide an updated framework that can be applied to a multitude of different analyses in hopes of continuing to better understand how ideological information is being spread within a hyperpolarized environment.

To conceptualize and evaluate how language is circulating via key terms or phrases embedded with ideological meaning, this chapter engages with the frameworks of critical rhetorical and ideological criticism. Political rhetoric is grounded in the art of persuasion which provides a rich pool of texts to evaluate for deeper ideological understandings. Moreover, the current processes by which the law is developed, advocated or framed, and subsequently talked about and remembered is steeped in ideological power disparities which causes complex ideas to

condense down to unnuanced phrases or terms. These next sections will evaluate how current sociocultural contexts and political environments have begun to be reflected into current legal language and public discourses which situates my analysis of language surrounding Florida House Bill (HB) 1557. The following sections lay out the theoretical frameworks and processes by which I curated a set of texts that allow me to analyze the circulation of language occurring within the sociopolitical landscape of the United States.

Critical Rhetorical Criticism

Foss (2009) defines rhetorical criticism as "the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes" (p. 6). I systematically identified key terms or phrases circulating around HB 1557 as an artifact which allows investigation of the rhetorical processes that are impacting political rhetoric, legislation, and public discourses within Florida and across the United States. As studies continue to highlight how hyperpolarized and divisive politics are impacting individuals, it remains critical for scholarship to evaluate how this circulation influences what rhetorical processes are the most persuasive and/or prevalent within discourses (Doherty et al., 2022; Kim & Zhao, 2020; Warner et al., 2020). Moreover, Makus (1990a) referred to critical rhetorical criticism as moving beyond the study "logical and aesthetic qualities of discourse" to encourage a method of study "that stimulates social change" (p. 305). This adds a crucial component to this thesis' composition and purpose by highlighting how my analysis evaluates power structures and influences within these rhetorical processes. Since this circulation of language is generated by and in conjunction with power holders, applying a critical lens allows my analysis to investigate and propose new lines of theory and knowledge for scholarship to engage with going forward to influence better futures.

Ideological Criticism

In addition to evaluating the power structures implicated within the circulation of language, I also engage with ideological influences. I argue that as public audiences engage with the circulation of hyperpolarized language, they do so without direct definitions or nuanced understandings of how legislative language operates or the larger political agendas at work beneath the surface. For these reasons, I adopt the framework of ideological criticism to begin to unpack the ways ideology has been intertwined within political rhetoric and public discourses.

Foss (2009) asserts ideological criticism allows the critic to evaluate beliefs and value structures that serve "as the foundation for the knowledge, attitudes, motives, and predilections of groups that adhere to [a given] ideology" (p. 209). It is crucial to note that within any given society or cultural grouping there may be several ideological patterns that inform sociopolitical structures; however, not every ideological pattern or belief system is treated equally. Scholarship notes that when one belief or value system is privileged over another/others it then becomes upheld as the dominant ideology (Dowery et al., 2014; Foss, 2009; Hall, 1986). A hegemonic dominant ideology then can utilize significant amounts of symbolic power or social capital to create the expectation of "the way things are" and what meanings are "real" or naturally occurring/accepted within a society (Foss, 2009, p. 210). For the purposes of this thesis, understanding how the public (e.g., public discourses) adopt and perpetuate dominant ideologies (e.g., what is put forward by legislation/politicians) plays a critical role in how these terms further embed themselves within and promote ideologies.

Ideological alignment or agreement amongst political actors and audiences informs subsequent understandings or definitions being formulated about specific pieces of language circulating around bills like HB 1557. Ideological criticism refers to this process as articulation,

or the process where identities are transformed due to the creation of a relationship among elements of an ideology (Foss, 2009). Within the example of Florida, the dominant ideology is currently upheld by the Republican party which holds the values of the hegemonic center (e.g., white, cisgender, heterosexual) as well as control of both the state legislature and the governor's office (Fineout, 2022). Individuals within Florida that agree with Governor DeSantis and/or the Florida Republican party, will uphold the legislative terms put forward with a positive valence (e.g., a god term), meanwhile those not in alignment with either DeSantis and/or the party will view the same terms with negative valences (e.g., a devil term). This process of articulating ideology through specific terms attached to value associations directly informs individuals regarding the ways they should think or behave within society (Foss, 2009; Slack, 2006). Finally, by adopting an ideological criticism framework my analysis will be able to investigate how these differences in ideological perspectives is creating real life consequences for individuals and American democracy.

Traditional Uses of Ideographs and Ultimate Terms

To conduct the ideological criticism, I utilize the frameworks of the ideograph and ultimate terms/god and devil terms to anchor my analysis. McGee (1980) defined ideographs as the building blocks of an ideology because they contain strong symbolic or ideological commitments that can help define group identities. Other ideograph analyses note that terms selected as an ideograph are abstract terms that help inform behavior (Condit, 1990; Catanzarite, 2015). Further, McGee (1980) notes that as these terms become more frequent or prevalent within a societal context, they can begin to gain symbolic power within audiences. The abstract nature of these terms mixed with a high frequency of usage allows the term to operate with polysemy or multiple meanings within a society (Condit, 1989; McGee, 1980). Within this

thesis, I have selected terms such as "parental rights," "fundamental rights," and "Don't Say Gay" based on their abstract nature, prevalence or frequency of usage, and their polysemic qualities to highlight them as ideographs.

However, as previously stated, the current nature of the United States' sociopolitical structure means that these terms are often being adopted by two opposing poles or perspectives which informs how ideological or symbolic power is embedded within them. For this reason, I argue that Weaver's (1953) ultimate terms and Burke's (1969) god and devil term frameworks should be adapted to be used alongside McGee's (1980) ideograph to fully encompass how ideological functions are operating within hyperpolarized discourses. Similar to the ideograph, Weaver (1953) defines ultimate terms as single terms that "carry the greatest potency" and "to which the highest respect is paid" (p. 212). Burke (1969) furthers our understanding of symbolically powerful terms, like ultimate terms, by providing a framework that sanctifies or anoints these terms with god or devil. Terms that are anointed or sanctified with positive valences become associated as god terms, while terms that are associated with negative valences become devil terms.

By combining these theoretical frameworks in this way, my analysis can engage with the circulation of language as it continually is adapted for and influenced by both political forces and the public alike. Further, my analysis posits that within the circulation of hyperpolarized language, symbolically powerful or influential terms are introduced as ideographs within legislation or by politicians. However, as the frequency of usage increases and the term permeates into society, the ideographs concretize into ultimate terms that have god or devil term associations in relation to ideological bounds. This then gives the terms the ability to be rallying points or buzzwords for political actors and their bases (i.e., campaign donors or voters). As a

result, complex ideologies can be attached to simple or unnuanced terms (e.g., the devil term "drugs" is associated with negative connotations like evil, illegal, bad, etc.). Since these terms can perform dual duties – a god term for one side of the political spectrum and a devil term for the other – the perception toward the term creates a framework of understanding for individuals. Grouping the perspectives of these terms together based on political ideology rather than by similarity operates like an enthymeme where a singular word or phrase can trigger specific actions based off ideological association (Olson & Goodnight, 1994). This process instigates the circulation between legislation language and public discourse by providing cover for complex or multifaceted issues to be summarized by ultimate terms without proper definitions or nuance.

Selection of Texts

To unpack and critically examine the circulation of language occurring within the United States' current hyperpolarized sociopolitical landscape, I drew upon sites of cultural debates or culture wars to highlight how these influences are impacting several levels of society. Currently, the sociopolitical debates occurring within several states are the direct result of think tanks or state/local official's attempts to test run legislation to determine what will be upheld and what will be struck down by legislatures or courts. Additionally, as these bills continue to receive national attention, they inform voters about what issues should be paid attention to, discussed, and what actions should be taken (Lau et al., 2021; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While there are several concurrent pieces of legislation that could be used as the artifacts for this analysis, Governor Ron DeSantis' actions in Florida have put forward clear exemplars of legislative test-balloons which inform his bids to be on the national agenda and a viable candidate for the 2024 presidential election (Druke, 2022). Specifically, Florida's HB 1557 "Parental Rights in Education" was brought forward and put into effect for the explicit purpose of progressing

conservative agendas and determine what rights or interests the Judicial Branch will protect in reference to the ongoing cultural wars. For these reasons, I have selected HB 1557 and the language circulating around it specifically the buzzwords it has pushed into sociopolitical discourses which I argue function as polysemic god and devil terms. This combination of political rhetoric and ideological influences is directly impacting the hyperpolarized and divisive language within current American discourses.

Before beginning the analysis, I first identified the stages or levels that polarized language is being circulating through. For the purposes of this project, I began with the legislation itself (i.e., House Bill 1557), then how political actors discuss it (i.e., politicians and major media outlets), and finally public discourses (i.e., established from social media posts). While additional analysis should be done regarding the ordering or causal relationships occurring within this process, this thesis focuses on the outputs or results of this circulation. Specifically, this project evaluated a variety of sources from the different stages identified to create a linage of term usage to be further investigated in my analysis. The following subsections explicitly state how sources were carefully selected, evaluated, and utilized within a rhetorical analysis to determine which terms best fit the criterium for this framework.

Legislation Language

To complete this analysis, I carefully read through both the drafts and final version of Florida's House Bill 1557 to find key terms that would indicate the goals, measures, and potential impact of the legislation. The passed version of HB 1557 that was signed by DeSantis is seven pages in length and does contain the key words: "sexual orientation," "gender identity," "parental rights"/"parent's rights," and "fundamental rights," with each term mentioned at least twice. It should be noted that the bill does not include the terms: "gay," "transgender"/"trans,"

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"LGBTQ+," or "pronouns" (Parental Rights in Education, 2022). By grouping the terms within quotes emphasizing that HB 1557 operates to "reinforce the fundamental right of parents to make decisions regarding the upbringing and control of their children" begins the process of sanctifying "parental rights" as a god term (p. 3).

As previously noted, this thesis is not as concerned with the term's origin points, but rather how the language permeates and transforms through each sociopolitical level of rhetoric. However, by beginning this analysis from the legislation itself, my analysis can begin to trace where terms are appearing and how they are being influenced by different ideological forces. Within the next section, I isolated political rhetoric from politicians/officials connected to HB 1557 to see which of these selected terms were continuing to appear and what new terms were added to the circulation.

Political Rhetoric

Within Condit's (1990) longitudinal study surrounding the political debates and public discourses, they stated that an ideal study of public discourse every utterance in public spaces would be included, however, that is not feasible so decisions must be made regarding what cross sections should be included to create a representative cross-section discourse. The following evaluation of sources from politicians, popular press, and public discourses will encounter a similar dilemma. Adapting Condit's (1990) method, I used key search terms established from the legislation to evaluate a range of sources (local and national news sources) as a barometer to highlight what topics were on the forefront of discourses surrounding HB 1557. Specifically, I looked for overlap (or the lack of overlap) between term usage in legislation and political discourse from leaders and in the media. This establishes how the circulation of language spread beyond the legislation and into the realms of public discussion.

While official government websites reporting the bill's language continued to center the terms: "parental rights," "fundamental rights," "gender orientation," and "sexual identity" (Florida Governor's Office, 2022a; Parental Bill of Rights, 2022), popular press sources continually ran headlines referring to the bill as the "Don't Say Gay" bill/law (Atterbury, 2022; Lavietes, 2022). In articles from *The New York Times*, *Fox News*, *NPR*, *CNBC*, *Politico*, and more, HB 1557 was nearly always introduced as the "Don't Say Gay" Bill/Law and explicit focus was paid to the restriction on discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity (Atterbury, 2022; Chasmar, 2022; Lavietes, 2022; Mazzei, 2022). These articles primarily contained phrases like: "LGBTQ+"/"gay," "gender identity," and "sexual orientation"/"sexual expression." Moreover, the terms "parental authority"/"parental rights" and "classroom appropriate" were presented with less frequency and in smaller subsections of the articles. Within the analysis section, I will further evaluate the effects of this on the circulation of language and how it informs understandings.

Public Discourses

Finally, to evaluate how these hyperpolarized terms and language have circulated within public discourses, I intentionally evaluated data from search engines and social media platforms to trace the lineage and frequency of these terms appearance as they filtered into the public's usage. According to data from Google Trends (n.d.), the search terms "Don't Say Gay," "HB 1557," and "Parental Rights in Education" appeared in nearly every state and saw peaks in early 2022. Of these terms, "HB 1557" had the least amount of searches and only appeared in 5 states and Washington D.C., while "Don't Say Gay" had search appearances in nearly all 50 states and peaked the week of March 6th-12th, 2022 (Google Trends, n.d.). Related queries data indicated that while "Don't Say Gay" was the most popular search, over a quarter of related searches

contained a variation of "Don't Say Gay" with add-ons such as "bill," "law," or "Florida gay"

(Google Trends, n.d.). This highlights that not only were individuals interested in this bill beyond

the state of Florida, but it also provides additional evidence regarding how individuals were

discussing the bill.

Further to see what terms continued to permeate and become a part of public discourses, I

used the Google Trends (n.d.) data regarding when these terms peaked to create the bounds for

social media advance searches to see how the public was further utilizing these terms. For

example, within a Twitter advanced search for "Don't Say Gay" during its peak (March 6th-12th,

2022). This utilization of Twitter's advanced search found that a majority of tweets relating to

HB 1557 in March 2022 (shortly after it's signing into law) contained the phrase "Don't Say

Gay" within them and very few contained "HB 1557" or "Parental Rights in Education"

(Twitter, n.d.). While DeSantis and other members of the Florida Republican party condemned

the use of "Don't Say Gay" and preferred the focus on "parental rights," they did still use the

phrase frequently which empowered their base to use it. And conversely, the Democrats

continued to protest and condemn the bill using "Don't Say Gay" due to the inflammatory nature

it created regarding their political opponents. This indicates that majority of the public only knew

the law as "Don't Say Gay" rather than its official titles and cements the power of terms like

"Don't Say Gay" or "gay" to operate as an ideograph representing ideological interests within a

bill.

Additionally, Facebook's hashtag search and advertisement library provided insight to

the way this bill was circulating within public discourse. A preliminary search of the ad-library

found 770 paid advertisements listed under the hashtag "#Don'tSayGay," with many of them

directed at users within the state of Florida (Facebook, n.d.). There were also a number of

Facebook groups entitled some variation of "Parental Rights in Education" or "parent's rights," although this is an imperfect representation because it is impossible to estimate how many groups may truly exist due to privacy settings (Facebook, n.d.). However, within the data from Facebook's advanced search and advertisement library (containing advertisements, public groups, and posts tagged to "#Don't Say Gay") showed two clear clusters of responses to the bill - the responses from liberal/left leaning individuals (e.g., LGBTQ+ activists) and the responses from conservative leaning individuals (e.g., parental rights groups).

Conclusions

Although this provides only a glimpse into the way HB 1557 was being discussed, by using a rhetorical analysis and a cross-section of social media posts has allowed this thesis to begin to capture part of the ongoing circulation of language occurring regarding this controversial and hyperpolarized bill. These stages and processes regarding how the bill appeared in both political rhetoric and public discourses allowed deeper ideological meanings to become attached to the polysemic terminology, which informed voters/the American public how to think and behave regarding these issues in varying ways. While the scope of this thesis project only allowed for the evaluation of one iteration of this hyperpolarized circulation of language, additional scholarship should seek to explore how circulation continues to loop and influence other iterations. The following chapter will further analyze the effects and implications of these discourses on individuals and the United States democratic institutions.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

Throughout this thesis, I have set up a framework that allows for the investigation of how hyperpolarized political language circulates within current American society. To best represent this circulation, I have analyzed the appearance of ultimate terms across three major sociopolitical levels that influence decision-making processes: legislation language, political rhetoric, and public discourse. This chapter will analyze how each of these levels interact and transform specific pieces of language to embed ideology and perpetuate hyperpolarization. Beginning with Florida's House Bill 1557, moving toward politician's and mass media's rhetoric, and concluding with public discourse allows my analysis to critically examine how polysemic political buzzwords circulate within American society and influence sociopolitical structures such as the media and/or the justice system. Ultimately, this analysis highlights how the usage and circulation of these terms creates as framework of understanding based on ideological symbolism that is not always directly reflective of the law itself despite stemming from legislative terms. Through my critical rhetorical analysis of the circulation of language, this thesis allows for a deeper understanding of how knowledge, ideology, and power interact to form contemporary political ideographs or ultimate terms.

House Bill 1557

In January 2022, two different draft versions of a bill titled "Parental Rights in Education" were filed into Florida's legislature. Senator Dennis Baxley's S.1834 failed early within the process, however Representative Joe Harding's HB 1557 passed through committee, the House, the Senate, and was ready to be enrolled by the end of February 2022 (Parental Rights in Education, 2022). HB 1557 was officially presented to Governor Ron DeSantis for his approval and signature on March 28th with the stipulation that it would be put into effect starting

on July 1st, 2022 (Florida Governor's Office, 2022a). This bill requires school districts to have procedures that "reinforce [the] fundamental rights of parents to make decisions regarding upbringing and control of their children" and "prohibits classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity" (Parental Rights in Education, 2022).

Within the United States legal system all pieces of legislation are intertwined and built off each other due to the functions and operations of precedent and judicial review. This means that all codes, statutes, and laws that are drafted and enacted they must be pursuant and upheld by existing or active legislation within the United States (National Constitution Center, 2022). Florida HB 1557 builds off school board statutes that were enacted in 2018 that outlined the duties and powers of education boards and school district personnel (Florida Statutes and Education Code, 2018). However, HB 1557 extends these existing statutes by creating punitive measures that prevent "school district personnel from discouraging or prohibiting parental notification and involvement in critical decisions affecting a student's mental, emotional, or physical well-being" and further "prohibit discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels or in a specified manner" (Parental Rights in Education, 2022, p. 1).

Within the seven pages HB 1557, the legislation language emphasizes disclosures regarding the "student's mental, emotional, or physical well-being" a total of four times (Parental Rights in Education, 2022). This emphasis on one function of the bill operates rhetorically to pull focus away from the bill's functions targeted at the prevention of LGBTQ+ advocacy and awareness. As stated, there were pre-existing statutes within Florida that encourage and mandate reporting or disclosures between school district personnel and parents. However, HB 1557's reinforcement of these practices in addition to, rather than just outright, banning LGBTQ+ discussions in classrooms gave politicians the ability to hone-in on "parental rights" while

conveniently obfuscating the discriminatory implications of the bill (i.e., the prevention of discussions regarding "sexual orientation" and "gender identity") (Parental Rights in Florida, 2022). Additionally, Florida's branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has noted that while the word "gay" does not appear anywhere within the bill, the "dangerously vague provisions in the bill" allowed the misrepresentation of the bill's focus on LGBTQ+ concerns to flourish without clear operational definitions (Florida ACLU, 2022). The vague provisions allow for cis-heteropatriarchal standards to continue to be upheld on the basis of "gay" content being "inappropriate" or unsafe for children's "mental, emotional, or physical well-being." Additionally, the vague nature of the language in the bill operates as a double-edged sword, where the lack of specification benefits conservative ideologies by providing additional coverage to further limit spaces where LGBTQ+ advocacy and awareness can exist, but also make it difficult for the legal system to pin-point what specifically can or cannot be prosecuted against. Opponents of HB 1557 have challenged the constitutionality of the law citing that the vague nature of what is "inappropriate" infringes freedom of speech and promotes discriminatory action, however, currently (March 2023) Florida state courts have ruled in favor of HB 1557 remaining in effect (Swidriski, 2022).

Moreover, since the United States has as long-standing history of supporting individual rights, the decision to adopt and use terms such as "fundamental rights" or "parental rights" immediately alludes some form of symbolic meaning for Americans by tapping into existing ideographs (i.e., <liberty>) (McGee, 1980). While individual ideological placement on the political spectrum may inform varying views of ideographic phrases like <individual rights> or <liberty>, there is still considerable symbolic power linking those phrases to American democratic institutions. Further, by linking terminology like "fundamental rights" to "parental

rights"/"parents' rights" regarding a child's "mental, emotional, or physical well-being" serves as an immediate and indoctrinated ideological defense mechanism for those advocating or supporting the provisions within HB 1557. By upholding "parental rights" as a "fundamental right," it places these "rights" as undeniable and inalienable rights that should not be criticized or debated.

This is evidenced within critics' opposition to HB 1557 which are largely concerned with the bill's vague descriptions of "classroom appropriate" discussions of "sexual orientation" or "gender identity" and the punitive measures established to enforce the prevention of these topics (Florida ACLU, 2022). However, political figures advocating for HB 1557 could quickly defend the bill and undermine those concerns by drawing upon the ideological links between "parental rights" and a child's "mental, emotional, or physical well-being." These links then subsequently paint any opposition to the bill as harmful to children and unpatriotic or against American democratic interests, rather than focused on protecting the rights of LBGTQ+ individuals.

Certainly, parents' rights encompass more than decisions about their child's exposure to gender and sexuality discussions. However, the bill effectively reduces "parental rights" as only related to educational disclosures to information regarding "sexual orientation" or "gender identity." The effectiveness of this can be seen within public discourses that narrow in on these aspects of the bill. Since the language of HB 1557 was intentionally designed to be vague or polysemic in nature as it began to circulate beyond the legal system and into the public sphere there was ample room for ideological interpretations to be attached. Additionally, it is rare for the public to read legislation language, so it falls upon politicians and the media to operate as advocates and gatekeepers regarding how legal knowledge trickles down to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; White, 1950). The next section overviews how legislation language

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enters the circulation process by being placed onto the agenda of politicians and the media. By carefully comparing these depictions of HB 1557 alongside the legislation language, I create a framework to evaluate how the circulation of hyperpolarized language impacts decision making functions and understanding.

"Don't Say Gay" as Political Rhetoric

Following the enactment or passage of new legislation, it is common practice for the legislation's creators, advocates, and/or the politician who enacts the law to put forward messaging about the bill. Whether it be for general diffusion of knowledge or campaigning purposes, these political actors then normally invite members of the press and media to be present or have access to these carefully curated messages on a given talking point. The following section provides analysis of rhetoric from the office of Governor Ron DeSantis and news media to highlight how HB 1557 began its transformation from "Parental Rights in Education" to the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

Florida Governor's Office Statement on HB 1557

On March 28th, 2022, the Florida Governor's Office published a press release relating to HB 1557 including Governor Ron DeSantis official statements on the new piece of legislation. Within the statement, DeSantis justifies his position and approval of HB 1557 by stating that "parental rights" have been "under assault around the nation" and further emphasizes that "parents have every right to be informed about their children at school, and should be protected from schools using the classroom instruction to sexualize their kids as young as 5 years old" (Florida Governor's Office, 2022a, para. 2). The press release then has several statements praising HB 1557 and DeSantis for "empowering parents," "safeguarding our children," and protecting "fundamental rights." Additional quotes warn against "fanatics" that encourage

"classroom discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity" (Florida Governor's Office, 2022a). Overall, the entire statement only features two paragraphs listing the actual content of the bill, the first paragraph that reads nearly identical to the bill's abstract and the final paragraph which features bullet points of the "steps taken to protect students and put power back into the hands of parents" (Florida Governor's Office, 2022a, para. 11).

Focusing this press release on DeSantis' and HB 1557's commitment to the protection of "parental rights" and "fundamental rights" through several quotes highlights how these terms have begun to circulate as ultimate terms or ideographs that are representative of both the bill and DeSantis' campaign. For example, Lieutenant Governor Jeanette Núñez states "Governor DeSantis and I believe that parents should have a say. We will not back down to woke corporations… I am committed to protecting the rights of parents" (Florida Governor's Office, 2022a, para. 3). The Florida Commissioner of Education, Richard Corcoran, stated "I am thankful for the Governor [and] Legislature… who stand up for parents' rights to be the foremost authority…. I am thankful for Governor DeSantis' commitment to all of Florida's 2.9 million public school students" (para. 4). It has been widely speculated that DeSantis is prepping to be a Republican front runner in the 2024 presidential election cycle, which means he needs to begin to transform and enlarge his base from just Floridians to individuals nationwide (Druke, 2022; Fineout, 2022). By using controversial legislation (e.g., HB 1557 and others) that has successfully been enacted under his duration as governor, DeSantis is able to continually attach his name to pieces of national coverage and prove to voters that he achieves policy goals put forward by conservative or Republican agendas.

Further, as DeSantis continues to attempt to place himself as head of the Republican party, it informs Americans about how to respond to him based on their own individual

ideological associations. Due to hyperpolarization, the divide between the two major political

parties in the United States is perceived to be large and contentious (Abramowitz, 2010; Doherty,

2014; Pildes, 2011). Since DeSantis and the Florida Republican party have positively responded

to and enacted legislation like HB 1557, the terminology circulating around these types of

legislation reinforces itself as representative of conservative or right-leaning political ideologies

within the United States. Moreover, these associations then serve as further points of polarization

and division among the American public. As American individuals began to interact with

political rhetoric referencing HB 1557, they positively (god term) or negatively (devil term)

associate with the rhetoric based off their ideological association in relation to DeSantis or his

party. Individuals that support or identify with the Republican party are then primed to

immediately uphold DeSantis' statements as god terms. This was exemplified within the press

release where a Florida parent stated "I want to thank Governor DeSantis… When parents are

excluded from critical decisions affecting their child's health and well-being at school, it sends

the message to children that their parent's input and authority are no longer important" (Florida

Governor's Office, 2022a, para. 9). While individuals with democratic associations immediately

are skeptical and view them as devil terms. Additional examples of this process will be further

evaluated within the next sections overviewing additional sources of discourse surrounding HB

1557 (e.g., news media and social media).

Ultimately, this press release highlighted which terms political figures have selected from

HB 1557 to operate ideographic buzzwords for the media and public to latch onto. This process

further embeds ideology into the terms by linking political parties' and their leaders' ideological

values onto the terms. For those in ideological alignment with DeSantis, the ideographs

"fundamental rights" and "parental rights" begin the process of turning into god terms. While

opponents will begin to view those very same ideographs as devil terms by associating them with skepticism and negative valences. Additional scholarship can be conducted to determine relative strength of the valences or the functionality of the law, however, this analysis reveals that regardless of valence the circulation of this divisive language operates to further bring publicity to the issues at hand which benefits cis-heteropatriarchal hegemonic power structures.

Media Coverage of HB 1557

As information regarding HB 1557 continued to circulate between the legislative branch and political rhetors, major news outlets were forced to pick and choose what pieces of information would be highlighted and what information fell to the wayside. While politicians and the legislation language itself seemed to be carefully crafted to center the terms "parental rights" and "fundamental rights" to protect children, the news media seemed to latch onto the mentions and implications of policy prohibiting discussions of "sexual orientation" or "gender identity." A common thread across several different articles was the transition from referring to HB 1557 by its title (HB 1557 "Parental Rights in Education") to openly referring to it as the "Don't Say Gay" bill. News sources from both sides of the political spectrum adopted the phrase "Don't Say Gay" within their coverage of HB 1557, however the valences attached to "Don't Say Gay" varied strongly dependent upon the source. Additionally, this indicates that the news media's dissemination and coverage of HB 1557 had begun to infuse new terms and outside context to the circulation of language beyond that which was provided by the legislation itself or political rhetoric.

Moreover, media coverage of both supporters and critics served to reinforce ideologies that had begun to embed itself within specified terms (e.g., the terms highlighted both within the bill and political rhetoric). This causes these terms to begin to transition from merely being

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ideographs that represent HB 1557, to also being connotatively connected to the public's psyche

as god and devil terms. As articles continued to feature the bill's content using the same key

terms (e.g., "parental rights," "fundamental rights," "Don't Say Gay"), the partisan and

hyperpolarized depictions of the terms embedded ideological associations onto the terms. Within

historically conservative or right-leaning news outlets (e.g., *Fox News*), the terms "parental

rights" and "fundamental rights" continued to be upheld in alignment with DeSantis' or the

Republican party's ideological stances. Meanwhile, liberal or left-leaning sources (e.g., *NBC*)

also utilized these same terms, but with opposing ideological connotations. Both sides then

demonized and condemned the other, which further exacerbated the levels of hyperpolarization.

This process was exemplified within a *Fox News* article entitled "Democrats claim Florida is

pushing 'Don't Say Gay' bill. Here's what the legislation actually says," which insinuates that

critics (i.e., Democrats) that link the bill to LGBTQ+ or "gay" concerns are perpetuating

incorrect representations of the legislation (Chasmar, 2022). This furthers the Republican agenda

seeking to ensure that ideographs like "parental rights" maintain their placement as god terms,

while establishing "Don't Say Gay" as a devil's term in the minds of readers.

As articles continued to support "parental rights" or "fundamental rights," while

condemning usage of "Don't Say Gay" or "gay," or vice versa, they use these terms as

ideographs with valences that indicate a deeper connection to ideological frameworks. While this

references only one bill, the media coverage intertwines coverage of HB 1557 to historical

sociopolitical contexts. One state legislature cannot be all-encompassing of the vast and diverse

environment that comprises the United States, and yet these terms are continually used within the

national media as extremely potent symbols representative of broad sweeping policy. This is a

dangerous assumption to place upon these terms because they are polysemic and vague which

leaves them open to interpretation and disagreement. Political rhetors and the media then take advantage of this openness and use terms as ideologically bound enthymemes. Within these, the polysemic phrase triggers responses based on the rhetor and/or individuals ideological association. As additional circulation and conflating contexts intertwine within this process, politicians and the media alike are given cover to then place complex, multifaceted issues within short enthymematic and polysemic phrases. An example of this can be found within an *NBC News* article that stated, "legal experts say that whether the bill prohibits the word 'gay' itself is a 'distraction.' In the same way that critical race theory isn't being taught in schools… the 'Don't Say Gay' moniker is a moniker" (Lavietes, 2022). This emphasis how the vague terms began to link themselves to other non-related issues, such as CRT, which subsequently conflates two different legislative actions together under the single banner of "Don't Say Gay."

Furthermore, this usage of enthymematic and polysemic phrases (e.g., "parental rights" and "Don't Say Gay") degrade public understanding by obscuring their true meaning. For example, by renaming HB 1557 "Don't Say Gay" and centering the fact that the word "gay" never appears within the legislation allows conservative ideologies to defend the bill, while obscuring the bill's actual implications that prohibit LGBTQ+ awareness and advocacy work. While it is true that HB 1557 does not explicitly say "Don't Say Gay" or "gay," its vague provisions prohibiting "discussions of sexual orientation or gender identity" and other content that is not deemed "classroom appropriate" functionally operates to stop all LGBTQ+ discussions within school spaces (Florida ACLU, 2022). Additionally, the vague nature of these provisions and subsequent media coverage of HB 1557 obscures these true definitions or implications behind buzzworthy terms like "sexual orientation" or "gender identity," which are not explicitly defined anywhere within the text or related political rhetoric. This leaves these

terms to be open to interpretation and therefor polysemic to individuals as they try to make sense of these vague provisions and undefined terms.

For ideologies that are attempting to maintain or reinforce white cis-heteropatriarchal standards as the hegemonic dominant, their rhetoric relies on the fact that audiences have only heard "sexual orientation" or "gender identity" as these enthymematic-polysemic buzzwords rather than knowing functional or operational definitions of these terms. This allows politicians and legislation to then continue to hide goals or implications of bills like HB 1557 behind already dominant or familiar ideographs like "fundamental rights" or "parental rights." This adherence to hegemonic dominant ideals regarding sexual orientations, gender identity, and other identifications that are complementary or beneficial to the dominant ideology keeps these politicians in power.

Additionally, by upholding and perpetuating white cis-heteropatriarchal structures, the adoption and continual usage of these types of enthymematic terms discourages and silences LGBTQ+ and other minority voices before they can even begin to host discussions or provide further clarity. Even within more liberal-leaning media forms, the frequent usage of "Don't Say Gay" encourages and normalizes the ideal that "gay" terminology is controversial and should be carefully monitored if not avoided all together. For example, an *NBC News* article focuses on "a core argument of the bill" which is the distinction between if HB 1557 "would prohibit the 'instruction' or 'discussion' of sexual orientation" (Lavietes, 2022). Rather than explicitly disavowing the Florida legislature for effectively banning LGBTQ+ educational advocacy and awareness initiatives, this focus upholds the idea that these conversations need to be carefully evaluated, labeled, and prohibited.

As this type of language continues to circulate within legislative, political, and media forms it also directly informs public audiences regarding how they should perceive and discuss these issues themselves. This encourages hegemonic-dominant discriminatory beliefs to embed themselves into the language and terms made accessible to the public before non-dominant groups (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals and advocates) can begin to resist or inform audiences differently. Moreover, the following section will analyze how public discourses have begun to adopt and utilize these terms within the ongoing circulation of hyperpolarized language surrounding HB 1557.

Public Discourses on HB 1557

The appearance of HB 1557 related discourse on Facebook (n.d.) and Twitter (n.d.) highlights how these discussions have disseminated beyond the floor of the Florida legislature and into day-to-day discussions for millions of Americans. While using social media as an indicator of public discourse is an imperfect method, the advance search functions did allow for a detailed analysis of the ways in which HB 1557 circulating within public discourses. Further, the data pulled from Facebook (n.d.) and Twitter (n.d.) indicates that public discourses followed the media's lead in adopting "Don't Say Gay" as the primary title of HB 1557. By early March 2022, nearly all 50 states had searches containing the phrase "Don't Say Gay" or other closely related queries (Google Trends, n.d.). This serves to further cement the terms "gay" and "Don't Say Gay" as ideographic terms or buzzwords that were accessible and readily used by members of the public.

Moreover, the usage of language is heavily dependent on an individual's ideological association and their relationship to the source (i.e., a politician or a news source). As politicians and news media continued to attach interchangeable positive (god) or negative (devil) valences

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to these ideographs dependent on their ideological leanings and/or the ideological leanings of an intended audience, individuals began to do the same. For example, the posts using "Don't Say Gay" as a devil term were more likely to include praise of DeSantis' or HB 1557's commitment to maintaining "parental rights" and protecting children from "inappropriate" or "sexual" content (Facebook, n.d.; Twitter, n.d.). Christina Pushaw (2022), DeSantis' press secretary, tweeted "the bill that liberals inaccurately call 'Don't Say Gay' would be more accurately described as an 'Anti-Grooming Bill'" followed by "if you're against the Anti-Grooming Bill, you are probably a groomer or at least you don't denounce the grooming of 4-8 year old children." This highlights how individuals in alignment with conservative ideologies adopt these ideographs as god (e.g., "parental rights") and devil terms (e.g., "Don't Say Gay") to further formulate or express their own opinions on the bill. This perpetuates the circulation of language by creating additional contextualization and streams of influence which attach ideology and inform sense making for individuals hearing and using the term(s).

As individuals continue to hear and use these terms in accordance with how the media and politicians are using them, the varying sources of ideological influence entangle themselves to the polysemic terms which become difficult for individuals to separate for the purposes of individual or public sense making. For example, while DeSantis and other prominent Republicans frequently disavowed the usage of "Don't Say Gay" to describe their policy, by acknowledging it and thus perpetuating the media's usage of it, even supporters of the HB 1557 continued to use it publicly. This created a unique situation where the same phrase ("Don't Say Gay") began to be pulled back and forth between the two ideologies (i.e., supporters and opponents of HB 1557). Heriman and Lucaites (2003) discuss how a single static image can become representative of two opposing ideologies, which informs viewers identification and

public memory of an event. Supporters of HB 1557 that commonly refer to the bill as "Don't Say Gay," are identifying with DeSantis' policy while re-crafting the dominant public memory to uphold a law that never explicitly says "gay" as one that does. This serves dual functions to strengthen support for DeSantis and reinforce societal understanding regarding what the bill "does" – at least ideologically. Regardless of this complex interweaving of influence, as these terms are incorporated within legislation, political, and public usages they lose their polysemic quality and tend toward the adopted usage of the dominant ideology.

The separation and dual usage of terms operates to further separates individuals into hyperpolarized camps based on agreement or disagreement with these perceptions. As terms continue to circulate within hyperpolarized sociopolitical discourses, they continue to become symbols informed by dominant ideologies. As previously established, politicians and the news media intentionally and frequently utilize these polysemic terms as enthymemes indicating a deeper ideological attachment in implicit ways. This further morphs these ideographs into symbols with ideological valences intertwined into their usage. Within the previous example where "Don't Say Gay" operated as a devil term representing "grooming," individuals following this usage adopt strong and almost immediate defenses against the terms "gay," "sexual orientation," or "gender identity" due to the enthymematic understanding created by political and media rhetoric. This further framed allowance of these "inappropriate classroom discussions" as putting children at risk of being groomed or other predatory behaviors. Just hearing the phrase "Don't Say Gay" triggers the ideological understanding that whoever does "say gay" is then against the "fundamental rights of parents" or the "mental, emotional, or physical well-being" of a child.

Moreover, when the opposing perspective tries to further elaborate or define what "sexual orientation" or "gender identity" discussions do, the immediate connection to an attack on "parental rights" or "fundamental rights" prohibits meaningful debate and encourages divisive and hyperpolarized argumentations. This sets a dangerous precedent by reinforcing "othering" or us v. them mentalities through divisive language that dissuades substantive discourse or debate. This is then harmful to interpersonal relationships as well as the deliberative ideals of democracy by furthering divisions among individuals through obfuscation and deflection (Chambers, 2009; Kim & Zhao, 2020; Warner et al., 2020). Within the isolated example of HB 1557, individuals are continually forced to choose between protecting children's well-being or supporting LGBTQ+ advocacy with no option of a middle ground. This furthers harmful stereotypes about the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., Mishel, 2020; Herek, 1998) and forces individuals to pick between a lesser of two evils – which often results in the perpetuation of the pre-existing hegemonic dominant (Hall, 1982).

As these terms continued to circulate within public discourses, they also began to conflate or intertwine with other seemingly unrelated controversial issues. This exemplifies the enthymematic and polysemic nature of these terms because individuals then connected "Don't Say Gay" and "parental rights" to other examples of this circulation (e.g., Florida HB 7 "Stop WOKE", Texas HB 1607 banning CRT-related language, Tennessee HB 9/SB 3 banning drag performances). As these controversial bills continue to circulate within the media and public discourse, their vague and polysemic nature cause them to overlap within the public's understanding. While HB 1557 exists entirely separate from the CRT and "woke" language bans, the public views "Don't Say Gay" as a continuation of "woke" language and CRT curriculum bans without distinction from one another. The HB 1557 press release exemplifies this conflation

between "woke" language and "Don't Say Gay," within Lieutenant Governor Núñez quote "we will not back down to woke corporations" (Florida Governor's Office, 2022a, para. 3). While this press release was supposed to be focused explicitly on HB 1557 being signed into effect, Núñez is directly referencing HB 7 "Stop WOKE" and its operational functions which further conflates the two bills for audiences (e.g., voters) (Florida Governor's Office, 2022b).

Further as ideologically powerful and hyperpolarized language continued to circulate regarding several controversial issues, the polysemic nature of these terms allowed them to merge and become synonymous or representative of each other in the minds of the public. HB 1557 was developed based on the legal precedent being developed by legislation targeted at critical race theory (CRT) bans effecting schools in 42+ states (The Economist, 2022). As the public began to hear and become familiar with "parental rights" in relation to CRT, DeSantis was able to capitalize on these discussions and sponsor additional "parental rights" legislation within Florida (e.g., HB 1557, HB 7). This then sets the legal precedent and public expectation that legislation and campaign language will continue to adopt these types of hyperpolarizing qualities. Subsequently, making it easier for politicians (in this case – DeSantis) to put forward ideologically extreme and controversial campaign promises and legislative proposals.

Conclusion

To conclude, while the scope of this type of legislation is, at the moment, confined to states like Florida, the ideographs and usage of ultimate terms to perpetuate ideology frameworks are not. The legislative language and political rhetoric employed around have been adopted and used across the United States regarding a multitude of cases. This highlights how the lack of specified or defined language associated with these pieces of legislation made the terms prime targets for additional ideological influence. This subsequently makes them eligible to reenter this

circulation as support for additional pieces of legislation or ideological goals of politicians. Thus,

the circulation remains a repetitive circuit and the process restarts. While this analysis was

focused on the circulation around HB 1557, there are a multitude of other examples that could be

substituted into this framework to uncover how ultimate terms are being used within

sociopolitical contexts across the United States.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE APPLICATIONS

I started this project with the explicit goal of wanting to better understand how hyperpolarized political language was affecting individuals. As someone who was coming of age alongside a seemingly endless stream of unprecedented events and divisive political campaigns, I often found myself wondering how American society reached the point where democracy felt as if it was constantly on the verge of failure (e.g., the 2016/2020 elections and January 6th). Going into this project I had the end goal of wanting to use critical rhetorical analysis to uncover hidden motivations and better make sense of the areas of life I considered to be the most hyperpolarized or sites of contentious sociopolitical disagreement. Within sociopolitical disputes and cultural wars surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing racial "reckoning" and Black Lives Matter movement, and political campaigns were specific sites of hyperpolarizing content that I found myself particularly interested in. However, as I began the process of determining what specific artifact(s) I wanted to evaluate it became apparent that one text alone would not allow me to fully uncover how hyperpolarization was influencing sociopolitical discourses. For this reason, I began to theorize about how language was circulating between these sites of hyperpolarization and public discourses.

Ultimately, I settled upon creating an updated theoretical framework by piecing together existing theories to highlight how modern hyperpolarized political language circulates and impacts multiple levels of society. By applying this framework to one primary exemplar, Florida House Bill 1557, I was able to analyze how the adoption of specific symbolically powerful ultimate terms directly influenced perceptions and sense-making processes of individuals in relation to ongoing culture wars and new legislation. As culture wars continue to wage within

our society (as they always have and always will), it is critical that we understand the ways in which our usage of language continues to impact our institutions and everyone within it.

Impact of Hyperpolarized Circulation

Throughout my analysis I established that there were several institutions or areas of life which were directly impacted by the circulation of hyperpolarized language. It is my goal that future scholarship continues to use the framework and findings established within this thesis to inform new research studies that evaluate these impacts and more. By understanding how current hyperpolarized language is being used in harmful ways, continued scholarship must illuminate and prioritize research that guides us away from divisive political extremism and back to productive substantive debates. These next sections will overview my overarching conclusions, limitations, and future directions for research.

Weakened Legislation

The United States legal system is built upon the basis of Judicial Review and precedent, meaning that each new code, statute, or law must be pursuant to the existing governing laws of the nation (National Constitution Center, 2022). While legislation like Florida's House Bill 1557 was directly built upon the precedent of existing statutes, its new and vague provisions have opened the door for several other potentially unconstitutional provisions to begin to enter the fray. For example, in the time since HB 1557's enrollment (March 2022) several other states have begun creating and passing variations of "Don't Say Gay" bills and other anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. While it is easy to brush aside these pieces of legislation because they are *merely* political footballs created only to garner cultural outrage and attention, or because they *might* not directly impact your life, or because the courts *might* overrule them – the very existence of these types of policies allows for the precedent to be overruled or created to further discriminatory

action. Presently (March 2023) new legislation like Tennessee's House Bill 878 is being debated

within the legislative and public discourses. This bill could potentially gut marriage equality for

same-sex, interracial, or interfaith couples and was created with the explicit purpose of 1) scoring

political or cultural outrage and 2) to be challenged within the court of appeals which could go

all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court (Otten, 2023). While the premise of this bill is blatantly

unconstitutional based on 50+ years of marriage equality precedent, by passing this bill

Tennessee provides the ability for the courts and the public to question what should be upheld

and protected under the law – an individual's "fundamental rights" or the rights of individuals

in/wanting "non-traditional" marriages.

Further, controversial debates like the ones occurring regarding Tennessee HB 878 have

been reignited and made possible by the passage of other politically controversial bills like HB

1557. This continues a dangerous precedent of hiding malicious and discriminatory practices of

the law alongside what is deemed by the hegemonic-dominant as a de facto or commonsense

function (i.e., banning topics under the guise of protecting children's "well-being"). Generations

of discriminatory policy and legislation within the United States has perpetuated and reinforced

elements of white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchal standards by legally enforcing

discriminatory practices under the thin veil of supporting other rights (e.g., literacy tests, separate

but equal).

While a strength of this project is its focus on contemporary examples of circulating

hyperpolarization, it also creates a weakness due to its lack of evaluation of the implementation

or punitive functions of the new legislative language. Future lines of research should seek to

evaluate how these laws have been implemented and the effects of their punitive measures. For

example, studies investigating the hyperpolarization of the judicial system through the usage of

appointments (i.e., Supreme Court Justices) and the politicized nature of upholding or

overturning of types of legislation would illuminate more ways that this circulation of divisive

language is impacting American society. Additional legal and longitudinal studies would be best

situated to analyze more specified impact of legislation like HB 1557 and others.

Increased Hyperpolarization

Additionally, when legislation like HB 1557 has been crafted and discussed using

intentionally vague or polysemic language with the intent of creating new (or undoing) pathways

in the law, it also invites new avenues for contentious action or debate. Increasing usage of

vague, enthymematic-polysemic buzzwords allows for misinterpretation and us v. them rhetoric

to thrive. This is exemplified within arguments in favor of HB 1557 that view individuals as

either supportive of "parental rights" or against the protection of the "mental, emotional, or

physical well-being" of a child. This creates an immediate sense of us v. them in the minds of the

public and presents the issue as one-dimensional rather than multifaceted. By removing the

option of a potential middle ground, individuals are forced to continue to choose political sides

which prevents substantive debates on policy. This further degrades the deliberative ideals of

democracy and reinforces bitter sociopolitical divisions.

Moreover, as politicians like Ron DeSantis continue to successfully campaign and pass

legislation with these hyperpolarized terms, the media and voters alike both came to expect and

reinforce the usage of these terms. To maintain prominence on the agenda, politicians are

expected to address and use these hyperpolarized buzzwords or risk being seen as unaware or out

of touch with hot topics. Within news articles, DeSantis and other political figures are often

featured with quotes stating that reinforce that HB 1557 does not prevent individuals from saying

"gay" but rather prevents discussions of "sexual orientation" or "gender identity" which are

"inappropriate" for the classroom (Chasmar, 2022; Lavietes, 2022). This highlights the fact that politicians and audiences are conflating the terms "gay", "sexual orientation", and "gender identity" within discourses. As the hyperpolarized and polysemic terms continue to circulate, DeSantis and the media perpetuate anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies without having to explicitly say that they are doing so or espouse themselves to discriminatory beliefs. Additionally, as post-truthism and hyperpolarization continue to be a dominant part of American society, the average citizen may not have accessible or accurate information on these topics beyond what is being given to them by politicians and the mass media. While this project began to untangle the usage of hyperpolarized language within American sociopolitical discourses, future studies should seek out how this intentional obfuscation of information or use of misinformation effects public political systems or institutions.

Degradation of Trust

The final overarching concluding theme I found was that the continued circulation of hyperpolarized language degrades the trust for all parties involved. Within both the news articles and social media posts I examined, I found evidence that individuals felt misdirected or skeptical of information readily available regarding HB 1557 and other controversial legislation. Parents no longer trust teachers, individuals no longer trust their representatives, and everyone mistrusts the judicial system to then evaluate these laws. Outside of the examples of HB 1557, evidence from the last major election cycles (i.e., the 2020 presidential election and January 6th) showed that individuals no longer trusted voting systems or Congress to certify election results. This hints to a much larger issue regarding American citizens and their trust in democratic institutions. However, due to this project's focus I was only able to evaluate a small cross-section of the wide web of language circulating within current sociopolitical discourses to test this

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updated theoretical framework. More longitudinal studies should be done to truly unpack and understand the nature of this circulation of ideologically powerful and hyperpolarizing language. Additional studies should incorporate other avenues of data collection (e.g., from different methodological perspectives) to further analyze the impacts of hyperpolarizing language and hyperpolarization on larger scales.

Final Conclusions

My goal is that my thesis helps to shed a small beacon of light into the crazy and ever-evolving world happening around us. I hope to continue this research and be informed by other studies with the goal that one day these sociopolitical divides won't be as big, but instead points of understanding amongst each other. While today's sociopolitical landscape is hyperpolarized and divisive, it does not have to forever be this way. Historically, the United States has seen periods of hyperpolarization followed by cohesion and progress. Hopefully projects like this one continue to be created to illuminate a better, more inclusive future for us all.

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