ABSTRACT

In the 2004 presidential election, Republicans frequently and successfully attacked Democratic candidate John Kerry for being a liberal Senator from Massachusetts. Since the 1960 election, the use of this liberal label has increased significantly and its connotations have become extremely negative. Examining candidates’ political convention addresses, presidential candidate debates, and campaign commercials reveals obvious trends of the epithet’s increasing use by the Republicans at the expense of the Democrats. Public opinion analysis reveals that the newfound use of the liberal label is not a reflection of Americans’ changing opinion about the political left wing or its ideology; instead, it is the product of a clever conservative campaign strategy. Regardless of their origins, these changes in ideological rhetoric have occurred at the sacrifice of the Democrats’ ideological identity and productive policy discourse. Democrats must reclaim the liberal label to prevent an ideological identity crisis, to protect future left-wing candidates from ideological attacks, and to improve political discourse overall.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my mentor, Diana Owen
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In the second debate of the 2004 presidential election, incumbent candidate George W. Bush blasted his opponent John F. Kerry as the “most liberal senator of all” (Bush and Kerry, 2004, October 8). Earlier in the campaign, a Bush-Cheney television advertisement, “Doublespeak,” highlighted the same statistic from the National Journal magazine, claiming Kerry was “more liberal than Hillary Clinton or Ted Kennedy” (Bush-Cheney ’04, Inc., 2004). And on the Sunday television talk show Meet the Press, Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespie branded the challenger as a “Massachusetts liberal” who was “out of touch” with the American people, an effective criticism borrowed from the Republicans’ victory over Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in 1988 (Russert, 2004, February 15).

From Bush to Gillespie, conservatives in the 2004 election employed the liberal label frequently and with the explicit purpose of portraying Kerry as a candidate who favored higher taxes and more government regulations, who endorsed a weak foreign policy and an inadequate strategy to fight terrorism, and who did not espouse the values of common Americans. This branding of Kerry’s left-leaning views appeared to resonate with voters and contributed to Bush’s victory in November 2004: in an ABC poll conducted less than a month before the election, 45% of likely voters considered Bush’s opponent too liberal, compared to 37% who thought Bush was too conservative.
(Langer, 2004). By highlighting Kerry’s liberal ideology, Bush was able to paint the Senator as out of the mainstream and a poor choice for the country’s leader.

The evident success of the liberal label in 2004 is a far cry from the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt who leveraged his liberal views against conservatism to win an unprecedented three national elections. In a manner unthinkable for today’s political discourse, Roosevelt disparaged conservatives as too narrow-minded and without a vision for the future. In a radio address to the New York Herald Tribune Forum in 1939, the thirty-second president identified the four political groups in the U.S.: “A radical is a man with both feet firmly planted in the air. A conservative is a man with two perfectly good legs, who, however, has never learned to walk forward. A reactionary is a somnambulist walking backwards. A liberal is a man who uses his legs and his hands at the behest of his head” (Roosevelt, 1939). To this day, Roosevelt represents the country’s hero of liberalism. His New Deal programs are supported broadly by Americans, conservatives and liberals alike, but his confident and overt support for liberalism has disappeared from presidential races. John Kerry’s 2004 candidacy strove to avoid all liberal attacks launched by the Republicans. Sixty-five years after Roosevelt dismissed conservatives, the word liberal had acquired libelous connotations.

What, then, accounts for the evolution of the word liberal from a laudatory label during Roosevelt’s presidency to a negative epithet in the 2004 race for the White House? Was the 2004 election an anomaly in political rhetoric? Or has the American
The electorate grown increasingly conservative and developed a negative view of liberals?

The election of John F. Kennedy indicated Americans’ support of overtly liberal candidates as recently as 1960. Twenty years after Roosevelt’s New Deal, the young Massachusetts Senator stood on the three-term president’s legacy, proudly stated his liberal allegiances, and successfully won the White House. He burnished political opponent Nixon’s emerging criticism of his left-leaning views and questioned the attacks’ rationale, dismissing the conservatives’ assertions equating liberals with reckless spending and invasive federal government. Kennedy’s rhetoric echoed Roosevelt’s theme of liberals’ forward-thinking philosophy. Speaking to the New York Liberal Party to accept their nomination of him for president, he rebuked Nixon’s criticisms of his ideology. Kennedy confidently defined a liberal as “someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of people – their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties.” Despite Republican attacks and secure in his beliefs, Kennedy asserted, “I’m proud to say I’m a “Liberal” (Kennedy, 1960, September 14). His presidency arguably represents the pinnacle of liberal politics, during which the country’s liberalism hit its highest level in the last 50 years and thereafter declined (Stimson, 1999). This study explores candidates’ use of the liberal label from Kennedy to Kerry and compares its evolution to trends in public opinion over the last four decades.
The use of the word liberal and relevant public opinion indicators are the focus of this paper and are used to determine the trajectories of both from 1960 to 2004 as a means to understand whether the use of liberal in 2004 was part of a greater pattern or unprecedented instance, and whether its negative connotations as leveraged by the Republicans coincide with public opinion. This paper hypothesizes that since Kennedy’s election the liberal label has been used with increasing frequency and with more damaging connotations for the Democrats. In addition, this study tests the hypothesis that public opinion supports this trend with decreasing favorable opinions of liberals and the fundamental tenets of liberalism.

To examine these hypotheses and answer the above questions, this paper will pursue an empirically based methodology that relies on rhetorical and opinion analyses. First the paper will establish the theoretical framework and definition of liberal used for this study. Next the use of the ideological epithet in the 2004 election will be established by analyzing appearances by politicians on NBC’s Meet the Press, a Sunday morning political talk show that attracts the most prominent politicians. A cursory study of media coverage in 13 major U.S. newspapers bolsters the talk show findings. And finally the stump speeches of Kerry and Bush are evaluated and compared to those of Nixon and Kennedy in 1960 to illustrate liberal’s negative use in the last presidential election.

Following the 2004 analysis, the paper will explain its methodology for determining whether the Bush-Kerry contest was part of a larger pattern and
subsequently delve into the political rhetoric and public opinion analysis. First the study will complete the rhetorical analysis, which will be based on three variables: addresses by Party nominees at the Republican and Democratic nomination conventions, presidential debates between the two (and sometimes three) candidates, and television advertisements aired by the candidates’ campaigns. These variables will be assessed for their use of the word liberal and general ideological rhetoric, and an overall liberal index will be derived from their analysis. Then the study will turn to its second component, the public opinion analysis. Using data obtained by the National Election Survey, Americans’ feelings toward liberals and liberalism will be analyzed through the following variables: feeling thermometers of liberals and conservatives, ideological identification, political party affiliation, ideological assessment of political parties, and support for government spending and services, involvement in health care, welfare, and reduction of the defense budget.

From these statistics, the study aims to determine whether the trajectory of Americans’ opinion of liberals from 1960 to 2004 mirrors that of the liberal label. Conclusions about the two variables’ relationship follow. These deductions are then used for further analysis of the implications of the liberal label and its potential impact on U.S. presidential elections. The findings lend themselves to a cursory critique of the Democrats’ current method of addressing the phenomenon. The paper wraps up these conclusions and revisits relevant literature to propose more effective means for
the Democrats to reclaim their ideology and rebuke conservatives’ leverage of the liberal label.

Because the patterns of political rhetoric and public opinion from 1960 to 2004 do not match, this paper urges Democrats to reclaim their ideology by waging a similar vocabulary war against the conservatives. The political rhetoric analysis reveals that the use of the liberal label has increased steadily since 1960, jumping significantly in the late 1980s and mid 1990s. In almost every election, Republicans uttered the label more frequently and at the Democratic candidate’s expense. This finding supports the hypothesis that the 2004 election was not an anomaly but part of a greater trend toward the epithet’s expanding use and increasingly negative connotations.

The public opinion analysis does not support the original hypothesis that the American electorate has grown more conservative. On the contrary, the electorate has sustained moderate positions on ideology, political parties, and fundamental tenets of liberalism. Some of the indicators slightly favor the conservatives and some lean mildly toward the Democrats, but none of the statistics follows the steep incline of the rhetorical variables.

The discrepancy between the two variables led to this study’s conclusions that the more frequent use and more negative associations of the liberal label are not supported by public opinion. Although the direct impact of the political rhetoric on public opinion was not analyzed (such a connection can be made tenuously at best), the relationship between ideology and other public opinion variables was tested in multiple
ways and revealed that consistent berating of the liberals by the Republican elite could potentially influence the popular perception of the Democratic party and affect party affiliation. Moreover, it pushes candidates to one narrow place on the political spectrum and limits political discourse. Democrats’ susceptibility to these attacks encourages their use and larger strategies of negative campaigning at the sacrifice of policy debate. For all of these reasons, Democrats should confront these ideological attacks.

Perhaps presenting a moderate candidate is the best way to circumvent the Republicans’ disparagement of the liberal ideology, but public opinion on many issues indicates a politician with more left-leaning views might appeal to voters. Simply nominating a candidate who does not attract the liberal label, however, does not address the harsh reality of the negative epithet’s success. The left wing should wage a campaign to reclaim the liberal label. The Democrats must resurrect the brashness and confidence of John F. Kennedy to avoid the ideological identity crisis the Democratic Party could face if the liberal label attacks go unaddressed.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Presidential elections are, of course, rife with discrepancies between political rhetoric and public opinion. President Johnson’s 1964 campaign provides a perfect example. Johnson campaigned as the peace candidate -- in contrast to Senator Barry Goldwater, who once suggested nuclear weapons might help to end the Vietnam War – while he was simultaneously engaging U.S. soldiers in an escalation of the southeast Asia conflict (CQ Press Staff, 2005, p. 69). And in the 1988 campaign, Vice President George H.W. Bush promised to the American people, “Read my lips, no new taxes!” only to increase taxes in 1991 as part of an effort to tame the federal deficit (Roberts and Hammond, 2004, p. 302). This thesis does not pretend to contribute unique findings of such a natural component of electoral politics; however, in the following review of relevant literature, this paper argues that the discrepancies between ideological rhetoric and public opinion, regardless of the electorate’s understanding of ideology, is particularly significant for electoral outcomes.

The numerous volumes of literature on political ideology alone attest to its importance in the overall understanding of politics, but beyond acknowledging its existence, political scientists remain inconclusive about the public’s understanding of ideology or its role in voter choice, governance, and public opinion. Although these are no doubt important topics to be tackled, this paper does not concern itself with the electorate’s precise comprehension of the term or its significance. Instead, more important for consideration is popular perception of liberalism and conservatism
ideology. For a study that assesses the impact of just the ideological label, what an individual believes liberalism entails is far more important than whether the person’s assumptions are correct.

Robert Lane similarly dismisses evaluation of individuals’ beliefs in *Political Ideology* (1962). In his work, Lane interviews fifteen ordinary American men to determine their beliefs on a variety of issues ranging from freedom to their jobs to racism. Through his conversations he identifies trends in their beliefs and expressions of these beliefs. Although his work can be considered outdated since it included only men in a small eastern town, this paper relies on one of Lane’s basic assumption -- that people’s ideas, whether properly informed or not, are valid.

Other political scientists take great efforts to point out the gradations of understanding of ideology among Americans. Levitin and Miller state explicitly that ideological labels are used by at least 70 percent of the public, though only the more “sophisticated voters” do so with true cognizance of their meanings (1979, pp. 751-752). Philip Converse claimed very few voters could explain what liberal and conservative meant (1964). Bowles and Richardson also delineate between those who can link occurrences together, or think in more ideological terms, and those who do “not see relationships between events, concluding that individuals’ opinions are more consistent when they accomplish the former (1969, pp. 677, 684). Finkel, too, agrees with Converse and Pierce and Hagner that there is a stratification of ideological understanding among voters, and those with the greatest comprehension translate such
ideas to the general public (Finkel, 1989; Converse, 1975; Pierce and Hagner, 1984). While these distinctions might be important for some studies trying to identify the impact of ideology on voter choice, this paper is more concerned with ideological rhetoric, specifically the connotations of liberal and individuals’ reaction to the word’s usage.

This paper’s conclusions, however, partly do hinge on findings such as Converse’s and Bowles and Richardson’s, for the phenomenon of liberal’s negative connotation is directly linked to the public’s lack of knowledge of liberalism. As will be discussed below, Republicans successfully injected the word liberal into the 2004 campaign, selectively and negatively defining the epithet and leveraging it against the Democratic candidate. Because public opinion suggests the basic tenets of liberalism are still popular among Americans, the effectiveness of these attacks revealed the public’s shallow understanding of political ideology and their subsequent willingness to accept a new, albeit incomplete, meaning of liberal. It has been argued that trends in increase ideological awareness are simply regurgitations of political rhetoric and do not reflect a greater understanding of ideology (Converse, 1975; Pierce and Hagner, 1980). This study agrees that public opinion has remained relatively constant, despite the increased aversion to the word liberal. The reappearance of the liberal label in campaign rhetoric represents a resurfacing of ideological rhetoric, though not necessarily a more ideologically astute or engaged public. If this trend persists, the studies of the electorate’s accurate understanding of political ideology will be less
relevant. The campaign value of the words will eclipse their theoretical and historical significance. In this way, this study attempts to redirect the focus of political ideology away from the public’s knowledge of the word and toward the impact of ideological rhetoric.

Even in the studies that attempt to distinguish between the proper and incomplete understandings of ideology, many authors acknowledge the importance of the common usage and implications of the words. Bowles and Richardson recognize the importance of popular definitions and for their study defined liberalism and conservatism “according to their usage in contemporary American politics” (Bowles and Richardson, 680). And Levitin and Miller appreciate the “political significance” of liberal and conservative, despite the incomplete understanding of the terms (1979, p. 752). Minar agrees that ideology’s historical context means it cannot be “stripped of its global embellishments and connotations” and as a result is complexly and with difficulty defined (1961, p. 319). Conditional factors such as the most salient issues or a candidate’s character can influence the prominence of ideology in an election. In fact, as the GOP’s use of the liberal label demonstrates, “political parties and candidates [can] stimulate ideological conflict within the electorate” (Pierce, 1970, p. 41).

In addition to the public’s understanding of political ideology, much of the literature wrestles with its elusive definition. Lane opens his book with numerous interpretations of the word and arrives at a seven-part definition himself (1962, pp. 14-
Minar outlines six different categories of meanings for the concept, perhaps summarizing this literature best when he says that ideology often becomes the concept used as a “delusory ‘explanation’…that nothing else accounts for” (1961, p. 368). Holm and Robinson avoid the discussion altogether and jump straight to the empirical studies’ measurement of the concept (1978). This study also avoids the definition debate. For its purposes, liberal is loosely assumed to be, in contrast to that of conservative, “more government action to meet individual needs” (Safire, 1968, p. 373). But beyond this vague explanation, this paper avoids the murky topic of ideology definitions because the power and presence of political rhetoric means the public perception of the word is more important than the true meaning itself. Whether the electorate’s beliefs coincide with the terms’ definition has little impact on how they affect the voters’ opinions. Therefore, in this assessment of the liberal label, the popular connotations of the word are considered more influential than the complex theoretical debate surrounding ideology, and much of the theoretical

This paper acknowledges that ideology can influence voter choice. Or at least a negative political epithet based on ideology can affect public opinion of a candidate. But the focus of the paper is not on the direct link between the liberalism or conservatism and the ballot box. This evaluation of the liberal label is a corollary to Pierce’s suggestion that candidates and campaigns can affect an election’s ideological influence through their rhetoric (Pierce, 1989). The 2004 election supports his and Nie’s conclusion that citizens can become more ideologically aware due to presidential
campaign rhetoric, in this case with unfavorable results for the Democrats (Nie et al., 1976). Even though this awareness might not reflect deep knowledge about liberalism and conservatism, the electorate has responded to candidates’ increased ideological rhetoric (Finkel, 1989). Should this pattern continue, the liberal label could force the Democratic Party to redefine themselves and therefore the concept of American political ideology.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Building off the ideas of Converse, Levitin, and Miller this study aims to evaluate how the liberal ideology has been portrayed during the last 12 presidential elections. In order to accomplish this daunting goal, the study pursued a very simple methodology of empirical evaluation. Its straightforward approach possibly limits its overall findings, but it permits clear conclusions to be drawn from the political rhetoric and public opinion analysis.

2004 political rhetoric

The evaluation of ideological rhetoric in the 2004 presidential election was based on two variables: the transcripts of *Meet the Press* and relevant newspaper articles in 13 major U.S. newspapers. To help determine whether the 2004 election was a rhetorical anomaly, the stump speeches of Kerry and Bush were compared to those of Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy in the 1960 election. Below is the precise method used to assess each variable.

*Meet the Press*

*Meet the Press* was chosen as the one analyzed television talk show because of its prestige and popularity among the political elite. Although its viewership does not compare to popular television shows in prime time, it is widely respected and watched among politicians. As a result, it is a required platform from which presidential
campaigns discuss their issue positions, their candidate’s strengths, and their opponent’s weaknesses. All transcripts from the 45 shows aired from January 1, 2004 to November 2, 2004 were accessed from MSNBC’s website and searched electronically for the word “liberal.” When occurrences of the word were found, the transcript was reviewed carefully to determine the speaker and the context of the liberal reference. These findings were compiled anecdotally and are presented in Chapter 4 as evidence of the liberal label’s use in the last presidential election.

Newspapers

In addition to the Meet the Press analysis, the study turned to newspaper coverage of the liberal label during the same time frame, January 1, 2004 to November 2, 2004. Using Lexis Nexis as a research tool, daily periodicals were searched for the terms “liberal,” “label,” “president,” and “election.” These terms were chosen to identify those articles that discussed the liberal label itself, not just a liberal candidate, in the presidential election. Each article meeting these requirements was read completely to determine if the search engine’s results were relevant for the study. The articles were compiled and, for the sake of brevity, only those from major publications – defined by circulation size – were considered. The findings are presented following the conclusions from the Meet the Press analysis in Chapter 4.
Stump speeches

To first establish whether there has been a change in ideological rhetoric since Kennedy, the study begins with a content analysis of Kennedy-Nixon and Kerry-Bush campaign speeches available online. Five hundred ninety-two of Kennedy’s speeches given between July and November 1960 and 283 of Nixon’s speeches during the same period were analyzed. Texts of the 1960 speeches were obtained from a Web site titled JFKLink.com, which identifies itself as “an ongoing, growing, archive of documents relevant to the life, administration, death and legacy of President John F. Kennedy” (Hopley, 2004). Unfortunately and surprisingly, such an extensive online repository for 2004 campaign speeches could not be located. The sample size for both Bush’s and Kerry’s stump speeches was 40 between July and November 2004 as found on the American Presidency Project Web site, an electronic database of presidency documents affiliated with the University of California Santa Barbara (Peters, 1999). Both the 1960 and 2004 speeches were searched electronically for the word liberal, and the number of times the word was mentioned was recorded. These tallies for each candidate were totaled and the percent of speeches in which the word occurred was calculated. The findings from the 1960 addresses were compared to those of 2004 to evaluate whether the most recent election featured the liberal label more frequently than the Kennedy-Nixon contest.

Political Rhetoric

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1 Some of the speeches analyzed were advance copies of speeches, the delivered versions of which also were analyzed. In all occurrences of the word liberal, there was never a discrepancy between the advance and the delivered texts.
After establishing that the Republicans leveraged the liberal label against the Democrats quite frequently in the 2004 election and more frequently than the conservatives in the 1960 campaign, the paper moves to analyze the overall trend of ideological rhetoric in the last dozen presidential elections. This pattern is established by assessing three rhetorical variables for each contest for the White House since Kennedy and Nixon’s. Specifically, the transcripts of candidates’ addresses to their political party conventions, of the presidential debates, and of television advertisements were scoured for their use of the word liberal to determine how the epithet’s use has changed.

**Convention Speeches**

Using again the American Presidency Project’s Web site, this study accessed electronic versions of all presidential candidates’ convention speeches from 1960 to 2004. These transcripts were searched electronically for the word liberal and the number of occurrences was recorded. The findings were organized according to political party so use of the word could be assessed across party lines.

**Presidential Debates**

As with the convention speeches, the presidential debate transcripts were compiled for each year and analyzed for the word liberal. The word’s frequencies were noted for each candidate for each year. Although no presidential debates were held from 1964 to
1972, this variable was included in the study because it is a rather uniform feature of 75% of the last dozen races and presents an optimal opportunity to analyze the candidates’ rhetoric.

Television Advertisements
The Livingroomcandidate.org Web site, a project of the American Museum of the Moving Image, supplied the transcripts for television advertisements from each presidential campaign included in this study (Slovin, n.d.). Using the same method employed with the convention addresses and the presidential debates, transcripts of these campaign commercials were searched electronically for the word liberal. The results were recorded and used to analyze the pattern of ideological rhetoric. The results from the analysis of the speeches, debates, and advertisements were then totaled to produce an overall indicator of liberal rhetoric across the previous 12 presidential elections. This statistic was used in subsequent comparisons between the evolution of political rhetoric and public opinion.

Public Opinion
The second component of the study focused on public opinion analysis from 1960 to 2004 with the goal of comparing patterns in Americans’ views of liberals and liberalism to the use of the liberal label between 1960 and 2004. To complete this part of the investigation, the paper relied heavily on the American National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan. Statistics were evaluated for the last 12
presidential elections, if possible, or the time period for which the indicators were available. The indicators examined included the following: feeling thermometers of liberals and conservatives, ideological identification, political party affiliation, ideological perception of political parties, public support for government services and spending, public support for government involvement in health care and welfare, and public opinion on defense spending.

Using linear plots, these measures were analyzed for basic trends over the last four decades. Often and when appropriate, these linear graphs were compared between variables to determine relationships among indicators. When the plots warranted further investigation, multiple linear regressions were run between various statistics to determine the correlation between the two. This level of analysis was successful for only one pair of variables, and those results and implications are discussed below.

Comparing the two variables
Once the political rhetoric and the public opinion data had been collected and analyzed, the patterns in both variables were compared to determine whether a shift in voters’ beliefs could explain the increased use of the liberal label. These results were then used to formulate conclusions about the liberal label, its origins, and its implications. The study’s overall findings included recommendations for the Democrats based on the disparities between political rhetoric and public opinion since Kennedy. It relied primarily on one of the statistically significant linear regression models to indicate why the Democrats must respond to the Republicans’ use of the liberal label before its
frequent use and negative connotations create an ideological identity crisis for the Democratic Party.
CHAPTER 4: LIBERAL IN 2004

To followers of the most recent race for the White House, the 2004 presidential campaign seemed to be a choice between political ideologies, the compassionate conservative and the Massachusetts liberal. Republicans carefully delineated between the two candidates’ ideologies, inundating voters with ideological attacks of the Democratic candidate. One of the Republicans’ most popular tactics involved painting Kerry as a Massachusetts liberal who was out of touch with Americans. Conservatives reiterated this criticism on talk shows, in newspaper articles, in public appearances, and in campaign commercials. Perhaps because the Democrats did not respond to these ideological attacks, their libelous tones echoed throughout the campaign until election day. Whether or not the use of the liberal label was unique to 2004 or merely a repetition of previous election years will be discussed in later chapters. This chapter serves to demonstrate how pervasively and overtly the Republicans used the liberal label against the Democrats. Specifically, it analyzes the use of the liberal label on Sunday political television talk show Meet the Press and then examines treatment of the ideological epithet in major newspapers published in the election year to demonstrate the frequent occurrence and negative connotations of the liberal label in the 2004 presidential election.
Meet the Press

Tim Russert’s Meet the Press on NBC is one of the major political television talk shows broadcast on Sundays. It is considered a crucial stop for presidential campaigns because it commands a prominent and influential audience. This study elected to analyze Meet the Press as an indicator of television appearances by Republican and Democratic politicians during the 2004 election because it is a highly revered show that always presents a Democratic perspective when a Republican one is offered. During the last presidential election, appearances by conservative and liberal political players illustrated the frequency with which the liberal label was leveraged by the Republicans against the Democrats and the negative connotations the ideological epithet has acquired.

From the beginning of primary season to the November ballot, political analysts and high-level party representatives appeared on Meet the Press to tout the virtues of their candidate and lob criticism at their opponent. Russert featured conservative syndicated columnist Bob Novak and award-winning political historian Doris Kearns Goodwin in late February to discuss the election. Goodwin offered an extremely rare defense of the liberal label and Kerry’s Massachusetts roots, suggesting he follow Kennedy’s example of redefining and asserting pride in the liberal label. Novak’s response, however, summed up the word’s politically injurious connotation: “Nobody wants to be called a liberal, Doris. Maybe you do, but no politician does.” The columnist contrasted this reality to the President’s comfort with the word
conservative and acknowledged the Democrats’ precarious position of presenting themselves as members of the left wing of the Democratic Party while avoiding the word liberal. A dilemma made difficult, Novak said, because it is a “matter of deception.” (Russert, 2004, February 29)

Even more telling than Novak’s characterization, however, was Senator Ted Kennedy’s March 21st appearance. Russert asked the senior Senator from Massachusetts if he is a “proud liberal” like President Bush is a “proud conservative.” Kennedy answered “Yes, but I think…” and trailed off, not wanting to dwell on the liberal label and trying instead to criticize Bush’s ideology. Russert pushed ahead, asking “Is John Kerry a liberal?” and forced Kennedy to shy away from the descriptor completely. “John Kerry believes, as I do,” Kennedy stated, “that labels don’t make a lot of sense.” Despite Kennedy’s attempts to question Bush’s fiscal conservatism, Russert refocused the interview on Kerry’s liberal beliefs, demanding to know if Kennedy agreed with the *National Journal* rankings that identified Kerry as the number-one liberal in the Senate and Kennedy as the eighth. “He’s more liberal, than I am,” Kennedy answered sarcastically, “just as George Bush is a compassionate conservative.” (Russert, 2004, March 21)

Kennedy’s refusal to answer Russert’s questions underscores Novak’s assertion that liberal politicians do not want to be so labeled. Although Goodwin’s notion of a firm defense and redefinition of liberal worked for John F. Kennedy, the 2004 election
demonstrated how unpopular the word has become and how far politicians will go to distance themselves from such a characterization.

Even Barack Obama, a victorious candidate for Senate in 2004, would not take advantage of his indisputable electoral lead and defend his liberal views. When asked whether he would become a liberal Senator, Obama demurred, “I’m really not somebody who’s comfortable with liberal-conservative labels,” he responded. Weak retorts by Democrats allowed Republicans to continue to pin the unwanted label on their opponents. (Russert, 2004, July 25)

Senator George Allen, a Republican from Virginia, used the liberal label to expose Kerry’s lack of presidential qualifications. He argued that instead the Senator’s 20 years in Congress and his “very elitist Massachusetts liberal record,” should be the means of evaluating, and subsequently dismissing, his leadership skills despite his Vietnam heroics (Russert, 2004, August 22). Bush-Cheney 2004 Campaign Manager Ken Mehlman also discounted Kerry’s chances for the presidency based on his liberal ideology. He explained poll increases for the president’s campaign based on the Senator’s left-leaning political history. After the debates, Mehlman contended, the people “saw that John Kerry is, in fact, a Massachusetts liberal who will increase taxes and who will increase government involvement in health care” (Russert, 2004, October 17). A fact not disputed by Kerry’s political strategist, Bob Shrum, who appeared opposite Mehlman.
In these talk show debates, Russert always featured a Democrat to present the alternative view to the campaign and Kerry’s political ideology, but neither then-Democratic Senator John Corzine nor Shrum stepped up to the challenges of Senator Allen and Ken Mehlman, respectively. In all of Russert’s shows in 2004, no liberal representatives took Goodwin’s advice; no Democrat defined and defended liberal as Kennedy did during his 1960 campaign.

E.J. Dionne, a *Washington Post* columnist, provided an explanation for this seeming Democratic weakness in his *Meet the Press* appearance in July. To understand how values, for example, became a conservative issue, Dionne cited Republican efforts in the 1970s to split off voting groups from the Democratic Party’s supporters by targeting blue-collar workers with more conservative social views. This conscious campaign effort combined with the Democrats’ association with less conventional views on sex education and their pro-choice position on abortion, for example, “ceded the word morality to conservatives and Republicans” and allowed it to be defined by specific, popularly unfavorable issues. (Russert, 2004, July 18)

Despite Dionne’s explanation and Goodwin’s instructions, the Democrats who appeared before and after the columnist and the historian on *Meet the Press* did not retort the conservatives’ liberal label attacks. Prominent Democrats such as Barack Obama and Edward Kennedy continued to surrender control of ideological diction and its associated issues to the conservatives, furthering the liberal label’s negative connotations. This rhetorical phenomenon was seen not only on Russert’s television
show. The Republicans’ use of the liberal label and the Democrats’ inability to respond to it also appeared in headlines of major U.S. newspapers. The press’ acknowledgement of the epithet and its damaging meaning underscored the prominent role of the liberal label and its harmful implications for the Democrats as seen on *Meet the Press*.

**Newspapers**
The print media covered Republicans’ use of the liberal label in appearances on *Meet the Press*, other talk shows, and speeches. Their reporting of the tag’s frequency and success legitimized its effectiveness as a campaign attack and contributed to the common acceptance of its acquired negative connotations. Major newspapers dubbed it the “L-word” and analyzed its negative impact on Kerry’s campaign. Although some considered the label’s history and evolution and weighed whether it accurately described the Democratic candidate, most dailies merely remarked on the phenomenon of the word and its apparent success. From January 2004 to election day, 13 major U.S. newspapers published 26 stories and numerous editorials on the conservatives’ use and the rhetorical significance of the liberal label. Examining some of this newspaper coverage underlines the Republicans’ exploitation of the word and the Democrats’ aversion of it as demonstrated by members of both parties in their appearances on *Meet the Press*.

One of the major newspapers to recognize and assess the liberal label was *The Washington Post*, which ran six lengthy articles about the ideological attack in 2004.
Even before Kerry won the Democratic primary, the Post published an article titled “Republicans relish facing one of the ‘liberals’; they don’t know his name, but the label is ready” (Broder and Allen, 2004). Kerry’s Massachusetts credentials might have made the label stick, but, according to Broder and Allen, the Republicans were prepared to paint any Democratic candidate – regardless of his home state -- with the same liberal brush: “President Bush’s Washington strategists…are delighted at the prospect of running against a liberal tax-raiser who is soft on terrorism,” the article states, because it makes applying the liberal label easier.

This admission exhibits the disconnect between the use of liberal and its actual meaning. Republican strategists in 2004 adopted the word for their own political agenda, depriving it of its original meaning or positive connotations. One Republican consultant gave Broder and Allen convincing evidence of the discrepancy: “the basic message of ads on behalf of Bush will be that the Democrat is liberal, liberal, liberal,” he said, not referring to a specific candidate’s record. The Christian Science Monitor acknowledged the same Republican strategy in an article four days later, stating without surprise that “on a basic level,” the Republicans will define the Democratic nominee as “liberal [and] out of touch with the American mainstream” (Feldmann, 2004).

The strength of the liberal label, as acknowledged by the Post and the Monitor, greatly shaped Democrats’ election strategies. In a May 2004 article, the Post identified Southern Democrats who would not associate with Kerry’s presidential bid.
South Carolina Senate candidate Inez Tenenbaum admitted that the Republicans would attempt to classify her as a “classic Democratic liberal,” but due to her avoidance of the liberal label and Kerry’s candidacy, she hoped the attacks would “fall on deaf ears” (Babington, 2004).

Although little media coverage went beyond factual descriptions of the attacks or Democrats’ corresponding election tactics, occasionally an outlet attempted to assess the importance of such a label. The Post in one article considered both sides of the argument, citing some Democratic strategists who encouraged avoidance of liberal and others who argued that the word’s “explosive power” is not as effective anymore (Harris, 2004). USA Today reporters Susan Page and Jill Lawrence also went beyond basic reporting of the label’s use, exploring the strength and the veracity of the Republican attacks. They conclude in the headline “‘Massachusetts liberal’ looms as label to avoid,” but not until they have examined the word’s accuracy in terms of Massachusetts politics, determining that Massachusetts is not as liberal as it used to be (Page and Lawrence, 2004).

The Boston Globe and The Boston Herald also reported that the Massachusetts liberal label was harmful for Kerry’s campaign. In an article titled “Kerry looks to neutralize ‘Mass. Liberal’ tag,” Patrick Healy writes that the Massachusetts liberal image was one that the Senator was “preoccupied with shaking” (2004). Without investigating the label’s veracity, Healy wrote that the Republicans were “hammering” the Democratic candidate as “an elitist liberal who would raise taxes and cut defense
spending, not to mention that he served as a lieutenant governor under 1988 nominee Michael S. Dukakis” (2004). A month before the campaign, the Globe ran another article stating that the "‘Massachusetts liberal’ label has made a return to the presidential campaign trail” (Klein, 2004). Dubbing it the “L-word” in the headline, Rick Klein commented that the epithet was cropping up in Bush’s speeches and television ads as part of a “long eyed repris[al] of the tactic that worked so well against…Dukakis” (2004). Neither Patrick Healy nor Rick Klein defined the word liberal nor assessed its accurate description of John Kerry. Both articles, however, touted the Republicans’ frequent use of the label and the word’s negative connotations in their headlines alone.

Even after the election, the Herald blamed the liberal label for Kerry’s loss and drew sweeping conclusions about the fates of future presidential candidates from Massachusetts. Reporter Noelle Straub determined that the politicians from the New England state have been “hamstrung by the ‘Massachusetts liberal’ label,” costing the Democratic Party two of their last five attempts to win the White House (Straub, 2004). In response to this pattern, the Herald reported, “political observers” believe that Massachusetts politicians may “lose some of their pull on the national scene” (2004).

From The Washington Post to USA Today to The Boston Globe, major newspapers around the country noticed the influential presence of the liberal label in the 2004 election. But more than just reporting the Republicans’ use of the epithet, the
newspapers unquestioningly accepted the label’s negative connotations and instead wrote about the Democrats’ efforts to limit its damages. This newspaper trend echoed the pattern of appearances by representatives from both sides of the political spectrum on Meet the Press. In both media outlets, Republicans leveraged the liberal tag against the Democrats -- who did not dispute its injurious implications and who distanced themselves from it --and the word’s negative connotations went undisputed. Many of the newspapers referred to the 1988 presidential election when a similar conservative strategy used against then- Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis appeared to succeed. Whether the use of the ideological epithet as a damaging label in 2004 was a historically unique occurrence or part of a larger trend is the precise question this paper attempts to answer. As the first step toward figuring it out, the study will analyze the stump speeches of Kerry and Bush and compare them to those of Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, the last year a Massachusetts senator was elected to the White House.
CHAPTER 5: STUMP SPEECHES IN 1960 AND 2004

1960
The politicians on Meet the Press and the headlines of major U.S. newspapers agreed in 2004 that the liberal label was one to avoid. The epithet, according to the Boston Globe, appeared in all facets of the conservatives’ campaign, including in their television appearances, campaign commercials, and, closer toward election-day, in Bush’s stump speeches, in which the President commonly attacked Kerry for being a liberal Senator from Massachusetts. As part of this study’s efforts to determine whether the use of the ideological tag in 2004 was unprecedented, this chapter also examines the stump speeches of John Kennedy, the last Senator from Massachusetts to run for president and win. By comparing the candidates’ speeches in 1960 and 44 years later, it will be evident whether the ideological attacks historically have plagued politicians from left-leaning states, or whether the liberal label has developed only recently into a successful Republican campaign tactic.

The speeches of Kennedy, Nixon, Kerry, and Bush, as explained in the methodology chapter above, were evaluated for their inclusion of the word liberal to provide the framework within which more detailed analysis of the liberal label would be conducted. The distinctions between the two elections are stark. In 1960, Kennedy employed the liberal label willingly and with confidence, devoting one speech to the redefinition of the epithet and the disparagement of those who opposed it. Nixon offered only one documented attack on Kennedy’s ideology and even claimed to be a liberal in some respects. Eleven elections later, the Kerry-Bush contest revealed a
reversed reality. Bush attacked Kerry frequently and mockingly for being a liberal, an attack to which the Massachusetts Senator had no reply. Forty-four years after Kennedy’s grandiose liberal rhetoric, the Democratic candidate avoided all mentions of the word and even claimed to espouse “conservative values,” evidence that the liberal label has not always espoused the damaging associations it did in the 2004 elections.

Kennedy’s first campaign speech to mention liberal was a press conference in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts in late July 1960. In response to a question about changes in his campaign to accommodate issues or tactics raised at the Republic Party Convention, Kennedy reversed the question’s implication and credits the Democrats’ platform with shaping the Republicans’. New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Kennedy claimed, pushed the Republicans to modify their views on national defense, the economy, and civil rights because the leftist positions were more popular and threatened to challenge Nixon’s nomination if the Party did not do so (1960, July 28).

Two months later Kennedy visited Flint, Michigan on Labor Day and discussed his dedication to workers’ causes. He touted his 14 years in the Senate and the “liberal Democrats” defense of “working men and women” issues, the very issues the Republican Party worked and voted against (1960, September 5). In both speeches, Kennedy pits the Democrats against the Republicans by exposing the conservatives’ efforts to work against liberal causes and, in some cases, obligation to assume some liberal positions.
In the same vein and just a few days later, Kennedy addressed a crowd of Californians and criticized the Republicans’ lack of accomplishments. He disagreed with Governor Adelai Stevenson’s belief that the right wing’s agenda was thankfully “interrupted by the liberal hour” every four years, during which important things finally were accomplished. The conservatives’ record, he declared, “is written on the bills that never become law, on the things that we failed to do,” but the “record of the Democratic Party is written in the programs of Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom, Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, Harry Truman’s Fair Deal, [and] Adlai Stevenson’s new America.” Kennedy coined this concept the “leap year liberalism” and used it in three subsequent speeches during the campaign. These speeches served to characterize the Republican Party as that of politicians who “have stood against progress” and to identify his party as one of “creative legislation” and support for the common man (1960, September 8, Oakland, California).

He also lampooned the Republicans’ “leap year liberalism” to contrast the conservatives’ and liberals’ stance on issues. “Leap year liberalism” referred to the Republicans’ efforts every four years to portray themselves as the same as liberals. Such a ploy, Kennedy argued, was futile in the face of their record in Congress when they consistently opposed measures such as minimum wage, medical care for the elderly, federally funded education, and government housing efforts, examples of Roosevelt’s programs that had become the basic tenets of liberalism. Leveraging the success of these government initiatives against Nixon and building on Roosevelt’s
liberal legacy, the Senator successfully equated Republicans with inactivity and Democrats with impressive accomplishments that improved the lives of all Americans (1960, October 3).

Kennedy asserted liberalism’s strength in matters of foreign policy as well as social policy. In a manner similar to conservatives’ flip-flop attacks on John Kerry in 2004, the young candidate questioned how Nixon could claim to be “a liberal abroad and a conservative at home.” “Unless you are a liberal here,” he stressed to an elderly audience in New York City two months before the election, “you can’t be a liberal abroad” (1960, September 14, City Center). His opponent’s stance was a weak one, for it seemed to agree with the ideology behind Kennedy’s foreign policy position and allowed the Democrat to question why it was not suitable for domestic policy as well.

Kennedy capitalized on the Vice President’s confusing position, and a few weeks later in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania he repeated Nixon’s statement and rephrased it in more damaging diction: “We cannot be strong abroad if we are weak at home” (1960, September 15). Adopting the politically impervious language of freedom, he argued that the U.S. must demonstrate to the world “what freedom means” and that “freedom can also bring the good life “ by pursuing a liberal policy at home (1960, September 15). Liberal, in Kennedy’s campaign, was not the damaging word Kerry avoided in 2004; it embodied strong foreign policy, compassion at home for the common American, and forward-looking legislation.
Liberal’s connotation in the 1960 campaign can be attributed to Kennedy’s command of the label. In his most famous declaration of his liberal values, Kennedy accepted the Liberal Party of New York’s nomination with gusto, announcing that he was “proud to be a liberal.” The young Senator responded directly to Republicans’ criticism of his ideals: “What do our opponents mean when they apply to us the label liberal?” he asked the audience, then answering, they mean “someone who is soft in his politics abroad, who is against local government, and who is unconcerned with the taxpayer’s dollar.” But that is not what a liberal is, he cautioned and countered with his own resounding and lofty definition of the word. A liberal is, he stated grandly:

Someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people – their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties – someone who believes that we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad. (1960, September 14, Commodore Hotel)

To Kennedy, liberal embodied all of the principles and programs of Roosevelt’s New Deal as well as optimism and creativity in foreign and domestic policy. Using this noble meaning, he declared, “I’m proud to say that I’m a Liberal.” Since the 1960 election, no Democratic candidate has won the White House after so proudly declaring his liberal allegiances. In this way, Kennedy presented the apex of presidential liberal rhetoric in the last 44 years (1960, September 14, Commodore Hotel).

This is not to say, however, that Kennedy always flaunted his liberal ideology or even made it a mainstay of his election. On the contrary, liberal appeared in only 17
of Kennedy’s speeches, a mere three percent of the 592 analyzed. Each incidence did represent a self-assured identification with the liberal ideology as established by Roosevelt 20 years before, but the Senator’s campaign was not centered on his political philosophy. Kennedy’s confident definition and defense of the word liberal and his subsequent control of the label’s meaning did not hint at its connotative reversal that would evolve over the next 44 years. Similarly Nixon’s 1960 rhetoric did not serve as a harbinger for the persuasive attacks Republicans would develop against the Democrats’ ideology in the subsequent 11 presidential elections.

An investigation of Nixon’s 1960 campaign speeches reveals how much rhetorical control Kennedy wielded over liberal. The word appears in only three of the Vice President’s speeches, or one percent of the 283 analyzed, and in only one of those instances did Nixon attempt to attack his opponent’s beliefs. Certainly other politicians attacked Kennedy for his ideology, but Nixon’s addresses on the whole did not, a stark contrast to President Bush’s approach in 2004.

Nixon’s first reference to liberal occurred the day after Kennedy gave remarks accepting the Liberal Party of New York’s nomination for president, in which he elaborately defined and defended liberal. Nixon offered his rebuttal the following day before an audience of left-leaning machinists in St. Louis, Missouri. Acknowledging the liberal affiliation of his audience and quoting Roosevelt, Nixon defined liberal as “a man who wants to build bridges over the chasms that separate humanity from a better life” (1960, September 15). The candidate claimed he wanted to “build bridges,”
too, but not by reducing interest rates to create more jobs, as the Democrats suggested. Instead, Nixon ambiguously stated, “I say we should go forward with the tried and true principles that we have adopted” since 1953 under Eisenhower. He offered no clarification of these true principles other than to say that the government cannot be primarily responsible for the country’s progress achieved during the last eight years (1960, September 15).

Nixon’s attempt to define and diminish liberal ideology was incomplete and slightly confusing. He endorsed Roosevelt’s principles but disagreed with the economic policies of his and Truman’s presidencies. Moreover, he did not respond to Kennedy’s remarks from the day before, which were spirited and focused on freedom and optimism and opportunity, language Nixon could have matched in his self-description. Instead, the Vice President offered a very opaque and narrow definition of liberalism and actually claimed to be a liberal, at least in part, himself.

Nixon’s second use of the word liberal was marginally more focused on his opponent. The next month, in front of an audience of Ohioans, he offered a criticism of liberals and their interpretation of foreign policy. America must build and maintain “the greatest military strength in the world,” he said, while insisting that he would “always go the extra mile to negotiate” with enemies. But to adopt what Nixon dismissed as his opponent’s “liberal attitude” of disarmament, would “destroy our hopes” of peace because the Russians were not reducing their weapon stockpiles. Taking a stand against the liberals’ policy of military reduction, Nixon equated a
smaller military with weakness and war. A fortified military, however, would provide strength and protection from “ruthless men,” and, most importantly, would empower the U.S. “guardians of peace” to keep the world from the grasp of war. (1960, October 1)

Nixon easily could have capitalized on the public’s fear of war and been more critical of the liberals’ disarmament position. But he outlined his position of military strength negatively using the word liberal only once in his speeches, an indication that the campaign was not ideologically driven. And while his statement does equate liberals with a smaller military, he does not accomplish rhetorically that which Kennedy achieved in his foreign policy addresses. Kennedy’s speeches cited Republicans’ admonition that they were “liberals abroad,” an effective way of bolstering the liberal ideology. In fact, Nixon did not respond to these attacks or distinguish ideologically between his foreign and domestic policies. As a result, Nixon’s criticism of the Democrats’ soft military position does not appear to hold up against Kennedy’s loftier rhetoric, nor does it represent a condemnation of the liberal ideology. On the contrary, Nixon embraces it, at least in part and dismisses only the Democrats’ foreign policy, not their political philosophy as a whole.

In his final use of the word liberal, at a question and answer session at the University of Southern California, Nixon again refuses to attack the ideology and does not make an effort to distance himself from the liberal label. When he was asked how he planned to achieve his stated goals, the Republican candidate seemed to wander off
topic to that of ideological epithets. Instead of adopting the current-day approach of leveraging liberal against his opponent, Nixon eschewed all ideological labels. Posing a hypothetical question to himself from a college student, Nixon asked “Are you a liberal or a conservative?” His reply mimics that which the Democrats have since adopted: “Those words have been so contaminated and so corrupted that again you have to define your terms.” He returned to Roosevelt’s legacy, quoting the former president and claiming, “We’re all liberals in that sense [because] we all want a better life” (1960, October 14). Even three weeks before the election, Nixon did not launch an ideological attack against Kennedy or the Democrats. Nor did he identify himself as the opposite of a liberal. He defined liberal in Roosevelt’s words and embraced the concept as a unifying characteristic of all Americans.

Beyond the fact that his views in the 1960 campaign were not very ideological, Nixon’s speeches reveal his own discomfort with using the word. It is helpful to analyze the few times he did incorporate the label into his appearances, but it is even more telling that he did not it against his opponent often. This paper argues that the Vice President did not adopt the modern-day method of undermining Democratic candidates by associating them with the liberals because it would not have resonated with the public. In 1960 the issues of Social Security, Medicare, federally funded education, and federal assistance in job procurement, to name a few, were not accepted as part of the country’s status quo. Republicans, though not Nixon himself, still campaigned against the government’s extension of services. Kennedy’s definition
exhibited the political reality that the American people supported those programs and the political party that had brought them about. On the other hand, the conventional wisdom that liberals were in favor of raising taxes and shrinking the military had already taken root, as Kennedy’s reference to those criticisms evidenced. But neither liberal’s negative connotation, nor its frequent use, characterized the 1960 election.

Perhaps this absence of ideological tension with his opponent allowed Kennedy to establish his liberalism confidently. Maybe other issues, such as religious differences (which Kennedy quickly mastered as well), occupied more salient positions in voters’ minds than ideological differences. Regardless, Nixon’s stump speeches demonstrate that the Republicans had not commandeered yet the liberal label for their political attacks in 1960. In fact, the Kennedy-Nixon campaign reveals the Democrats’ comparative dominance of ideological rhetoric and pride in their liberal affiliation. Liberal had not assumed the negative connotations it has since acquired and did not present the issue of ideological identity that challenged John Kerry and the Democrats in the 2004 election.

2004

Unlike the 1960 campaign, the 2004 election was extremely ideologically charged. Republicans included among their campaign strategies heavy use of the liberal label against the Democratic challenger, even before there was a winner of the primary process (Broder and Allen, 2004). There was a modicum element of ideological
labeling in the 1960 campaign, but not necessarily against liberals, whose meaning was not nearly as negative nor as frequently invoked. In 2004, however, the Bush campaign specifically targeted Kerry with the liberal label; they strove to undermine fundamentally the Senator’s campaign by associating him with the fringe elements of politics that made him out of touch with the average American and in favor of increasing taxes, expanding federal government at the sacrifice of local government, and leading the country down an morally ambiguous path. There was no struggle over the definition, no attempt to assign the word a new meaning. Kerry never alluded to his ideological affiliation and never uttered the word liberal, not even to defend himself. These changes illustrate quite a turn around from the 1960 election, and why the two campaigns provide excellent bookends for this paper’s exploration of liberal’s evolving connotation.

Bush leveraged Kerry’s liberal ideology against his opponent much more frequently than Nixon did against Kennedy. In 40 stump speeches delivered between July and November 2004, Bush attacked Kerry as too liberal 30 times in 11 speeches. The first mention of the Senator’s ideology occurred in a speech delivered on July 9 in York, Pennsylvania. Before a carefully selected crowd (Bush’s speeches were rarely open to the public), the President mocked Kerry for claiming he was a “liberal and proud of it,” a quote ostensibly taken from a 1992 interview with the Boston Globe.² He cited the conservative magazine National Journal’s rankings of members of Congress based on their liberalism, announcing that Kerry was “rated as the most

² The author attempted to find the original text of this interview, but could not.
liberal member of the Senate.” Extending the attack to Senator John Edwards, Kerry’s running mate, Bush continued, “and he chose a fellow lawyer who is the fourth most liberal member of the Senate. Back in Massachusetts, that’s what they call balancing the ticket.” (2004, July 9) He repeated this criticism almost verbatim in 10 subsequent speeches.

By drawing on Kerry’s Massachusetts origins, Bush compounded the criticism. Americans commonly perceive Massachusetts to be one of the most liberal states in the country, particularly after it was the first to legalize gay marriage in May 2004. Being a politician from Massachusetts has become associated with being on the extreme left of the political spectrum, an assumption Bush used to his advantage. Throughout the campaign, but more frequently when the race was close, he repeated the conservative magazine’s liberal ranking of Kerry to demonstrate that Kerry did not have the same views as the majority of the population and, therefore, could not be Americans’ effective leader.

This type of attack was delivered two more times in July, presumably during the lead-up to the Democrats’ national convention. Interestingly, however, out of 18 campaign speeches delivered the following months in August and September, Bush did not refer to Kerry as “liberal” or “out of the mainstream” in a single one. But the ideological attacks were renewed with new vigor in eight stump speeches in October, the last month of the campaign when the polls showed the candidates neck and neck. It is hard to demonstrate concretely that Bush increased his liberal attacks to eek out a
victory, but Bush’s campaign, as is any modern campaign, was extremely calculated. Therefore, it seems safe to assume that conservatives believed attacks against Kerry’s liberalism would sway independent voters in the states like Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Nevada, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Florida, some of the states where Bush made the remainder of his ideologically charged remarks.

On October 6 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, for example, the President lampooned Kerry for his most liberal member of the Senate award and complimented him for beating out even Senator Ted Kennedy. But he went further than his previous criticisms, reasoning that Kerry won the distinction: “by voting for higher taxes, more regulation, more junk lawsuits, and more government control over your life” (2004, October 6). Skillfully Bush not only criticized Kerry for being on the opposite end of the spectrum, but he also associated the word liberal with positions no citizen, regardless of political ideology, would support.

Merely by classifying Kerry as a liberal, the President achieved a concise jab; he distinguished the Senator from himself, pushed his opponent out of the mainstream, and delegitimized Kerry’s positions on all issues. Liberal, in the words of Bush, has become antithetical to conservative and synonymous with “out of step with mainstream values that are so important to [the] country” (2004, July 9). Because Republicans use the ideological epithet frequently and vehemently, Democratic presidential candidates must fight to disprove this assumption before they can define themselves. Kerry tried to do just that, but not by using the same approach as John F. Kennedy.
While Kennedy confronted Republicans’ attacks and then dismissed them with his own rhetoric, Kerry attempted to counter Bush’s criticism like Nixon, by claiming not to be dissimilar from the conservatives. This method was not successful and actually fueled the President’s flip-flopping bashing. In fact during a speech in Las Vegas, Bush highlighted one of Kerry’s such attempts to circumvent the liberal label: “he called himself the candidate of conservative values,” the President laughed, “but he has described the Reagan years as a time of moral darkness” (2004, October 14). Kennedy employed the same tactic and turned against the Republicans’ their purported adoption of liberal policies. Similarly, Kerry followed Nixon’s example and attempted to borrow some of his opponent’s ideological language, but he met only more mockery.

Bush’s frequent and mocking use of the epithet illustrates the ridiculing nature of the liberal tag and how libelous it has become. Bush did not have to explain thoroughly why Kerry was a liberal and why he disagreed with the Senator’s positions. The commonly understood connotation of the word means predetermined conclusions and opinions are activated when it is included in political rhetoric. It was helpful for the incumbent to have Kerry’s quote self-identifying as a liberal, but even in other speeches, Bush simply stuck the label on Kerry and used it for its connotative value, not actual definition.

Kerry’s response to this criticism was weak and not only because he became cast as a flip-flopper. It was difficult for the Senator to counter such attacks because
conservative has no widely accepted unflattering connotations. The challenger did
attempt to paint Bush as “out of touch” in response to the President’s attacks, but only
consistently in October and in nine speeches total. Without an award as notorious as
the most conservative member of Congress to tout, Kerry’s snubs came off as limp.
“The President,” he claimed, “has proven beyond a doubt that he’s out of touch, out of
ideas, and unwilling to change course.” Even when Kerry tried to deepen the claim, he
could not state with Bush’s conviction that his opponents’ conservative views left him
isolated from the rest of America: “He isn’t just out of touch with middle-class
Americans, he’s more than in touch with the big drug companies, the insurance
industry, and the HMOs. And we’re paying the price.” Kerry’s rhetorical limits,
however, were not the result of public opinion. On the contrary, Americans support
government involvement in health care and are wary of big corporations’ influence in
politics. The Senator’s inability to respond to the attacks derived from the rhetorical
coup the conservatives have accomplished over ideological language, leaving
Democrats no easy choice but to run from their political ideology. (2004, October 14)

Kerry’s 2004 campaign illustrates this reality. Just as Michael Dukakis, the
1988 Democratic presidential candidate from Massachusetts, had to dodge the liberal
label, Kerry did not ever claim to be ideologically liberal during the campaign. The
word has become a pariah and a source of political weakness for national Democratic
candidates in a way that Kennedy never experienced. In recent presidential campaigns
the Democratic candidate could not appear to be liberal and had to shy away from their
political ideology in order to combat the Republicans’ attacks. Juxtaposing both Kerry’s and Bush’s attempts to shove the other to the political extremes presents the true strength of liberal’s connotations: that word, in addition to its lack of conservative equivalent, makes it easier for Republicans to lambaste the Democrats for their political positions.

In direct contrast to Kennedy’s confident assertion of his beliefs, Kerry never identified himself as a liberal. He steered clear of ideology in every one of his stump speeches, not even uttering the word to respond to Bush’s attacks. Kennedy never allowed Nixon to define him and even forced his conservative opponent on the defensive ideologically. But in 2004 the label clamped down hard on Kerry’s candidacy and forced him to avoid all ideological language while trying to counter Bush’s claims that he was a liberal. Touting the virtues of Roosevelt’s and Kennedy’s legacies is no longer sufficient protection for the Democrats against the liberal stigma, because Republicans often acknowledge the accomplishments of the New Deal or the Civil Rights Movement. Investigation of nomination speeches, presidential debates, and TV advertisements in each election beginning in 1960 unveils the slow but sudden changes in ideological rhetoric that led to the extreme and effective use of the liberal label in 2004. These variables provide a more detailed insight into what the above stump speech analysis outlined: over the last four decades liberal has evolved into a stigmatizing label and thus represents a shifting interpretation of political ideology and a significant electoral challenge for Democrats.
The differences between Kennedy’s and Kerry’s stump speeches demonstrated that the use of the liberal label so prominent in the last election has not always dogged presidential candidates from Massachusetts. Instead, the distinctions between the 1960 and the 2004 elections suggest the epithet evolved during those 44 years into the negative tag it has become. This chapter examines the presidential nominees’ addresses delivered at the party conventions to further explore the liberal label’s development. The findings show that after the Democrats mentioned the word sparingly in the 1960s, neither party incorporated the label in the 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, however, the Republicans began employing the word as a method of attacking their opponents on a slew of issues. Democrats did not respond with Kennedy’s liberal confidence, avoiding the word entirely. The convention speeches reiterate what the stump speeches revealed: The change in liberal’s usage from 1960 to 2004 has been drastic, and liberal has become a key tool for Republicans’ political attacks at the expense of the Democrats. The conservatives’ ownership of the word liberal presents a serious identity challenge for the left-wing party and represents a potential Republican advantage in the presidential elections to come.

1960s
Although Kennedy boasted of his liberal allegiances on a few occasions during his 1960 campaign, he did not, nor did Nixon, choose to repeat his ideological beliefs during the party convention that year. In fact, convention speeches for both parties
were void of overt ideological language during the 1960s. Johnson briefly interrupted this ideological silence during his convention address. Like Nixon in his 1960 campaign speeches, Johnson attempted to redirect voters’ focus away from ideological labels and toward subsurface characteristics of each party. Using the word liberal only once, he claimed the 1964 election was like every other “faced at every turning point in history.” The election was not, he said, between “liberals and conservatives.” Nor was it “between party and party or platform and platform.” No, he declared, the “contest” was a choice “between courage and timidity” -- differences far more important than political descriptors. Johnson attempted to steer discussion away from ideology and toward questions of character because Goldwater was perceived as a fervent extremist. One of Johnson’s campaign slogans, after all, was “In your guts, you know he’s nuts.”

Johnson’s use of the word liberal demonstrates that the word had not acquired as negative a connotation as it has today, but it also demonstrates the incumbent’s efforts to capitalize on Goldwater’s seemingly rabid personality and to minimize the effects of the Senator’s criticisms of Democrats’ major accomplishments. (Johnson, 1964)

Given that there was serious debate on the extent of government services and the role of the U.S. military, it is surprising that the 1964 campaign was not infused with ideological rhetoric. Senator Barry Goldwater was considered an extreme Republican, and he opposed most of civil rights legislation and major components of the New Deal, such as Social Security and the Tennessee Valley Authority. Despite these strong ideological leanings, he did not use the liberal label to attack President
Johnson. Instead he lashed out at Democrats, blaming the expansion of Communism on their weak military resolve. He lambasted Johnson’s administration for misleading the American people about the country’s purpose in Vietnam. But he did not characterize his opponents as liberals or classify their “timid” military position and rampant corruption as products of liberalism. His avoidance of this word seems out of place in today’s political environment. Now Republicans use the label with alacrity to attack Democrats for these specific positions. The difference between Goldwater’s positions and President Bush’s positions on the military and Social Security are more similar than dissimilar, but the rhetoric each invoked to describe their positions and disparage their opponents differed significantly. (Goldwater, 1964)

1970s
After Johnson’s brief use of liberal in 1964, no candidate from either party used the liberal label in their convention speeches until Reagan’s reelection campaign. Nixon’s 1968 address criticized Johnson’s administration for damaging America’s reputation abroad with its misguided foreign policy. And he disagreed with extensive government services, a central component of liberal ideology: “Instead of government jobs, and government housing, and government welfare, let government use its tax and credit policies to enlist in this battle the greatest engine of progress ever developed in the history of man – American private enterprise.” But he launched these rhetorical attacks without even mentioning the Democratic Party, much less employing the word liberal. (Nixon, 1968)
In 1972, Nixon went beyond this neutral language to call all Democrats, independents, and Republicans to unite behind his candidacy, but without bashing liberals. The Democratic nominee George McGovern echoed the president, soliciting the help of “every Democrat, of every Republican, of every Independent” to take the country back. Without criticizing Nixon’s conservatism or the Republican Party for that matter, McGovern called on the country to fight the “tax favoritism,” “prejudice based on race and sex,” and “despair of the neglected sick” promoted by Nixon’s policies. The incumbent responded in kind and also without ideologically inflammatory rhetoric. Nixon touted all the virtues of conservatism -- such as lowering taxes, creating new jobs, and reducing the size of government – and criticized his opponent’s contrasting plans but did not attack McGovern’s ideology. (McGovern, 1972)

Gerald Ford employed similarly neutral language in his 1976 convention speech. Like Nixon’s address the previous election, Ford called on all Americans, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike to support him on election day, pledging to continue his “steady course” of leadership. Ford criticized “the other party” (he used the word Democrat only once) for their tax policies, for their inaction on solving crime and drug abuse, and for their large reductions in defense spending. He painted clear delineations between political parties but dismissed ideological differences between citizens, stating about voters, “I can’t tell which faces are Republicans, which are Democrats, and which are Independents. I cannot see the color
of their creed. I see only Americans.” Ford delivered most of his speech in this unifying language as he made the requisite campaign promises -- to provide for the less fortunate, promote peace in the world, improve the schools, and reduce the cost and size of government. (Ford, 1976)

Of the two candidates in the 1976 elections, Carter referred more frequently to the Democratic Party and the fathers of liberalism. He quoted Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy. He credited the Democrats with Social Security and civil rights legislation. And he berated his opponents for being out of touch. They “never stand in line looking for a job” when unemployment rises, he declared. Their children never experience “inferior” public schools “torn by strife.” And unlike those dependent on welfare, Carter said, his opponents “never do without food or clothing or a place to sleep.” He took more jabs, though none with ideological overtones, at the conservatives for being out of touch with the American people than the conservatives took at him, a surprising feat made possible by his rural upbringing and overt religion, and one that would rarely be repeated by future Democratic nominees. Over the next three presidential elections, Republicans’ criticism of Democrats’ programs and Democrats’ criticism of Republicans’ programs would persist, but the language with which these attacks were articulated would become increasingly ideological at the Democrats’ expense. (Carter, 1976)

1980s

Ronald Reagan’s ascendancy to the White House brought with it increased political rhetoric, including expanded use of the word liberal to attack the Democrats.
The 1980 election, according to Reagan, centered on “the direct political, personal and moral responsibility of Democratic Party leadership...for this unprecedented calamity which has befallen us.” In his speech he outlined along ideological lines the failures of Carter’s term in office and the initiatives the Republicans would take to ameliorate the country’s economic, energy, and foreign policy status. The “injuries” of the Carter administration, namely the soaring inflation rates and high unemployment, and an underperforming economy, Reagan opined, could be overcome with his economic plans “based on growth and productivity.” The “overgrown and overweight” federal government would be reduced and programs wasting taxpayers’ money would be eliminated. But more important than reversing the errors of the Democrats’ tax and spend downward spiral, he pressed, his administration would change the tone of American leadership. He promised to “restore...the American spirit” and guide Americans to prosperity, condemning Carter’s “mediocre leadership that drifts from one crisis to the next.” (Reagan, 1980)

Reagan’s obvious disagreement with his predecessor’s presidency naturally set up an ideological comparison between the two candidates. His first convention message outlined the clear ideological disparities between the two candidates, though not in explicitly ideological language. Carter’s more moderate beliefs, his religion, and his Southern roots likely could have made it more difficult for the challenger to leverage the liberal label against the former peanut farmer. This explanation for the absence of the word seems probably when compared to Reagan’s depiction of and
attacks on his 1984 opponent. Although the Carter-Reagan contest is unique due to its focus on ideology without ideological rhetoric, it laid the foundation for the increased use of the liberal label in subsequent campaigns, beginning with Reagan’s 1984 convention acceptance speech.

President Carter’s religion and lower class origins made it difficult for conservatives to portray him as an extreme liberal, but Walter Mondale, the Democratic presidential candidate in 1984, was an easy target for such attacks. Mondale unapologetically fit the liberal stereotype. Rising to power as a candidate from Minnesota’s left-wing Democratic-Farm-Laborers Party, he promised to rescue social security, Medicare, and protect the environment. To accomplish these goals and to reduce the dangerously high deficit, he admitted, Americans would have to contribute: “Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I. He won’t tell you. I just did.” In addition to increasing taxes, Mondale also took a true liberal position on the military, promising to reassess the U.S. military and its presence abroad. He bemoaned the dangers of nuclear weapons, questioning why there were not summits with the Soviet Union at least once a year and a reduction of all nuclear weapons, including those in the U.S. arsenal. In a typically liberal anti-war fashion, he fearfully acknowledged that the U.S. and the Soviet Union “have the capacity to destroy the planet” and stated his dedication to ending the reality of “nuclear nightmares.” Beyond these ideas, Mondale also supported the inclusion of an Equal Rights Amendment in
the Constitution, rounding out his platform with another quintessential liberal component of expanding civil rights to all. (Mondale, 1984)

Regan explicitly attacked Mondale for these liberal stances. Revisiting his 1980 victory, the President claimed his election had been the voice of Americans telling the “liberal leadership” that they wanted to reduce the size of government and pay less in taxes. Mondale’s admission of the need for increased taxes, he said, was the same “old liberalism” that would allow the government to “spend money like drunken sailors.” Putting the ideological labels aside, Reagan acknowledged that the greatest challenge facing the country was to reduce the risk of nuclear war, but he cautioned that this could not be done by making “unilateral and unwise concessions to the Soviet Union,” as his opponent supported. He rebuked Mondale’s assertions that the American armed forces should not be flexing its muscle around the world, declaring that the U.S. military did not exist “to promote war” but to “be prepared for peace.” These attacks responded directly to Mondale’s unabashed admission of his liberal beliefs. Though he launched pointed attacks against Mondale, Reagan used the ideological label only twice in his speech, and both times in a comparative reference to President Carter. (Reagan, 1984)

Reagan did not characterize Carter as liberal in his 1980 convention speech, but he capitalized on Americans’ dissatisfaction with the Georgia governor’s presidency after the fact, lumping Mondale and Carter under the same negative “liberalism” umbrella. As in his 1980 speech, Reagan enunciated the stark ideological differences
between Republicans and Democrats in his 1984 address. Elections did not always focus on such ideological delineations before Reagan, but, as his nomination speeches illustrate, both of his candidacies did and to his advantage. His ability to phrase these differences in optimistic and inclusive diction allowed him to attack Democrats without sounding nasty and let him explain his beliefs in a way that appealed to Americans across the political spectrum. Reagan’s efforts to remain above the political fray likely tempered his language and steered him away from ideological epithets while still allowing him to attack effectively his opponents’ beliefs. Subsequent conservative candidates, such as George H. W. Bush, would build off the Great Communicator’s clear and palatable articulation of Republicans and Democrats’ ideological differences, as well as Reagan’s overwhelming popularity, to launch harsher attacks against their liberal opponents. These attacks, however, were not always as successful as Reagan’s.

George H. W. Bush rode to the White House on Reagan’s coattails and similarly used his 1988 nomination speech to identify the candidates’ ideological differences, but with harsher rhetoric than his predecessor: “Some say this isn’t an election about ideology,” he cautioned, but “the truth is, this election is about the beliefs we share, the values we honor, the principles we hold dear.” These beliefs and values, Bush declared, would protect those Americans who were “brutalized by inflation” under Carter from more mismanagement by the White House. Conservative principles, he continued, would fuel the nation’s economic growth and bring prosperity
to Americans across the country. But the values of the “liberal Democrats” would not. (Bush, 1988)

Beyond economic mismanagement, Bush warned, Dukakis’ misguided principles threatened to alter the fabric of American communities with policies dictated by “a limited cluster of interest groups.” The Democratic candidate, he itemized, opposed mandatory pledge of allegiance in schools, the imposition of the death penalty for extraordinary crimes, voluntary prayer in schools, gun ownership, protection of unborn life, and decreasing taxes. Furthermore, Dukakis and the “liberal democrats” wanted power concentrated “in the hands of the federal government,” while Bush wanted power concentrated in the hands of individuals and local government. Like Reagan, Bush used ideological differences to distinguish between him and his opponent. He leveraged the liberal label more than his predecessor but still applied it to a wing of the Democratic Party, not all members of the left wing. (Bush, 1988)

The Vice President’s 1988 nomination speech was unique for another reason; he expressed support for a few rudimentary tenets of liberalism and accused the Democrats of threatening their existence. He assured the aging population that Social Security would remain intact, its “trust fund sound, and out of reach of the big spenders.” He acknowledged the presence and needs of the homeless and the poor, citing Kennedy’s discovery of poverty during his campaign trips through West Virginia. And he quoted Franklin Roosevelt when asking the American people to vote for him and not “change horses in midstream.” Bush’s tangential support for some
components of the liberals’ ideology represented a turning point in political rhetoric. For the next three presidential elections, the Republicans would make ideological distinctions between the conservatives and their opponents, using the word liberal to connote misguided values and a lack of principles. At the same time, they would voice support for basic aspects of the liberal platform, those which had garnered significant popular support over time. This blend of attacks against the liberal ideology and endorsement of some liberal programs presented a serious challenge to the Democrats. While the liberal ideology was being attacked rhetorically, the Republicans commandeered parts of the Democrats’ platform and attracted socially conservative members of the left-wing party. The flight of social conservatives from the party and the incorporation of historically Democratic initiatives into the conservative portfolio clouded the meaning of liberal and forced the word to acquire meanings of only the fringe elements of the left wing’s platform, such as their abortion policy. This ideological criticism would become a staple of Republicans’ election tactics, though its effectiveness would be dictated by the moderate qualities of their opponents. (Bush, 1988)

Dukakis’ Massachusetts’ origins and his tenure as governor of the northeastern state lent more legitimacy to Bush’s anti-liberal attacks. Dukakis’ convention speech did little to rebut these attacks, though. He claimed in his address that the election was not about ideology, but “competence.” It was not, he said, “about meaningless labels.” On the contrary it was about American values, “old-fashioned values like
accountability and responsibility and respect for the truth.” Dukakis attempted to counter Bush’s criticism with an assurance of his principles and morals. He claimed these values motivated him to ensure all Americans experienced the country’s growth and wealth. Republicans’ assurances that the country was prosperous and strong applied to only “some neighborhoods and some regions of this country,” the governor said. But those dependent on welfare needed help and a chance to “lift themselves out of poverty” and farm families needed a “price they can live on” so they have a “future they can count on.” Dukakis attempted to thwart the liberal label by advocating his vision of the American community and the idea that everyone, “regardless of who we are or where we come from or how much money we have” counts. He even tried to embrace his Massachusetts roots by resurrecting the legacy of John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Like his recent Democrat predecessors, Dukakis did not address directly the sources of Bush’s criticism, nor did he contest the negative use of the liberal label. Instead he shied away from all things ideological, referred to his fellow Democrats explicitly only four times, and never uttered the word Republican. In this way, he continued the liberals’ trend of avoiding ideological confrontation, effectively ceding the definition of the epithet to Bush and the conservatives and permitting the ideological attacks to resonate with the public. (Dukakis, 1988)

1990s
President Bush’s criticism of Governor Bill Clinton’s liberal ideology was not as successful as his attacks against Dukakis. In his 1992 convention speech, Bush tried to paint Clinton as the same type of generic liberal he had defeated four years earlier. He branded the Governor of Arkansas a member of the “liberal McGovern wing” of the Democrat Party, suggesting that Clinton was as politically extreme as the 1972 Democratic nominee. These liberals, Bush asserted, supported a “hollow army,” a “nuclear freeze,” and a foreign policy that emphasized negotiation and deliberation. He leveraged his extensive military background against Clinton’s draft-dodging and classified his opponent as another soft-on-defense liberal, a chief component of the epithet’s negative connotation effectively established under Reagan. Bush also resurrected Reagan’s association of liberals with taxing and spending leaders, blaming the “liberal leaders of the Congress” for blocking a constitutional amendment requiring balanced budgets. And he cautioned that Clinton would pack the courts with “liberal judges” who will codify laws of which voters do not approve. In these attacks, Bush furthered the connotation of a liberal as one who favors shrinking the military, increasing taxes, spending wastefully, and legislating unpopular causes from the judicial benches. Clinton was not as easy a target as Dukakis, so the liberal label did not stick to him as it did to Bush’s previous opponent. Still, the President’s rhetoric served to further the negative association of liberal and continued the Republicans’ strategy of making the Democrats’ political ideology a liability for their party. (Bush, 1992)
Two important differences contributed to Clinton’s imperviousness to the liberal label. First, the Arkansas governor was more popular than Dukakis (Gallup, 1988 and 1992).³ And second, Clinton responded to Bush’s labeling more than other Democratic nominees. He said the word twice, the only candidate to do so since Johnson, but in the same conciliatory manner as the 1964 incumbent: “The choice we offer is not conservative or liberal. In many ways, it is not even Republican or Democrat. It is different. It is new. And it will work...because it is rooted in...the values of the American people.” He further criticized Bush’s attempts to stratify the electorate by stereotypes and dismissed politicians’ “us-them” rhetoric: “Them, the minorities. Them, the liberals. Them, the poor. Them, the homeless,” he said, mocking such classifications, then refuting them, “But this is America. There is no them. There is only us.”

Beyond this grandiose rhetoric, Clinton adopted another successful Republican strategy that deflected the liberal label. He defended liberal programs while asserting many conservative viewpoints as well. Welfare, he said, must exist, but it should be a “second chance, not a way of life.” College loans would also be available, Clinton assured, but they must be paid back. And, thwarting off criticism of being a big government liberal, he proposed a “leaner, not meaner” government that “expands

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³ The percentage of polled, registered voters who indicated they would vote for Dukakis over Bush never peaked above 40% and often dragged 6 points behind the percentage who said they would vote for the Vice President. In contrast, after Ross Perot dropped out as an independent candidate in July 1992, Clinton shot up in the polls, with 50 percent of registered voters indicating they would vote for the Democrat. He remained ahead of Bush in the polls through election day. Gallup polling data compiled from 7/5/1988 to 10/21/1988 and from 7/17/1992 to 10/28/1992.
opportunity, not bureaucracy.” His incorporation of the word liberal and his inclusion of Republican viewpoints distinguished Clinton’s speech from previous Democratic candidates. These tactics repelled Bush’s liberal label but also established the popular belief that only a moderate Democrat can win the presidency. Clinton’s language was strong, but it was not as politically extreme as Mondale’s. Despite the Governor’s victory, liberal’s negative connotation remained and would dog him during his reelection campaign as well. (Clinton, 1992)

Clinton’s 1996 convention speech struck a similarly moderate tone as his first nomination speech. He used inclusive language, even acknowledging that his opponent, Senator Bob Dole, loved the country and “worked hard to serve it.” Although he knew the two men’s records must be measured against one another, he would “not attack them personally.” The rest of his address discussed protecting America’s values, helping individuals get an education, breaking the cycle of poverty, protecting the environment, and maintaining peace and freedom around the world. He bolstered this lofty rhetoric with accomplishments of his first term and small samples of the programs he proposed for his second. And he repeated his earlier endorsement of many conservative ideas, such as cutting taxes, balancing the budget, and cutting government waste. Unlike any Democratic candidate during the previous three decades, Clinton could tout his achievements and avoid political attacks. (He mentioned the failures of the Republican Congress only once and the word “opponent” only twice) (Clinton, 1996). His approval ratings were over 50 percent and three
months before the election 48 percent of all registered voters indicated they would vote for Clinton, nearly twice the number who said they would vote for Dole. Moreover, only 35 percent of registered voters considered Clinton too liberal, compared to the 42 percent who said he was “about right” and the 16 percent who said he was not liberal enough (Gallup, 1996). Because of these facts Dole mostly refrained from applying the negative liberal label to Clinton in his nomination address.

At the Republican convention, Dole accepted Clinton’s pledge not to lead a negative campaign and emphasized that the President was his opponent, not his “enemy.” As a testament to just how moderate Clinton was, Dole acknowledged that Clinton recently had “tried to be a good Republican” but had not been entirely successful. Instead of attacking his opponent’s ideology, the Senator sought to distinguish between the two parties. “There are distinctions between the two great parties,” he said, quickly identifying the Democrats as the “party who brought us the biggest tax increase in the history of America.” A long list of Republican achievements followed this declaration of differences. Dole credited the conservative party with lowering taxes, pursuing a strong defense, and fighting drug use among youth. In his one use of the label, Dole criticized Clinton’s “liberal judicial appointments” and those judges who “replace” the Constitution “with conceptions of their own fancy.” These loose interpretations of the law, he said, contrasted explicitly with his tough-on-crime policy that would punish violent criminals while respecting civil rights. But beyond his attack on Clinton’s liberal judicial appointments, Dole did
not try to paint him as a liberal. By admitting that his opponent held many Republican views, the Senator made meaningless the liberal label in the 1996 campaign. (Dole, 1996)

2000 & 2004
Al Gore’s moderate politics made application of the liberal label difficult in 2000 as well. The Vice President’s nomination speech did not lash out at the Texas Governor George W. Bush, and he said “opponent” only once in the address. He did draw distinctions between himself and his challenger in their approaches to Social Security. He accused the Republicans of catering to the big drug companies, and he assured his party base that he would protect abortion rights. Primarily, though, Gore touted the achievements of the Clinton-Gore administration, underscored the economy’s strength, and promised to keep on fighting for similarly beneficial causes. The government’s surplus, the low unemployment rate, and the administration’s high approval ratings made Gore largely impervious to ideological attacks. (Gore, 2000)

The economy’s strength and Gore’s moderate politics made him an unlikely target for the liberal label. Consequently, George W. Bush did not once use the word in his speech, though he did launch typical Republican attacks against the Clinton-Gore administration. The President and Vice President, he said, had “squandered” American power. The military is “low on parts, pay, and morale,” he said. And only when the country was fighting in World War II were taxes as high. Bush made these remarks with comparatively little ideological rhetoric. Nor did he repeat Bob Dole’s attempt to
differentiate between the two parties; he touted his record of bipartisanship and never attacked the Democratic Party specifically. It is likely that Bush did not have to resort to ideological or partisan attacks to make the case for conservative values given Clinton’s moral aberrations in office. As an indication of the lack of ideological rhetoric, the “compassionate conservative” candidate said conservative only twice: “It is time to put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity.” (Bush, 2000)

But beyond his digs at the previous administration and his declaration of conservative values, in some ways Bush’s rhetoric resembled Clinton’s. Speaking about poverty, he promised to fight poverty, bad schools, violence, drugs, and the digital divide. He pledged to “tear down [the] wall” dividing the haves and the have nots. To do so would require another “bold step of welfare reform” that supported homeless shelters, hospices, and crisis pregnancy centers, for example. He endorsed a housing rental program “to help hundreds of thousands of low-income families find stability and dignity in a home of their own.” Only when he declared, “government cannot do this work” did Bush’s speech sound different than the Democrats’ rhetoric (Bush, 2000). Even as he closed his speech, the Governor echoed Kennedy’s call for “new invention, innovation, imagination, decision” (Kennedy, 1960). “We,” Bush said, “are now the party of ideas and innovation… the party of idealism and inclusion.” Then borrowing from Reagan’s optimism, he said, we are “the party of a simple and powerful hope” (Bush, 2000). Bush’s blending of conservative and liberal rhetoric
without ideological labeling mimicked Clinton’s successful approach to the nomination speech in 1992 and 1996 and represented a short hiatus from ideological labeling in presidential campaigns.

Once John F. Kerry won the Democratic nomination, the Bush campaign heavily employed ideological language to attack the challenger. The incumbent bashed Kerry for his liberal political leanings, his Massachusetts roots, and his high-class tastes. But because Bush had the advantage of already occupying the White House, much of these attacks, as will be seen later, were left to other elements of the campaign, such as television commercials. Although he never used the word liberal, Bush mocked Kerry for claiming to be the conservative candidate:

> If you say the heart and soul of America is found in Hollywood, I’m afraid your note the candidate of conservative values. If you voted against the bipartisan Defense of Marriage Act, which President Clinton signed, you are not the candidate of conservative values. If you gave a speech, as my opponent did, calling the Reagan presidency eight years of ‘moral darkness,’ then you may be a lot of things, but the candidate of conservative values is not one of them. (2004, September 2)

By turning Kerry’s words against him and highlighting his opponent’s attempt to claim to be conservative, Bush effectively dismissed Kerry’s ideology without uttering the word liberal. He associated liberals with the corruption of Hollywood, the failure to preserve the tradition of marriage, and the antithesis of the conservative legend Reagan. This ideological contrast between the two candidates was underscored when Bush claimed to be running with a “compassionate conservative philosophy.” And it permitted him to dismiss Kerry’s contrasting proposals on Social Security, the war on
terrorism, or the tax code as irrational liberal ideas. Bush’s branding of Kerry as a flip-flopper further served to delegitimize the challenger’s beliefs and provided a solid foundation from which ideological attacks, whether implicit or explicit, could be made. (2004, September 2)

Kerry’s convention speech attempted to overcome these attacks against his political record and ideology by emphasizing his willingness to use force, his dedication to reducing the Americans’ tax burden, and his embodiment of American values. He also attacked Bush for his support of the wealthy at the expense of the poor. He lashed out at Bush for slashing worthwhile government programs for schools and cops so that “Enron can get another break.” He rejected Bush’s values rhetoric, claiming the President sacrificed American families’ prosperity for the sake of big drug companies. Kerry tried to express conservative beliefs and expose Bush’s close connections to big companies as a means to mitigate the effects of the liberal label, but these efforts were not effective. (2004)

Beyond attacking Bush’s favoritism of big companies and the rich, Kerry attempted to turn the values rhetoric against the President. In a surprisingly confrontational manner, Kerry stated that the election was “about choices…and choices are about values.” Despite the anti-values connotation of the liberal label, the Senator declared that he would defend family values better than Bush, listing numerous policies the president pursued in violation of family values. Although Kerry promised not to raise taxes on the middle class, to cut the deficit in half in four years, and to
require accountability from schools – three policies Bush also supported -- he could not overcome the Republicans’ liberal label. And the Republicans’ seemingly amused criticisms of Kerry’s flip-flopping and “conservative values” made it more difficult for the Senator to fend off the liberal attacks. His willingness to confront the values debate was bold considering the extent of the ideological criticism, but he claimed to espouse conservative, not liberal values, further solidifying and legitimizing liberal’s negative connotations. As will be seen in the following analyses of the presidential debates and television advertisements, Kerry’s unwillingness to embrace his liberal views as such further solidified liberal’s unflattering meaning in 2004 and complicated the Democrats’ ideological future in elections to come. (Kerry, 2004)

Kerry’s inability to counter the Republicans’ ideological attacks, however, was not unprecedented among Democratic presidential candidates. This investigation of the convention speeches emphasizes the increasing frequency with which the liberal label has been leveraged against left-wing candidates over the last four decades. The basic graph below summarizes the pattern identified across the convention speeches and highlights some unique findings mentioned above. The use of the liberal label has clearly increased in convention speeches since the Kennedy-Nixon contest. But the epithet’s frequency was not always related to its success. The graph shows that in
1988 Bush used the liberal tag three times against Dukakis, the most of any candidate at that point, and that election’s outcome demonstrated his rhetoric’s success. During his re-election campaign, however, the same correlation between increased use of the word liberal and victory at the ballot box is not seen. Bush attacked Clinton’s ideology four times at the 1992 Republican convention but was not re-elected that year. Therefore, the use of the liberal label is not a guarantee for Republicans’ electoral success. As this paper investigates the ideological rhetoric in presidential debates and campaign advertisements, trends seen in the convention speeches will become clearer, namely that the success of the conservatives’ ideological attacks depend greatly on the Democratic candidates’ response and popular perception. These findings will figure prominently in this paper’s recommendations to the Democrats to resolve their political identity crisis.
CHAPTER 7: PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

As in the nomination speeches, ideological attacks against liberals have become increasingly common in presidential debates over the last 12 presidential elections. The trend in the debates mostly mirrors that of the nomination speeches, though there are a few debates in which ideology is not referenced as much as it was in the convention address, a fact likely attributable to the debate format, in which candidates are pressed for time to respond to specific questions. Also, debates were not held in the three elections in 1964, 1968, and 1972. The absence of these variables makes larger conclusions slightly more difficult. The controversial Vietnam War would have been an important factor in the use of the liberal label; however, because the convention addresses and campaign commercials reflect similar patterns, the debate data is analyzed despite the fact that it is unavailable for 25% of the presidential elections analyzed. The findings support those concluded from the stump speech comparisons and the convention address analysis. The absence of the liberal label in 1960 and the heavy use of it since the 1988 debate supports this paper’s thesis that ideological attacks against liberals have become more common and liberal’s connotations more negative over time.

1960s and 1970s
Ideological references, either conservative or liberal, were not featured in presidential debates until the mid 1980s, though this result is tempered greatly by the lack of debates for three elections during this timeframe. In the debates that occurred,
candidates used rhetoric to distinguish between themselves and their opponents much like they did in the convention speeches, usually along party and not ideological lines. The only mention of the word liberal in the 1976 debate between Ford and Carter was a reference to the liberal Supreme Court under Chief Earl Warren. The word did not appear outside of this reference until the 1984 debate between Reagan and Mondale. Its absence from these earlier elections supports the idea that the label has become more popularly used and more negatively understood.

1980s
Despite Reagan’s conservative ideology, he did not leverage the word liberal against either Carter in 1980 or Mondale in 1984. The word surfaced in a Reagan-Mondale debate, but it was used by Mondale himself in reference to a “liberal adoption law” he signed to make adoption easier and abortion less common, as well as “the most liberal pro-abortion bill” signed by Reagan while he was governor of California. The format of the debates resulted in specific questions asked of the candidates by moderating journalists. But even when the candidates were posed a question asking for their differences on the “uses of American military power” or solutions to the Iran hostage situation, ideology was not part of the response. In response to the moderator’s query about Mondale’s “leadership characteristics,” Reagan did not respond with a discussion of his conservative values and his liberal opponent’s lack of principles. He stated that a leader must have principles they believe in. He believed that people, not the government, are to “have control of their own affairs” and based his leadership on
that concept. No part of his response criticized Mondale. (Mondale and Reagan, 1984, October 7)

George H.W. Bush in the 1988 debates, however, would not miss any opportunity to attack Dukakis for his ideology. George Bush and Michael Dukakis debated two times in the 1988 election and each prominently featured attacks against the Democratic candidate’s liberal ideology. In the first debate, Bush questioned the Massachusetts’ Governor’s declaration that he was a “‘strong liberal’” and proud of his ACLU membership. “He is…out of the mainstream,” the Vice President said, wondering whether “we want this country to go that far left.” Although Bush admitted that nothing was “wrong” with being a liberal and applauded Dukakis for his “passion,” he asserted that the country should be led in a different direction. He outlined his vehement disagreement with many of the ACLU’s positions on unsavory topics. The ACLU, he argued, wanted to take away tax exemption from the Catholic Church, wanted to repeal “kiddie pornographic laws,” and remove “under God” from U.S. currency. (Bush and Dukakis, 1988, September 25)

Highlighting these positions unfavorably characterized card-carrying members of the ACLU like Dukakis, but it also tainted the word liberal to mean those who are pro-pornography, anti Catholic Church, and anti-religion. Since his opponent was not willing to confidently defend these positions named by Bush, as no politician would be, the Vice President was able to paint himself as “more in touch with the mainstream of America.” Beyond the values issues, Bush also typically criticized Dukakis and all
liberals as being big spenders, soft on defense, and pro-big government. Although Dukakis countered these positions with attacks of his own, he did not join in the ideological debate and left Bush’s liberal label stand. (Bush and Dukakis, 1988, September 25)

Dukakis’ obvious uneasiness with the liberal label further hindered his ability to overcome it. Often cited as his campaign’s greatest failure, the Massachusetts Governor simply appeared more willing to discuss policies than defining himself ideologically. One famous gaffe during his second debate with the Vice President revealed Dukakis’ refusal to address greater ideological or personal beliefs instead of his policies. The first question of the debate was asked of the Governor; Bernard Shaw posed the following hypothetical situation to the Democratic candidate: “Governor, if Kitty Dukakis [his wife] were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?” The Governor did not cave on his policy preferences: “No, I don’t,” he retorted, “And I think you know that I’ve opposed the death penalty during all of my life.” Even when presented with a horrific fictional situation, Dukakis would not compromise his beliefs for the sake of a politically favorable response. The same reticence to stray from discussions of policy applied to his answer to Bush’s liberal attacks; he would not dignify them with a response. (Bush and Dukakis, 1988, October 13)

Bush capitalized on Dukakis’ apparent discomfort with his ideological attacks, claiming, “the liberals do not like me talking about liberal” (Bush and Dukakis, 1988,
September 25). In the second debate, the Massachusetts Governor seemed to support this statement, saying with irritation, “I think Mr. Bush has used the label ‘liberal’ at least ten times. If I had a dollar, George, for every time you used that label, I’d qualify for one of those tax breaks for the rich that you want to give away” (Bush and Dukakis, 1988, October 13). Another time, he snarkily thanked the Vice President for not using the words liberal or left one-time in his response. These statements did not help to combat Bush’s attacks on Dukakis’ liberalism.

At one point, Dukakis attempted to defend liberalism by turning it on Bush and then discrediting the use of ideological labels. Reagan, he said to his opponent, “called you a liberal for voting for Federal gun control.” Then, having run out of ways to turn the liberal label against Bush, he criticized the use of ideological labels overall. He claimed that great presidents such as Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy all suffered from similar ideological attacks. “It’s not labels,” he contested, “It’s our vision of America,” admitting that he and Bush offered two very different ideas for the country. This defense of ideological differences did not help to thwart Bush’s use of the liberal label. Because he whined about Bush’s use of the word and then tried to turn it against him, he seemed more frustrated by his opponent’s attacks than confident in his belief. His inability to assert pride in his liberal beliefs significantly advanced the negative connotations of the word. (Bush and Dukakis, 1988, October 13)
**1990s**

Although Bush used the liberal label with success against Dukakis and the Democratic Party in his 1988 convention speech and presidential debates, Clinton’s moderate politics made such attacks less effective, and, therefore, less frequent in 1992. Liberal occurred only once in the 1992 debates, when Bush characterized liberal Democratic women candidates, but it was not made in reference to his opponent or the Democratic party as a whole. As in the convention speeches, the debates’ language held ideological overtones and attacks were made against each party, but no ideological labels were used.

The lack of ideological references in the 1992 debates had several roots. The presence of Ross Perot in the 1992 debates most likely contributed to the toned down ideological rhetoric because each candidate had to differentiate himself from Perot’s independent views. And Clinton came out early against discussions of his opponents’ character, so attacks against the Governor’s personal beliefs, like those made against Dukakis, would have come across as antithetical to Clinton’s attempts to raise the debate above mud-slinging. Clinton made a similar pledge with Senator Bob Dole in the 1996 campaign to stay away from negative campaigning, even though it did not last long. As a result, their respective convention speeches largely steered clear of ideological attacks. During the presidential debates, however, Dole vehemently attacked Clinton for being too liberal. The incumbent, in contrast to previous Democratic candidates, defended himself from such criticism.
Dole’s attacks against Clinton’s ideology followed the usual Republican template. He called Clinton part of the “liberal establishment” and characterized those working in the White House as elitists. He disparaged the President’s attempt to “take over healthcare and impose a governmental system.” He cited Clinton’s vetoes of a balanced budget and welfare reform as evidence of his liberal misguided leadership. Although Dole acknowledged that his opponent’s beliefs were moderate, even conservative at times, in his convention speech, he repeated no such acknowledgements during the debate and based many of his attacks on Clinton’s liberal ideology. (Bush and Clinton, 1996, October 6)

In response to these criticisms, Clinton, like Dukakis, attacked the conservatives’ use of the liberal label: “This liberal charge, that’s what their party always drags out when they get in the tight race.” Then the incumbent followed with a list of his administration’s accomplishments, namely the creation of 10.5 million new jobs, record number of new small businesses, declining crime rates, and a reduction in number of people on welfare rolls. Clinton’s defense against the liberal label was that much stronger than Dukakis’ because he had these achievements to stand on. He also attempted to take the definition of liberal out of the conservatives’ hands and let the public decide. “The American people,” he said, “can make up their mind about whether that’s a liberal record or a record that’s good for America.” Although he implied in this statement that a liberal record would not be good for the country, Clinton recovered in his next sentence: “Liberal, conservative, you put whatever label
you want on it.” Dole accepted the invitation to apply the liberal label and retorted that the credit for Clinton’s achievements must be shared by the Republican Congress. Still, the challenger’s rejoinder did not diminish Clinton the way Bush’s attacks against Dukakis’ undermined that Democrat in 1988. (Clinton and Dole, 1996, October 6)

Clinton’s ability to respond to the liberal label did not mean that he embraced it. In contrast, Clinton did not accept liberal as a proper description of his beliefs. When asked what his political philosophy was in the 1996 debates, he offered a conservative-liberal hybrid answer that viewed politics as the way to “give people the tools to make the most of their own lives.” His philosophy also excluded discrimination and included a belief that the government can “protect the environment and grow the economy.” These political goals, he said, must be done with a “smaller and less bureaucratic” government. Clinton successfully deflected ideological criticisms simply because his own rhetoric did not support Dole’s attacks. He was comfortable with ideological labels because neither one applied to him. Therefore, his campaigns and presidency served to separate the liberal label from the Democratic Party, but only temporarily. As many of his detractors point out, Clinton insulated himself from ideological attacks, but he did not help to divorce the word from its negative connotations for future Democratic candidates. (Clinton and Dole, 1996, October 6)
2000 & 2004

Although Al Gore did not campaign on Clinton’s legacy, he was spared the liberal attacks largely because he was believed to be as moderate as the President. The 2000 election, as exhibited in the candidates’ convention speeches, was not very ideological. Bush and Gore criticized each other’s policies and disagreed with each other’s fundamental approach to politics, but the liberal label rarely appeared. When it did appear in the 2000 debates, it was used by Bush to describe what types of judges the Vice President would nominate for the judiciary, criticism Dole used against Clinton as well.

The use of liberal to describe “activist” judges does not explicitly attack the ideology of the Democratic candidate, but it perpetuates the negative connotation of the word. Although Americans might not oppose liberal views on government services such as Medicare or Welfare, there is less public support for liberal social policy. Issues recently decided by the courts – such as gay marriage and abortion -- are much more controversial issues. Therefore, accusing a candidate of filling the courts with liberal judges conjures up the associations of pro-abortion and pro-gay marriage beliefs that are politically unviable for presidential candidates.

John Kerry turned this attack against Bush in the 2004 debates, criticizing the President for saying that he believed the country needed “‘some good conservative judges on the courts.’” As if to preempt the incumbent’s declaration that the Senator would appoint activist judges, the Senator countered by saying “I don’t believe we need a good conservative judge, and I don’t believe we need a good liberal judge.”
Judges’ ideology should not be a consideration for their nominations, he concluded.

(Bush and Kerry, 2004, October 8)

Kerry might have defended himself against this one use of the liberal label, but Bush bashed Kerry’s ideology in other ways. Repeating one of his key stump speech attacks, the President criticized Kerry for being “the most liberal senator of all,” according to the National Journal. He supported this claim by condemning the Senator’s 98 votes to raise taxes. He also cited Kerry’s “proposed $2.2 trillion in new spending” and his “novel health care plan,” two programs, he said, that would force Kerry to raise taxes and result in the “largest increase in federal government health care ever.” Adopting a very negative tone, Bush continued on: “That’s what liberals do,” he said, “They create government-sponsored health care. Maybe you think that makes sense. I don’t…..It would ruin the quality of health care in America.” (2004, October 8)

Although the President did not attack Kerry’s ideology as much in the debates as in other parts of his campaign, he used the liberal label to discredit the candidate and many of his proposed policies. Supporting his criticism with the National Journal’s “most liberal” ranking of Kerry, the President made it difficult for his opponent to respond. To do so, Kerry would have to discredit the magazine, disagree with the results, and deny the votes on which it was based. Kerry did try to attack Bush for his ideological standards for judges, but he did not defend his liberal beliefs or, as Clinton did, disavow the label. Instead he avoided referring to his political ideology and
smartly tried to focus the debates on criticizing Bush’s record and presenting his policy ideas.  

Ideology was very important during the 2004 election, but the President’s ideological attacks were not the most numerous during the debates. As illustrated in the graph below, George Bush in 1988 and Bob Dole in 1996 were the most fervent in their ideological criticisms when the candidates faced each other to discuss the issues. Aside from these instances, the debates as a whole did not include as much ideological rhetoric as the nomination speeches did. Perhaps this is because the debate format presents specific questions to the candidates who must then respond in short periods of time and prepare for the other candidate’s rebuttal. Nomination speeches, however, are delivered to the fervently supportive party base and thus invite more ideological rhetoric.

Graph 2. Liberal Mentions in Presidential Debates.
rhetoric. Regardless, in both formats, the word liberal has been used with increasing frequency since 1960 and with uncontested negative connotations. An exploration of television advertisements over the same period reveals the same, and more exaggerated, trend.
CHAPTER 8: TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS

Analyses of the candidates’ convention speeches and the presidential debates have exposed a pattern of expanding application of the liberal label and increasingly common acceptance of its negative connotations. Although the label has sometimes proved very successful, as in 1988, it has not always ensured victory for the Republicans, as evidenced by Clinton’s two terms. The 2004 election, however, signified a reprisal of the liberal label tactic in a more concentrated and widespread manner. Of the 12 elections examined for this study, only in 2004 did ideological rhetoric, specifically the liberal label, appear in campaign commercials. This chapter explains to what great extent Bush applied the liberal label in the television medium and why the advent of this campaign strategy is significant for presidential elections to come.

The first ad to use liberal was “Doublespeak” which served to thwart Kerry’s attempts to define himself. It cited Kerry’s “hometown paper” as saying he “engage[ed] in a level of doublespeak,” and referred to the Wall Street Journal’s expected criticism of the Senator’s tax plan. Then the ad repeated President Bush’s favorite attack against Kerry – the National Journal’s most liberal ranking of the Senator. The magazine, the announcer says, “ranks Kerry…more liberal than Hillary Clinton or Ted Kennedy.” The advertisement sought to define the challenger negatively early on in the campaign. The fact that his liberal ranking is a primary
component of this unfavorable portrayal underscores the word’s significant and accepted negative connotation. (Bush-Cheney ’04 Inc., 2004, April 21)

“Healthcare: Practical v. Big Government” used the liberal label to condemn “frivolous lawsuits against doctors” and dismiss Kerry’s health care proposal. The “liberals in Congress and Kerry’s plan,” the announcer says, support a “government run health care plan [with a] $1.5 trillion price tag.” This health care plan, the ad warns represents “Big government in charge – not you, not your doctor.” The ad not only brands Kerry a liberal, but also criticizes the candidate and his ideology for proposing more government involvement and more wasteful spending. (Bush-Cheney ’04 Inc., 2004, September 20)

“Thinking Mom” furthers the same stereotypes using the liberal label to paint Kerry as a tax-increasing, money-wasting Democrat. The ad depicts a mom listening to the radio in her car as she hurries to get to the grocery store. The radio announcer condemns “John Kerry and the liberals in Congress” for voting to “raise gas taxes 10 times.” The mom interjects with her own worries, questioning how anyone could raise gas prices when they are already high. The radio announcer continues on, blaming the Senator and the liberals for raising taxes on Social Security benefits, on middle class parents, and on married couples. The mom is obviously flustered by this news, as the announcer offers a summary of the liberals’ record: “350 times…Higher taxes from the liberals in Congress and John Kerry.” This commercial furthers liberal’s negative connotation by its usage in the tax-increasing context, and, more significantly, because
it features a seemingly mainstream mother reacting unfavorably to the liberals’ actions. In this way the Bush campaign television spots contributed to the popular perception that liberal is a bad word and to the political reality that the epithet is damaging. (Bush-Cheney ’04, Inc., 2004, October 4)

The fourth ad to use liberal, “Risk,” took advantage of the War on Terror to increase the political injury brought by the label. It painted Kerry and the liberals in Congress as against fighting terrorists, relying on the tried and true soft-on-defense attack. It resurrected their opposition to Reagan during the Cold War, their vote against the first Gulf War, and their efforts to reduce intelligence spending after the first attack on the World Trade Center. Going further than the previous descriptions of “Kerry and the liberals in Congress,” this ad criticized “Kerry and his liberal allies,” to ensure the close connection between the challenger and the liberals. Kerry and his allies, the ad claims, “repeatedly opposed weapons vital to winning the War on Terror.” “Are they,” the announcer asks, “a risk we can afford to take today?” “Are they a risk we can afford to take today?” he repeats. In the era of Americans’ heightened sense of vulnerability and insecurity, this ad capitalizes on those fears and implies that the liberals have compromised the country’s security. (Bush-Cheney ’04, Inc., 2004, October 18)

Bush sharpened the typical soft-on-defense attack in the same style as the “Daisy” ad aired by the Johnson campaign against Goldwater. In that commercial, a small child is seen counting flower pedals and then an announcer takes over counting
down to the pictured atomic bomb explosion. Johnson similarly implied that his opponent would represent a greater risk to the country, but the ad aired only once, and the attacks were focused on Goldwater as an individual, not the conservative ideology. Bush took the same concept one step further by questioning whether liberals, including Kerry and those in Congress, would make the country more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. By doing so, he increased the injury associated with the liberal label. He also increased the challenge before Kerry and all subsequent Democratic presidential candidates to identify with their party and ideology without conjuring the now severely negative connotations of being liberal.

As a sequel to “Risk,” “Wolves” assailed the Democrats for failing to support crucial elements of the War on Terror. It aired 11 days before the election and vividly represented the country’s risk of terrorist attacks with images of snarling wolves jumping out of the forest. “Kerry and the liberals in Congress,” the announcer cautioned, “voted to slash America’s intelligence operations by six billion dollars.” These reductions “would have weakened America’s defenses,” he admonished further, “and weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm.” The combination of the harmful rhetoric and the scary wolves made this commercial memorable and, therefore, potentially very damaging for the Kerry campaign. Although it is impossible to determine what its precise effect was, the advertisement certainly went beyond any previous attacks on Democrats for being detrimental to the War on Terror. The depiction of America as susceptible to hungry attackers had never been portrayed
in a campaign commercial. The drooling wolves ready to pounce created an unnerving image of America’s vulnerability. The powerful images combined with the condemning rhetoric made a strong association between the liberals and another terrorist attack. (Bush-Cheney ’04, Inc., 2004, October 22)

Although it is easy to cite the Bush campaign as an anomaly in its liberal bashing, “Wolves” represents the culmination of two decades of ideological attacks on liberalism. Starting with Reagan’s criticism of Carter’s approach to the economy and the Cold War, the Republicans began to build a foundation of negative associations with the label. Clinton’s moderate beliefs helped to lessen the impact of the liberal attacks, but they did not dispute any of liberal’s negative associations. “Wolves” demonstrates that these increasingly frequent ideological criticisms, seen in the nomination speeches, the presidential debates, have now arrived in full force in campaign commercials.

The trend of increasing ideological attacks in television campaign advertisements is more pronounced than the patterns of liberal label criticisms in convention speeches and presidential debates. No campaign ad from 1960 to 2000 used the liberal label or overtly referenced a candidate’s political ideology, as seen in the graph below. But in the 2004 election, the Republicans included the liberal label in five of the campaign’s 17 television spots. Because only one year of commercials has used the liberal label, it is difficult to find support for the trend found in the convention speech and presidential debate analyses.
Yet the unique nature of television advertisements lends itself to other, equally significant conclusions. Of the three political rhetoric variables evaluated in this study, the television advertisement is the only one that reaches viewers involuntarily. While an individual has to tune into the debates or convention speeches of their own volition, commercials interrupt Americans regular T.V. shows whether they are interested in seeing the spots or not. As a result, it can be postulated that the audience for campaign commercials on average represented a more typical sample of Americans than the viewers of the conventions or debates, not just those who were interested in the presidential contests.

Therefore, the ideological content of Bush’s 2004 ads reached a broader and bigger (if the media markets of all the ads are totaled) population than his convention speeches or debates with John Kerry. The frequent incorporation of the liberal label in his campaign commercials signifies that the negative connotation of the label has
become so commonly accepted as to be effective in widely broadcast campaign advertisements. This conclusion suggests that the Democrats’ efforts to combat the ideological criticism must be just as far-reaching as campaign commercials to challenge liberal’s popularly understood, negative connotations. Fortunately for the left wing, the electorate continues to view liberals favorably, consistently identifies with the Democratic Party, and supports at least moderately the basic tenets of liberalism. The following chapter will illuminate the contrasts between political rhetoric and public opinion on ideology, thus revealing the liberal label to be a reflection of smart political strategy, not shifting popular beliefs.
CHAPTER 9: PUBLIC OPINION

The previous three chapters detailed the increasingly frequent use of the liberal label by Republicans to attack their opponents in presidential elections since 1960. Clear patterns of growing criticisms of liberals’ ideology were uncovered in convention address, presidential debates, and television advertisements in the last 12 White House races. The Democrats’ comparative reticence on ideological matters and their insufficient response to the negative epithets could be interpreted to suggest that Americans are increasingly conservative, and the conservatives’ liberal bashing is merely a product of this shift in public opinion; however, statistical analysis of various measures including the electorate’s ideological identity, political party affiliation, support for classic liberal programs dismisses these inferences. Using this data as collected by the American National Election Survey project, linear graphs of the annual means of these variables were produced and analyzed to identify trends in public opinion over time. According to most of the statistics measured, Americans have remained in the middle of the road. While some analyses of public opinion data over the last four decades reveal increasingly conservative trends, there has not been an overwhelming change in the electorate’s perception of liberals or liberal ideology. Therefore, this study concludes that liberal’s connotative evolution since Kennedy’s election is not an explicit reflection of changes in public opinion. And to reverse the conservatives’ ideological attacks, Democrats should draw support from the electorate’s beliefs.
Feeling Thermometer
According to feeling thermometer statistics, the electorate’s perception of liberals, while consistently lower than that of conservatives, has not declined as precipitously. When asked to rate their feelings toward liberals on a scale of 0 to 100 (with 100 being the most favorable), Americans consistently rate liberals above 50. This indicator has fluctuated over the last four decades, dipping to just below 50 in 1970, to 53 in 1982, and to 52 in 1994. These periods of less favorable opinions of liberals have always been followed by a sharp increase in favorable perception. In 1972, for example, the feeling thermometer jumped to 68 and in 1985 it peaked to 65. Since it dropped in 1994, overall public opinion of liberals has increased steadily over the last 10 years. Although it usually dips every off-election year, the general feeling toward liberals has increased from a 53 rating in 1994 to a 64 rating in 2000. In 2004, the public gave liberals a 63 favorability ranking, just three points lower than that of conservatives.
The electorate’s feeling toward conservatives follows an almost identical pattern as that toward liberals; popular perception generally decreases during off-election years and peaks during presidential campaigns. As with the opinion of liberals, the public always has rated conservatives favorably. The lowest ranking of conservatives (57) occurred in 1966 and did not increase until Nixon’s reelection in 1972, when opinions of conservatives soared to 73. Although the spikes in public opinion make it difficult to spot a general pattern, the public’s feelings toward conservatives declined rather steadily from 1972 to 1998. Since then it has rebounded slightly and hovered around 66 in the 2004 election.
When viewed simultaneously, as shown in the graph below, it is easy to detect that the feeling thermometer consistently ranks conservatives higher than liberals. In fact not once in the last 40 years has public opinion of liberals exceeded that of conservatives. This finding would be telling and perhaps explicating of the liberal’s negative connotation except for the fact that public opinion has fluctuated on liberals and conservatives in tandem. No dramatic increase in conservatives’ favorability can be contrasted to a severe decrease in public perception of liberals.

Graph 4. Mean Liberal and Conservative Thermometers. ANES.

Instead, similar decreases between liberals’ and conservatives’ favorability are evident since the early 70s and subsequent increases have been seen since the early 1990s. Furthermore, because popular opinion has always ranked conservatives higher than
liberals, no specific justification for the liberal epithet’s increasingly injurious associations can be found in the feeling thermometer polls over the last four decades.

These conclusions are supported by the graph of the combined feeling thermometers, created by averaging the two indicators. In this depiction, a ranking closer to 100 represents a more favorable impression of conservatives. As shown by the individual thermometers, the combined graph indicates that public opinion overall is more favorable to conservatives than to liberals. Although public opinion of conservatives drastically improved in the late 1960s, the 2000 and 2004 elections did not match the comparatively higher conservative rankings seen in the 1980 and 1988 elections or during the 1994 midterm elections during which House Speaker Newt Gingrich
launched his anti-liberal “Contract With America” campaign. Moreover, no increase in the conservatives’ favorability seems to come at the cost of the liberals’ favorability in this graph.

The liberal-conservative thermometer, like the individual feeling thermometers, varies significantly from election year to election year, making it difficult to discern overall patterns. As mentioned above, the sweeping highs and lows seem to occur during election years, making the thermometer a relatively sensitive measure of campaigns and elections’ impact. The 1988 election, for example, was one identified earlier as having significant levels of ideological rhetoric at the expense of the Democrats. That election year experienced a definite increase in the public’s favorability of conservatives, perhaps due to Bush’s characterization of Dukakis as a liberal and attacking him with ideological language. Reagan’s two terms preceded Bush’s campaign, so the public was not responding to an unpopular Democratic president, as is most likely responsible for the increase in conservative popularity witnessed in 1980.

Despite these correlations, it is obvious that the thermometer does not always reflect the presence of ideological rhetoric. Reagan’s reelection campaign in 1984 painted his opponent Walter Mondale as a liberal who would make unnecessary concessions to the Russians and raise taxes on Americans. Despite the incumbent’s unflattering ideological characterization of his liberal opponent, the feeling
thermometer dropped to 51, a more favorable ranking for liberals and a relatively large decrease from the 55 ranking in 1980.

Another manifestation of the rating’s sensitivity is the 1990s decade. Clinton’s victorious campaign for the White House resulted in a more favorable liberal rating of 51 in 1992, but Gingrich’s vociferous attacks of the Democrats in the 1994-midterm elections increased the rating back to 54. Surprisingly the investigation of President Clinton’s extramarital affairs did not turn the public off from liberals, perhaps because he sought to distinguish his leadership skills from his personal issues; Clinton’s last two years of presidency received a ranking of 51. The 2000 and 2004 elections, however, did not witness such large spikes in favor of either ideology. The ranking reached 53 in 2000, but decreased to 51 in 2004, a surprising drop given Bush’s ideological rhetoric.

Although the thermometer suggests a more favorable rating of conservatives than liberals since 1960, it should be noted that the ranking never exceeds 55 and hovered around 51 for several years in Reagan’s and Bush’s presidencies. Furthermore, the thermometer was approximately 53 when Clinton won and over 52 when Carter was elected. There is no dramatic increase in conservatives’ favorability, and the public’s opinion toward liberals and conservatives does not offer an explanation for the increased use of the liberal label during the last 12 elections, especially the 2004 campaign.
**Ideological Identification**

Statistics regarding Americans’ self-identification as liberal or conservative similarly do not expose an obvious increase in the number of conservatives. On a scale of 1 to 7, citizens were asked to identify their political ideology. One represents very liberal and 7 very conservative. Between 1972 and 1994, an upward trend -- though very small -- toward conservative is observed. In 1972, the mean of all respondents’ answers was 4.1, or “moderate, middle of the road.” The highest was observed in 1994 as 4.4. Because the mean response returned to 4.2 in 2004, these small increases do not seem to imply a strong, permanent shift toward conservative. All answers indicate that Americans have identified and continue to identify themselves as “moderate, middle of the road” ideologically.

The ideological identification measure resembles the feeling thermometer statistic, appearing to fluctuate according to election cycles. In 1980, the rating increased to approximately 4.3, up from approximately 4.18 in 1978. Bush’s 1988 campaign witnessed an increase to just over 4.35, though this fell to 4.2 during his reelection efforts. Despite these election-cycle fluctuations, Americans consistently identify as moderates, not liberals or conservatives. The responses tend to hover on the conservative side of moderate, a trend supported by the percentage of Americans that place themselves
one the right side of the political spectrum (32) compared to the proportion that places them on the left side (22). But these statistics have been relatively stable over the last 30 years and do not follow the steep trajectory of liberal rhetorical uncovered in the chapters above.

**Political Party Identification**
Political party identification statistics reveal a similarly stable pattern and do not help to explain the liberal label phenomenon. This graph represents individuals’ self-placement on a 7-point scale of party identification. One represents strong Democrat, and seven represents strong Republican. In 1964, the mean response dropped to 3.25, and in 2002 it jumped to 3.95, but it has remained below 4.0, the value for
independents, or no party affiliation. But the last 50 years, the mean response has been below 4, or leaning toward Democrats.

Graph 7. Mean Party Identification. ANES.

Americans’ party affiliation appears to contradict their responses to the liberal-conservative scale. The ideological scale seemed to indicate a stronger identification with conservatives, but these results suggest Americans lean more toward the Democratic Party. Despite these differences, both indicators place Americans in the middle of the political spectrum. Although a slight shift to the right can be discerned between 1960 and 2004, it is not the dramatic leap toward the Republican Party as conservatives’ liberal attacks would indicate.
Ideological Perception of Political Parties

Popular perception of political parties’ ideology also reflects this shift to the right and potentially explains why party identification is inching away from the Democrats. When asked to place the political parties on an ideological spectrum (where 1 is liberal and 7 is conservative), the Democratic Party is identified as liberal and the Republican Party as conservative. Americans believe Republicans have become increasingly conservative and Democrats increasingly liberal over the last two decades. In the ideological identification graph discussed above, this paper acknowledged a slight upward trend toward ideologically middle of the road. If this small shift in Americans’ ideology translates to their perception of political parties, the small change in ideology could
explain the growing lean toward no party affiliation. In support of this finding, the graph below demonstrates that Americans on average identified more with the Democratic Party when they perceived the left wing to be more conservative in 1990 and 1998. Since then, the mean party placement has moved toward the Republicans and the perception of Democrats has grown increasingly liberal.

This relationship between perception of a party’s ideology and party affiliation, however, does not seem to mirror the larger pattern of ideological rhetoric found in convention speeches, debates, and television advertisements for two reasons. First, Democrats were perceived as more liberal in 1988, a year in which party affiliation spiked toward the right. But looking at the 1970s and 1980s as whole reveals an

Graph 9. Mean Ideological Identification of Democratic Party & Party Identification Scale. ANES.
increasingly conservative perception of the Democrats, at a time when Reagan was increasingly criticizing the left wing for being too liberal. Second, in 2000 the liberal label was hardly used in the convention speeches, debates, or commercials, though the public believed the party had become increasingly liberal at that point. These instances help to underscore, albeit in the reverse way, the disparities between public opinion and political rhetoric.

**Party Affiliation and Perceived Party Ideology**
Despite their apparent independence, this study assumed there must be some connections between political rhetoric and public opinion, or politicians’ speeches and campaigns would not matter. The impact of political rhetoric is difficult to measure empirically, and this study did not attempt to do so. This paper does, however, try to identify relationships among public opinion variables to identify potential places of rhetorical influence. To determine correlations between the variables measured in this section, linear regression models were run on various permutations of these political party and political ideology variables. Only one model resulted in a noteworthy relationship, that between the ideological perception of political parties and party identification.

To test the relationship between the two variables, a linear regression model of the two variables was completed, using the ideology of the Democratic Party as a predictor of an individual’s party identification. The results indicate that there is a strong, though not overwhelming, relationship between perception of the Democratic
Party’s ideology and party affiliation. The R Square value (.073) is relatively low, though the Beta coefficient is pretty high (-.393) and statistically significant (0.00). Therefore, with moderate accuracy, an individual’s perception of the Democratic Party’s ideology will predict their party affiliation. It suggests that persuasively attacking the Democratic Party as being too liberal might eventually impact Americans’ party affiliation, causing them to lean closer to the independent category and potentially the Republican Party.

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<th>R Square</th>
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Table 1. Linear Regression Model.
Dependent Variable: Political Party Affiliation
Predictor: Ideological Perception of Democratic Party

The uniqueness of this finding is underscored when linear regressions are run using the Republican Party’s ideology as a predictor of an individual’s party affiliation; the model is much weaker, with an R Square of .005 and a Beta coefficient of -.071. Though the results were statistically significant, they do not reveal a strong relationship between the right-wing party’s perceived ideology and the individual’s party affiliation.

The relationship between ideological perception of a political party and party affiliation is difficult to establish, but it is worth noting when evaluating these variables that only the liberals have been the victims of ideological attacks. To be clear, the trends in the party’s ideology and in the use of the liberal label do not coincide
precisely, but the relationship between the negative use of liberal, public opinion of
the Democratic Party’s ideology, and the gradual shift away from the left wing party
should be considered as a potentially vulnerable intersection of campaigns and public
opinion given the popularity and perceived success of the liberal label.

The electorate’s assessment of the Democrats’ ideology is the only indicator
measured above that witnessed a drastic change since ideological rhetoric has become
a more important factor of Republicans’ presidential campaigns. Feelings toward
liberals and conservatives, for example, have consistently favored the conservatives,
but only by a margin, and recently began to suggest an increasingly favorable opinion
of the left. Americans’ placement on the liberal-conservative scale still indicates that
most identify as independents. The public’s mean response to the party affiliation
scale continues to suggest the majority associate with the Democratic Party, though
this statistic reveals a gradual shift toward no party affiliation over the last 40 years.
Of the two, only the left-wing party is perceived as decreasingly liberal, a fact that
coincides with the slight movement from the left toward the middle of the political
party spectrum. None of these variables seemed to reflect or explain explicitly the
recent increase in ideological rhetoric. But the party affiliation variable lends itself to
greater investigation because it suggests that the popular perception of the left-wing
party’s ideological identity influences party identification.

Since the liberal label ostensibly could affect public opinion of the Democrats,
it is possible that party affiliation would be one statistic affected by liberal’s negative
connotation. This logic, this study argues, emphasizes the potential severity of the left wing’s identity crisis. The Democrats have to date not confronted the liberal attacks or sought to redefine themselves, but this is not because public opinion disagrees with the idea of liberal as an ideology or policy position on issues. The statistics above explain that Americans continue to view liberalism favorably and lean toward the Democratic Party more than its right-wing counterpart. In addition, they remain ideologically moderate, not extreme conservatives. The analysis below turns to specific tenets of liberalism and exposes Americans to be moderates, and even leaning liberal in some cases, by those measures as well. The Democrats’ response to the liberal label should not be based on the widely accepted epithet’s negative connotation; instead it should be founded in the public opinion research analyzed in this study that explicitly that burnishes the tag’s damaging associations and reveals popular, albeit not overwhelming, support for liberalism.

**Basic Tenets of Liberalism**
Patterns in public support for some tenets of liberalism over the last 44 years also differ from those identified above in political rhetoric. While the liberal label has become more frequently applied to Democrats with increasingly damaging results, public opinion on government services and spending has remained more or less moderate. This chapter will explore popular support for an expanded federal government, a fundamental tenet of liberalism, as well as government defense spending, two fronts on which the Republicans have viciously attacked the liberals.
The findings confirm the moderate snapshot of Americans gleaned from the ideology and party statistics analyzed in the first half of this section and suggest the liberal label is not the result of changing American attitudes, but a campaign tactic that is successful in spite of the electorate’s opinions.

**Government Services and Spending**

One of the fundamentals of liberalism analyzed in this chapter is the belief that government should provide services to its citizens, especially those who cannot provide for themselves, even if it means an increase in taxes or spending. The relevant data were pulled from the National Election Surveys from 1982, the first year this question was asked, until 2004. Individuals were asked to indicate on a scale of one to seven whether on a government should provide more services and increase spending (7) or provide fewer services and reduce spending (1). The mean of each year was taken, excluding
those responses that were missing or “do not know.” The responses for this and the other statistics analyzed below were plotted in a linear graph against the year the survey was taken. The graph below illustrates that the electorate’s opinion on government spending and services has shifted far more dramatically than the indicators above. Even with these fluctuations, Americans still support a middle of the road approach to government services and spending, though their responses were sometimes surprising. For example, support for increased spending and services soared under Reagan, rising above the scale’s median of 4 and staying there for the rest of his presidency. Only after 1990 did public opinion change its mind; between 1990 and 1994, the rating dropped from 4.35 to 3.75, its lowest point in the last two decades. Perhaps this dip coincided with Newt Gingrich’s vehement campaign against the Democrats. Regardless, the indicator has increased steadily over the last 10 years, and
now the mean response does not support a decrease in government spending or services, a display of tacit support for the liberals’ view of government.

**Government Involvement in Health Care**

Public opinion regarding government involvement in health care supports this recent trend of increasing approval for government spending and services. On a scale of one to seven, where one represents a government insurance plan and seven represents a private insurance plan, on average Americans indicated they wanted some government support in the provision of health care in 2004 (3.65). This represented a significant decrease from the 1994 peak when the mean response was a four. Only in 1992, perhaps due to Clinton’s pledge to provide government-funded, universal health care, did the response dip to 3.4. This change, and some of the shifts in opinion around Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America,” suggests that Americans might view an issue more favorability if the issue is particularly salient and positively addressed, a phenomenon endorsed by the liberal label. When the liberal label is used significantly and negatively, as in the 2004
election, voters ultimately were convinced that Kerry was too liberal. This sensitivity to rhetoric, whether about liberalism or liberals, means the Democrats must counter the liberal label with positive descriptions of the left-wing and promotion of their platform’s components, including the issue of health care to garner support for their programs and reclaim their ideological identity.

**Government Involvement in Welfare**

Public opinion regarding welfare and unemployment does not reflect the electorate’s more liberal beliefs about health care. Since 1972 the public always has believed the government should err on the side of letting each person provide for himself or herself. This conservative lean, however, is slight. Americans consistently indicate the

Graph 11. Mean Position on Government Health Insurance Plan. ANES.
government’s role should be a four (on a scale of 1 to 7 where 7 is no government support of an individual’s income or job availability). There have been dramatic fluctuations within this ranking, notably a sharp increase in 1976 and a decrease in 1998. These fluctuations appear to mirror slightly the ideology of the president in office, but more accurately the statistic seems to reflect economic downturns. In 1984 and 1990, when the economy was not very strong, popular opinion endorsed greater government involvement to guarantee jobs and incomes.

But like many other indicators, these changes in opinion did not reflect sweeping changes across the spectrum. On the contrary, the public has supported a moderate level of government support for jobs and income over the last 30 years,
furthering the conclusion found in the previous statistical analyses: that Americans have maintained middle of the road positions on ideology, party affiliation, and liberalism.

The importance of these specific programs relates to their frequent inclusion in the Republicans’ ideological attacks. In 1988, Dukakis was lampooned for being too soft on welfare. Clinton’s approach to welfare was challenged by George H.W. Bush in 1992, and Kerry’s health care plan received vociferous criticism from George W. Bush in 2004. Moreover, every Democratic candidate since Kennedy has been criticized for proposing policies that increase government spending and services. Public opinion shows the lack of popular support for these ideological attacks. At the same time, the label’s success, despite differing public opinion, gives credence to the belief that political rhetoric can be powerful and, in the Democrats’ case, must be responded to.

**Reduction of Defense Spending**

Another consistent target of conservatives’ criticism is the Democrats’ desire to reduce defense spending. Although not an explicit part of the liberal platform, decreased military funding has been affiliated with the liberal label so frequently that it is commonly identified as a left-wing policy. This indicator is also measured on a seven-point scale, with one representing a great decrease in defense spending and seven
representing a great increase. Not unexpectedly, this variable appears to be somewhat sensitive to America’s involvement in combat. In 1980, the mean response was above five, but this quickly fell to below 4 in 1982 and down to 3.5 in 1992. Despite the Persian Gulf War, support for a decrease in military spending surprisingly continued through 1991. This slope downward could be due to the fact that military spending skyrocketed under President Reagan and was still at high levels by the early 90s. Only in 1992 did public opinion begin to support an increase in defense funding. This upward trend continued throughout Clinton’s eight years in office, despite the lack of protracted armed conflict. Perhaps this public response reacted slowly to the Persian Gulf War or to Clinton’s military budget cuts.

Notwithstanding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and public debate over the troops’ insufficient armor, public support for an increase in defense spending has since
leveled off at about 4.6 and was on the decline in 2004. These specific examples reveal that the occasional incongruity between support for military spending and armed conflict. Still the basic connection between increased military spending and conflict does not seem farfetched. As a result, this statistic is expected to vary more than the preceding statistics; however, the electorate has not favored extreme increases in military spending since 1980. The public’s middle of the road position on defense spending resembles the electorate’s moderate opinions about the extent of government services, government involvement in health care, and the government’s role in guaranteeing jobs and income – all common components of the Republicans’ liberal bashing.

Looking at all four indicators of support for liberal programs – government spending and services, government role in health care, government role in welfare, and defense spending – it appears that Americans have moderate beliefs on most of these issues. Views on government health care are slightly more liberal than those on welfare, but the electorate generally supports a moderate amount of government services and spending. These variables were selected for this study because they are often singled-out by the conservatives as a weak part of the Democrats’ platform and lumped in with the liberal label criticism. The fact that they are not strong indicators of an anti-liberal population illustrates that the liberal label is not the result of changing public opinion but the advent of a successful campaign tactic.
Making conclusions regarding Americans ideology based on their support for government involvement in health care is a tenuous approach at best, and, to be clear, not the objective of this chapter. Philip Converse convincingly argued that Americans have not viewed policies through an ideological lens since at least the 1960s, and this study does not mean to contradict his findings (1964). This chapter does not serve to show that Americans are liberal because they support some government role in health care provision. Instead it strives to expose the fact that Bush’s disparagement of Kerry’s health care plan -- which called for an increased but still limited government role -- is not reflected in public opinion.

These findings continue the pattern identified throughout this paper: that popular opinion does not agree with the present-day use of the liberal label and its negative connotations. In fact, it is precisely according to Converse’s theory that the liberal label has been successful despite public opinion indicators that suggest support for the left wing and its policies. Americans’ incongruous belief systems and their susceptibility to political rhetoric represent the exact reason why Democrats must counter the liberal label to overcome their identity crisis and the precise method of doing so.
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSIONS

The political rhetoric and public opinion analyses completed for this study reveal that the liberal label that figured so prominently in the 2004 presidential election has been used increasingly by Republicans at the expense of Democrats since 1960; however, an investigation of public opinion regarding political ideologies, party affiliation, and programs the conservatives lambaste as too liberal indicates the electorate’s views have not mirrored the evolving connotations of the epithet. Instead, Americans adopt moderate opinions on nearly all indicators examined for this paper. From ideological identification to the government’s role in health care, voters prefer the middle of the road. This discontinuity between the liberal label’s success and popular beliefs begs the question, why is the label so effective if Americans generally disagree with its sentiment? Based on the progression of the liberal label and public opinion patterns over the last 12 presidential elections, this study argues that several factors account for this divergence.

Incongruous Belief Systems, Converse Revisited

First, Americans, as first explained by Philip Converse (1964), have complex belief systems that are not necessarily meaningful and often can encompass numerous contradictions. In terms of the liberal label, these belief systems mean Americans can respond favorably to the Republicans attacks against Kerry’s liberal health care plan, while supporting similar proposals for increased government involvement on the issue.
Moreover, because Americans’ understanding of political ideologies, their definitions, and their significances is generally limited, save for the political elites, they are not able to position themselves ideologically on an issue or evaluate issues through an ideological lens. Therefore, the word liberal, as commonly used by the conservatives, likely is understood by voters, not as an ideological epithet, but as any common campaign criticism, such as flip-flopper.

To determine the extent to which this postulation is true, studies should be completed that measure the public’s reaction to a similar criticism devoid of any ideological meaning. The distortion of Kerry’s position on the War in Iraq offers one shred of evidence to support this conjecture. The Senator actually “voted for the war before he voted against it,” a phrase he unwisely used to characterize his position on the war. As a result, Republicans could cast his opinion as “flip-flopping,” regardless if the majority of voters agreed with his criticism that things were going poorly and that the invasion of Iraq was not worth it (Gallup, 2003). It follows that effective political rhetoric is successful because it can capitalize on Americans’ unstructured belief systems. Thus, political communication is able to dodge public opinion realities and sway voters to draw conclusions about a candidate’s character (good leadership skills) or a general policy (strong on defense), even if they have opposing views on the real subject at hand (War in Iraq).

**Power of Political Rhetoric**
Beyond Americans’ belief systems, the power of political rhetoric is another reason the liberal label has become so widely used and accepted. What politicians say has an impact on public opinion, whether through citizens’ direct consumption of their speeches or through media coverage of them. Roosevelt’s ability to convince isolationist Americans that U.S. engagement in World War II is an often-touted example of a president’s ability rhetorically to sway public opinion. Even on smaller issues, the effect of political communication on popular beliefs can be significant. Some of the graphs analyzed above reveal this connection. For example, the electorate’s views on government involvement in health care changed dramatically during 1992, when Clinton ran for president, decrying the current state of health care in the country, and promoting his proposal that called for a larger federal role. That election year the people endorsed greater government involvement. Similarly, the public’s support for extended government spending and services dropped precipitously in 1994, when Newt Gingrich launched his “Contract with America” campaign that demanded a smaller government and a decrease in taxes. It is impossible to isolate political rhetoric as the only reason public opinion changed, but the relationship between the two is not independent.

The effect of political rhetoric might be even greater during presidential election years because presidential candidates are given a loud microphone through which they can broadcast their visions and influence voters. As a result, some election years are “landmark” because the “landscape seems to register a significant enough
measurement of change on the political Richter scale to warrant lavish commentary” (Gregg, 1989, p. 385). This change is often caused by the political rhetoric of a politician whose articulated beliefs resonate with or convince Americans to make a choice about their country. In 1980 Reagan spoke of hope and prosperity to a country that suffered from economic chaos and foreign policy defeats. His sanguine rhetoric contrasted sharply to Carter’s dour tone and, according to some, caused many voters to disregard liberalism, albeit Carter’s tempered version, as a path to prosperity and prowess. After his election many claimed Reagan’s victory represented the “capstone of a decade of drift toward communism” and would change “public attitudes, ideological alliances, and value orientation.” Historical context is crucial to understanding his victory, though. Reagan’s words landed on the ears of people eager to escape from the long lines at gas stations and increasing unemployment. Therefore, his rhetoric cannot be credited uniquely for the country’s selection of Republican presidents for the next 12 years. But his cheery voice and promising vision guided the overwhelming majority of Americans to support his presidency and programs, which differed significantly from that of his predecessor. His presidency and speeches had a profound and long-lasting effect on the country: today he remains the popular icon of conservatism, and his optimistic rhetoric lives on in the speeches of Republican candidates across the country.

Influence of a Candidate
Another factor in the success of the liberal label is the character of the presidential candidates from both parties. Reagan’s role in popularizing conservatism was due in part to his warm personality and subsequent popularity. He exuded ease and confidence and spoke grandiosely of America’s future, a combination his opponents found difficult to undercut. In contrast, Michael Dukakis’ technocratic personality and seemingly wiry character made him an easy target for Bush’s ideological criticisms. His refusal to support the death penalty under any circumstances, including the rape and murder of his wife, made him appear simultaneously uncompromising and lax to a fault. Voters did not respond well to these qualities, did not support his candidacy, and were therefore more willing to agree with criticisms of his political positions.

Bill Clinton represented the foil to Dukakis. He was a masterful politician whose excessive charm and eloquence made him popular. His approval rating, even after being impeached by the House, remained at a solid 71 percent a month before leaving office (Gallup, 2000). This general appeal cushioned him not only from the political fallout of scandals but also from the ideological attacks launched by his opponents in 1992 and 1996. Admittedly, Clinton denied being a liberal, identifying with a more moderate, triangulated political philosophy. Therefore it is difficult to say whether the liberal label would have stuck to him had he implicitly accepted it like it did Dukakis, or whether his popularity would have prevented the word’s negative connotations from damaging his campaign.
In 2004, however, the conservatives successfully painted Kerry as a “flip-flopper,” causing voters to question his leadership skills and overall character. As a result, the Senator never developed broad character appeal with which he could deflect the Republicans’ liberal tag. Had Kerry seemed less stiff or more congenial, it is possible his personality would have insulated him from the Republicans’ ideological undermining. The ideological legacies of Kennedy and Reagan suggest candidates can be overtly liberal or conservative and popular. In fact, perhaps the two are deeply intertwined and should be considered in the Democrats’ plan to reclaim their political identity.

**Why Democrats Must Reclaim Ideological Identity**

The liberal label is a daunting rhetorical challenge nearly every Democratic presidential candidate has faced, but few have overcome since 1988. Only President Clinton successfully responded to the ideological tag and won the White House. And he did so by disassociating himself from liberalism. Does it follow, then, that only a moderate Democratic candidate can win the White House? Is that a bad result considering the American public by many measures of ideological identification and party affiliation are politically moderate?

The 2004 presidential election revealed how imperative it is for the Democrats to reclaim their ideological identity. Automatically, Kerry was put on the defensive once he declared his candidacy. He struggled to gain any advantage in the campaign,
despite the fact that Americans repeatedly disagreed with the war in Iraq and consistently thought he would be better for the country on key issues such as the economy. Because there is no equivalent ideological attack for conservatives, the Republicans have a guaranteed advantage over their opponents. Liberals must respond to criticisms of their ideology or else face an immediate disadvantage in future presidential campaigns.

The success of the label also serves to push the discourse away from policy discussions toward negative campaigning. Attacks are a natural component of presidential elections and have been shown to be effective, though with the undesired result of voter demobilization (Ansolabehere et al., 1994). But the liberal label is a particularly distracting type of political attack because it can be used to criticize any aspect of a candidate from his character to his proposals and reduce it to name-calling. Bush used this tactic effectively in 2004 to dismiss Kerry’s health care plan. If the epithet were understood by the public to signify a candidate’s political philosophy and the people comprehended issues with an ideological understanding, the liberal label would not necessarily be as damaging to the Democratic Party or election year discourse. But the tag is necessarily associated with negative and extreme positions such as raising taxes and increasing government regulations senselessly. As such it is a drag on any Democratic candidacy and the left-wing party as a whole.

Statistical analysis above demonstrated just how damaging the unchecked liberal label could be to the Democrats and their party. In Chapter 9 this study
explored the relationship between perception of a political party’s ideology and the public’s party affiliation. How liberal the electorate views the Democratic Party was found to be a good predictor of the public’s party affiliation. The more liberal the Democratic Party was perceived, the less individuals affiliated with it. This intersection of ideology and political choice is why the Democrats must combat the negative connotations of the word liberal. This study has acknowledged before that the impact of political rhetoric on voters is difficult to isolate and discern. But the connection between ideology and party identification exposes a potentially dangerous reality. The public continues to lean toward the Democratic Party, but that measure has been inching gradually toward no party preference for decades. The liberal label cannot be blamed for this exodus of Democratic Party supporters, but it certainly cannot help to garner support for the left wing. In the interest of their future presidential candidates and the party base, Democrats must rebuke the liberal label in future presidential elections.

**How Democrats Must Reclaim Ideological Identity**

Party support and future Democratic candidates are evident reasons to defeat the ideological epithet, but the silver bullet to do so is elusive. How can the Democrats combat a tried and true Republican campaign strategy, particularly when the electorate is not overwhelmingly liberal? The answer lies in the way the conservatives established the label to begin with.
The moderate nature of voters’ opinions on political ideology and basic tenets of liberalism demonstrate that the negative connotations of liberal were not derived from Americans’ beliefs. In fact much of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 argues that the common voter does not understand the definition or significance of political ideologies. The political elites, those who are interested and involved in politics on some level, do understand liberalism and conservatism and can often distinguish what policies belong to what ideological school (Levitin and Miller, 1979). If the public does not assign accurate or even specific definitions to the words liberal and conservative, it would be difficult for them to evaluate candidates or issues on such a scale (Converse, 1964). Therefore, the political elite must have designed the liberal label. The appearances of politicians on Meet the Press and the acknowledgement of the taboo epithet in major newspaper headlines reinforces this idea.

The Democrats must emulate this tactic for their counter-strategy. With the help of political elites within the Party, liberals must appear on talk shows, provide interviews to newspapers, and give speeches to the public in an effort to reclaim the word liberal for their political purposes. Having candidates embrace the word confidently and offering alternative definitions of the Democrats’ philosophy as Kennedy did would help to re-establish their ideological identity. Of course mentioning the “L-word” has its perils, but appearing weak or uncertain is worse.

Fortunately, the Democrats’ daunting task is made easier by moderate public opinion. The left wing does not have to convince conservative extremists that the word
liberal does not have negative connotations. On the contrary, Americans prefer the middle of the road by almost all measures, so redefining the word will be easier than if public opinion leaned right. Perhaps reintroducing the liberal label in a positive light on issues where the electorate sides more with liberals might be a good starting point, but laying an overarching framework of ideological confidence is key. This should be done by leveraging the same power of political rhetoric employed by the right wing. Repeating liberal’s true meaning with confidence and charisma will help to diminish the label’s negative effects and work toward restoring the ideological balance between the two parties.

2008: Pragmatism and Principle

The 2004 election exposed the Republican Party’s default rhetorical advantage over the Democrats. President Bush and the conservatives employed the liberal label freely and effectively. The fact that 45% of voters considered Kerry to be too liberal confirms the epithet’s success. It forced the Democrats on the defensive immediately and allowed the incumbent to define his opponent negatively very early in the race. Moreover, it directed political discourse away from meaningful issue debates and toward ideological name-calling. Kerry’s stilted character never gave him the boost he needed to overcome the ideological attacks. This study revealed, however, that the liberal label is not borne out of popular dislike for the leftist ideology. The label has been used increasingly over the last few decades as designed and defined by the political
elite. The epithet’s damage to Kerry’s candidacy and the gradual decline in affiliation with the Democratic Party represent how imperative it is for the Democrats to address the attack and reclaim their ideological identity. To do so will require effective political communication and a candidate who espouses Kennedy’s liberal pride and confidence and Clinton’s popularity. Although the label’s indisputable negative connotations make such an undertaking a risky strategy for the Democratic Party, they must do so for the sake of future Democratic candidates and political discourse. The liberal label is not a product of public opinion but a construct of conservative campaigns. Two compelling reasons must motivate the Democrats to overcome it in 2008: the pragmatic reason of needing more Democratic Party victories and the principled reason of improving U.S. political discourse.
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