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An Automated Analysis on the Content of U.S. Senate Rhetoric

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This project aims for a better understanding of politicians’ re-election strategies and how they appeal to constituents in their discourse. Such an understanding would allow for better informed citizens on the workings of our democracy.

The work examines the content of speeches given by United States Senators from 1994 until the present. More specifically, I use a script coded in the Ruby programming language to generate frequencies of the number of times a Senator utters his or her home state in every year during the previously mentioned time span and hope to find evidence that the number of state mentions increases during the fifth and sixth year of a Senator’s six-year term.

This finding would support previous literature on the representational implications of symbolic speeches in the U.S. Senate, in which the amount of constituency identification and constituency empathy speeches were greater than general policy speeches during election years. Politicians may reference their home states in praise of successful state level policies, to congratulate local sports teams, to advocate for legislation favorable to their constituents, or to generate media sound bites favorable to their re-election strategies. If the hypothesis proves to be true, I will analyze the content of speeches that do reference the home state and compare it to the content of the speeches that do not to find out which issues or ideas are being associated with a Senator’s home state. These would be the issues or ideas that the Senator believes are important to his or her home state’s constituents.