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Invoking “The Family” to Legitimize Gender- and Sexuality-Based Public Policies in the United States: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the 2012 Democratic and Republican National Party Conventions

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Abstract

Women and sexual minorities in the United States continue to experience subordinate status, and the policy gains they have made in areas such as reproductive rights and marriage equality continue to be challenged in political discourse. We conducted a critical discourse analysis of texts from the 2012 Democratic and Republican national conventions in order to examine the extent to which ideological representations of the family were employed to legitimize public policy positions related to gender (e.g., abortion) and sexuality (e.g., same-sex marriage). We analyzed two forms of text (official party platform document, transcripts of speeches) with distinct intended audiences (i.e., party members, general audience). Findings revealed that an ideological representation of the traditional family ideal—featuring a heterosexual couple, their children, and asymmetric gender relations—was present within speeches given by both parties, particularly by the spouses of the presidential candidates (Michelle Obama and Ann Romney). Although this ideological representation was subsequently used within the Republican Party platform to legitimize positions against same-sex marriage and abortion, the Democratic Party platform challenged this representation of the family to instead advocate for policy positions in favor of same-sex marriage and women’s reproductive rights. We discuss this ambivalence within Democratic texts in light of the different audiences that party convention texts seek. Implications for gender- and sexuality-based policies are discussed, as well as the importance of examining political discourse across diverse forms and settings.

Keywords: discourse, ideology, family, critical, patriarchy, heterosexism, policy

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Like many nations, the United States has a long history of political inequality on the basis of gender and sexual identity. Women were historically denied full participation in the political life of the nation (e.g., the right to vote), and protections to ensure their equal treatment have been historically absent (see [Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996](#)). Women in the US continue to experience inequalities in income compared to their male counterparts (e.g., [Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007](#); [Chang, 2010](#); [Jokinen-Gordon, 2012](#)), and they continue to report high prevalence of discrimination in numerous contexts (see [Ridgeway, 2011](#)). Same-sex sexual activity was criminalized through explicit laws in

numerous states since the founding of the nation, with the constitutionality of state sodomy laws initially upheld by the Supreme Court in 1986 but then ultimately struck down by the Court in 2003 (see [Eskridge, 2008](#); [Hammack & Windell, 2011](#)). Although cultural attitudes and social policies in the US have begun to favor civil rights for sexual minorities, including marriage equality ([Pew Research Center, 2013](#)), the repudiation of policies limiting sexual minority rights is by no means settled in the US, and LGBT people continue to experience social and political exclusion ([Hammack & Cohler, 2011](#)). In short, the historical experience of women and sexual minorities in the US has been largely characterized by government policies that have limited their rights in relation to men and heterosexuals, respectively.

In this article, we explore how gender- and sexuality-based policies were discursively framed during the 2012 US election through ideological representations of the family unit. “The family” is a common metaphorical trope informing both political ideology ([Lakoff, 2002](#)) and political discourse ([Strach, 2006](#)). Codified in such documents as Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([United Nations, General Assembly, 1949](#)), the family is often perceived as the basic unit of society. The family, as such, features prominently in the political discourse of both political elites and lay people. Research within political psychology has tended to focus on the use of the family as a metaphor underlying political ideology and informing political communication (e.g., [Deason & Gonzales, 2012](#); [Lakoff, 2002](#); [McAdams et al., 2008](#)). A second body of research (e.g., [Strach, 2006](#)), often inspired by feminist perspectives (see [Andersen, 1991](#); [Collins, 1998, 2001](#)), notes the ways in which the family is an ideological representation in political discourse that reproduces and legitimizes political and social inequality.

In the US, the *traditional family ideal* features a heterosexual couple, their biological children, and gender roles characterized by a wage-earning, head-of-household father and a stay-at-home mother ([Andersen, 1991](#); [Collins, 1998, 2001](#)). This idealized family structure is assumed and subsequently codified by government policy ([Strach, 2006](#)). Appeals based on “family values” rooted in this traditional ideal re-affirm gender- and sexuality-based hierarchies ([Collins, 1998](#)). Males, for example, assume an economic leadership position within the family, while females assume a subordinate, domestic function. As a consequence, family structures deviating from the ideal—for example, ones that feature same-sex couples—are considered less legitimate and less worthy of benefits derived from government policies, laws, and regulations, while those reflecting the ideal are privileged.

Family is a construct featured within political discourse that is frequently informed by the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal*. Such constructions of the family are utilized to achieve specific political objectives ([Strach, 2006](#)). Drawing the boundaries of the family unit, namely specifying who is considered to be part of the family unit and who is to be excluded, can be a means through which inequality can be reproduced via the distribution of social legitimacy and government benefits. Specifying the roles of each member of the family unit, moreover, represents an additional means of affirming hierarchy through the circumscription of gender identity via the privileging of traditional gender roles. Recognizing these functions, we were particularly interested in examining the emergence of the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal* and its function in reproducing gender- and sexuality-based inequality within political discourse.

The Current Study

Political discourse on public policies regarding gender and sexuality has shifted over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first century toward equality and social justice ([Hammack & Cohler, 2011](#)). The 2010 end to the ban on discrimination against sexual minorities serving in the military illustrates this ideological shift (see [Hulse, 2010](#)). Public opinion data also reveal a decisive shift with regard to these ideologies. For example, public opinion

polls reveal a significant trend toward acceptance of marriage equality for sexual minorities, with a majority of people in the US now supportive of same-sex marriage for the first time since such polls have been conducted (Pew Research Center, 2013). Unlike in previous presidential elections, issues of gender and sexuality did not figure as prominently in the 2012 election as other issues (e.g., the economy; see Pew Research Center, 2012b). The broader cultural context of the election, however, was characterized by continued conversation and public debate about issues and policy related to gender equality (e.g., equal pay, reproductive rights) and sexual identity equality (e.g., same-sex marriage).

While we recognize that candidates and parties “own” particular issues and seek to guide the actions of voters on this basis (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003), our study was not concerned with the relationship between party or candidate discourse and voting behavior. Our study is instead situated within approaches to social psychological analysis emphasizing the relationship among discourse, thought, and behavior (e.g., Bamberg, 2011; Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012).

Recognizing the history of social injustice on the basis of gender and sexual identity in the US and the continued efforts of women and sexual minorities to work for equal rights (Herek, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011), we sought to examine the way in which positions on policies related to gender and sexuality were framed via representations of the family within Democratic and Republican convention texts. We analyzed four speeches (two from each nominating convention) and the official policy platform document for each party. We sought to address the following question: *How is the ideological representation of the traditional family ideal used within Democratic and Republican convention texts to justify positions on gender- and sexuality-based public policies?*

Method

Data Corpus: Republican and Democratic National Convention Texts

Nominating conventions mark the transition from the cacophony of voices of the primary period to the single, coherent party narrative that is mobilized in preparation for the general election (Smith, 1992). The nominating convention accomplishes this transition through two mechanisms: the construction of a party platform and “podium events” (e.g., speeches). Party platforms represent an institutional discourse with the internal aim of synthesizing disparate elements within the party into a single document for the purposes of coalition building (Smith, 1992). Complementing this document are podium events that make manifest the ideological content contained within the platform events. Unlike the internal audience sought by the platform document, podium events seek to appeal to an external audience (Smith, 1992). National party conventions thus represent an ideal context to examine party ideology, as the convention serves the dual functions of constructing a coherent ideological narrative of party identity, values, and positions, and of presenting that ideological narrative to a general audience.

Following methodological conventions in discursive psychology (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 1992, 2003, 2010; see also Hammack & Pilecki, 2014), we began by specifying our phenomenon of inquiry—mentions within political texts of family, specifically its invocation in regards to positions on gender- and sexuality-based public policies. In accordance with our CDA framework, we generated a corpus of data representative of the ideological functions the national party convention serves. We thus sought to analyze various *forms* of texts (i.e., platform documents, speeches by nominees, speeches by nominee spouses). Our final corpus of data consisted of (1) the official party platform documents publicly distributed at the nominating convention;

(2) the convention speech of each Presidential candidate; and (3) the convention speech of each first lady candidate (i.e., spouse of the Presidential candidate). Details of the data corpus are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Details of Data Corpus

Document	Type	Word Count
Democratic		
2012 Democratic Party platform ^a	Platform text	26,627
Barack Obama, Presidential candidate ^b	Podium event	4,661
Michelle Obama, First Lady candidate ^c	Podium event	3,010
Republican		
2012 Republican Party platform ^d	Platform text	30,817
Mitt Romney, Presidential candidate ^e	Podium event	4,102
Ann Romney, First Lady candidate ^f	Podium event	2,342

^a<http://www.democrats.org/democratic-national-platform/>;

^b<http://www.npr.org/2012/09/06/160713941/transcript-president-obamas-convention-speech/>;

^c<http://www.npr.org/2012/09/04/160578836/transcript-michelle-obamas-convention-speech/>;

^d<https://www.gop.com/platform/>;

^e<http://www.npr.org/2012/08/30/160357612/transcript-mitt-romneys-acceptance-speech/>;

^f<http://www.npr.org/2012/08/28/160216442/transcript-ann-romneys-convention-speech>

Analytic Framework

The principles of CDA informed our analysis. As with other discursive analytical frameworks (see Gee, 1999; Hammack & Pilecki, 2014), CDA views language as a form of action that assumes a mutually constitutive role with the social and historical context from which it emerges (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 1993). In line with the principles of CDA and previous research employing the method (e.g., McDowell & Schaffner, 2011), we conducted our analysis at three levels: (a) the actual text; (b) the discursive practices; and (c) the larger social context (Fairclough, 2010). At the *textual* level, we conducted a microanalysis with special attention paid to rhetorical constructions and lexical choices (e.g., McDowell & Schaffner, 2011). Given that we were interested principally in the ideological *content* of convention texts, our microanalysis of podium events did not extend to omissions, hesitations, and other linguistic devices, which is common within studies employing a CDA approach (e.g., Sowińska, 2013; Sowińska & Dubrovskaya, 2012).

At the level of *discursive practice*, we analyzed how family was employed as a discursive construct in reference to policy positions. We were particularly interested in the ideological content that accompanied the use of this construct, namely who is assumed to be part of the family, what actions and behaviors are perceived as indicative of the family, and how the family is positioned in relation to the government. In this respect, we were particularly sensitive to ideological representations approximating the *traditional family ideal* given its previously documented presence within US political discourse (Strach, 2006).

The *contextual* level, in the case of our study, features both the macro policy context as it relates to issues of gender and sexuality, as well as the micro context of the nominating convention, which represents a forum for the concretization and articulation of party ideology (Edelman, 1988; Smith, 1992). Our analysis of ideological repres-

entations of family within Democratic and Republican texts was thus conducted through these contextual frames with particular attention paid to the interaction between textual form (i.e., speech versus platform document) and audience (i.e., party members versus general audience).

Each of the authors independently engaged in multiple readings of all texts. We then came together to establish consensus on the analysis. Through this iterative process, consensus was achieved on the meaning and function of discourse related to ideological representations of family. This consensus approach to qualitative data analysis represents the standard for hermeneutic approaches (Tappan, 1997).

Results

Consistent with standards in qualitative methods (e.g., Langhout, 2006), we offer a statement of position or reflexivity with regard to our research questions. We are social scientists who take a normative stance with regard to social justice for women and sexual minorities. We are opposed to inequality based on gender and sexuality. We value the long tradition of knowledge production that has sought to challenge pernicious ideologies such as racism and antisemitism, and we identify with this tradition in social psychology (e.g., Allport, 1954; Lewin, 1946; Smith, 2003). We believe that this position facilitated our ability to analyze our qualitative data, as it made us particularly sensitive to discourses related to the family and their deployment to justify gender- and sexuality-based policy.

We present our findings in four sections. To highlight the divergence in ideological content we discovered across textual forms, we present our analysis of podium events first, followed by our analysis of the Republican and Democratic platform texts, respectively. In the first section, we describe how both Democratic and Republican podium events featured an ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal* (Andersen, 1991; Collins, 1998, 2001), especially within the speeches given by Michelle Obama and Ann Romney. In the second section, we note how this representation was featured within the Republican platform as a means of legitimizing gender- and sexuality-based inequality. The Democratic platform, as we illustrate in the third section, proposed gender- and sexuality-based policies based on an expanded definition of the family. This definition, in turn, was rooted in an ideology of equality that explicitly repudiated aspects of the *traditional family ideal*. We argue in the fourth section that this ambivalence among Democratic texts is a function of the different audiences that podium events seek versus platform documents.

Privileging the Traditional Family Ideal Within Republican and Democratic Podium Events

We found that Democratic and Republican podium events featured an ideological representation of the family based on the *traditional family ideal* (see Andersen, 1991; Collins, 1998, 2001). The prevalence of this representation of the family, featuring a father and mother in traditional gender roles along with their children, points to the hegemony of the *traditional family ideal* within contemporary political discourse. Economic struggles, for example, were described in the podium events from both parties in terms of the burdens placed on families defined in terms of the *traditional family ideal*. Both presidential candidates, for example, discussed policy with respect to its impact on this family unit, especially children. In expressing his views on taxes, Barack Obama declared:

Excerpt 1: Barack Obama

I refuse to ask middle-class families to give up their deductions for owning a home or raising their kids just to pay for another millionaire's tax cut.

Rather than addressing the ramifications of Republican tax policy on society as a whole, Barack Obama instead critiques it by drawing attention to its unfair treatment of the family unit. Mitt Romney criticized Obama's policies using a similar tactic:

Excerpt 2: Mitt Romney

[N]one doubted that here in America they could build a better life, that in America their children would be more blessed than they. But today, four years from the excitement of the last election, for the first time, the majority of Americans now doubt that our children will have a better future.

Like Obama, Romney positions the consequences of government policy in terms of its impact on the family unit, most notably children.

The emphasis placed on the economic ramifications of government policy on children occurs within a socio-historical context that has traditionally excluded sexual minorities from this family structure (e.g., [Weston, 1991](#)). Sexual minorities are often portrayed as a threat to the welfare of children (e.g., [Family Research Council, 2014](#)). The ability to have children, moreover, has been used in legal arguments against same-sex marriage (e.g., [Hollingsworth et al. v. Perry et al., 2012](#); see also [Corvino & Gallagher, 2012](#)). Regarding policy, eight states (Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Utah, and Wisconsin) currently have some kind of legal restriction on the adoption of children by same-sex couples, with Mississippi and Utah having outright prohibitions ([Human Rights Campaign, 2014](#)). Therefore, despite recent developments, the trope of *children* continues to be used to justify the restriction of sexual minority rights.

Gender roles stipulated within the *traditional family ideal* were also evident in the personal narratives featured in the podium events of both parties. These accounts lauded the supportive, domestic roles (i.e., as wives and mothers) that women have traditionally served. The family narrative described in Mitt Romney's convention speech, for example, features the story of the subservient woman who lives and sacrifices her own autonomy for her family role as wife and mother:

Excerpt 3: Mitt Romney

My dad had been born in Mexico and his family had to leave during the Mexican revolution. ...And he had big dreams. He convinced my mom, a beautiful young actress, to give up Hollywood to marry him. He moved to Detroit, led a great automobile company and became Governor of the Great State of Michigan.

Romney's family narrative centers on a great man with great dreams and a woman who subordinates her own interests and desires to secure her husband's success, reflecting discourse content supportive of patriarchal ideology.

The speeches given by the spouses of the candidates, Michelle Obama and Ann Romney, were especially noteworthy for their presentation of the *traditional family ideal*. The podium events of both First Lady candidates were thematically similar. Drawing upon the supposed "non-political" nature of the position (see [Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002](#)), Michelle Obama and Ann Romney provided personal narratives emphasizing their domestic roles, which

were used as vehicles to present a more personalized framing of their candidate-husbands. This approach reifies an important element of the *traditional family ideal*. By specifying the gender roles occupied by men and women, the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal* implies a distinction between the domestic, non-political space occupied by the wife/mother and the external, political realm of the husband/father (cf. Arendt, 1958/1998; see also Edwards & Chen, 2000). Excerpts 4 and 5 illustrate how Michelle Obama and Ann Romney sought to place themselves within the former domain:

Excerpt 4: Michelle Obama

And I say all of this tonight not just as First Lady and not just as a wife. You see, at the end of the day, my most important title is still “mom-in-chief.”

Excerpt 5: Ann Romney

I can’t tell you what will happen over the next four years. But I can only stand here tonight, as a wife, a mother, a grandmother, an American, and make you this solemn commitment: This man will not fail.

Both Michelle Obama and Ann Romney drew upon these traditional domestic roles as a source of expertise to present a non-political case for why people should vote for their husbands. Their professional and political experience is instead subsumed into their roles as “mom-in-chief” or “a wife, a mother, a grandmother,” which is invoked in order to give authority to their political argument as to why people should vote for their husbands (“This man will not fail.”). This performance allows both Michelle Obama and Ann Romney to effectively embody the supportive wife/mother role stipulated within the *traditional family ideal*.

The Republican Party Platform’s Protection of the Traditional Family Ideal

The construct of the family used within the Republican platform privileged, as in the podium events, the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal*. In contrast to the podium events, though, it was not presented symbolically in the form of a personal narrative given by the presidential candidate and his spouse. As illustrated in Excerpt 6, the Republican Party platform explicitly exalts the *traditional family ideal* as a national goal with major implications for gender- and sexuality-based policies:

Excerpt 6: Republican Party Platform

The lack of family formation not only leads to more government costs, but also to more government control over the lives of its citizens in all aspects. We recognize and honor the courageous efforts of those who bear the many burdens of parenting alone, even as we believe that marriage, the union of one man and one woman, must be upheld as the national standard, a goal to stand for, encourage, and promote through laws governing marriage.

The “lack of family formation” is portrayed as a threat to both the economic health (“more government costs”) of the nation and the liberty of its citizens (“more government control”). The “lack of family formation” is subsequently defined as family structures that fail to adhere to the “national standard” represented by the marriage “of one man and one woman.” Only this configuration, moreover, can guard one against the “burdens of parenting alone,” which, although recognized as “courageous,” is ultimately framed as a subordinate familial configuration. Only laws that promote the “national standard”—such as those preserving marriage rights exclusively for heterosexual couples and encouraging reproduction within the context of a traditional family unit—can adequately safeguard the nation from the consequences the “lack of family formation” presents.

The attempt to codify the *traditional family ideal* into law effectively undercuts legal attempts to legitimize alternative family structures, most notably those that feature a same-sex couple. Such efforts, according to the Republican Party platform, represent a threat to the family as defined by the *traditional family ideal*. Republican Party platform positions are thus further legitimized by the claims that, as illustrated in Excerpt 7, safeguard and protect the family:

Excerpt 7: Republican Party Platform

A blatant example [of “judicial activism”] has been the court-ordered redefinition of marriage in several States. This is more than a matter of warring legal concepts and ideals. It is an assault on the foundations of our society, challenging the institution which, for thousands of years in virtually every civilization, has been entrusted with the rearing of children and the transmission of cultural values.

The use of the construct of family presumes the self-evident nature of familial roles and obligations, most notably the responsibilities that parents have towards their children. The *traditional family ideal* specifies these roles further by outlining who the parents ought to be (i.e., a heterosexual couple). Upon this basis, the Republican Party platform argues that efforts to change the definition of marriage represent an “assault on the foundations of our society” given that it is rooted in a configuration that is both timeless (“for thousands of years”) and universal (“in virtually every civilization”).

Republican efforts to safeguard the *traditional family ideal* have consequences for policies beyond those concerning same-sex marriage. Excerpt 8 intimates that the function of marriage is the “rearing of children.” Procreation from the standpoint of the *traditional family ideal* is legitimate insofar as it occurs within the family structure. Procreation, and control over it, is thus no longer the exclusive domain of women:

Excerpt 8: Republican Party Platform

We oppose using public revenues to promote or perform abortion or fund organizations which perform or advocate it and will not fund or subsidize health care which includes abortion coverage. We support the appointment of judges who respect traditional family values and the sanctity of innocent human life.

The inviolability of the fetus' right to life is a moral claim common among anti-abortion proponents (see [Lake, 1986](#)). Respect for “traditional family values” is elided with this claim in order to legitimize support for the appointment of anti-abortion judges. Invoking “traditional family values” here emphasizes that the regulation of the procreative capacity of the heterosexual couple within the *traditional family ideal* exists outside the immediate control of the woman.

In summary, Republican policy positions privileged the construct of family as it is defined within the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal*. Efforts to either legitimize alternative family formations, namely those featuring same-sex couples, or reserve to women rather than the family control over reproduction were thus perceived as threats to the basic functioning of the family unit. Such policies were, as a result, considered illegitimate and worthy of criticism when raised by the political opposition. The *traditional family ideal* thus provided the rationale for Republican positions against same-sex marriage and abortion.

The Democratic Party Platform’s Repudiation of the Traditional Family Ideal

Despite the emergence of the *traditional family ideal* within the personal narrative shared by Michelle Obama in her podium event, this ideological representation of the family was noticeably absent within the Democratic platform.

We thus observed an ambivalence regarding the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal*, which we interpreted as a function of textual form. Within Democratic platform texts a different ideological representation of family was used to justify policy positions, namely one comprised of members described irrespective of gender. In other words, what constitutes a “parent” or “couple” is purposely left undefined within this ideological representation. The principle of equality that underlined this representation, moreover, implied that both men and women—and whatever combination of the two—should have equal access to these roles. This standard provides the basis of an expanded definition of the family supporting more equitable gender- and sexuality-based policies.

Democratic platform positions sought to expand the definition of family to include those who would otherwise be subordinated or delegitimized with the framework of the *traditional family ideal*. Excerpts 9 and 10 exemplify the repudiation of the *traditional family ideal*, specifically its outlining of gender roles within the family unit:

Excerpt 9: Democratic Party Platform

President Obama’s administration has offered men who want to be good fathers extra support. We have bolstered community and faith-based groups focused on fatherhood, partnered with businesses to offer opportunities for fathers to spend time with their kids at the bowling alley or ballpark, and worked to help deployed dads connect with their children.

Excerpt 10: Democratic Party Platform

The President and Democrats have cut taxes for every working American family, and expanded the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit. We believe that all parents and caregivers—regardless of gender—need more flexibility and support in the workplace.

The *traditional family ideal* draws a distinction between the external, economic responsibilities (i.e., “breadwinner”) of the father/husband and the internal, domestic responsibilities (i.e., “caregiver”) of the wife/mother. The Democratic Party platform, in contrast, makes policy positions based on a more equitable distribution of labor, particularly within the domestic sphere (“offered men who want to be good fathers extra support”). There is also no presumed hierarchy among the potential configurations in the parent-child relationship. “Parents and caregivers” are given equal footing with the latter left undefined, thereby leaving room for non-traditional guardians.

This representation of the family based on equality was used to justify Democratic positions supporting same-sex marriage. Excerpt 11 demonstrates how, in contrast to the Republican position that established a hierarchy of family configurations with those featuring a union of “one man and one woman” as the “national standard” for marriage, the Democratic position places same-sex couples on the same level as their opposite-sex counterparts:

Excerpt 11: Democratic Party Platform

We oppose discriminatory federal and state constitutional amendments and other attempts to deny equal protection of the laws to committed same-sex couples who seek the same respect and responsibilities as other married couples.

This position is rooted in both a legalistic argument (“equal protection of the laws”) as well as an appeal to the commitments inherent to the family unit. Regarding the latter, the platform states that same-sex couples “seek the same respect and responsibilities as other married couples.” The reference to “responsibilities” connotes that the self-evident aspects of the family unit, namely the commitments and obligations that couples have to each

other and—potentially—their children, exist independently of gender and thus should not be used as a basis to exclude same-sex couples.

Within the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal*, procreation is a function of the family unit. Women, therefore, do not have ultimate control over their reproductive capacities. Excerpt 12 illustrates how the Democratic platform clashes with this framework:

Excerpt 12: Democratic Party Platform

The President and the Democratic Party believe that women have a right to control their reproductive choices. Democrats support access to affordable family planning services, and ... [ensuring] that women have access to contraception in their health insurance plans.

The principle of equality serves a protective function in that the reproductive capacities of women are protected from external interference (“women have a right to control their reproductive choices”). The family, within this framework, is not defined solely by the birthing and rearing of children; women are thus not obliged to produce children. Contraception and abortion are thus placed under the label of “family planning” reflecting this right that women have to exercise their innate, reproductive capacity at a time of their choosing.

The Democratic platform, in sum, repudiates elements of the *traditional family ideal*. The construct of family featured in the Democratic platform, unlike Democratic podium events, was rooted in a principle of equality in which familial roles are framed in a gender-neutral matter. Policies legitimizing same-sex marriage can, as a result, be justified via appeals to the family construct. The construct of family within the Democratic platform was also not defined solely by its procreative function either. In stark contrast to an ideological representation of the family rooted in the *traditional family ideal*, reproduction remained the exclusive authority of women within the Democratic construct of family. The biological ability to produce children was thus a “right” preceding the formation of the family that women could exercise at their choosing. In this vein, the Democratic platform advocated for women’s access to contraception and abortion under the heading of “family planning.”

Ambivalence Between Forms of Democratic Texts

Representations of the *traditional family ideal* were present in the Democratic podium events. Repudiations of this ideological representation of the family, in contrast, were contained within the Democratic Party platform. An important assumption of CDA is the inextricable link that exists between discourse, on the one hand, and context, form, and setting, on the other (Fairclough, 2010). A piece of text, in other words, cannot be analyzed solely on the basis of its content. The context in which discourse is deployed is central to an analysis of its function and meaning. We thus interpret this apparent ambivalence with respect to the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal* within Democratic texts as being a function of the relationship between *form* and *intended audience*. This pattern is not surprising given that, as an internal document intended for party members, the platform is more sensitive to the needs of different party constituencies.

As noted, national party conventions are comprised of two elements: the party platform and the “podium events” (i.e., speeches) (Smith, 1992). The form of these texts—platform versus podium events—corresponds to their intended audiences. Whereas Democratic and Republican platform texts were lengthy documents comprised of policy statements following a formal rhetorical structure, podium events consisted in large part of personal narratives. These personal narratives became a vehicle through which policy positions and party values were disseminated.

These personal narratives serve the purpose of helping the audience identify with the speaker and the party that he/she represents (see Hammack, 2014).

A Pew Survey of registered voters in 2012 showed that the Democratic Party enjoyed an advantage over the Republican Party among women voters (40% versus 27%; Pew Research Center, 2012a). This advantage was even more pronounced among unmarried women (45% versus 23%). Women are thus a crucial demographic within the Democratic coalition. As made evident in President Obama’s eventual 76% to 22% advantage over Mitt Romney among LGBT voters in the 2012 election (Gates & Newport, 2012), sexual minorities also represent an important voting constituency within the Democratic coalition. Repudiating the *traditional family ideal* and its implications for gender- and sexuality-based policies within the party platform may thus reflect an effort to appeal to both of these constituencies.

Podium events, in contrast to the party platform, are intended for an external audience. Speeches by Democratic speakers must therefore be adjusted in form and function in order to appeal to those who, presumably, are not members of the Democratic Party. Members of this audience, particularly those identified as Independents, are more likely to hold views reflective of the *traditional family ideal* in comparison to party constituents. The Pew Survey of Registered Voters in 2012 illustrates this difference. Asked whether they held “old-fashioned values” about family and marriage, 70% of registered Independents—versus 59% of registered Democrats—stated they agreed; moreover, 52% of registered Independents—versus 39% of registered Democrats—disagreed with the statement that “one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together.” Although registered Independents overwhelmingly disagreed (87%) with the statement that “women should return to their traditional roles in society,” they nevertheless were more likely to disagree with the statement that “Women get fewer opportunities than men for good jobs” in comparison to registered Democrats (50% versus 34%). It is worth noting, however, that registered Independents tended to support both same-sex marriage (52% support versus 38% oppose) and the right for gays and lesbians to adopt children (58% support versus 35% oppose).

A divergence thus exists between those groups that comprise the Democratic Party coalition and Independent voters. While the ideological representation of the *traditional family ideal* may facilitate policies antithetical to gender- and sexuality-based equality, its tenets nevertheless resonate with registered Independents. The privileging of the *traditional family ideal* within Democratic podium events may thus reflect an attempt to appeal to Independents and the “old-fashioned” values they are more likely to hold about the family. The overall ambivalence characterizing Democratic texts, in other words, reflects the contrasting needs to satisfy internal constituents, requiring the repudiation of elements of the *traditional family ideal*, and to appeal to non-party members who retain support for those very same elements. Republican constituents, who overwhelmingly accept “old-fashioned” values about family and marriage (88% agree versus 12% disagree) and disagree with the idea that one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together (65% disagree versus 33% agree), do not present a similar issue for the Republican Party. Our findings therefore illustrate how the content of political discourse is impacted by form and setting in order to meet the sometimes contradictory needs of party supporters and non-party members.

Conclusion

As theoretical perspectives in social psychology and human development have increasingly come to emphasize the relationship among discourse, thought, and behavior (e.g., Bamberg, 2011; Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012), the study of political discourse has become the purview not just of sociolinguists but also of social and political psychologists. How political discourse is employed to advocate policy positions bears upon how citizens understand themselves and the meaning and relative value of their social identities (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). Because political discourse has the power to shape social and psychological understanding and development (Hammack, 2014), the analysis of policy discourse represents an important contribution to social psychology.

Political discourse can be analyzed for its support or challenge of inequality and hegemonic social relations (Fairclough, 1992, 2010). In US political history, key areas of inequality have centered on the rights of women and sexual minorities. For most of the nation's history, women and sexual minorities have been subject to discourses and public policies that explicitly frame them as unequal to men and heterosexuals (e.g., Hammack & Windell, 2011; Ridgeway, 2011). Our study examined the way in which Democratic and Republican texts employ the construct of "family" to legitimize or criticize gender- and sexuality-based policies. We were especially interested in the ideological representations of the family (i.e., who comprises the family?; what is the role of the members of family?; what are the processes that the family engages in?) featured in the discourse of both parties. Our point of analysis was the 2012 US presidential election, when the two parties sought to present their ideological positions in a coherent form through both official platform documents and speeches delivered at their respective nominating conventions. We view this study as contributing to critical approaches to policy analysis and discursive analyses within social psychology.

Our findings revealed that the construct of family served a legitimizing function among the texts we analyzed. That is, family was invoked to justify the policy positions of one's own party and criticize those of the rival. This construct was informed by an ideological representation of the family based on the *traditional family ideal* among the podium events from both parties. This ideological representation defines family in terms of a heterosexual couple and their children with gender roles specifying a wage-earning, head-of-household male figure and a domestic, subordinate female figure. This ideological representation of family was especially emphasized within the personal narratives presented in speeches by the spouses of the presidential nominees (Michelle Obama and Ann Romney).

Our analysis, however, revealed a divergence in discourse content based on the form in which policies were presented. Republican discourse featured in the podium events and platform was consistently explicit about its privileging of the *traditional family ideal*. This discourse, in turn, was used to legitimize Republican opposition to both same-sex marriage as well as women's access to contraception and/or abortion. Democratic discourse content varied across forms and settings, with the party platform document explicitly repudiating the ideological representation of family based on the *traditional family ideal*. The Democratic platform featured, instead, a representation of family based on equality that allowed it to be employed as a means of endorsing same-sex marriage and women's access to contraception and/or abortion.

We interpreted this ambivalence among Democratic texts as a function of the different forms we analyzed and their intended audiences. Whereas platform documents are typically aimed towards an internal audience of party members, podium events are geared towards an external audience of independent voters that could be potentially won over (Smith, 1992). Public opinion data reveals that registered Independents typically hold attitudes that are

more in line with Republican voters on family-oriented issues. There is, therefore, a divergence between the views of factions that make up the Democratic coalition and independent voters that is largely absent among Republicans. Thus our analysis reveals the way in which political discourse is deployed in particular forms to achieve particular political objectives depending on the intended audience (e.g., party constituents versus independent voters).

Our study is limited by the fact that our data corpus featured podium events from the Presidential nominees and their spouses. Although these are typically the most viewed events (see "Closing night of Democratic National Convention draws 35.7 viewers," 2012; "Final night of Republican National Convention draws 30.3 million viewers," 2012), further inquiry should be made into how ideological representations of family are featured within the podium events of other speakers to determine whether they reproduce the pattern of results revealed in this study. We also acknowledge that our study is limited to the socio-political context of 2012. Even though this period has witnessed substantive policy changes regarding sexuality and gender, it would be worthwhile to examine how ideological representations of family were employed to justify gender- and sexuality-based policy positions across different historical periods. Lastly, the findings of our study do not reveal the extent to which the presence of the *traditional family ideal* within political discourse influences public support for gender- and sexuality-based policies. Future studies should incorporate both a discursive and an experimental component (e.g., Verkuyten, 2005) to address this question.

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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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