Constitutive Rhetoric and Partisan Polarization in the 2016 Presidential Primary Debates

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Abstract

For decades political scientists and communication scholars have grappled with the connection between political primaries and rising polarization. Despite significant scholarly attention to the connection between primaries and polarization, little attention has been afforded to the rhetoric of polarization in primary campaigns. Through the lens of constitutive rhetoric, we investigate the intersection of primary campaigns and polarization from a rhetorical perspective. We analyze the rhetoric of the 2016 presidential primary debates to understand how candidates drew on traditional and innovative strategies of rhetorical polarization in constituting party identity. We find that establishment candidates depended on in-group affirmation and out-group subversion while partisan outsiders deployed entelechy and affect to constitute a unique partisan identity.

Key Terms: Presidential primary debates, polarization, affect, entelechy

Political primaries are a frequent target for those lamenting the rise of polarization in American politics. Scholars and pundits alike have questioned the role of intraparty political contests in deepening division in the public and among their elected representatives. Primaries are frequently criticized as insular contests in which only the most ideologically extreme voters participate (Troiano, 2021; Walker, 1988). Yet data suggest that primary voters are not more polarized than those who vote in general elections (Abramowitz, 2008; Sides et al., 2020). Others have blamed closed primaries for polarization, but researchers have similarly found no significant effect of open or closed contests on polarization (Hirano et al., 2010; McGhee et al., 2013). Instead, scholars have found consistent evidence that polarization is a product of campaigns and campaign messages rather than the structure of primaries or the nature of primary voters (Sood & Iyengar, 2016; Warner, et al., 2021), with at least one study finding that televised primary debates are among the campaign media increasing polarization in viewers (Warner et al., 2021).

Given the role of campaign messages generally and primary debates in particular in advancing polarization, there is a need for deeper investigation into the polarizing messages in presidential primary debates that moves beyond the assumption that candidates respond to the desires of already extreme primary voters. We argue that the 2016 presidential primary debates functioned as sites of partisan identity negotiation and consequently of polarization. We find that in addition to traditional approaches for enforcing us/them dichotomies, candidates navigated intraparty division by turning to affective or entelechial understandings of partisan identity that maintained the rhetoric of polarization despite obvious in-group differences. We begin by

reviewing the academic literature on constitutive rhetoric, the rhetoric of partisan polarization, and presidential primary debates.

Constitutive Rhetoric and Party Identity

Understandings of campaign rhetoric have long been dominated by functional perspectives, which view campaign discourse as strategic communication with the central aim of winning an election (e.g. Benoit, 1999; Denton et al., 2019). Today much of campaign scholarship focuses on elements and effects of campaign rhetoric beyond the winning or losing of elections (e.g. Stuckey, 2005; Lee, 2017). These trends reflect scholars' appreciation for the more complex socio-cultural implications of campaign discourse, especially in constructing partisan and national identity. The shifting focus of campaign rhetoric reflects a broader move from persuasion to identification (Burke, 1969a). Burke's concept of identification asks how speakers and audiences become consubstantial, with audiences embodying the rhetoric through which they are persuaded.

Drawing from Burkean identification and Althusser's concept of the ideological subject, Charland (1987) proposed a reformulation of rhetoric as constitutive of its audience. Where functional perspectives rely on understandings of rhetoric as emerging in response to an exigence and targeting pre-defined audience (Bitzer, 1968), a constitutive approach allows critics to attune to the ways in which discourse constructs, defines, and redefines shared identities. The constitutive view has particularly focused on the organizing function of rhetoric (Ihlen & Heath, 2018). Crable (1990) argues that rhetoric is inherently organizational and proposes a shift in the understanding of rhetoric from its functional, psychological, and sociological origins to a new focus on the "ontological nature of modern rhetors" (p. 118). This approach centers questions of identity and identification in rhetoric beyond speaker and audience to understand the ways that discourse constitutes organizations and organizational identity.

Charland's (1987) original articulation of constitutive rhetoric investigated a burgeoning political party as it worked to shape a new national identity of *Peuple Québécois*. Despite this initial focus on partisan discourse and the central role of ideology in constitutive rhetoric, there has been little scholarly attention devoted to the ways in which partisan identities are formed, challenged, and maintained through rhetoric (for notable exceptions see McGowan-Kirsch, 2019; R. Neville-Shepard, 2022). A constitutive view allows scholars to see campaign rhetoric, especially in primaries, as constituting organizations and defining in-group/out-group parameters even within powerful, long-established institutions like the Republican and Democratic parties. We position primary debates as sites of identity negotiation and constitutive of party identity to understand the polarizing rhetoric of primary debates divorced from the now disputed understanding that primary messages are simply polarized to appeal to more partisan voters. First, we examine the robust body of literature on the rhetoric of polarization and its association with constitutive rhetoric.

The Rhetoric of Partisan Polarization

While polarization is frequently discussed in the context of political partisanship, it is a wide-ranging rhetorical phenomenon of establishing group identity through opposition to the out-group. Polarization is inextricably tied to constitutive rhetoric (Fortuna, 2019) with rhetors constituting organizational identity through opposition. More than fifty years ago, King and Anderson (1971) argued that the rhetoric of polarization depends equally on in-group cohesion and an expressed belief that the out-group is the primary force preventing an otherwise realizable goal. Within these categories, King and Anderson suggest that two strategies emerge in the rhetoric of polarization: a strategy of *affirmation* and a strategy of *subversion*. Affirmation seeks to build a strong base of support and extol the virtues of the ingroup. By contrast, subversion is aimed at undermining the credibility or efficacy of the opposition. Importantly, subversive rhetoric recasts the opposition as not only unwise but as ill intentioned. Over the last five decades scholars have offered new and profound insights into this phenomenon that defines much of American political life, but the fundamental understanding of polarization as establishing and entrenching "us versus them" dichotomies through in-group affirmation and out-group subversion remains largely unchallenged (McCoy et al., 2018).

Polarization reduces complex and multifaceted organizational identities to a single dimension and utilizes that dimension as a wedge between "us" and "them," creating clear delineation between competing groups or factions (King & Anderson, 1971; McCoy, et al., 2018). Polarization and partisanship depend on the symbolic creation of artificial dichotomies that are fostered by mutually reinforcing stages of isolation within the party and confrontation with opponents (Lanigan, 1970; Raum & Measell, 1974).

As a subset of polarization, political partisanship derives from an affinity for a political party and uses party lines as the markers of in-group and out-group. Parties and political ideologies are frequent sources of polarization in a democracy, yet our understanding of the rhetoric constitutive of these institutions is relatively limited. The rhetoric of polarization provides a lens by which to better understand how partisan lines are constructed and entrenched in the process of party formation and the role that primary debates play in constituting the identity of a political party.

Two significant observations about group identity and outgroup animosity in the last twenty years have reshaped our understanding of the rhetoric of polarization in the context of partisan politics. First, with respect to in-group affirmation, Americans' partisan leanings have increasingly become a defining characteristic of their individual identities and sense of self (Mason, 2018). Political identity has become increasingly entangled with Americans' choices of occupation (Roth et al., 2022), religious affiliation (Margolis, 2018), and geographic location (Bishop, 2009). In this way, many of the cross-cutting cleavages that defined scholarly understanding of partisanship prior to the 21st century (see Dahl, 1982; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) have evaporated in favor of a society increasingly organized around partisan identity.

Just as in-group identity has shifted over the last twenty years, so has dominant framing

of the political outgroup. Ingroup/outgroup distinctions are no longer defined primarily by divergent ideologies or policy perspectives but rather by what Iyengar et al. (2012) call *affective polarization*. Affective polarization describes the strong, personal dislike of opposing partisans. In recent years scholars have devoted increasing attention to the combination of affect and ideology in organizing (Papacharissi, 2015), but scholarship has thus far done little to examine how intragroup conflict and division shape discourses about the outgroup.

Traditional understandings of the rhetoric of polarization depend on cohesive in-group identity, but polarization seems to be at its peak when in-group identity is in question, such as in presidential primary debates. Our investigation of constitutive rhetoric in primary debates suggest that intraparty factions rely on unique strategies of polarization to navigate around the in-group conflict made plain on the debate stage and constitute a vision of a unified party. Among these strategies is a turn toward entelechy. Burke (2003, p. 125) defines entelechy as, "such use of symbolic resources that potentialities can be said to attain their perfect fulfillment." Or, in a more Aristotelian sense, Burke (1961, p. 246) notes, "the seed 'implicitly contains' a future conforming to its nature, if the external conditions necessary to such unfolding and fulfilment occur in the right order." As a tool of organizational identity formation, entelechy allows rhetors to draw a straight line to the future and situate identity in the perfect fulfilment of an ideal, rather than on the identity as fixed in the present.

Rhetorical critics have noted that entelechial rhetoric plays an important role in ideological sorting and in the rise of presidential hopefuls. Steudeman (2013, p. 88) notes that entelechy provides inroads for those outside traditional ideological nodes, noting that, "As scholars continue to consider how presidents grapple with the conditions and events that brought about their rise to power, careful attention to these rhetorics of entelechy and irony can elucidate the entry points through which new ideological orientations gain their footing." We find that entelechy serves the purpose of defining party identity for political outsiders in presidential primary debates. The final section of our literature review details extant scholarship on primary debates and the unique challenge these contests create for organizational identity.

Primary Debates

Primary debates occur more frequently and typically include more candidates than general election debates but remain significantly understudied by comparison (McKinney & Carlin, 2004). The preponderance of extant literature on presidential primaries takes a functional view of these contests, discussing them largely as tools for the selection of party nominees (Benoit et al., 2002; Kendall, 2000); but rhetorical investigations of televised presidential debates have shed light on the discourses of social change (Murphy, 1992), agency (Kephart & Rafferty, 2017), economics (Coker & Reed, 2021), and masculinity (Kephart, 2020). We argue that primary debates serve a unique function as sites of identity negotiation for political parties. Primary debates stand out as one of the only instances of televised intraparty discourse at a national level. In the modern era, the other major site of intraparty discourse, national conventions, function as a form of party branding with parties unifying around a selected

nominee (Bolton, 2018). Primary debates are unique instances in which party identity is up for debate, with candidates representing varied ideological and policy preferences.

As previously mentioned, primaries are often a target for polarization opponents. Findings from extant research give credence to the assertion that discourse among insular groups may further entrench partisan perspectives and promote animosity toward the political out-group (Sunstein, 2002; Sunstein & Hastie, 2014). The rhetoric of polarization is deeply connected to the type of in-group identity formation that dominates presidential primary debates, yet these debates call into question some of the chief constructs associated with a rhetoric of polarization, namely, an emphasis on in-group cohesion and affirmation. Neither the functional explanation (of candidates appealing to polarized voters) or the current rhetorical perspective (of in-group affirmation/out-group subversion) seem to explain how debates, in which in-group identity is deeply fractured, produce discourses of polarization. We propose that candidates compensate for this lack of cohesion by turning against the outgroup (subversion), providing an entelechial vision of their own party, or organizing around affect.

To best facilitate an examination of interparty and intraparty rhetoric in primaries, we selected the 2016 presidential primary debates as a case study to analyze both interparty and intraparty polarization. The 2016 primary debates are uniquely suited for an investigation of the constitutive nature of both interparty and intraparty discourse. These debates provide the most recent example of an election cycle in which both parties held presidential primary debates. The 2016 election cycle is also one of only two times in over 60 years that neither the incumbent President or Vice President sought nor won their party's nomination for the presidency. Without an incumbent or former president or vice president seeking the nomination, we believe that partisan identity is more open for interpretation or redefinition, emboldening intraparty factions to craft a vision of the party in line with their positions. In 2016, both parties saw the emergence of clear factional lines between establishment insiders and partisan outsiders.

The 2016 Primary Debates

In 2016, both the Democratic and Republican parties saw clear ideological divisions between establishment candidates and party outsiders. For the Republicans, a growing intraparty schism between the Tea Party and establishment Republicans meant that the 2016 contest for the Republican presidential nomination would represent one of the most tumultuous political contests of the modern era. While only four candidates would eventually win primaries, the field opened with a total of 17 candidates. Leading up to the first primary debate in August 2015, New York businessman Donald Trump had a surprising lead in the polls. As a political outsider, Trump appealed initially to the Tea Party wing of the GOP. His lead highlighted the growing rift in the Republican Party between Tea Party conservatives, opposed to cultural and economic shifts during the Obama administration, and establishment conservatives, who hoped to expand the Republican base by reaching out to minority voters whom they had lost in large numbers in 2008 and 2012. In the primary debates, Donald Trump, Texas Senator Ted Cruz, and neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson represented the Tea Party wing of the GOP. Leaders of what came

to be called the "establishment wing" of the Republican Party included former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, and Ohio Governor John Kasich.

Between August 2015 and April 2016, Republican presidential candidates participated in 12 primary debates. Because of the large number of candidates, the first seven debates included both a "main-stage" debate, featuring the 10 or 11 candidates with the highest poll numbers, and a secondary or "undercard" debate featuring candidates with lower poll numbers. Attempts at party unity unraveled quickly at the beginning of the first debate (August 16, 2015) in Cleveland, OH when moderator Bret Baier asked if any candidates were unwilling to support the eventual Republican nominee. The frontrunner, Donald Trump, was the only candidate not willing to make that pledge. Over the course of the Republican primary debates, tensions between factions continued to grow. In fact, intraparty unity was at such a low point that RNC Chairman Reince Preibus addressed the audience before the final debate on March 10, 2016, in Coral Gables, FL to assure party faithful that the party would support the eventual nominee.

Intraparty factionalism was also on display in the Democratic primary debates. While Secretary of State Hillary Clinton entered the 2016 primary with a sizeable lead over her closest competitor, the unlikely surge of Independent Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders quickly dampened Clinton's hopes of an easy path to the nomination. Sanders succeeded in motivating much of the young, liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Sanders' platform included free college tuition at state universities, universal healthcare, and opposition to free trade agreements. Clinton, seen by many as a representative of the Democratic establishment, advocated reform of the student loan system, continuation of the Affordable Care Act, criminal background checks for firearm purchases, and an increased minimum wage. Clinton and Sanders participated in a series of nine presidential primary debates between October 2015 and April 2016. In the first debate they were joined by Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee, former Virginia Senator Jim Webb, and Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley. While Chafee and Webb ended their candidacies within days of the first debate, O'Malley participated in three more televised debates with Sanders and Clinton before suspending his campaign in February 2016.

Both Republicans and Democrats saw clear divisions between establishment candidates (Clinton, Kasich, Rubio, Bush) and partisan outsiders (Trump, Cruz, Sanders). We will argue that these divisions produced distinct forms of constitutive rhetoric that in turn generated unique rhetorics of polarization. We begin by describing our procedures for selecting and analyzing debate rhetoric before outlining the unique approaches taken by establishment and outsider candidates.

Identifying Constitutive Rhetoric in the 2016 Primaries

Scholars disagree about the specific role of television in shaping debate messages, but there is widespread agreement that modern debates are inseparable from their media context (Kraus, 1996). Beyond simple political arguments, debates are media events; and it is essential for rhetorical critics to view debates in their original modality (McKinney & Carlin, 2004). As such, our analysis proceeded through three stages. First, we viewed all 21 of the Democratic and

Republican primary debates in their original modality. While our findings center primarily on textual evidence of constitutive rhetoric and rhetorical polarization, visual elements play a key role in presidential debates (Patterson et al., 1992), and multiple checks were included to assure that the analysis featured both visual and verbal content. Visual elements did communicate party identity and outgroup opposition. For example, the second Republican debate in Simi Valley, California on September 16, 2015, was held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, with the retired Air Force One dominating the background, as a reminder of the party's history and connection to Reagan. Additionally, both Republican and Democratic debates utilized stage position as a proxy for party identity by placing candidates polling the highest at the center of the stage and those polling the lowest on the ends and literally at the margins. Similarly, the visual of only Sanders and Clinton on the stage for five of the Democratic debates could be easily contrasted with the Republican debate stage, which never dipped below four candidates, creating clearer visual factions for Democratic viewers. After viewing the debates, we systematically identified candidate exchanges and remarks representative of either cross-party rhetoric or intra-party rhetoric.

Within the identified instances of constitutive rhetoric, it became clear that candidates were engaging in rhetorical strategies of polarization that King and Anderson (1971) refer to as in-group affirmation and out-group subversion. The debates contained ample evidence of both forms of polarized rhetoric, but examining this rhetoric in the context of primary campaign debates revealed unique tensions and exposed a third entelechial component to the rhetoric of polarization. Within each party, there were sharp divisions in the rhetoric used by centrist or establishment candidates like Bush, Clinton, and Kasich and anti-establishment candidates like Sanders, Cruz, and Trump. Both centrists and the anti-establishment candidates employed strategies of subversion relative to the opposing party; but in-group affirmation was complicated by the presence of intraparty factionalism, leaving centrist candidates to emphasize strategies of affirmation, while political outsiders emphasized affect and articulated an entelechial vision of what the party was to become. The prominence of entelechy and affect advance scholarly understanding of the rhetoric of polarization and its association with primary debates. We begin by discussing the more traditional constitution of in-group and out-group from establishment candidates in the 2016 primary debates.

Identity and Polarization from the Establishment

Throughout the 2016 primary debates, centrist candidates foregrounded strategies of in-group affirmation, often vowing to defend an already "strong" or "growing" political party. Rather than acknowledge the stark divisions evidenced by their disagreements with the other candidates, centrist candidates pointed to non-ideological sources for intraparty disagreement and attempted to recast their in-party opponents as somewhere outside the parameters of an otherwise strong movement. In their constitutive rhetoric, centrist candidates claimed ownership over the party's past leaders, unifying symbols, and past legislative accomplishments.

More than any other candidate studied, Hillary Clinton embodied these strategies by extoling the power of the Democratic Party in what she framed as its current form. When Clinton spoke of division in the party, she spoke in the past tense, referring to the Democratic Party that supported Obama over her own candidacy in 2008 and casting the major division in the party as one that had already been bridged with her assistance. Clinton's strategies included invoking past and present Democratic Party leaders, like Harry Truman, Barack Obama, and her husband, Bill Clinton. In doing so, Clinton presented herself as the heir to a strong movement, built on the success of these leaders. Her rhetoric relied heavily on her connection with President Obama. Clinton mentioned Obama by name 97 times during the nine primary debates, more than three times the 31 mentions of Obama made by Sanders. Most of Clinton's mentions praised President Obama and his signature accomplishments.

On multiple occasions Clinton presented the Affordable Care Act as an accomplishment of the entire Democratic Party, glossing over the differences of opinion within the party. During the Des Moines, Iowa debate, Clinton (Democratic Debate 2, November 14) solidified her stance by positing the Affordable Care Act as an essential part of the Democratic lineage, stating, "We've made great progress as a country with the Affordable Care Act. We've been struggling to get this done since Harry Truman. And it was not only a great accomplishment of the Democratic Party, but of President Obama." The lineage framed by Senator Clinton often included the label *progressive.* For example, during the first Democratic debate in Las Vegas, Clinton (October 13) told the audience, "And I don't take a back seat to anyone when it comes to progressive experience and progressive commitment." Both Clinton and Sanders used the progressive label while avoiding the term *liberal* entirely. In fact, only Lincoln Chaffee embraced the categorization of "liberal" during the primary debates and did so only in describing what type of Republican he used to be (Democratic Debate 1).

Attempts to build solidarity and cohesion within the Democratic Party were complicated by the divisions that provide the stasis point for intraparty debates; but Clinton often extolled the virtues of her party even in the face of in-group factionalism. Clinton regularly reminded debate audiences about her shared goals with Sanders. Throughout the debates, Clinton told viewers that both she and Sanders agreed on the need for universal healthcare, increased infrastructure spending, expanding Social Security, support for immigrants, campaign finance reform, and greater financial regulation of Wall Street. This affirming strategy is consistent with King and Anderson's (1971) model of polarization, which seeks to reduce the threat of internal factions and acclaim the virtues of the in-group. Clinton even drew a comparison between her sources of campaign funding and those of her opponent. At the February 11th debate in Milwaukee, Clinton said, "We both have a lot of small donors. I think that sets us apart from a lot of what's happening right now on the Republican side" (Democratic Debate 6). As illustrated by this case, Clinton made frequent use of the Burkean assumed "we" to present the party as unified and consistent (Cheney, 1983).

Clinton repeatedly invoked shared identity with her fellow Democrats, imploring them that, "*As Democrats* we ought to proudly support the Affordable Care Act, improve it, and make it the model we know it can be" (Democratic Debate 2). Clinton's strategy of interparty polarization through affirmation was largely unique to her in the Democratic debates. Statements of agreement on policy issues came overwhelmingly from Clinton; and her frequent agreements with Sanders served as the main difference and dividing point between a noble and unified Democratic Party and their Republican opponents.

While affirmation was dominant in Clinton's rhetoric, subversion was also present. Clinton relied on antithesis and a construction of the Republican out-group to define the partisan landscape and entrench the us/them dichotomy. This foregrounding is apparent even in the way that Clinton addressed intraparty divisions. For example, during the March 7th debate in Flint, Michigan, she told viewers, "You know, we have our differences. And we get into vigorous debate about issues, but compare the substance of this debate with what you saw on the Republican stage last week" (Clinton, Democratic Debate 7). Her attack on Republicans minimized either the presence or significance of in-party divisions, while attacking Republican candidates as lacking substantive issue positions. She similarly presented Republican obstructionism within the framework of Democratic accomplishments:

> Well, I'm a little bewildered about how to respond when you have an agreement which gives you the framework to actually take the action that would have only come about because, in the face of implacable hostility from the Republicans in Congress, President Obama moved forward on gas mileage, he moved forward on the Clean Power Plan. He has moved forward on so many of the fronts that he could, given the executive actions that he was able to take (Clinton, Democratic Debate 9, April 14, 2016).

Hillary Clinton repeatedly engaged in the rhetoric of affirmation even when attacking her rival, Bernie Sanders. In addressing Sanders, Clinton again focused on the successes of President Obama, which she also framed as the successes of the broader Democratic Party. For example, in the same April 14th debate in Brooklyn, NY, Clinton went on to accuse Sanders of undermining Obama's accomplishments through his campaign strategy, stating, "I'm getting a little bit concerned here because, you know, I really believe that the President has done an incredible job against great odds and deserves to be supported" (Democratic Debate 9). Clinton echoed a similar sentiment with respect to healthcare reform, implying that Sanders was ignoring President Obama's accomplishments with the Affordable Care Act and, "starting all over again, trying to throw the country into another really contentious debate" (Democratic Debate 9). She argued that the difference was not between the two Democratic candidates and their desire for universal healthcare, but instead in their response to Republican opposition.

When moments of clear in-group disagreement arose, Clinton maintained her strategy of affirmation by simply redrawing the political boundaries in a way that placed Sanders with the Republicans, outside of an otherwise cohesive party. On March 9th, Clinton told the Miami,

Florida debate audience, "And in 2006, when Senator Sanders was running for the Senate from Vermont, he voted in the House with hardline Republicans for indefinite detention for undocumented immigrants, and then he sided with those Republicans to stand with vigilantes known as Minute Men who were taking up outposts along the border to hunt down immigrants" (Democratic Debate 8). She continued the attack, a few sentences later telling the Senator, "When you got to the Senate in 2007, one of the first things you did was vote against Ted Kennedy's immigration reform, which he'd been working on for years before you ever arrived." Clinton created the impression of a unified Democratic Party but positioned Senator Sanders outside of it. Clinton's rhetorical strategy was reinforced by Sanders' decision to skirt the Democratic label during his time in the United States Senate. In Clinton's characterization, problems arise when candidates break off from the coalition. Clinton presented her long-time involvement in the party and her successes in fundraising efforts to support fellow Democrats as evidence that she was more representative of the party's ideals. Clinton's willingness to own the label of the party, her rhetoric suggested, gave her greater agency to define the party in line with her own positions.

When discussing interparty dynamics, Clinton focused on the major accomplishments of the Democratic Party including the Affordable Care Act, gun-control legislation, and environmental regulation. Here, she built upon the theme of Democratic unity by referring to her ability to consolidate the party's left along with then Senator Obama in 2008. She routinely referred to accomplishments made during the Obama and Bill Clinton Administrations to highlight the progress the party had made in recent years. Clinton often levied attacks against "obstructionist Republicans," but did so against the backdrop of affirmation for an already successful Democratic Party. Clinton's rhetoric resisted efforts to constitute party identity outside of the party's history, norms, and traditions. The party was defined by its past and in opposition to the Republican Party.

With 17 candidates in the race, the ability of centrist Republican candidates to develop substantive positions with respect to the other party was often overshadowed by internal divisions. However, a common refrain from those on the Republican debate stage was that any participant in the debate was far better than either of the Democratic frontrunners. For example, during the January 28th debate in Des Moines, Iowa, Jeb Bush suggested, "Everybody on this stage is better than Hillary Clinton. And I think the focus ought to be on making sure that we leave this nomination process, as wild and woolly as it's going to be — this is not being bad" (Republican Debate 7). Ohio Governor John Kasich, a leading establishment Republican, most clearly demonstrated this strategy. Despite advocating greater openness to compromise, Kasich presented stark differences between Republicans and Democrats on policy issues while foregrounding strategies of in-group affirmation. For example, Kasich regularly challenged President Obama's foreign policy agenda and presented his stance as a distinct alternative. During the Coral Gables debate, Kasich criticized Obama's foreign policy while invoking the Republican ideal of American strength, saying, "And a strong America is what the entire world is begging for. 'Where has America gone?' is what many of our allies say around the world.

When I'm president, they're going to know exactly where we are because we're coming back" (Republican Debate 12).

Throughout the debates, Kasich made consistent reference to his conservative credentials, but he also reminded viewers that he had supported repealing the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and wanted to hand numerous federal powers over to the states. He bragged to a debate audience in Greenville, South Carolina about having sued the Obama administration over the ACA and having refused to organize a healthcare exchange in Ohio, but he couched his polarizing claims in the context of in-group affirmation:

> Now, with Obamacare, I've not only sued the administration, I did not set up an exchange. And he knows that I'm not for Obamacare, never have been. But here's what's interesting about Medicaid. You know who expanded Medicaid five times to try to help the folks and give them opportunity so that you could rise and get a job? President Ronald Reagan. Now, the fact of the matter is, we expanded to get people on their feet, and once they're on their feet, we are giving them the training and the efforts that they need to be able to get work and pull out of that situation (Republican Debate 9).

Kasich engaged in many of the same affirming strategies as Clinton. He presents his in-group credentials, invokes a significant party leader, and presents his in-party opponents as outside of the strong movement solidified under Ronald Reagan.

Like several Republican candidates, Kasich focused on key party figures and party symbols as a means of affirming the virtue of the GOP. At various points in the debates, Kasich identified Presidents Ford, Reagan, and Bush as exemplars of the ideal Republican. Kasich also pointed to his own success and the successes of others on the debate stage as evidence that Republican and not Democratic ideals have worked to lift people out of poverty. Despite his more centrist approach, Kasich did not shy away from the rhetoric of polarization. During the November 10th debate in Wisconsin, Kasich told viewers:

> Well, ladies and gentlemen, if Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders were to win this election, my 16-year-olds, I — I worry about what their life is going to be like. You know, the conservative movement is all about opportunity. It is about lower taxes. It's about balanced budgets. It's about less regulation. And it's about sending power, money, and influence back to where we live so we can run America from the bottom up (Republican Debate 4).

Kasich enthusiastically endorsed the virtues of the Republican Party, while presenting the Democratic out-group as threats to his children and the prosperity of future generations. For Kasich, party identity was constituted through ideology, policy preferences, and party history.

Kasich and Clinton's rhetoric, in many ways, embodied the traditional modes of in-group/out-group identity formation, including affirmation and subversion (King & Anderson, 1971), antithesis, unifying symbols, and the assumed we (Burke, 1969b; Cheney, 1983). Establishment candidates were able to frame partisan identity as fixed rather than floating and present their intraparty opponents as attacking an existing entity by striving to redefine what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican. By contrast, those on the wings of their parties needed to constitute an image of party identity outside of the traditional strategies of identification or polarization. These candidates rendered party identity malleable and turned to entelechy to reimagine the ingroup while leaving the out-group as a fixed reference point for opposition.

Identity from the Outsiders

During the Democratic primary debates, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was highly critical of the Democratic Party establishment and often grouped its members with the same network of corruption that he argued was characteristic of the Republican out-group. While Sanders would frequently express agreement with Secretary Clinton, he would then take her positions further to the left, by insisting on a major overhaul of the education system, a substantial increase in the minimum wage, or a new wave of environmental regulations. At the February 4th Durham, New Hampshire debate, Sanders told moderator Rachel Maddow, "Secretary Clinton does represent the establishment. I represent, I hope, ordinary Americans, and by the way, who are not all that enamored with the establishment…" (Democratic Debate 5). Sanders' primary campaign depended on an in-party rhetorical strategy that laid bare intraparty factionalism and foreclosed a strong emphasis on in-group affirmation. Instead, Sanders engaged in in-party rhetoric that highlighted these internal divisions rather than reducing them.

While not affirming the in-group, Sanders certainly engaged in out-group subversion against Republicans, consistent with King and Anderson's (1971) rhetoric of polarization. He cast Republicans as subservient to the interests of the fossil fuel industry, tying them to the same attack that he had levied against his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, "Do you think there's a reason why not one Republican has the guts to recognize that climate change is real, and that we need to transform our energy system? Do you think it has anything to do with the Koch brothers and ExxonMobil pouring huge amounts of money into the political system?" (Democratic Debate 5). While Sanders often highlighted major disagreements between himself and Hillary Clinton, he was just as vigorous in his attacks on Republicans. Sanders suggested that Republican success depended on demoralization and voter suppression. He went on to tell the Durham, New Hampshire debate audience:

> Republicans win when people are demoralized and you have a small voter turnout, which, by the way, is why they love voter suppression. I believe that our campaign up to now has shown that we can create an enormous amount of enthusiasm from working people, from young people, who will get involved in the political process and which will drive us to a very large voter turnout (Democratic Debate 5).

Attributing malevolent intentions to the political outgroup is an essential component of subversive rhetoric as defined by King and Anderson. Sanders utilized subversion to undermine his Republican rivals during interparty-focused discussions.

Sanders chastised congressional Republicans for their lack of basic civics knowledge in blocking President Obama's nominee to the Supreme Court; but just as often, he levied simultaneous attacks against members of the Democratic Party. Sanders grouped some Democratic elected officials, including Clinton, with Republicans in their support for what he labeled, "disastrous trade policies" (Democratic Debates 1, 6, 7, 8, & 9). He also criticized Democrats who had joined Republicans in cutting services for veterans. Unlike Clinton's affirming praise for past Democratic presidents, Sanders suggested that Bill Clinton's crime and welfare reform bills in the 1990s had bowed to Republican interests with long-term negative consequences especially for black and brown Americans.

Sanders' rhetoric offers an important addition to the affirmation/subversion heuristic proposed by King and Anderson (1971) that helps make sense of polarization divorced from in-group affirmation or cohesion. Sanders utilized a rhetoric of polarization built on the Aristotelian and Burkean construct of entelechy. For Steudeman (2013), this entelechial vision of party plays a significant role in convention addresses. Such rhetoric may be even more apparent in political primaries and party debates and may provide one of the keys to understanding rhetorics of polarization within fractured parties and fractured movements. Rather than building a coalition around party, Sanders relied on the notion of his supporters as part of a, "movement" or "revolution" (Democratic Debates 1-9). This movement was simultaneously outside the partisan fold but also the next stage of the party's entelechial journey.

This complex relation to partisan identity is most clearly demonstrated in the different manners in which Sanders and Clinton invoke past party leaders on the issue of healthcare. As already noted, Clinton appealed to these leaders as evidence for the significance of the party's accomplishments in the Obama years. In response to Clinton's claim that Sanders was undermining the celebration of their healthcare accomplishment, Sanders said, "The vision from FDR and Harry Truman was healthcare for all people as a right in a cost-effective way. We're not going to tear up the Affordable Care Act. I helped write it. But we are going to move on top of that to a Medicaid-for-all system" (Democratic Debate 4, January 17). Rather than turning to the celebratory rhetoric of affirmation, Sanders noted that the drive for a perfected health system was not yet complete. This drive toward the perfect form is the hallmark of entelechy. Sanders presents his movement as a step toward the ideal form not just for healthcare, but also for the party and for politics more generally.

That Sanders did not seek to vindicate the Democratic Party through affirmation was revealed again in his discussion of Martin Luther King Jr. Sanders said, "As we honor the extraordinary life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it's important not only that we remember what he stood for, but that we pledge to continue his vision to transform our country" (Democratic Debate 4). Sanders' framing of this new movement is consistent with Steudeman's (2013, p. 88)

observation that entelechy provides "entry points through which new ideological orientations gain their footing." In imagining politics' ideal form, Sanders was able to situate his movement as the next step in the progressive chain toward party perfection. Sanders' entelechial rhetoric is still aimed at partisan polarity and his entelechial vision for politics is achieved through the Democratic Party also reaching its ideal form. Entelechy challenges the in-group assumptions of the rhetoric of polarization by rejecting the fixity of group identity. Instead, the party's identity is in a state of becoming.

Navigating the relationship between a new movement and the established Democratic Party became a complex task of identification. In one exchange during the final Democratic debate in Brooklyn, NY, debate moderator Dana Bash asked Sanders if he was truly a member of the party and what he was doing to support other Democrats. Sanders responded by proposing a vision of the Democratic Party refreshed by new, young members and broken free from the influence of wealthy contributors:

> The truth is, and you can speak to my colleagues, we have raised millions of dollars to the DSCC. I have written letters that have raised, if I may use the word, huge amount of money so that's just not accurate. But, I will also say, and this is important and maybe the Secretary disagrees with me, but I am proud that millions of young people who previously were not involved in the political process are now coming into it, and I do believe, I do believe that we have got to open the door of the Democratic party to those people. And, I think the future of the Democratic party is not simply by raising money from wealthy campaign contributors (Democratic Debate 9).

The move from Clinton's rhetoric of affirmation to Sanders' use of entelechy, as it relates to the Democratic Party, fosters a profoundly different rhetoric of polarization. Rather than relying on self-praise for the political in-group, Sanders speaks into existence the ideal form: a party healed of internal divisions and able to resolve the exigencies that had for so long confounded it:

> What I believe is that this country, if we stand together and not let the Trumps of the world divide us up, can guarantee health care to all people as a right, can have paid family and medical leave, can make public colleges and universities tuition-free, can lead the world in transforming our energy system and combatting climate change, can break up the large financial institutions, can demand that the wealthiest people in this country start paying their fair share of taxes. And we can do that when millions of people stand up, fight back, and create a government that works for all of us, not just the 1 percent. That is what the political revolution is about. That is what this campaign is about (Democratic Debate 9).

Affirmation depends on pride in the form the party has achieved, whereas entelechy uses the party's ideal form to draw lines between the party, progressing toward its destiny, and the

opposing party, mired in malevolent ideology. Entelechy challenges King and Anderson's model of polarization by allowing for the continuation of out-group polarization despite in-group divisions.

As with Sanders, Republican challengers Donald Trump and Senator Ted Cruz dedicated substantial energy to painting themselves in opposition to their own party's political establishment. Both candidates were highly critical of leaders within their own party, including George and Jeb Bush, Mitt Romney, and John Kasich. Trump described the last months of George W. Bush's administration as a "catastrophe" (Republican Debate 1, August 6) and said Mitt Romney was a "terrible candidate" who "ran a terrible campaign" (Republican Debate 10, February 25). Ted Cruz and Donald Trump did not shy away from intraparty rivalries, including their rivalry with one another. Cruz told the audience at the debate in Boulder, Colorado on October 28th, "You know, everyone here talks about the need to take on Washington. The natural next question is who actually has done so. Who actually has stood up not just to Democrats, but to leaders in our own party? When millions of Americans rose up against Obamacare, I was proud to lead that fight" (Republican Debate 3). Cruz routinely invoked the memory of Ronald Reagan, but, unlike Kasich, Cruz suggested that only Tea Party leaders were the natural heirs to the Reagan movement.

While neither Cruz nor Trump showed rhetorical restraint in attacking their intraparty rivals, they saved the true thrust of their animus for their Democratic challengers and the incumbent Democratic president, Barrack Obama. During the debates, Senator Cruz attacked President Obama over the Iranian Nuclear Agreement, the Fast and Furious gun smuggling investigation, the ACA, illegal immigration, abortion, judicial appointments, and same-sex marriage, among other issues. Cruz not only went after the sitting president using the rhetoric of subversion, he also attacked other Democratic leaders including Chuck Schumer, Harry Reid, and Hillary Clinton. Perhaps the most subversive rhetoric among the Republicans came from the eventual nominee, Donald Trump. Trump often made a point of attacking the motives and intelligence of those in the opposing party. In reference to President Obama, Trump said, "I would be so different from what you have right now. Like, the polar opposite. We have a president who doesn't have a clue. I would say he's incompetent, but I don't want to do that because that's not nice" (Republican Debate 1).

This subversive out-party rhetoric is a hallmark of polarization; but, as with Sanders, Donald Trump's vicious lambasting of his own party does not fit King and Anderson's (1971) model of polarized rhetoric. Donald Trump's rhetoric demonstrated a willingness to expose factionalism within his own party in a way that establishment candidates did not. Trump relied on entelechial rhetoric like that of Senator Sanders, including framing his supporters as a movement reclaiming the lost or corrupted tradition of the party. Trump claimed that he could reclaim the legacy of Reagan by realizing the dreams of the party's ideological forebears. Making the Republican Party great again, as with "making America great again," promotes a vision of ideal forms. Party formation in the style of Trump conforms to what Burke (1969a)

describes as an Aristotelian notion of entelechy: "the striving of each thing to be perfectly the kind of thing it was" (p. 249). In striving for this ideal form, the party as presently constituted is irrelevant, but the party in its final form fills the void of in-group cohesion and party affirmation.

John Kasich, Marco Rubio, and Jeb Bush all made mention of uniting the Republican Party and the country either before or after the election. However, Donald Trump avoided the rhetoric of intraparty unity altogether. Instead, Trump defined what it meant to be a Republican in terms of affect and his own entelechial journey rooted in the movement that he framed as rising around him. Rather than affirming or uniting, Trump promoted a vision of ideal forms and placed himself squarely at the center. The movement that Trump was creating, according to this vision, was entirely of his own design.

During the August 6th debate in Cleveland, Trump told moderator Chris Wallace, “So, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be talking about illegal immigration, Chris. You wouldn't even be talking about it. This was not a subject that was on anybody's mind until I brought it up at my announcement” (Republican Debate 1). While Trump was often at the center of his narrative, he also presented himself as having been transformed alongside it. Trump presented his own ideological development as etched in the entelechy of the Republican Party and conservative movement. Trump twice invoked Reagan’s move from the Democratic to the Republican Party as mirroring his own shift on the issues. During the February 25th debate in Houston, TX, Trump said, “And if you talk about evolving, Ronald Reagan was a somewhat liberal Democrat. Ronald Reagan evolved into a somewhat strong conservative — more importantly, he was a great president. A great president” (Republican Debate 10). By explaining the shift from left to right as ideological evolution, Trump reframed his partisan transformations as the steps toward an entelechy, which would culminate with his presidency. While those candidates utilizing affirming rhetoric presented Trump’s past statements as placing him outside the otherwise united Republican Party, for Trump, these were merely steps on the path of becoming for himself and the party.

At the heart of this entelechy was a merging of business and government, in which Trump’s personal success and ambition would be reconciled with the ambitions of the Republican Party. Trump’s grand claims in the primary debates relied on his promotion of this reconciling of ambitions as the ideal form of the GOP. During the September 16th debate at the Reagan Presidential Library Trump argued, “If I become president, we will do something really special. We will make this country greater than ever before. We'll have more jobs. We'll have more of everything” (Republican Debate 2). Trump further explained his complex relationship with liberal politics and politicians by justifying his past donations to Democratic candidates, saying, “So at the beginning, I said openly to everybody that I contribute to many, many politicians, both Republican and Democrat. And I have, over the years. I'm a businessman” (Republican Debate 10). Ultimately the merging of Trump’s business ambition with the practice of government would create both government and party in their ideal forms. Trump introduced himself during the Simi Valley debate saying,

> I say not in a braggadocious way, I've made billions and billions of dollars dealing with people all over the world, and I want to put whatever that talent is to work for this country so we have great trade deals, we make our country rich again, we make it great again. We build our military, we take care of our vets, we get rid of Obamacare, and we have a great life altogether (Republican Debate, 2).

Trump establishes an ideological foothold by arguing that free market politics had only been missing a free-market leader, a goal that his presidency would realize. For Donald Trump, entelechy supplanted unity in the rhetoric of polarization, paving the way for polarization even from a fractured party.

In addition to his use of entelechy, Trump's rhetoric also emphasized the pathetic and affective elements of subversion for the (re)creation of in-group identity. A sense of frustration and a pre-cognitive rejection of the status quo allowed for the creation of a Republican identity not connected to traditionally conservative issue positions as much as to the growing sense of frustration felt by his base around globalization, anti-racism, and shifting sexual and gender norms within society. Opposing candidates in the debates quickly identified the pull of emotionality within Trump's rhetoric and the potential for this polarizing anger to leave them outside the in-group Trump was constructing. In the Detroit debate (March 3rd), Cruz pointed to Trump's anger as the motivating impulse for the reality star's supporters and attempted to make the case that Trump was himself a part of the problem, "…I understand the folks who are supporting Donald right now. You're angry. You're angry at Washington, and he uses angry rhetoric. But for 40 years, Donald has been part of the corruption in Washington that you're angry about" (Republican Debate 11). Cruz's observation illustrates the broad awareness of how Trump was fomenting affective polarization.

The emotional nature of Trump's strategy was criticized by other leaders in the GOP, including South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley. In her response to President Obama's State of the Union Address, Governor Haley (2016) called for a rejection of "the siren call of the angriest voices." When Fox Business host Maria Bartiromo asked Trump for his response during the North Charleston, South Carolina debate (January 14th) with Haley in attendance, Trump doubled down saying:

> …And I could say, oh, I'm not angry. I'm *very* angry because our country is being run horribly and I will gladly accept the mantle of anger. Our military is a disaster. Our healthcare is a horror show. Obamacare, we're going to repeal it and replace it. We have no borders. Our vets are being treated horribly. Illegal immigration is beyond belief. Our country is being run by incompetent people. And yes, I am angry. And I won't be angry when we fix it, but until we fix it, I'm very, very angry.

Trump boldly claiming "the mantle of anger" illustrates how significant affect is in constituting a new partisan identity and as a driver of polarization. Papacharissi (2015) highlights the growing

significance of *affective publics* in an era of politics dominated by social media in which fragile publics emerge in moments of solidarity around shared affect. Trump's use of affect and entelechy in the 2016 debates tapped into anger and frustration to repaint the boundaries of one of the nation's oldest and most dominant political institutions.

Conclusion

Presidential primary debates have long been criticized for their polarizing potential, but traditional explanations have failed to account for the unique rhetorical pressures of these mediated campaign events. Primary voters do not appear to be more polarized than general election voters and primary debates create fissures in party identity disrupting the assumptions of rhetorical polarization. Rather than producing intraparty skepticism that might resist polarization (Muirhead, 2014), primary debates produce increased polarization and attribution of malevolent intentions to the opposing party (Warner et al., 2021). We argue that primary debates function as sites of identity negotiation as rhetors work to constitute a party in line with their ideological commitments. In so doing, establishment candidates turn to traditional strategies of polarization, including an emphasis on unifying symbols, a common ground, antithesis, and subversion aimed at the opposing party to conceal the fractures in party identity.

Anti-establishment candidates on the ideological wings of their respective parties rely on entelechy as a unique form of rhetorical polarization, presenting their party as on a path of becoming. Denton et al. (2019) argue that "challengers" in political primaries often try to claim the political center, but in 2016, those challenging more established party leaders rejected the center and positioned themselves as embodying the fulfilment of their party's potential. Candidates also relied on the tools of affective polarization, constituting their party around shared affective experiences of frustration, anger, or resentment. Both entelechy and affect are important features of the rhetoric of polarization, especially when in-group identity is under threat.

Our findings advance scholarly understandings of primary campaign rhetoric, primary debates, and the rhetoric of polarization. First, we provide evidence of the constitutive function of presidential primary debates. While scholarship on presidential primary rhetoric has focused on nominee selection, it has failed to appreciate the constitutive function of primary campaign discourse. Beyond their role in selecting nominees, primaries function as sites of identity negotiation for the parties and debates are a key focal point of those negotiations. Primary candidates offer competing visions for the future of their party, grounded in affect and ideology. Not only do candidates articulate visions of their own party, they also work to constitute the opposing party through antithesis and subversion. Rhetorical-critical analyses of presidential primary debates have understandably focused on *intraparty* conflict (Coker & Reed, 2021; Kendall, 2000; McKinney et al., 2001), but interparty divisions are central to the discourse of primary debates. Future scholars should consider the role of both interparty and intraparty exigencies in shaping primary campaign discourse.

Our study also contributes to understandings of the rhetoric of polarization. Through the process of party identity construction, candidates relied on traditional and novel forms of polarizing rhetoric. Establishment candidates navigated intraparty factionalism by claiming ownership over the party's past successes, pointing to unifying leaders or party symbols, and through antithesis in opposition to the other party. Because of the apparent intraparty divisions, outsider candidates lacked access to many of these traditional tools of identity construction and polarization. Instead, these candidates turned to affect and entelechy as forms of polarization to conceal the intraparty divisions made apparent by the debate. Future scholars should continue to investigate the role of affect and entelechy in the rhetoric of polarization.

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