Bread or Circuses? Parsing Representative and Representational Democratic Discourse on U.S. Political Blogs

by

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Abstract

This thesis finds empirical support for Jodi Dean's theory of declining symbolic efficiency through a qualitative content analysis of discourse concerning the 2013 U.S. government shutdown on political blogs. Themes of this thesis explore reflexivity, decontextualization, and an erosion of meaning brought about by changing media technologies and practices. Humanistic analyses of media and politics by scholars such as Benkler (2006) and McChesney (1999) are contrasted with works by Gitlin (1980), Postman (1985), and Dean (2010), who see media systems operating outside human control. This study's methodology relies upon Knight and Johnson's (2011) pragmatic justification for democratic institutions. The analysis uses a system of categories to describe statements about political strategy along four dimensions: operant; method of action; operand; and the consequence of the strategy. This study identifies important distinctions between textual descriptions of nominal and instrumental strategy; it is argued that nominal discourse represents the influence of symbolic inefficiency.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

This thesis is about political symbols and the way we use them in democratic debates. This is a hard subject to write about – it’s impossible to avoid using these symbols even as I attempt to objectively analyze them. It’s as if we can’t find our glasses because we’re blind without them; the fire engine is on fire. This problem is most acute as I first begin to tell this story, looking for stable reference points to orient my arguments without oversimplifying, making brash assumptions, or contradicting my eventual conclusions. It will get easier after I get started.

It’s a little like waking up in the middle of the night delirious with fever. The tool you would ordinarily use to understand your problem – your brain – is the very thing that’s impaired. Your consciousness returns gradually out of sleep. You don’t know where you are, and even your sense of who you are is a bit fuzzy. It’s dark when you open your eyes. As you look around the room the things you see appear superficially normal, but everything is suffused with an overwhelming yet inexpressible wrongness. There’s nothing identifiably amiss about the picture hanging on the wall, but every detail your eye registers heightens your feelings of terror and despair: the size, shape, and angle of the frame; its position on the wall; the distances between it and the other objects in the room. Each moment that passes renews the horror, with no end in sight.

In situations like these, I find the best strategy is to focus on what you can remember. Any memory of a time before this waking nightmare clues you in to the fact that whatever is happening, it’s probably temporary. Things were OK once; they could be again. That by itself is a huge relief. Every bit of context helps, and if you can connect things up to more recent memories – for example, that you went to bed early because you weren’t feeling well – then you can begin to piece together that everything around you seems wrong because you’re delirious. If you can make it downstairs, some aspirin and a glass of water might help. And now you’re on your way; still suffering, but no longer helpless and confused.

In the same spirit, I think the best way to begin to explain how I approach the topic of this thesis is to explain a little about my history – what I remember about being a consumer of information about politics, policy, and current events. Of course, I do not think my experiences are universal,
but I also do not think they are unique. They are offered as anecdote, to illustrate what I think are the most salient issues. Hopefully you, the reader, will be able to relate at least some parts of what follows with your own experiences.

I suspect that for many people, interest or involvement in politics begins with having an opinion. An opinion is a view, implying perspective: the uniqueness of your point of view. It’s also – I suspect usually if not necessarily – a view about how things should be, and this implies conflict and disagreement.

In my case, all this began in the 2000 U.S. presidential election, the first national election in which I was old enough to vote. The general election was a contest between Republican Texas governor George W. Bush and Democratic Vice President Al Gore. I favored Gore, as my worldview was (and is) mostly liberal or progressive, and environmental issues in particular have always been very important to me. I listened to National Public Radio, and regularly read The New Yorker and Newsweek. Getting drawn into the drama of the campaign, I remember feeling annoyed with Newsweek, thinking that the news articles often skewed descriptions of events and the policy positions of the candidates to fit a predetermined narrative. And then, of course, there was the split result between the national popular vote count and the Electoral College, with the results of the latter hinging on county-level recounts in Florida and the surrounding legal challenges. The legal disputes revolved around the standards by which questionable ballots should be recounted (e.g., punch card ballots that were not fully perforated), and the interpretation of election-result-related deadlines set forth in Florida law.

These events crystallized my identification with the Democratic Party, and opposition to Republicans. I still remember James Baker III – then chief legal adviser to the Bush campaign – standing at a podium, paternally admonishing us that the votes had been counted, recounted, and counted again. It made me acutely angry, for several reasons: It seemed to be a nearly perfect inversion of the truth; I thought it should be obvious to anyone and everyone that what he was saying wasn’t true; and, I thought it was clear that he wasn’t giving an honest assessment of the situation as he saw it, but that rather his statements were deployed as rhetoric, to achieve a certain goal. And yet, many people not only accepted Baker’s statements as truth, they seemed to act as though that truth should be obvious to anyone. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was another major event in which I felt that my understanding of such basic concepts as
truth and reason were being stretched to the breaking point, as it seemed quite plain to me that the invasion was a terrible idea and, even considered strictly as a matter of practical self interest, was certain to backfire painfully. Yet again, so many otherwise sane, intelligent people around me saw things differently.

I was hooked. I was a dog, and in politics I had found my squeaker ball. My particular fascination was wrongness: How it could be that so many people could believe such obvious nonsense, when they were otherwise rational and able to function in society? This was the question that drove my interest. For over a decade, I spent several hours every day consuming information about politics and current events.

I learned a lot, and was exposed to many ideas that shed light on my underlying question. Of course, the media was an obvious culprit, and it’s easy to conclude that people believe nonsense because they see it on TV, hear it on the radio, or read it in newspapers or on the Internet. However, this doesn’t really answer the question. It just moves it to new terrain. What about the people in the media who created and spread these ideas? What were they trying to accomplish? What was really the root cause of this apparent dysfunction?

With many political issues, with a little effort it’s not hard to construct a plausible theory that puts rational self-interest at the heart of efforts to deceive the public. For example, we could suppose – not without evidence – that skepticism about climate change is driven by the efforts of energy businesses to protect their profits, and that money gives these companies the power to influence both politicians and journalists. However, as I learned more – and particularly after I started reading political blogs, which provide much more detailed information than radio or print journalism – these kinds of explanations didn’t hold up. As with the it’s the media’s fault hypothesis, I felt that politically motivated deception was often a correct answer that didn’t explain enough.

One example that can illustrate what I mean is the controversy over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act¹. Disagreement over the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has been one of the

¹ The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is the health care overhaul legislation passed by a Democratic Congress and signed into law by President Obama in early 2010. “Affordable Care Act,” “ACA,” and “Obamacare” are all equivalent descriptions.
central axes of American politics over the last five years; tepid, qualified liberal support contrasts with unanimous, vituperative opposition from conservatives. However, in a 2010 interview, Mitch McConnell, then the Senate minority leader, had this to say about the Republicans’ strategy and tactics:

> It was absolutely critical that everybody be together because if the proponents of the bill were able to say it was bipartisan, it tended to convey to the public that this is O.K., they must have figured it out…It’s either bipartisan or it isn’t. (Hulse & Nagourney, 2010)

To a liberal like myself, and as someone whose well being depends on the American health care system, McConnell’s Bond-villain monologue can provoke outrage. Of course, he does not say that Republican opposition to the Affordable Care Act was exclusively the result of this strategy – it’s possible that there are other more substantive reasons for opposition that he did not mention, or that the article’s authors didn’t quote. Nonetheless, he is saying that to some degree opposition to the law was driven by this messaging strategy. As for McConnell, in the context of the article it is clear that his goal was winning the next election. Like James Baker’s comments on the Florida recount, the unanimity of Republican opposition was intended not as an expression of truth but as a means to an end. However, not everyone was in on the ruse. Many movement conservatives, persuaded that the ACA represented liberal overreach in part because Republican politicians unanimously opposed it, do not know that this was part of a messaging strategy. Some of these people have since been elected to Congress, and some of them work in political media.

What can we say about the beliefs, or ideology, of these anti-ACA conservatives? I don’t think it’s useful to question their sincerity, and neither do I mean to suggest that conservative opposition to the ACA is somehow illegitimate per se. Nonetheless, in light of McConnell’s remarks it’s hard not to conclude that, to some extent, their version of the truth is collateral to dynamics that they do not fully understand. What is more troubling is that their ideas and beliefs, as sincerely held as yours or mine, persist as the basis of word and action; persuading others,

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2 For this riff I am indebted to Jonathan Chait: http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2012/10/barack-obama-is-a-great-president-yes-great.html
reaffirming the orthodoxy of conservative opposition to the ACA, and leading to successive rounds of unintended consequences. One might say these symbols have taken on a life of their own.\(^3\)

The slippery, ambiguous intersection between ideology and motivation has been observed and remarked upon in our culture. The comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term *truthiness* in an attempt to describe something similar. Truthiness is not truth, but rather a quality or attribute of facts that can make them attractive:

> Truthiness is tearing apart our country… I don't know whether it's a new thing, but it's certainly a current thing, in that it doesn't seem to matter what facts are. It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It's certainty… I really feel a dichotomy in the American populace. What is important? What you want to be true, or what is true? (Rabin, 2006)

Personal preference is a key component of this criticism. Political theorist Cass Sunstein (2002) suggests something similar in his analysis of group polarization dynamics, specifically the tendency of people, when deliberating within like-minded groups, to become more extreme in their views. It seems natural to wonder if the affordances of new media technologies, by presenting citizens with a larger array of choices, are contributing to this dynamic. Perhaps, in the political arena, citizens are acting like consumers and choosing their truth like they would choose a brand of clothing.

To a greater degree than most consumer choices, however, the choice of which politically contested truth to accept can have consequences beyond personal satisfaction. Returning to the example given above, McConnell’s strategy had serious effects that go far beyond election results. Republicans’ unanimous opposition to the ACA affected the drafting of the law, and

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\(^3\) This point is hilariously underscored by the excoriation of McConnell as a RINO (Republican in Name Only) on RedState.com, one of the blogs examined in this thesis, due to his insufficient zeal in fighting the ACA.
conservatives’ continued opposition has had drastic real-world repercussions. These include the refusal of Republican governors to accept the federally funded Medicaid expansion that was part of the law, as well as the 2013 government shutdown that is explored in more depth in this thesis.

The shutdown was the result of a threat by Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives, who vowed to withhold funding for the federal government unless President Obama and the Democratic-controlled Senate agreed to delay or defund the Affordable Care Act. Widespread controversy and public debate lasted for several weeks leading up to the shutdown itself, which began on October 1, 2013 and ended on October 17, 2013. During this time, different factions within the Republican Party and the conservative movement suggested other concessions Republicans might accept in exchange for reopening the government. Republicans also tried to attach demands to raising the debt ceiling – the statutory borrowing limit imposed on the Treasury Department, separate from the spending and taxation mandated by Congress which necessitated the borrowing in the first place. Many economists warned that failing to raise the debt limit – effectively forcing the government to default on its debt obligations – would have disastrous effects both on the ability of the U.S. government to finance its debt and upon the world economy. President Obama and Congressional Democrats argued that the Republicans’ tactics amounted to extortion, and refused to negotiate. Eventually the shutdown was ended and the debt ceiling raised, prior to default. The Democrats provided one very minor symbolic concession, and most observers concluded that the Republicans lost the fight.

When I first began planning this research project, one reason I thought it would be helpful to use the government shutdown and debt ceiling negotiations as a case study in political discourse is that it presented such a clear example of a political movement acting contrary not only to its own interests, but to common sense and sanity as well. I thought I could derive meaningful conclusions from the wrongness. This case study is appropriate for other reasons, but the problem with using it as an exemplar of truth versus falseness is that I no longer feel there are stable reference points for political truth, and I no longer trust what I know, or think I now, about political events – this one included.

For example, when writing the paragraph above, describing last year’s government shutdown, I was trying to be as neutrally descriptive as possible. Nonetheless, I could not help thinking that a conservative Republican would likely take issue with many aspects of my account, and might
present a very different version of those events. Where could we turn to settle our disputes? Are there sources of information that both of us would find credible that can answer these sorts of questions for us?

More to the point – after years of observing how other people’s beliefs and perceptions are warped by political and media dynamics they do not understand, I am forced to acknowledge that I am part of the same ecosystem. I read something about current events written by a professional journalist or blogger, and I accept it as true and credible based on various social cues. It’s unlikely I fully consider the possibility that the sources I’m trusting have their own entanglements or agendas, either professionally or socially, because taking the time to check out every source would be an exhausting and never-ending process. A year passes, and I remember the political events but no longer remember where that knowledge came from. Thus, if challenged, it would be difficult for me to defend many of my beliefs, at least in a rigorous or systematic way. Moreover, even if we assume I’m savvy enough to navigate the confusing, ambiguous, and overcrowded field of political media and arrive at the correct conclusions, because these conclusions are so hard to defend, functionally my knowledge is no better than opinion. This problem is quickly apparent to anyone who has ever debated with ideological opponents in online forums, as I have. Any fact can become subjective simply on the basis that someone chooses to dispute it, and it’s impossible to convince someone of something they don’t want to believe. In a political context, even if I’m right, it doesn’t matter.

Many times over the years friends and relatives approached me with variations on the same question: Given the number of different news sources we now have available to us, and given how frequently you hear accusations and counter-accusations that one news source or another is biased or pursuing a hidden agenda, how can one know what to believe? In the past I answered that accusations of bias were often a deliberate attempt to sow exactly this kind of confusion, and recommended a few sources I considered reliable and insightful. I thought that the quantity of knowledge and information that I had accumulated, the time I had invested over the years, made me qualified to confidently answer that question. I no longer feel that way. After conducting this research and carefully considering the issues it raises, I have finally crossed the event horizon of truthiness.
Like a lost pair of glasses, the subject of this study is, itself, a methodological hurdle to researching it. Of course, it is impossible to proceed with research like this without relying on some basic knowledge of political events and processes, and I do make judgments where required throughout the text that follows. However, the goal of this research is to explore the ambiguities surrounding the interpretation of political symbols without relying too much on an external set of reference points for what is and is not true.

To that end, I begin in Chapter 2 by building a conceptual framework that is based on a pragmatic analysis of the functioning of democratic institutions, which can then be used as a standard by which to assess the use of symbols in democratic discourse. The conceptual framework also builds on analyses of the political consequences of both the structuring effects of media technologies and the way they are used. I adopt Jodi Dean’s (2010) explanation of symbolic inefficiency – an erosion of the consistency of symbolic meaning that results from excessive freedom to define ourselves and our beliefs online – and hypothesize that the effects of symbolic inefficiency can be observed in online political discourse.

In Chapter 3 I explain the methodology of this thesis, which focuses on discourse on political blogs during the controversy around the 2013 government shutdown. Many analysts, both inside and outside academia, have extolled the benefits of information and communication technologies on democratic discourse. It seems to me that many of these analyses focus more on the theoretical positive potential for use of these technologies, and pay less attention to the actual practices or the subjective experience of participation. I focus on blogs in the hope of providing a partial corrective.

This study draws its data sample from two blogs – DailyKos.com and RedState.com. These were chosen because they are both well-established, relatively popular political blogs, could be relied on to produce a volume of content large enough that patterns and themes could be found in the analysis. Additionally, although it’s not part of this study to compare the perspectives of people with liberal or conservative ideologies, I felt it was important to sample both a liberal and conservative blog so the data sample would include a fuller range of perspectives on events as they unfolded. I also apply a system of categories I created to the data sample, which narrows the scope to texts that discuss political strategy. This is a way of focusing the analysis on blog participants’ conceptions of political efficacy.
In chapters 4 and 5, I proceed with a qualitative content analysis of the data sample. I find evidence that symbolic inefficiency is indeed a factor in the political discourse that takes place on blogs, and my findings further suggest that symbolic inefficiency could play a role in undermining the effective functioning of democratic institutions, leading to perverse, nonsensical, or even destructive outcomes. In the last chapter, I discuss some of the limitations of my study, and offer suggestions for further research.
Chapter 2
Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Many scholars, from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, have analyzed the intersection of mass communication, ideology, and politics. To gain a better understanding of the issues involved, and to construct a conceptual framework that will guide my inquiry, I draw on the work of Yochai Benkler (2006), Jodi Dean (2010), Todd Gitlin (1980), Neil Postman (1985), Robert McChesney (1999), and others. I also draw upon political theory and political science, including Jack Knight and James Johnson (2011) and Nancy Rosenblum (2008), to gain insight into the functioning of democratic institutions.

None of the authors I discuss would likely disagree that technology, institutional design, and the beliefs and behaviors of individuals and groups are each important elements in any analysis of media and democracy. However, there are differences in emphasis that lead to very different conclusions. Logically, it makes sense that authors who value human individuality and autonomy would more likely take a positive view of information and communications technologies that empower individuals. Conversely, authors who see mediated culture shaping individuals’ values and beliefs tend to be less enthusiastic about the affordances of technology. I explore these perspectives in the following sections.

Humanistic analyses of media and democratic politics

In The Wealth of Networks (2006) Yochai Benkler provides a taxonomy of the most common criticisms of what he refers to as the networked information economy. Benkler’s work is useful for illuminating some of the deeper assumptions that often underlie analyses of politics and media. As he states early on,

…the position I take is humanistic and general, as opposed to political and particular. It is concerned first and foremost with the claims of human beings as human beings, rather than with the requirements of democracy…the individual’s claims provide a moral anchor for considering the structures of power and opportunity, of freedom and well-being. (2006, p. 19)
I appreciate Benkler’s candor, as it seems that many with similar views take them for granted. The presupposition that respect for the claims of individual human beings are the yardstick by which to measure media institutions and practices drives Benkler’s (2006) analysis that networked communication will “improve the practiced experience of democracy, justice and development, a critical culture, and community.” (p. 9)

Benkler is most interested in assessing the virtues of networked communication in contrast to a “hub and spoke” mass media model of communication, in which a central organization – usually a capital-intensive hierarchy, such as a corporation – produces content and distributes it to a mass audience. He makes a fair point in arguing that it’s unfair to compare the communication practices of the Internet with some unrealistic utopian ideal, and that to reach normative conclusions about the effects of networked communication on the liberal public sphere we ought to consider what has been the chief alternative – mass media.

Benkler (2006, pp. 196-211) finds that scholarly critiques of mass media fall into three main categories. First, there is concern about intake: Too few information collection points leave mass media oblivious to certain perspectives. This is essentially an argument that mass media is not sensitive to feedback. The second category of critique deals with concentration of media ownership and the belief that this creates unfair or socially harmful concentrations of political power. The third category of critique focuses on the capitalist incentives faced by advertiser-supported media businesses, and the fear that the necessity of attracting large audiences incentivizes the creation and dissemination of content that is entertaining or reassuring at the expense of being salient or useful. This critique also emphasizes the tension between journalistic ethics and business interests.

Obviously, some tension exists between these basic types of criticism, depending on the specifics of their interpretation. One needn’t be a mass media apologist to point out that advertiser incentives could actually undermine the agency of media owners, limiting how far they can carry their own particular political agendas. In fact, Robert McChesney (1999) seems to be implying something similar when he notes that although several large U.S. media firms are owned by foreign companies – which in turn serve the interests of shareholders all over the world – there is “no discernable difference in the firms’ content” (p. 104). However, McChesney’s larger purpose in pointing out the globalized homogeneity of commercial mass media content is to advance the
argument that this homogeneity tends to circumvent or obviate local cultural and political concerns. Audiences and media firms adapt to each other, and commerce hums along. In McChesney’s view, this itself is the manifest political agenda of commercial mass media.

More recently, McChesney (2014) sees an alignment of the economic interests of advertisers and the political interests of the economic elite. He points out that advertisers no longer have to rely on journalists to attract spectators to the media that carry their messages – instead, they can target ads at customers directly, wherever they go online. Thus, advertising dollars no longer support serious news organizations. This state of affairs suits economic elites nicely, McChesney argues, as it’s easier to dominate a population that remains politically ignorant.

The critical issue here turns out to be what we mean when we talk about politics and democracy, and McChesney (1999) is fairly clear on this point:

> With this hypercommercialism and corporate control comes an implicit political bias regarding the content of the media system. Consumerism, the market, class inequality, and individualism tend to be taken as natural and often benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values, and antimarket activities tend to be marginalized or denounced. (p. 110)

In this account, the primary political goal of neoliberals is simply to solipsistically advance the cause of neoliberalism. McChesney (1999) also defines neoliberal democracy as:

> …trivial debate over minor issues by parties that basically pursue the same pro-business policies regardless of formal differences and campaign debate. Democracy is permissible as long as the control of business is off-limits to popular deliberation or change; that is, so long as it isn’t democracy. (p. 111)

For McChesney (1999), the salient political question is always whether, or to what degree, market-based institutions will prevail in society. I don’t disagree with much of what he says about the hegemony of capitalism and its perpetuation through commercialized mass media. Nonetheless, I find it startling that he so casually dismisses the salience of political issues that
aren’t the relative merits of neoliberalism. One can agree with McChesney that neoliberal democracy is a bad thing, and that the generally pro-business agenda of the major political parties is bad for the public interest. At the same time, it is not difficult to imagine versions of neoliberal democracy that are far worse, or far better, than what we have now. Unemployment, access to health care, education, pollution, and many other public policy issues all have a range of possible outcomes within a neoliberal political framework. Some of these are life and death questions. While it is certainly fair and reasonable for McChesney to claim that consumerism versus civic values is a more important issue, I cannot abide his dismissal of all other questions as “minor issues.” Neoliberal democracy is still democracy.

This hard-line stance against neoliberalism illustrates one reason why I am skeptical of analyses such as McChesney’s (1999) or Benkler’s (2006), rooted as they are in morality or humanism. Ideologies of many different stripes often fail to give enough consideration to diversity. The political theorists Knight and Johnson (2011) make a detailed normative justification for democratic institutions, and begin by pointing out that the central problem that politics seeks to ameliorate is diversity. Crucially, their philosophical outlook is pragmatic, meaning their case is built on the consequences of decisions, rather than upon notions of fairness or justice.

It’s a simple fact of human society that people disagree on a vast array of subjects, but these disagreements are rarely so fraught or turbulent than when the disagreement is over the apportioning of wealth and power. Knight and Johnson (2011) contrast pragmatic justifications for governance with those based on some form of morality:

Considered from the perspective of someone who seeks to establish the normative basis of social order, we understand the desirability of having a reason for action that is grounded in morality. Such reasons are deemed more compelling, seen as deriving from a stronger, if not absolute, principled commitment. The binding force of such a moral obligation is presumed to be greater than other kinds of reasons for action. If successfully established, a properly moral obligation most effectively trumps the claims of narrow self-interest.
Nevertheless, however much we may hope to back political obligation with the presumptive force of moral reasoning, this desire runs up against the fact of social diversity. The efforts to ground normative justifications of social order in universal moral principles or values seem to deny the reality of such diversity. (p. 271)

To put it bluntly, Benkler (2006) and McChesney (1999) might find that empowering the public relative to business and political elites doesn’t produce the consequences they expect. This raises a further point. One of the premises of the discussion that Benkler and McChesney engage in concerning democracy and communications is that media can have a profound impact on the beliefs and behavior of individuals. Our selves and our culture have been shaped by generations of constant exposure to media. Having said that, does it not to some degree beg the question to assume that simply freeing people from the oppression of elite-dominated hub-and-spoke mass media will lead to more authentic expression of the values and interests of the previously oppressed, suppressed, and manipulated masses? How has exposure to media shaped our view of our selves and our interests, and how does that shaping in turn affect the way we use communications technologies?

**Other analyses – individuals embedded in systems beyond their control**

To see how conceptions of politics and democracy can affect the analysis of media and its effects, it is interesting to see how Neil Postman (1985) grapples with very similar issues. Postman is more focused on the social consequences of television as a technology – while McChesney (1999) does not neglect this topic, he seems more worried about active control of mass media by certain political factions. Postman sees the medium of television itself creating its own discourse. He uses as an example the 1984 PBS documentary “The Voyage of the Mimi,” – which follows a floating whale research laboratory – and argues that the documentary was made not because of an imperative to educate America’s youth on the subject of whale research, but rather because the topic was “televisable” (p. 153). Elsewhere, Postman discusses the influence of mass media on politics, and the way that appearances, or images, eclipse all else: “If politics is like show business, then the idea is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty, but to appear as
if you are, which is another matter altogether” (p. 126). Both the affordances and the constraints of the medium lead to an aesthetic of discontinuity, which Postman refers to as a “Now…this” culture. Concerning the impact of this culture on civic discourse, he writes:

…embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anticommunication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. In aesthetics, I believe the name given to this theory is Dadaism; in philosophy, nihilism; in psychiatry, schizophrenia. (p. 105)

Information is decontextualized and juxtaposed to accommodate its technological medium, and meaning subtly erodes.

Todd Gitlin (1980) provides a fascinating and evocative case study that illustrates how these issues can play out in a political context. His subject is the development, tactics, and strategy of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the larger antiwar movement in the U.S. in the 1960s.

Gitlin begins by describing the power of mass media to shape our understanding of reality. Again, the decontextualization of information as a result of technological affordance is an important theme. Gitlin points out that only a very small proportion of what people must know about social life comes from direct experience. Mass media has long been an important component of completing that picture. “[P]eople find themselves relying on the media for concepts, for images of their heroes, for guiding information, for emotional charges, for a recognition of public values, for symbols in general, even for language” (1980, p. 1). Looked at objectively, this is not surprising, as humans have for centuries built cultures and communities using the communication tools available. The deeper significance of this observation comes when we look at the question subjectively, which is to say when we consider the implications for our own views on the world, and our sense of ourselves as we exist in that world. Gitlin writes, “Of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness…They name the world’s parts, they certify reality as reality” (1980, pp. 1-2). The certifications of reality, the language and symbolic field that are provided to us define the limits of the possible, the practical, and the desirable.
This is significant because many political theorists have argued that the practice of democracy bears little resemblance to the grade-school civics model of citizens expressing their individual preferences through votes, the counting of which allows us to determine the best, or fairest, outcome. Taken on its own, this sort of majoritarianism has more in common with violent anarchy—another system in which majorities rule—than the pluralism that makes democracy work.

Knight and Johnson (2011) draw upon the political philosophy of John Dewey to argue that democracy does more than provide a way to make collective decisions without resorting to violence. Rather, democracy has unique problem solving attributes that result from the necessary process of forming political majorities (and minorities) through debate and deliberation. This idea has been developed further by scholars such as Henry Farrell (2013), who coined the term “cognitive democracy” to describe the process by which political values, ideas, and interests are developed and articulated using networked communications media, antecedent to any voting which produces decisive results. For Knight and Johnson, this idea is crucial because it gives democratic institutions greater responsiveness and flexibility, compared to other institutional forms such as hierarchies or markets. This responsiveness and flexibility is the result of reflexivity – the ability of democratic participants to evaluate not only the issues placed before them, but the system itself and their own role within it.

For Gitlin (1980, p. 24), politics is inextricably bound up with the contestation of signs and symbols. He describes the important role that publicity and events tailored for mass media appeal played not just in spreading the ideology of the anti-war movement, but in shaping that ideology as well. Political groups and movements struggle to gain access to media platforms that can spread their message; at the same time, these groups seek to define the terms of the debate. But the media have agendas of their own.

Writing about the mid-to-late 1960s, Gitlin (1980) focuses on television news and large-circulation daily newspapers. In contrast to McChesney (1999), Gitlin is skeptical of the claim that elite interests drive the framing of political messages in the media. While he concedes that this is likely a factor, he finds that journalistic conventions and business incentives are also important. Echoing some of the observations made by Postman (1985), Gitlin finds that the news media routinely used conflict to construct easily digested narratives (p. 227), and was intent on
presenting its audience with novelty—new actions, new directions, new angles (p. 234). Thus, the news media came to emphasize only the most extreme, attention-grabbing factions within the anti-war movement (p. 182).

What is interesting about Gitlin’s work is his description of the reflexive, feedback-loop dynamic between the media and the anti-war movement. As a certifier of reality, mass media was an indispensable tool for the anti-war movement. Groups or ideologies that lack other forms of institutional power can contest dominant narratives using mass media (Gitlin, 1980, p. 11). SDS and the anti-war movement in general sought to contest some of the dominant cultural and political symbols of the U.S. in the 1960s. Mass media platforms provided more than just an opportunity to persuade others: they became a way for the movement to define and refine its message, and eventually to recognize its own ideology in the menu of options framed for the public by the media.

That is where the frames borne of journalistic routines and business interests began to distort the movement’s practices and ideology. In order to construct more compelling narratives to appeal to a mass audience, the news media tended to focus on the personalities of movement leaders, often at the expense of the ideology the movement hoped to construct and propagate. Gitlin writes,

> From the media point of view, news consists of events which can be recognized and interpreted as drama; and for the most part, news is what is made by individuals who are certifiably newsworthy. Once an individual has been certified as newsworthy, he or she has been empowered, within limits, to make news. (1980, p. 146)

In converting political activism into a contest of celebrities, much of the institutional strength of a movement is drained away, replaced with something more like an affective product, created and packaged for mass consumption so that audiences may be delivered to advertisers. Gitlin writes that “Stars, or celebrities, in the strict sense are precisely famous people without institutional positions of power” (p. 147). This definition certainly fits famous actors or musicians, who often voice political opinions but lack formal power. One might also argue that, given the antiquated U.S. presidential system and its excessive number of veto points, perpetual obstruction and gridlock has created a situation where many politicians themselves can be
described as mere celebrities – famous people who lack institutional power. But that would be a topic for another thesis.

Both the leaders of the anti-war movement and their followers accepted the distorted images of their own movement as it was portrayed in the media. Gitlin (1980) points out that occasionally the practices and incentives of mass media aligned with the goals of the anti-war movement, but when this happened it was best understood as coincidence. Over time, the effect that this feedback dynamic of reflection and distortion had on the movement can, I believe, best be described as depoliticization. Having first argued that any political struggle involves a struggle to control symbols, Gitlin finds not only that the anti-war movement became confused about the difference between symbolism and political leadership, but also that this confusion is endemic throughout our media-saturated society (1980, p. 151).

As the spiral of distortion and the exaggerated spectacle of personality and conflict continued to escalate, the goals of the anti-war movement became more and more unrealistic. The “self-mystification” of the movement, as Gitlin describes it, could be understood as a frantic, compensatory grasping for the political efficacy, and ultimate victory, that always seemed just out of grasp. The movement’s symbols, amplified by the mass media, were so righteous, so emotionally satisfying to its followers, that success must have seemed like a foregone conclusion, and the consequent rage and despair when this success inevitably failed to materialize only fed further cycles of symbolic excess and media distortion.

The reason for the decline in political efficacy is that spectacle engulfed political agendas (Gitlin, 1980, pp. 161-162). The outsized expectations of the anti-war movement’s rank and file led to estrangement from their leadership, as movement participants lost any clear, objective criteria or set of principles by which they could evaluate the tactics, strategy, or goals of the movement and its leaders. Since the anti-war movement came to recognize itself in the symbols that the mass media reflected back to them, the possibility of identifying with other goals or methods of political action became more and more difficult. The imperfections of the image in the mirror called out for corrective action, to repair the image, or to find new, better symbols with which to identify. In considering the ways that symbols failed the anti-war movement, I notice two important themes discussed throughout this thesis: decontextualization and consequentialism.
One of the major biases of television and newspapers is in favor of compelling images. Gitlin writes of the frustrations of certain people within the anti-war movement who could not get mass media interested in information that was important, yet complex and difficult to illustrate. Instead, flamboyant public actions generated the most press. “By the normal workings of commercial journalism, the building occupations and the police bust were routinely decontextualized, abstracted from the political situation that provoked them” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 193).

Gitlin seems to agree with Postman (1985) that the root cause of this malady is technological. He acknowledges that political chaos and dysfunction existed long before television, but nonetheless finds something new and disturbing in the synthesis of symbols and images by modern media, and the velocity with which those symbols and images appear, change, and disappear, only to be replaced. Gitlin (1980) writes that this gives rise to “a new order of experience,” (p. 233) and raises serious questions about what is real and how we can know it is real. The protests and civil disobedience of the anti-war movement were transformed into ephemeral, transitory images, disassociated from the day-to-day existence of the people involved in the political struggle and the people affected by its outcome. Without the necessary context, it was hard to know what anything really meant, and without meaning it became harder and harder to know what was real.

With ever-escalating spectacle, the movement lost the ability to define success or failure independently. It wanted "revolution," but didn't know what it was or how it would come into being. It was a style. “Militancy had been severed from strategy and value” (p. 201). In broadening his point to encompass politics in a capitalist society more generally, Gitlin makes a comparison to advertising:

From the association of Salem cigarettes with the blue-sky clear-water countryside, to the association of the nineteenth-century military tactic with a twentieth-century student uprising, the dissociation of action from context is a central and continuing feature of modern capitalist society. For a movement that intends to transform society, not to enter into its stabilizing rituals, such a dissociation is murderous. (1980, p. 238)
It is interesting to talk about *stabilizing rituals* in the context of escalating political turmoil, but what Gitlin means is that, in this case as in many others, it is the structure of capitalist society itself that is stabilized, not any particular economic or political faction within that structure. Although I am attempting to draw a contrast between these two different analytical constructs – McChesney’s top-down control versus the acephalic, rudderless, uncontrolled and uncontrollable system of circumstance and contingency that Dean, Postman, and Gitlin point to – I do not think that these ideas are in any way contradictory. I also don’t think any of these authors would likely disagree with Gramsci’s (1971) idea of hegemony: that elites develop ideology and culture that favors their own interests, and then spread these values so that they become the default assumptions of society in general.

What’s really at issue here is what we mean when we talk about “politics.” In it’s most general sense, we often use the word to describe a process in which individuals and groups compete for power or for the distribution of resources. This definition would certainly include hegemonic ideology that supports a capitalist system. But it must also include the more prosaic contests that take place within the bounds established by hegemony, even if these contests are often “depoliticized” by capitalism.

What is refreshing about Gitlin’s (1980) work is that although he deals with the subject of hegemony explicitly, concluding that it is responsible for warping New Left ideology and making it ineffective, his choice of subject matter – opposition to the Vietnam War – constantly reminds us that there is often a great deal at stake in more prosaic political struggles. And, as Gitlin points out, not only did the U.S. eventually withdraw from Vietnam, but the Nixon administration, which had opposed the anti-war movement so vigorously, was in the end disgraced and rejected by mainstream society. After all this, the capitalist mass media remained as strong and influential as ever: “Above the battle, only the spotlight remained intact, with the media assuring the country that, in the end, the system had worked” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 192).

This highlights an important point: As much as capitalism interfered with the political process in this case, the fight was not about capitalism. While it’s possible some of the anti-war activists held anti-capitalist ideologies, overthrowing capitalism was not the goal of the movement. Furthermore, we can see clearly that American capitalism in no way depended on the continuation of the war, or upon the power and ruthlessness of the Nixon administration. Both
were ended, and capitalism emerged unscathed. So why then was it necessary, from the standpoint of capitalistic hegemony, to undermine the anti-war movement?

Gitlin doesn’t make this explicit, but his account of the vagaries of elite incentives and the routines of reporters, editors, and managers implies that it wasn’t necessary at all. In a larger sense, it does appear to be true that capitalism reconfigures political pluralism and undermines competing ideologies. But it also seems that this same process undermines ideologies that are perfectly consistent with capitalism. To my mind, this is a far more disturbing possibility. Plenty of ink has been spilled in academia on the evils of capitalism, and I am sympathetic to most of those perspectives. But what I find even more troubling is the possibility of ideological incoherence, nihilism, and chaos. Say what you will about the tenets of capitalistic hegemony, at least it’s an ethos.

**Political theory – Rosenblum, Knight and Johnson**

As the above discussion of Gitlin’s (1980) work makes clear, understanding how people identify with political symbols and form allegiances with particular movements is important for understanding the intersection of media and democratic politics. In other words, it is important to delve into the concepts of partisanship and party ID.

Nancy Rosenblum (2008) is an excellent guide. She begins by pointing out the gap that exists between definitions for democracy provided by political science and political theory. While political science places the activities of political parties at the center of democratic institutions, political theory sees democracy as “a framework of social and institutional conditions that that facilitates free discussion among equal citizens.” (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 322). The latter description seems almost utopian, emphasizing the role of *free and equal* citizens, and omitting altogether the role that parties and partisan activists play in nominating candidates and articulating political agendas.

According to Rosenblum, it is the tendency of individual voters to identify with political parties – to adopt a party ID – that give parties the characteristics that make them indispensable for democracy. Personal identification is key to party ID, a very stable affiliation that is distinct from, and predates, voting behavior (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 323). What this means is that a partisan *is* a Democrat or Republican: This identity does not shift if this person, for whatever
reason, decides to vote for a candidate from the opposing party. Sometimes partisans can be persuaded to break with their party on certain issues, or their voting behavior can be influenced, yet the identification itself remains stable. Political scientists usually measure party ID using surveys – party ID is entirely a matter of self-definition, not based on any other externally observable factors, and neither can it be explained as a “cognitive shortcut” that implicitly includes more detailed policy preferences (Rosenblum, 2008, pp. 335-336, 340). Party ID is not identification with a party, but identification as a partisan. In this it is similar to an ethnic identification, and it likewise has important affective dimensions.

This raises questions about the usefulness of political information. The “stability” of party ID, irrespective of information concerning the actions and positions of politicians and the consequences of policy outcomes, feeds criticism that partisans are blind, apolitical, and subordinate to parties. Empirically, the evidence is mixed, and Rosenblum briefly surveys some of the conflicting studies and ongoing disagreement among political scientists about how well deliberative democratic theory fits reality (2008, pp. 335-338).

A study by John G. Bullock (2011) that sought to measure the effects of elite influence on public opinion provides an interesting example of the ambiguities inherent in this kind of inquiry. The experiment recruited a non-probability sample of subjects who identified as either Republicans or Democrats. These subjects were provided fictionalized newspaper accounts of legislative changes to Medicaid in Wisconsin. The newspaper stories were manipulated to describe changes that either expanded or limited Medicaid coverage. The stories also varied in describing which political party supported or opposed the changes. Unlike previous studies on the impact of political information on public opinion cited by Bullock, the newspaper articles included a significant amount of detail about aggregate effects of the policy changes, as well as details about co-payments and disability coverage.

Bullock (2011) found that while elite cues did have a statistically significant impact on whether subjects favored or opposed the Medicaid changes, the policy details had a larger effect. Whether the article the subjects read described their party opposing or supporting the expansion or contraction of Medicaid coverage, Democratic subjects strongly tended to support the “liberal” position – expansion of Medicaid – while Republican subjects opposed it, and vice versa.
I wonder, however, if the relatively small impact of elite cues could be cumulative over time. In other words, perhaps the subject simply recognized liberal or conservative policy positions – the stated positions of the politicians in the manipulated articles notwithstanding – and matched their preferences accordingly, without needing to resort to detailed comprehension and reflection. Looked at this way, perhaps this experiment did not just measure the impact of elite cues versus political information; it also measured the relative impact of elite cues and partisan identification, and so it is perhaps not surprising that few subjects were fooled.

The important takeaway is that when studying policy preferences and the effects of mediated information, even in an experimental setting it is not possible to control all the variables. Media permeates society, and people who self identify with a political party have undoubtedly already consumed a great deal of mediated political information. Because the variables cannot be controlled, differing interpretations are inevitable.

Rosenblum (2008) pursues questions about the merits or party ID because she is concerned about the valorization of political independence. In this, she makes some important and persuasive points. She explains that the crucially important flexibility of partisanship is rooted in identity politics. She does not use the phrase “identity politics” in its usual meaning, which refers to pre-existing social groups organized around their particular interests and perspectives. The difference between identity groups and interest or advocacy groups is a crucial one:

If partisanship just is the alignment of a voter’s preferences with party, and if ideological proximity to party is seen as short-hand for interest, then to say that partisanship is not reducible to interest is counterintuitive, or simply wrong. So let me spell this out. Theorists of identity politics argue that “the defining feature of an interest group is the coalescing of individuals around a shared instrumental goal that preceded the group’s formation” (Gutman, 2003, pp. 13-14). . . . In contrast, identity groups are not defined by instrumental goals. Indeed, the business of identity politics is often to specify widely shared and politically salient interests flowing from the group’s experience . . . The goals of enhanced public standing for the group, respect for members, and appreciation for
the group’s culture and value transcend the potentially divisive business of specifying a common set of policy goals. (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 343)

Rosenblum makes her case for the “moral distinctiveness of party ID” (2008, p. 353) on the basis of participation and stability. Parties involve partisans in political struggles, and allow them to share in victories and defeats. Partisan expectations, rooted in memories of past elections and other political events, put limits on what parties and politicians can do in response to political vicissitudes. The narratives that partisans construct persist over time, and are to some extent a force for integrity and accountability.

The inclusiveness of party ID – since it is not based on “divisive” instrumental goals or pre-existing social identities – is also an important stabilizing force. A desire to win, to be in the majority, encourages inclusiveness (Rosenblum, 2008). This argument echoes a point made by Knight and Johnson (2011): The value of majoritarianism in democracies is not simply carrying out the will of majorities, but creating those majorities in the first place.

Related to inclusiveness, comprehensiveness is another argument in favor of party ID (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 358). The narratives that partisans construct to explain their allegiance to parties over time tell a comprehensive story about the greater good for the entire nation. As Rosenblum phrases it:

> The vicissitudes of targeted messages and slivered audiences and divisive issues of the moment could eclipse or obliterate entirely the more general story of ‘who we are’ and what the nation needs now: But partisans, more that some candidates and typically more than election strategists, resist fragmentation. Partisanship has a looseness, a buoyancy that comes from attachment to a comprehensive story about the times for the nation as a whole. (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 360)

Her argument is that independence is just as much an affective, expressive identity as partisanship is. Partisanship is superior to political independence because, to the extent that
independents care about engaging in effective collective action, they must *free ride* by choosing from among options created by partisans.

Rosenblum’s (2008) arguments here seem to address concerns similar to those of collective action theory. Olson (2009) suggested that if rational self-interest is the basis for collective action, a group of individuals with shared goals would not cooperate to achieve those goals. Each individual would have an incentive to free ride on the efforts of the group to achieve the goal; alternatively, if the group failed to achieve the goal, not contributing one’s efforts would still be the dominant strategy. Many other scholars have suggested social and institutional factors that can encourage or compel cooperation. In particular, Rosenblum’s analysis of party ID – an expressive identity that does not uniformly align itself with the actual agendas of political parties – has a lot in common with Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg’s (2012) description of connective action. This type of group effort can either be loosely coordinated and facilitated by organizations, or can arise with little or no organizational support as participants use shared networks for personal expression.

Unfortunately, Rosenblum’s (2008) normative case tends to elide the significance of her descriptive analysis of partisanship. She acknowledges that ongoing political science research has steadily eroded the model of the rational voter, and even remarks that voters are unlikely to be able to correctly assign praise and blame for the consequences of political decisions (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 337). However, she doesn’t explore the implications of this much further, remarking instead that since political independents tend to be even less informed than partisans, partisanship is to be preferred.

In order to ground my analysis in a thorough and comprehensive explanation of the real and potential benefits of democratic institutions, and the conditions under which they can be expected to best function, I turn to Knight and Johnson (2011). They explain the advantages democratic institutions have over other institutional forms, such as markets or bureaucratic hierarchies. In the process, they help to clarify some concepts and provide some definitions that are useful to this inquiry. As their endeavor is in part normative, they explain that their justification builds upon a pragmatic philosophical outlook. They focus on the consequences of institutional designs and the decisions they produce. I believe this concept is particularly useful when examining the communicative aspects of democratic politics. Consequences are context: A
chain of causation gives events meaning, linking symbols together with a larger world in which the stakes are real. This is what separates real political communication from entertainment. It also brings to mind an admonition from Postman:

…you may get a sense of what is meant by context-free information by asking yourself the following question: How often does it occur that information provided you on morning radio or television, or in the morning newspaper, causes you to alter your plans for the day, or to take some action you would not otherwise have taken, or provides insight into some problem you are required to solve?...But most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to meaningful action. (1985, p. 68)

Knight and Johnson (2011) find that the strongest justification for democracy is based upon its reflexivity, although they caution against the dangers of unbounded regress. Democratic institutions alone have the ability to assess not only questions of allocation of resources and power, but questions of the design and implementation of institutions themselves, including democratic ones. Democracies can be self-referential.

Dean and the decline of symbolic efficiency

In the discussion above, I established several important themes, among them the tendency for media to decontextualize political information. This can have a negative impact on conceptions of the self in relation to society, and on the pursuit of instrumental goals. Postman’s (1985) “Now…this” discourse analysis resonates strongly with arguments Jodi Dean (2010) has made, although she writes about a very different medium – blogging, and other forms of networked mass media that feature user-generated content. The issue again is rooted in the affordances of technology. Dean cites a 2008 statistic that there were between eighty and a hundred and twenty million blogs, each one representing a unique voice. The ease of setting up a blog means that anyone can participate and contribute their own perspective. This abundance sets up a kind of paradox – “the indistinguishable mass of the singularly unique” (Dean, 2010, p. 65). The whole of the blogosphere is incomprehensible to any individual, and thus the relationship of any individual to that whole is likewise inscrutable. This problem is compounded by the difficulty of
knowing who is seeing the information we post online. In both directions, the possibilities are limitless. We see ourselves as unique, yet take comfort in the knowledge that we are one face in an impossibly vast crowd.

It is in consideration of this problem, the “interchangeable yet irreplaceable” (2010, p. 66) that Dean’s analysis takes shape. Her idiom is the word whatever, referring to the U.S. popular vernacular sense of the word as a response indicating indifference; a verbal gesture. She uses it as an adjective – whatever blogging, whatever beings. The shift in perspective here is a result of decontextualization. “[W]hatever being points to new modes of community and new forms of personality anticipated by the dissolution of inscriptions of identity through citizenship, ethnicity, and other modern markers of belonging” (Dean, 2010, p. 66). Identity is atomized. But that phrase itself points to the contradiction: Identification is fundamentally a process of belonging, of identifying with, or in contrast to, some kind of other.

For whatever beings, in contrast, being comes to mean only being-such. The meaning and significance of this form of being does not extend beyond its present circumstances. Thus, although singularities may belong to sets, it is the belonging that is significant, not the nature of the set to which a singularity belongs. Dean points out that this kind of significance is really no significance at all: “Mattering matters…What matters stands out from the mass or multiple because it matters” (2010, p. 67).

On some level this is obvious, unavoidable: It is the primary task of every sentient being to find (or create) some kind of meaning from the raw materials that sensory experience affords us. But when you consider the degree to which we constitute ourselves within social parameters, seeing ourselves reflected in others, and the degree to which these social parameters are, in modern society, governed and defined by electronic media, it becomes clear that the affordances and constraints of those media could have far reaching consequences for how we understand ourselves, our goals, and our interests.

Being as we are constituted in language, in communication with each other, our language has similar properties and dynamics, and serves as a useful metaphor for our selves. Dean explains the significance of the “whatever” idiom, and reveals some of these parallels:
the only affirmation in “whatever” is of communication as such. Another has communicated. This communication in no way obligates me as the recipient of the message…‘Whatever’ forestalls a communicative exchange even as it adopts communicative form. It refrains from establishing the subject position of the one who responds with ‘whatever,’ and it unsettles the position of the one who initiates the exchange. It’s a glitch in orality. (2010, p. 69)

Although Postman (1985) was writing about a very different media landscape, the parallels with his “Now…this” analysis of media are striking. In both cases, the mere fact of communication, communication-as-such, displaces meaning.

The concepts that Gitlin (1980) develops in his account of the rise of the New Left in the late 1960s are expanded and deepened in Jodi Dean’s (2010) work on blogs and participatory networked mass media. Reflexivity and feedback are key to both analyses, as people see themselves being seen in media. Her perspective is all the more interesting because the media she focuses on are so different from the centralized, top-down, hub-and-spoke mass media that Gitlin describes, and yet many of the same themes emerge.

Dean (2010) dispatches the concerns of those, like McChesney, who seem to believe the greatest threat mass media poses to democracy is its centralized control of ideology. She references Guy Debord’s (1998) “society of the spectacle,” a vision of the interplay between media and society that implies reflexivity: The spectacle reshapes reality even as it describes it. Dean points out that Debord’s model underplays its implied reflexivity because of its embedded assumptions.

The problem, though, isn’t with the image’s displacement of language and critical thought or even with its commodity function. Rather, Debord’s worry stems from the fact that the images the spectator sees are ‘chosen and constructed by someone else.’ When ‘chosen by someone else’ is the problem, the solution seems like it can be found in choosing and constructing for oneself…He can’t allow, in other words, for the possibility that in choosing for
ourselves, in participating in the production of the spectacle, we might contribute to our own capture. (Dean, 2010, p. 109)

The same assumptions that Dean flags here seem to be operational in arguments made by McChesney (1999) and Benkler (2006). As mentioned previously, Benkler believes that there is a great deal of moral authority in the claims and preferences of individuals, and McChesney is content to define democracy in what he terms the “classical” sense – as the rule of the many (1999, p. 5).

Dean is particularly concerned with the feedback loops that often arise in reflexive networks (2010, p. 13). Often we assume that events follow a bell-curve type distribution. This leaves us ill prepared to deal with feedback, which builds upon itself in often unexpected ways and can lead to dramatic results. Particularly unsettling is the possibility that, since our subjectivities are constituted in social space that is shaped by media, our participation in that media could have unpredictable consequences down to the level of our self-conceptions.

Many of Dean’s themes are familiar from Gitlin (1980): feedback loops as we both witness the spectacle and help to enact it; a loss of meaning as the distortions of each loop build on each other; ultimate loss of political and social efficacy as the media’s illusions eclipse more and more of our perceived reality. Dean recognizes these dynamics as being distinct from issues of elite control of media content that seem to preoccupy many other scholars. This leaves her to contemplate the effects of media’s simulacrum of reality when it is us, the audience, who are creating the illusion – in other words, when we become our own audience. The critical point is feedback, and the unpredictable results such dynamics can have. When see ourselves being seen online, we begin to assume the role of Lacan’s big Other, which is to say the symbolic order from which we derive meaning. But we cannot fulfill this function for ourselves, just as we cannot adopt multiple perspectives simultaneously. “The recursive loop is the circuit of the big Other’s collapse.” (Dean, 2010, p. 11)

Superficially, Dean’s argument seems to share some points in common with the Babel objection, a critique of networked mass media addressed by Benkler (2006) and many others, which grows out of concern for the potential of participatory media to remedy the failures of centralized control of media messages. This superficial similarity sometimes leads to confusion and makes it difficult to explain the nuances of Dean’s critique. The idea behind the Babel objection is that
although blogs and other forms of participatory media allow people to create their own messages and publish them on a platform that makes them available to the whole world, the sheer quantity of information created means that most consumers of information on the Internet must still rely on a small number of trusted, highly visible sites in order to cut through the clutter.

There is empirical support for this idea. Benkler (2006) observed that the link structure and traffic patterns of web sites follows a power law distribution, meaning that a very small number of sites receive a large majority of the Internet’s links and traffic. Thus, the argument goes, the same elites who were able to control newspapers, radio, and television because they had enough capital to invest will still be able to maintain a hold on their power. There are several questionable assumptions in this evaluation of the Internet. Besides the idea that capitalist elites have the desire and the ability to successfully manipulate the content of traditional mass media, there seems to be an assumption that allowing the audience to shape the messages they receive introduces political opposition to elite agendas, and that audience messages are a more authentic representation of reality than the manufactured images of corporate media.

To some extent, Dean turns these ideas on their head. As with the Babel objection, her starting point is a vast overabundance of online information, more than any individual can hope to sort through, but there’s more to it than that. Adding to the complexity and ambiguity, even if a hypothetical information seeker finds exactly what he or she is looking for online, it is impossible to foreclose the possibility that there is better information, or more entertaining images, in some unguessed-at corner of the Internet (Dean, 2010, p. 6). We are never done, never completely satisfied. Of course, there was never a time when a determined seeker could not at least hope to find more information on any subject. What Dean is describing is a matter of degrees. Gitlin (1980) called television’s effects on modern society “a new order of experience” (p. 233). In the same sense, Dean argues that the velocity of information, and the freedom we all enjoy to control what we see and hear, has crossed a threshold and led to a qualitative shift in how we make sense of the world.

The criteria we might apply in everyday life to determine if information is reliable enough, or an entertainment is enjoyable enough, are to some degree missing online because all messages and images are reduced to a common denominator: content. This is the fruit of decontextualization. The commodification of important political and social information, the transformation from
socially-embedded meaning to à la carte entertainment that Postman (1985) and Gitlin (1980) warned about, shifts into overdrive on the Internet precisely because there is so much freedom to access and create.

These problems are compounded because we can never be certain who else is seeing what we are seeing. By constructing images and symbols and making them available online, whether on blogs or other forms of social media, we create representations of our ideas and our selves. But in many cases we may only guess at who is receiving this information and what sort of impression we are creating in their mind. Feedback, when it occurs, is delayed and mediated.

In order to develop a meaningful picture of this dilemma, it is necessary to consider individual psychology. Dean draws upon the work of Slavoj Žižek (1997), who used concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis to understand the beliefs that underlie ideology, how ideology comes to dominate us, and why we allow it to happen (Dean, 2010, p. 5). It’s not simply that we are duped – we actively participate in the recreation of ideology because it satisfies, or promises to satisfy, some need.

One of the key Lacanian concepts that Dean uses is the Master signifier. Lacan sometimes identified the Master signifier with language itself, but it is more complicated than that. It is a concept that encompasses the domain of the symbolic. For any symbol, there is necessarily a gap: The symbol itself has a specific form, but what makes it a symbol is that it means something. Meaning is the bridge between signifier and signified, but the relationship is arbitrary, or at least contingent. The meanings of signs and symbols are usually expressed using other signs and symbols, but this can lead to infinite regress, or situations where the meanings attached to signifiers warps beyond recognition. The Master signifier is the context that pins down the meanings of symbols, foreclosing their theoretically infinite possibilities. In the strict absence of a Master signifier, one can only approach language in a manner something akin to that of a psychotic: The form of images or the sound of words may be clearly apparent, but no meaning can be derived from them. This analysis again recalls Postman’s (1985) description of “Now…this” culture as the embodiment of a discourse of “nihilism” and “schizophrenia” (p. 105).

Dean writes of the “suspension of the function” of the Master signifier, but I strongly suspect she intends to refer only to the attenuation of its effectiveness (2010, p.6). The culprit in this
dysfunction is the fracturing of discourse online: the ever-present ambiguity about who is speaking and who is listening; and the freedom to choose which information to consume, subject only to the preferences of each individual. To many, this new freedom seemed like the solution to some particularly thorny problems with media and democracy – at last, people are no longer subject to the ideological dictates of corporate mass media; they can shape their own messages, and seek out information that undermines hegemony. This optimism overlooks the radical transformation that information undergoes when it takes on the form of a commodity, as Dean (2010), Gitlin (1980), and Postman (1985) each point out in their own way.

While Gitlin (1980) doesn’t ever use the term *Master signifier*, he describes its functioning when he writes about the role traditional mass media plays in certifying reality as reality. That is why the nascent anti-war movement viewed it as an unavoidable necessity to get the national news media to represent them and their ideas: They wanted to change the Master signifier. This helps to illuminate the misunderstanding that optimists such as McChesney and Benkler may be laboring under when it comes to the democratic potential of the Internet: As problematic as corporate mass media was, it provided an avenue for citizens to see themselves as part of a larger totality. This isn’t to say that this totality was monolithic – obviously, there have always been intense differences in American democracy – but the Master signifier offered by corporate-dominated mass media allowed people a common point of reference, and thereby a means to understand their differences as well as their similarities. Undermining this function certainly increases nominal freedom, but at the risk of undermining political efficacy.

The erosion of the Master signifier leads to what Dean calls the decline of symbolic efficiency. An efficient symbol is one that can transmit information not just from one person to another, but can do so in a variety of settings (2010, p.5). The decline of symbolic efficiency means that the symbols we use to understand ourselves and the world around us become ever more particular, ever more personal, even as their definitions soften, becoming ever more inclusive. To the extent that these symbols represent anything at all, they represent only us, ourselves, only a particular time and place. When meaning is eroded like this, the only thing that remains is the fact of the communication itself, and the fact of our participation in it. In one sense, this perfectly serves the interests of capitalist hegemony, as contrary political and social possibilities are foreclosed and only the wealth-generating network remains. However, I think it is confusing to speak of this phenomenon in terms of ideology. It is rather the antithesis of ideology. With the decline of
symbolic efficiency, the sole purpose of language becomes enjoyment, or communication for its own sake. It is actually imperative that we enjoy, because, unlike centralized mass media, participatory media requires our participation.

This erasure of meaning would be almost transcendent if the potential consequences for democracy were not so troubling. Dean writes:

> Insofar as whatever beings experience their own linguistic being, they turn their attention from the content of language, from trying to communicate something, back to themselves as speaking. They shift from focusing on something outside or beyond themselves to turning back round upon themselves. (2010, p. 85)

This reflexivity not only forecloses the possibility of meaningful political coalitions, it undermines the problem-solving attributes that make democracy a valuable institution.

I find that Dean’s (2010) description of the decline of symbolic efficiency has a great deal of explanatory power, both with regard to Gitlin’s (1980) account of the vagaries of mediated political ideology, and with much of the political drama that I see unfolding in the present. However, she proceeds mostly on assertion, and beyond anecdotes, examples, and illustrations there is little empirical data to support her interpretation. Thus, I come at last to the research question that will guide the rest of the thesis: Is there evidence of symbolic inefficiency in the discourse on political blogs surrounding the 2013 government shutdown? Pursuant to Dean’s analysis, I am defining *symbolic inefficiency* as a reduced consistency of a symbol’s meaning when it appears in different settings.

As the focus of this research is democratic discourse, I will be concerned with those aspects of symbolic inefficiency that are most salient to political debate. Utilizing the insights of Gitlin (1980) and Postman (1985), I emphasize the importance of context to making political symbols meaningful. The particular nature of this context, and the way I use it to make normative evaluations about the effects of symbolic inefficiency, are explained in the next chapter.
Chapter 3
Methodology

General considerations

As mentioned in previous chapters, this study focuses on political blogs to gain a better understanding of how symbolic inefficiency can affect political discourse in participatory, networked media. Jodi Dean (2010) focuses her analysis on blogs in spite of the fact that they have to some degree been supplanted by other online platforms, such as social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Dean explains that blogging emerged as a practice in the late 1990s in response to the same set of problems that led people to use search engines: the difficulty of finding what one was looking for amid the vast, chaotic, undifferentiated abundance of the Internet. These two modes of information seeking rely on different conceptions of trust, however. Search engines ask users to trust in their technological implementation, the efficacy of their algorithms. Blogs, on the other hand, ask users to trust the blogger (Dean, 2010, p. 43). The credibility-based social connection between author and reader, as well as the frequently updated, newest-first format of most blogs, invites analysis of blogging as a new form of journalism – Dean cites Dan Gillmore and Tama Leaver as advocates for blogging as a fifth estate (2010, p. 45). It is precisely these qualities that make blogs worthy of study, especially considering that blogs still provide so much of the content that is cross-linked and shared on more contemporaneous forms of social media (Dean, 2010, p. 36).

This study focuses on blog discourse surrounding the budgetary and debt ceiling fight that took place in the U.S. Congress in September and October of 2013, and which resulted in a temporary government shutdown. The particulars of this sequence of events may have faded from memory, so I will briefly summarize.

In order for the federal government to continue to operate past October 1, Congress was required to appropriate funds for fiscal year 2014. Republicans refused to pass such appropriations unless Democrats, who held the Senate and the White House, agreed to delay or defund parts of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Concurrently, the Treasury Department had warned Congress that unless the statutory borrowing limit was raised by mid October, the U.S. government would begin to default on its various obligations, which could include so-called
discretionary spending, Medicare and Social Security payments, or – most critically for financial markets and the U.S. fiscal outlook – interest payments on outstanding government debt.

Because my conceptual framework identifies inattention to context and consequence as markers of Dean’s decline of symbolic efficiency, I limited the scope of my inquiry to a set of events that gave blog participants ample opportunity to discuss the particular consequences of various political outcomes. I return again to Neil Postman’s (1985) point that a large proportion of what we are accustomed to accepting as news actually has no bearing on our lives, and presents us with no real opportunities for meaningful participation. Certainly, there are other political issues as tractable, from the standpoint of political blogs’ participants, as these fiscal and economic ones. However, the debt ceiling and fiscal negotiations present an unusual opportunity to focus attention on the workings of the U.S. political system. The problems Congress was trying to resolve were entirely the result of past decisions by elected representatives. Likewise, the solutions could come from no other source. It is rare that a problem generating such extended, high profile news coverage could potentially be resolved by elected representatives so quickly, so easily, and in so many different ways. Events were entirely within the control of the U.S. political system; therefore it presented a good opportunity to examine how blog participants conceive of the workings of that system, and its potential outcomes.

In order to shed light on the phenomenon of symbolic inefficiency, my methodology needed to look to latent meanings. To rely on explicit meanings would be to rely on the very efficacy of the symbols I wish to test. This consideration points to content analysis as the most effective study design. As Klaus Krippendorff (2012) notes, “Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). Krippendorff emphasizes that content analysts must look past physical properties of texts to how they are used (p. 22), and cautions against proceeding upon the supposition that meanings are contained within the texts that are analyzed. Rather, the meanings of texts are created by the people who read them, whether these people are the intended audience for the text or the researcher himself. A qualitative analysis can also sidestep the difficulties inherent in choosing a sample that is numerically representative of the blogosphere, which is both vast and difficult to define.
Sampling

This study employs relevance sampling, as outlined by Krippendorff (2012). The aim is not to arrive at a numerically representative sample of all political blogs; rather, the goal is to obtain a sample that effectively demonstrates the meanings created and used by blog participants. The sample must also be of a manageable size.

With these considerations in mind, this study’s sample is drawn from DailyKos.com and RedState.com. Both sites appeared in the online political blog ranking lists on Technorati.com and Yahoo.com in fall 2013. Additionally, although user statistics are not available, the high volume of comments on DailyKos.com and RedState.com, relative to other political blogs considered for part of the sample, was taken as evidence that these two blogs were indeed popular and well trafficked, pursuant to sampling methodology used by Park et al. (2013).

DailyKos was founded in 2002 by Markos Moulitsas Zúñiga, an author and liberal activist. It describes itself as an "online political community with 2.5 million unique visitors per month and a quarter of a million registered users." (DailyKos.com, n.d.) Markos also founded Kos Media, LLC, which owns DailyKos.com. RedState, on the other hand, was until recently owned by Eagle Publishing, Inc., a publisher of politically conservative books. Shortly after the data collection of this thesis, RedState.com and Eagle Publishing were bought by Salem Communications, a company that specializes in conservative and Christian content over radio, the Internet, and traditional publishing. RedState is often associated with long-time Editor-in-Chief Erik Erickson, an outspoken conservative pundit and author. (RedState.com, n.d.)

DailyKos.com is an explicitly liberal (or “progressive”) blogging community, describing itself on its masthead as "the largest progressive community site in the United States." (DailyKos.com, n.d.) RedState's "about us" page asserts that it is "the most widely read right of center site on Capitol Hill, is highly respected and cited in the media, and has rapidly become one of the most influential voices of the grassroots on the right." (RedState.com, n.d.) Including both of these blogs in the sample provides an opportunity to see how participants engage with unfolding events from different perspectives.

DailyKos.com and RedState.com are both large, collaborative blogs that publish work by many different authors, both as posts and as comments appended to posts. Although Dean (2010)
described declining symbolic inefficiency as part of an analysis that focused on individual
writers publishing individual blogs, I believe her theories can be applied just as well to websites
like DailyKos.com and RedState.com. Many definitions of the term “blog” make reference to
their characteristic structure of individual posts listed in reverse chronological order, and to the
practice of hyperlinking to other blogs. These distinctions are broadly inclusive, however, and
could easily include Web sites such as Facebook or Twitter, which are usually not what we have
in mind when we use the term. Moreover, even if we are considering a classic single-author
blog, many different configurations of software and hardware are possible. For example, a
blogger could have their very own site at the blogspot.com subdomain – all of the blog’s files
and data would be stored on Google’s servers, and the blogger would not legally own the site’s
URL. Does using a shared platform like this change the nature of the communication medium,
per se? Given that such blogs can be freely viewed by anyone, and the bloggers are (in most
cases) free to write what they wish, I argue that it does not.

The critical factors in Dean’s (2010) analysis of blogging were the abundance and velocity of
changing information, the unavoidable ambiguity about who is speaking and who is listening,
and the invitation to participate, to express oneself. All of these factors are present on
DailyKos.com and RedState.com. Participants in these forums may not own the servers that the
sites are hosted on, but they still log in to their own accounts and communicate freely with
whoever they imagine may be listening.

The time period I sampled from also offered opportunities to include different perspectives. I
employed systematic sampling, drawing upon blog posts published on three consecutive
Tuesdays: September 24, October 1, and October 8. While keeping the sample size manageable,
this also allows my analysis to follow participants as they interpret and react to different stages in
the political fight: 1) the initial threats of shutdown and default, and their attendant demands; 2)
the parliamentary maneuvering and managing (or mismanaging) of expectations as each side
tried to gain the advantage; 3) the shutdown itself and it’s immediate aftermath; 4) the grinding
war of public-relations attrition, and disagreements about which side was winning the public’s
approval or valuable policy concessions; and 5) looking ahead to the debt limit, and wondering if
Congress would take us over the brink, and if they did which side would get the most blame.
Within the set of everything posted on the front pages of DailyKos.com and RedState.com on the specified dates, the sample was narrowed further to include only blog posts that mentioned the conflict surrounding the budget and raising the debt ceiling, or the effects of that conflict. This was to keep the sample focused on the intended case study. Of course, the most interesting part of the source material is the comments that participants posted in response to blog entries. My sampling protocol included all such responses, provided that the originating blog post met the criteria set forth above. In practice this meant that some form of analysis was performed on many comments that digressed far from the intended subject matter. I believe it is appropriate to consider these contributions, as it is the opportunities for free and open conversation that has led many to conclude that political discourse has benefited from the affordances of the Internet.

The volume of posts and comments on DailyKos.com far exceeded both the volume of what was posted on RedState.com and the volume of texts required for this study’s methodology. Therefore, I used a random number generator to select a subset of DailyKos.com blog posts within the selected dates. This kept the sample size manageable and avoided overrepresentation of progressive perspectives.

Because new comments could be added to a blog post at any time, I established three days as the cutoff point for inclusion. Any comments posted within three days of the appearance of the original post were included in the sample. In practice it turned out to be very unusual for a comment to be posted more than three days after the original post, so this cutoff point was largely inclusive.

Analysis

My analysis proceeded first by applying a system of categories that I devised in order to select a narrower set of texts, one focused on participants’ conceptions of the causes and consequences of political outcomes. I believe focusing on the content in this way facilitated an understanding of latent meanings that can, in turn, provide some insight into the influence of symbolic inefficiency in online political discourse.

The political theorists Knight and Johnson, and their book *The Priority of Democracy: Political consequences of pragmatism* (2011), heavily influenced the design of these categories. Knight and Johnson set out to find a first-order justification for democratic institutions. They argue that
democracies must be effective not just at solving problems directly, but at selecting or designing other institutions—many of them not necessarily democratic—to solve problems in turn. Their work intersects the work of Jodi Dean on many levels, but most significantly in a thematic concern for reflexivity. To be effective, democracies must be able to critically consider their own performance. To this I would only add that in order to be assured our own participation in the political process is justified, we must likewise be able to reflexively examine the meaning and consequences of that involvement.

As explained in the previous chapter, Knight and Johnson’s (2011) analysis is based explicitly on a pragmatist perspective. While their justification for this perspective is itself pragmatic, it is persuasive. While they acknowledge that pro-democracy arguments based on morality—a greater good defined in terms of justice, equality, or fairness, for example—can seem more compelling, ultimately these explanations are lacking. As they put it:

Nevertheless, however much we may hope to back political obligation with the presumptive force of moral reasoning, this desire runs up against the fact of social diversity. The efforts to ground normative justifications of social order in universal moral principles or values seem to deny the reality of such diversity.

(Knight & Johnson, 2011, p. 271)

In forming a working definition of pragmatism, Knight and Johnson (2011) draw on the work of political philosopher John Dewey, who wrote, “In order to understand the meaning of [an] idea, ask for its consequences” (p. 25). A pragmatic outlook is particularly salient to both the evaluation of democratic institutions, and participation therein. Knight and Johnson approvingly cite Dewey’s observations on the nature of community, its importance in democratic processes, and the kind of communication that is required to sustain it:

But no amount of aggregated collective action itself constitutes a community. For beings who observe and think, and whose ideas are absorbed by impulses and become sentiments and interests, ‘we’ is as inevitable as ‘I.’ But ‘we’ and ‘our’ exist only when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort, just as ‘I’ and ‘mine’ appear on the
scene only when a distinctive share in mutual action is consciously asserted or claimed. (2011, p. 38)

In essence, consequence is an important part of the context of the use of political information. When political information is decontextualized, as it would be if declining symbolic efficiency were a factor, I expect this decontextualization to be evident in blog participants’ discussion of consequences, or outcomes.

The categories used in this study are intended to reveal different forms of participants’ ideas about the consequences of combined action. The key concept, and the top-level category, is strategy. When blog participants describe a strategy, they are describing a sequence of events – A leads to B, which causes C. An understanding of consequences is essential for anyone who attempts to describe a political strategy.

Strategy is a plan or method for achieving a goal, and as such statements about strategy can also reveal some of blog participants’ beliefs about the value the political system can manifest. Conceptions of strategy can also reveal beliefs about the efficacy of various actors, or methods of action within the political system. Efficacy, method of action, and the ultimate outputs of the political system are all subjects that can ground political discussion in a stable, meaningful context.

Beneath the top level in the hierarchy of categories, I designate four sub-categories of texts that deal with political strategy. These are \textit{operand}, \textit{method}, and \textit{consequence}. 
**Figure 1. Hierarchy of categories**

Operant refers to the instigator of the strategy – its planner or executor. This category is divided further into three sub-categories: politician, media, and activist. Politician refers most often to elected representatives, but can also represent political appointees, agency officials, Congressional staff, employees of think tanks or lobbying organizations – essentially, any person who works within the political system or system of government in a professional capacity. The meaning of the operant>media category is straightforward, and when it occurs the media is often referred to explicitly within texts. This includes media organizations, both old and new, as well as references to the affordances or constraints of media technologies. Operant>activist is a category that can include almost any person or organization that does not fit better into one of the other two operant subcategories, but in practice it usually means just what it sounds like: people who advocate to the media and/or elected representatives for political action. By default, operant>activist also includes voters – although the word activist does not usually designate people whose political involvement is limited to voting, voters fit within this category in the sense that they are not directly affiliated with a media or political institution, yet their actions can affect political outcomes. This category is distinct from people who perform similar activities as lobbyists or affiliates of think tanks, who would be categorized as operant>politician. The difference is the latter group has an explicit, official, formalized institutional relationship with a political or governmental organization. Activists, in contrast, are (or are seen as) independent;
outsiders to the Washington machine. To illustrate, an excerpt from a DailyKos.com comment coded with *operant>*activist:  

> Anyone, whether it be the media, other posters on Kos, or your friends, saying 'both sides do it' is perpetuating a lie, and therefore they both (implicitly) support the GOP’s efforts, and are trying to insulate them from any political backlash.

The *strategy>*operand subcategory has parallels to the *strategy>*operant subcategory. *Operand* refers to a thing or person that is acted upon, and is divided into three sub-categories: *politician*, *media*, and *public*. *Politician* and *media* have essentially the same definitions here as they do as subcategories of *operant*. *Operand>*public is very similar to *operant>*activist, except the context of action is different: Since these people are being acted upon, their role in the description of strategy is different than the people who comprise the *operant>*activist sub-category. Of course, in reality, a single individual would likely fit into more than one category – a voter necessarily is also a member of the public, for example – but the purpose behind these categories is to structure the discourse that appears on political blogs. As such, what matters is how a person is described, not who or what they are in real life. The following comment, taken from RedState.com, was categorized as *operand>*public:  

> We aren't Obama. If you have a problem with him, fire him. Don't take it out on everyone else.

*Strategy>*method refers to the method or methods of action that the strategy is described as employing. *Method* has three sub-categories: *signification*, *legislation*, and *electioneering*. *Signification* refers to the framing of messages, often for mass consumption. *Legislation* refers to actions of parliamentary procedure, such as voting on bills, bringing bills to the floor, proposing amendments, etc. This sub-category can also include actions taken by other parts of the government, like the executive branch or state agencies. *Electioneering* refers to actions intended to install or remove political actors. Usually this type of method is discussed in the context of an actual election, but it can also include actions that change the composition of executive agencies. A typical example, from DailyKos.com:
They don't care. The only way we can make them care is to find some good "moderate" Dems to run against them in their districts.

Which means it is on us to try to winnow out the "Blue dog" whores to Wall Street and find good-faith moderate/cons. whom we can somewhat trust to be what they bill themselves as.

We had a good one in 2010 in my district, who billed himself as a "frugal progressive". He was big on clean energy and supported health care reform. Unfortunately he couldn't get enough money for yard signs or bumperstickers.

The strategy>consequence sub-category likewise has three divisions: persuasion, legislation, and elections. There are strong parallels between the strategy>method and strategy>consequence categories. Consequence>persuasion is similar to method>signification in that what is described is communicative, the framing of a certain event or issue. Consequence>elections, like its counterpart under the method sub-category, refers to anything that changes or threatens to change the people who work in the government or the political system, be they elected representatives or unelected bureaucrats. The consequence>legislation category requires a bit of explanation – like its counterpart method>legislation, this category often delineates the passage of legislation by Congress, or some other official act of a governing body. However, it can also include the results of those government actions. These can be very diverse, and are perhaps best understood as effects that are not better categorized under persuasion or elections. Consequence>legislation can include any changes in the distribution of wealth or physical resources. The following example, excerpted from a comment on RedState.com, was categorized as consequence>legislation, and is typical:

But the point is time is short because when those checks start getting cut an outright repeal is very improbable. And Obamacare leads to the bankruptcy of all private health insurance (reconcile the definition of insurance with the outlawing of preexisting conditions) and after the kaboom we get single payer.
Of course, there is often ambiguity about which category should be applied to a given unit of text. Often blog participants speak of desired outcomes in very general terms. The passage of a bill, for example, could be a desired goal, or it could be endorsed because it is a means to an end. The similarity between the *method>*legislation and *consequence>*legislation categories provides flexibility to capture this ambiguity. Similarly, when examining blog participants’ understandings and beliefs about the chain of events that lead to political outcomes, there is inevitable uncertainty about how to emphasize a particular segment in the chain. Legislative outcomes affect both public perceptions about issues and politicians and, as a result, have an impact on elections. Elections, in turn, likewise affect public perceptions, and have clear legislative consequences. One of the reasons that political news is such an effective form of entertainment is that the chain of causation never stops, and the result of an action or even is often multifarious. In any case where it is possible to make more than one interpretation about which category should be applied to a blog post or comment, the ambiguity is resolved by focusing on what the author seems to emphasize as the most important elements in the chain of causation. In addition, it of course makes sense to evaluate categories with similar definitions in conjunction with each other, as well as separately, which will be described more fully in the next chapter.
Chapter 4
Findings

General discussion

In order to find evidence in political blogs for what Dean (2010) refers to as symbolic inefficiency, or the reduced consistency of a symbol's meaning when it appears in different contexts, I devised a system of categories, as introduced in the previous chapter. The purpose of these categories is to structure the sampled blog discourse to gain a better understanding of how participants conceive of political efficacy. *Strategy*, the top-level category, breaks down into four subcategories: *operant*, or the instigator of the strategy; *operand*, the thing or person that is acted upon; *method*, the action that the strategy is described as using; and *consequence*, the goal or outcome of the strategy. Each of these four subcategories is divided into three further subcategories.

Each sampled web page, containing both a blog post and all of the comments written in response to that post, were saved as rich text files and loaded into TAMS Analyzer. Using TAMS, I also manually reviewed each post and comment, applied the appropriate category codes, and ran queries that generated the results sets discussed in more detail below.

Of the 44 blog posts and 2,833 comments included in the sample, 1,169 evidenced a discussion of political strategy. By far the most common *operant* in these discussions was *politicians*, with 715 units of text containing that categorization. *Activists* and *media* followed, with 309 and 54 categorizations, respectively. The categorizations for *operand* followed a similar pattern: 502 units of text contained discussion of *politicians* as the operand in a strategic context, while such characterizations of the *public* were present in 251 units of text, and characterizations of *media* as operand were present in just 18.

The coding results were more evenly distributed for the *method* and *consequence* categories. For *method*: 427 units of text were coded with *signification*, representing descriptions of messaging or framing; 444 were coded with *legislation*; and 239 were coded with *electioneering*. The relative proportions were similar for the *consequence* categories: 227 units of text were coded with *persuasion*; 237 were coded with *legislation*; and 138 were coded with *elections*. 
For the most part, the categories I devised for this study were effective in describing the data. There were a few exceptions, which I would like to discuss first.

Exceptions to the categorization scheme

Occasionally, the categorization system had difficulty describing discussions of political strategy that primarily involved, or resulted in, institutional change. In theoretical terms, this was an unfortunate oversight. Knight and Johnson (2011) emphasize the reflexive ability of democratic institutions to evaluate the efficacy of institutional forms – including democracy itself – in solving first-order problems. Knight and Johnson refer to this special ability as the “second-order priority” of democracy (2011, p. 12).

In practice, however, these sorts of texts were relatively rare. A large majority of them came from DailyKos.com, and echoed President Obama’s framing of the dispute over the budget and the debt ceiling: that giving in to Congressional extortion would upset the constitutional balance of power between the legislative and executive branches of government. A typical example is below, excerpted from a comment to an October 1, 2013 DailyKos.com blog post:

If the President / Senate gives in to this political terrorism ... that's basically the end of our democracy as it's intended to work. I mean, that sounds a bit histrionic but ... yes; this same playbook could be used for all kinds of goals by any side.

Most often, when a unit of text clearly described some form of political strategy, and yet it was not clear which category should be applied to it, it was due to a lack of specificity. The commenters’ over reliance on metaphor was sometimes the culprit, as in the example below:

What boggles my mind is that these geniuses can't see what is clear to everyone else. That if you set out to take Vienna, you dang well better take Vienna. We just tossed a big stack of chips onto the table, as did the enemy. Winner takes the pot. Once we started this we really have no option but to play the hand out. And that if we fight we WILL win the issue. Only we can lose, there is no move the other side can possibly make that wins.
It’s very hard to discern what exactly this writer is trying to say about the exercise of political power and its consequences, while at the same time it’s hard to deny he or she is saying something. This example points to another major theme that emerged from a re-review of the ad hoc category of strategy, otherwise unspecifiable. In many of these kinds of texts, the authors seem to be writing about winning or losing political struggles in an almost definitional way, or as categorical imperatives. An example follows, in which the writer was responding to another commenter who suggested that President Obama would never sign legislation defunding the Affordable Care Act, and therefore the Republican strategy was doomed to fail. The rebuttal:

As Streiff stated, you either fight or you surrender. Quite frankly, from most of your posts I doubt I would have much respect for you as a person. Seems to me you only find your backbone when the outcome is certain, other than that you simply lie down and play the part of the victim. Pretty cowardly to me. See, when a person has courage, they run into the burning building to save the children even if the attempt may be futile or may cost them their lives because that is the right thing to do and it is what courage dictates. A person stands up and defends the person being raped and stabbed no matter the cost. But you seem to be like all the people who ignored the poor girl's screams for help for over an hour all while hiding in their apartments like the cowards they are.

Get a backbone, get some self respect.

This type of commentary was found throughout the sample, but was concentrated most heavily on RedState.com. Many similar examples dealt with Sen. Ted Cruz’s “filibuster” against the House-passed bill that funded the government but stripped funding for the Affordable Care Act. Although Cruz opposed the ACA, he was trying to prevent Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid from bringing the House bill to the floor of the Senate, where the Democratic-controlled Senate could strip the “defund” language from the bill with a simple majority vote and return it to the House. Supporters of this quixotic strategy often defended it with statements that were more explicit or pragmatic in their descriptions of operant and consequence, but vague or nominal when it came to talking about method. The following example, excerpted from a comment on a
RedState.com blog post from October 1, was coded with *operant*-*activists*, *operant*-*politicians*, and *consequence*-*legislation*, but while it clearly talks about the method Sen. Cruz and other conservatives should use, it was not possible to assign a more particular category for this dimension:

That said, we can and should support Cruz in his efforts because while it looks like he might be making this up on the fly, at least he is fighting. Which is a lot more than I can say about the other factions who were simply sitting their behinds saying "Oh woe, nothing we poor outnumbered Republicans/Conservatives can do."

This thing fully kicks in on Jan 1 and the bennies flow. The path from there to Kaboom followed by single payer and the end of the Republic after that are a done deal. Having blown much better chances, we are now left with throwing caution to the winds and fighting like there is no tomorrow... because if we lose this fight there probably isn't one. Cruz and Lee are the army we go to war with because they are what we have now. Like Rumsfeld said. And NOW is the time.

This lack of specificity with regard to the method of action recalls Gitlin’s (1980) account of the latter days of Students for a Democratic Society. Learning to recognize themselves and their movement in mass media depictions, anti-war activists lost the ability to independently evaluate tactics, strategies, and goals. Activism became a style. As Gitlin wrote, “Militancy had been severed from strategy and value” (1980, p. 201). These findings suggest that similar dynamics could be affecting political movements today.

**Categorization results**

**Overview**

Returning to the results of the coding, I have prepared *Figure 2* to give the reader a clearer picture of what the categorizations revealed about the way blog participants framed political strategy in their discourse, as well as what remains ambiguous, or lodged in the specific.
Figure 2 shows a count of the co-incidence of category pairs in units of analyzed text. The green, bolded numbers running through the center diagonal are simply the raw counts of each individual category.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>operand&gt;politicians</th>
<th>operand&gt;media</th>
<th>operand&gt;activists</th>
<th>operand&gt;public</th>
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<th>method&gt;legislation</th>
<th>method&gt;electioneering</th>
<th>consequence&gt;persuasion</th>
<th>consequence&gt;legislation</th>
<th>consequence&gt;elections</th>
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Figure 2. Incidence of category pairs in units of sampled text.

It is important to remember that, while a participant’s description of political strategy would often draw a line, narratively speaking, between the elements identified in the categorizations, this was not always the case. When these categories were developed, the hope was correlations of various categories within the same comment or blog post, in aggregate, would provide clues about what participants believed about the workings of the political system. In practice, however, many of the texts contained fragmentary descriptions of political strategies, and quick jumps...
between one idea and the next. So, for example, while it may be the case that a co-occurrence of \textit{operant>politician} and \textit{method>signification} involved a description of the operant politicians themselves doing the signification, this cannot be assumed. This point is underscored by looking at the numbers in red italics, which represent co-occurrences of categories within the same sub-categorization group (e.g., both \textit{activists} and \textit{politicians} are part of the \textit{operant} group of categories). These numbers usually represent comments in which the author has described more than one political strategy, either as a preferred alternative or a completely separate observation. One such example, taken from a comment written in response to a blog post on DailyKos.com on September 24, 2013, illustrates this. This comment was coded with all three \textit{operant} categories:

I'm tired of all of the "Blame Obama" mentality

He put the full weight of his Presidency and, to some extent, his re-election, behind building support for and getting Congress to pass ACA into law in the first place and he and his cabinet have been busy defending the law in courts and getting it implemented while Republicans- with the collusion of the "liberal media"- sabotage, lie, obfuscate, and otherwise try to destroy the law in its infancy- before it can take effect. The question, at least for me, is not what Obama has/hasn't done in terms of "selling" the law but what have WE done? Have we had his back?

While the raw numbers cannot provide detailed information about the nature of the relationships between the various entities and events described, it can serve as a rough guide. The most important thing is to not be misled by the apparent specificity of the category counts: They are all approximations of one sort or another.

\textbf{Category-specific findings}

In the following sections, I present the findings of my research for each of the twelve categories that were used to structure the discourse in the data sample.
Consequence categorizations

The consequence categorizations are particularly relevant to the search for evidence of symbolic inefficiency. Within my conceptual framework, declining symbolic efficiency is the result of the loss of a context that can ground symbols in shared meanings. As the object of study is democratic deliberation, I use Knight and Johnson’s (2011) normative justification for democratic institutions as a guide to the conditions and practices that should pertain in effective democracies. Pragmatism, or the evaluation of choices with respect to their consequences, is an essential component of this justification. Therefore it is appropriate to focus on blog participants’ conceptions of the consequences of political choices as the essential context that makes symbols used in democratic discourse meaningful.

Consequence>legislation subcategory

Reviewing these units of text revealed several recurring themes. First among these were texts that appeared to explicitly describe the effect of policy choices on persons or groups of people. For example, the following comment was taken from DailyKos.com on October 1, 2013, the first day of the government shutdown, and discusses the possibility that whatever deal emerges from the standoff will assume as a baseline “sequester” levels of government funding:

The Justice Department is still overfunded 31%, the majority, of all federal criminal defendants, are for drug crimes. And the vast majority of those are non-violent offenses. Given that, why does the Justice Dept. need another dime? So they can keep right on throwing people in jail for years for smoking weed?

I'm glad the "justice" system is being devastated [sic]. I'm glad the fascist war on drugs is running out of funding. I'm sick to death of my tax dollars going to pay for that shit. Long live the sequester!

Here, I'm going to do Holder's job for him, for free. If the Justice Dept. doesn't have enough funding, then throw out 1/3 of the cases! Problem solved.
No, the war on drugs does not need more funding. Is this a fucking joke?

Another example, excerpted from a comment on RedState.com on October 1, 2013, demonstrates the same kind of thinking, but also poignantly underscores an important distinction. This was written in response to another commenter who advocated allowing the ACA to be fully implemented so that it’s failure could be made apparent to the electorate:

I'm inclined to agree with you. I'm torn between two inclinations: My first inclination is, "let it roll out in all its clanking, unworkable GLORY, and let the damned Democrats OWN it when it collapses of its own weight, since they are the ones who crammed it down our unwilling throats without a SINGLE GOP vote."

But my SECOND inclination, knowing how govt. works, is to fear that once it IS rolled out, we will be permanently STUCK with it, even though it will not work. They'll just keep tweaking it here and poking it there while it bankrupts the country and destroys the economy and what is left of the (quickly disappearing) middle class.

This comment was categorized with both consequence>legislation and consequence>persuasion. This commenter’s second paragraph is similar to other examples from the sampled texts, which demonstrate a concern with the consequences that political decisions have outside the political system. The first paragraph, however, is different in that here success is apparently defined in terms of the success (or failure) of a political party. In this, it seems to share something in common with some of the examples of incomplete or ambiguous categorizations discussed earlier in this chapter. In those texts, political success was described as a categorical imperative, with one side “fighting” and “winning” over the other in what seemed to be a nominal struggle, one that required no additional context.

There are many other units of text categorized as consequence>legislation where the emphasis, when talking about feared or desired outcomes, is clearly placed with the fortunes of political
parties or politicians, even though the passage of legislation is the nominal goal. The following example is from RedState.com, October 1:

We're going to need everyone firing in the same direction in order to hold our own in this showdown. So as much as I want to see egomaniac fake conservatives like McCain and Graham lose their influence and ultimately their office, we need to be united and smart about this battle. It's only the first of several that we'll have to enjoin before the next election.

For instance, I love the mini-CRs for specific pieces of the government so we can get down to brass tax on ObamaCare. That was a great move by Boehner et al. You can tell these funding measures are dangerous for Democrats because Reid won't consider them. Congressional procedure may be boring to some, but it's crucially important. Good procedural moves won't win the fight on its own, but it can lose it for you even if you do have the public on your side.

When politics are discussed in these terms, it is not necessary to weigh the practical, real-world impact of policy choices. There are no tradeoffs. It is enough to know who your political opponents are, and to know that they are displeased with your actions. This is the contestation of political issues in nominal terms, and the disassociation of action and context. In the view of this commenter, the “mini-CRs,” or continuing resolutions that would re-fund parts of the government piecemeal, are good strategy because they displease Democrats.

Lest the reader wonder if I am choosing particularly egregious examples of this sort of thing, let me say that framing of this type, while not evident in a majority of the texts categorized as consequence>legislation, is not at all uncommon, and it is found both on RedState.com and DailyKos.com. Based on my review of the data, I estimate that about a quarter of these texts use this nominal type of framing to understand political events, while another quarter are of the first type, and frame political events in a more instrumental way. I caution the reader that these proportions are only rough estimates. I did not create further subcategories for nominal and instrumental discourse and tally the results because there is a tremendous amount of ambiguity
between these two types, as further discussion will show. Nonetheless, the distinction is a common theme that runs across many of the category data sets.

Most of the rest of the consequence\textsuperscript{>}legislation texts demonstrate a third theme, which can be seen as occupying a middle ground between the other two just described. The framing used in these texts often describes success or failure using what could be either symbolic tropes or just shorthand for desired legislative consequences. To illustrate, consider this example, from DailyKos.com on October 8:

I am becoming parinoid \textit{[sic]}…and cynical. I am thinking all the drama is just a lead up to the Democrats giving up something big like the Chained CPI and saying they made us do it and look we succeeded in preventing a default for another 6 months.

and even if one passes cleanly the republicans still have won because we are still accepting their terms for the sequestered budget numbers not the expansion or jobs program we need.

This comment has a lot in common with the nominal texts described above. It talks about fears that the Republican party will “win” if the Democrats accept their terms. It describes fears that the Democrats will give up some unspecified thing, “something big.” At the same time, it specifically mentions “chained CPI,” a reference to a policy idea that President Obama agreed to—in principle, and as part of a hypothetical bargain with Congressional Republicans that would have included higher taxes, a bargain that never came to pass—as part of the so-called “fiscal cliff” negotiations in 2012-2013. Essentially, it represents a small cut in the size of benefits distributed to Social Security recipients. This commenter also specifically references the effects of the sequester on the budget, and the need for a federal jobs program.

So, does this person really have strong feelings about the best measure of the Consumer Price Index to use when calculating cost of living increases for Social Security beneficiaries? Or is this person deploying these policy ideas mainly as rhetorical tropes, a shorthand for what he or she sees as the advancement of the liberal/progressive/Democratic cause, which is ultimately the more important goal? My personal feeling is that the latter interpretation is more likely correct. The more important point is that it is possible to interpret this text in two different ways.
Moreover, this issue raises an important point about the claims I am making regarding the nominal texts I describe above. Most of the people who come to these forums to discuss politics and current events no doubt do so with the expectation that most of the people who read their contributions share many of their values, beliefs, and goals. That being so, perhaps it isn’t surprising that participants are not always explicit about the policy consequences they hope for or fear. Perhaps it is sufficient, when participating in democratic institutions, to place one’s faith in a political party or ideology, and trust that the officials one helps to elect share the values of their constituents to a sufficient degree that the programs they enact will be broadly beneficial. Isn’t politics in a democracy essentially about constructing shared meanings and motivating people with diverse interests to enact a single policy agenda? That seems to be the view of Knight and Johnson (2011), whom I have already approvingly cited, and who adopt John Dewey’s view that the most important function of democratic institutions is not carrying out the will of the majority, but bringing those majorities into being.

Consequence>elections subcategory

Among these comments I noticed two general types. The first is relatively straightforward. These texts evince a discourse that places the winning and losing of elections as the ultimate consequence of political actions. An example, from RedState.com on October 8:

> Except that we won't die on that hill, but rather raise a flag of victory because the public doesn't want this law...and they'll be revolting against it by the 2014 midterms. Our strong stand against it now and forevermore is what will win us the senate next year.

Alternatively, other texts indicate a belief that, while winning or losing elections is an important consequence of political decisions, its importance stems at least in part from downstream effects on political actors, or from the incentives that the threat of losing or the promise of winning creates. An example, from DailyKos.com on October 1:

> Yeah, that's the problem

> I live in one of those gerrymandered districts in Ohio where it is literally draw [sic] street by street to max out the republican vote.

> A dead possum would get elected if he had an "R" beside his name
on the ballot. These guys know it and realize there is no
consequence as long as they suck up to the teabaggers and avoid a
primary challenge. I have little hope of the democrats regaining the
House in 2014. Too much voter apathy in an off year election. We
held a mayoral primary a few weeks ago here in Cincinnati and
only 5.68% of the electorate participated. Unfortunately sometimes
people get the government they deserve.

This text might have been categorized with method>elections and consequence>legislation. It
wasn’t because the author is so vague about what the consequences of the election are, writing
only that Republicans must “suck up to the teabaggers,” and that “sometimes people get the
government they deserve.” I think it is appropriate to distinguish this type of text, because the
author is clearly saying something about the instrumentality of elections, even if we’re not given
much to go on when trying to understand what those results would actually mean.

There are many other examples where texts categorized as consequence>elections are also given
other consequence categorizations. These too are best understood as describing elections in
instrumental terms, rather than a goal in and of themselves, or part of the definition of “winning”
a political struggle. The following example packs a lot in – I see evidence of a legislative
strategy that results in changing public perceptions of the ACA, and strongly implies a reaction
by voters that leads to the demise of the legislation. This was taken from RedState.com on
October 1, 2013:

Oh I dunno. I like the idea of sending the original Obamacare
legislation back to the Senate stripped of all the fixes, changes and
carveouts. Give them exactly what they passed into law. Reject all
efforts to apply lipstick to the pig. Here Harry, you brought her to
the dance...she's yours and the president's. Let everyone in
America watch as you try to dress it up. With each attempt we play
Harry's game...the House strips out any changes and sends it back.
I would like to see the albatross draped around each of their necks
in all it's [sic] dysfunctional glory. NO AMENDMENTS. Exactly
as passed, unread, hastily prepared and chock full of gobilygook.
Let the Democrats spend the next 3 years trying to make the thing workable. By election time it should be clear to all that the only fix will be to nuke it...#1 plank of the GOP convention.4

Drawing conclusions from these types of texts is difficult. Blog participants who describe elections like the commenter in the preceding example seem to be exemplars of Rosenblum’s (2008) identity politics, in the sense that they personally identify with a political movement, and share in the glory of its successes and the agony of its defeats. At the same time, it is striking the extent to which the emphasis is on publicly embarrassing Democratic politicians, rather than the legislative changes that will result once Republicans (presumably) win the next election. This again seems like an example of Gitlin’s “dissociation of action from context” (1980, p. 238). To the extent that comments like this evince a private, personal, particular use of political symbols that we would usually expect to have a shared meaning fixed in real-world context, they could be evidence in support of Dean’s (2010) theory of symbolic inefficiency.

**Consequence>persuasion subcategory**

Turning to the texts categorized with consequence>persuasion, and attempting to draw the same distinction as was done above with the consequence>legislation and consequence>elections texts, the results are less striking. Often, the persuasion category is either accompanied by other consequence subcategories. Alternatively, the comment or post will frequently contain language that, while vague or perfunctory, does indicate a belief that political persuasion is significant because of its context – in other words, because of the effect it has on the behavior of political actors. In an example, from RedState.com, October 1, 2013, the text’s author suggests the government shutdown could have positive effects apart from the potential to force Democrats to agree to defund or delay the ACA:

> The GOP must use this opportunity to show the persuadable voters that having less government is not a disaster. Then, they can later sell them on the idea that less government will be a positive for them. If they cave on this one, they will be part of the shrinking

4 Incidentally, the comment quoted on page 54 was written in reply to this one.
minority party forever, and their seats, which they think are safe, will be lost to them along with our country as we used to know it.

We may disagree with this commenter that this course of action represents good governance. Nonetheless, this contribution does specify that it is voters who are to have their views changed, the implication being that voting behavior will change as a result. It also mentions the consequences for GOP politicians, and hints at dramatic consequences for “our country.”

A contrasting example – of persuasion apparently described as a freestanding, nominal political goal – is provided below, also taken from RedState.com on October 1, 2013. For whatever reason, this type of comment was a small minority of the consequence->persuasion texts, but some of the examples are compelling. The way I understand this comment, the author assumes that Democrats would vote against a bill that reopened the government while repealing the medical device tax and blocking the implementation of the ACA:

I believe Republicans putting in a resolution to repeal Obamacare's medical device tax is a good idea, provided Obamacare's delay or defunding goes along with it. From a PR point of view, the commercials for Republicans to attack Democrats write themselves. With last night's refusal of House Democrats to fund veterans [sic] benefits, an [sic] competent Republican ad man can wreak havoc on these Democrats to show America how truly rotten Democrats are.

It is possible to interpret this remark as implicitly expressing the idea that Republicans can exploit an opportunity that will eventually enable them to enact their legislative agenda – after America learns how truly rotten Democrats are and hands the GOP the Senate in 2014 and the White House in 2016. I do think it may be significant that none of this is expressed explicitly, however. I also think it’s worth noting the author’s apparent relish at the thought of finally winning over the voting public. Notice that the goal, as it is expressed here, is not merely to persuade voters that the Republicans have better policy proposals than the Democrats; neither is it apparently enough to show America that Democrats are bad. This commenter wants it known how “truly rotten” the opposing party is. There’s nothing wrong with enthusiasm, but I think the choice of emphasis in this case is evidence that the legislative changes are a nominal goal, and
the true desire is simply to triumph symbolically. This kind of nominal use of symbols, or *symbols-as-such*, to echo Dean’s (2010) description of *whatever beings*, could be taken as evidence of symbolic inefficiency. This is tricky terrain, however, as Rosenblum (2008) makes clear that instrumental goals can be latent in symbolic identifications.

**Operant categorizations**

In strategic descriptions, *operant* refers to the instigator or protagonist. *Operant* categorizations were included in this study design because operant is an important component of any strategy, and I felt it was important to be as objective as possible about the meanings that were in the data sample. I had hoped that some interesting patterns might emerge within these categorizations, but in the end the *operant* categories turned out to be much less significant for my research than the *consequence* and *method* categories.

**Operant>politicians subcategory**

This was by far the most common *operant* category. One might be tempted to conclude from this that blog participants have become enamored with politicians as celebrities, and that this has eclipsed their own sense of agency. This might be true, but I do not think one can conclude that from this data. Government officials, by definition, are vested with institutional power. Particularly in a year without a national election (2013), while discussing current events it makes perfect sense that discussion would focus on the actions of elected representative. A review of comments within this subcategory did not reveal any interesting themes, nor any evidence for or against symbolic inefficiency.

**Operant>media subcategory**

The very low occurrence of *operant>media* in the sample was surprising. The alleged political agenda of the news media has been a familiar trope in political debates in the U.S. for many decades, but was very scarce in this sample. A review of those units of text that did contain mentions of *media* revealed nothing very interesting, just the usual assertions of bias and manipulation.

It is unfortunate, because a more in depth or wider ranging discussion among the blog participants on the role of media in the political process could have proved salient to the
questions posed in this thesis. I had hoped that the incorporation of *operant*–*media* in the blog texts could reveal a preoccupation with political symbols, similar to what Gitlin (1980) described in the context of the anti-war movement in the late 60s. Such a result could have lent support to the idea that, in the feedback loop of political activism and media representation, nominal goals come to overshadow instrumental ones.

One possible reason why such discussion of media frames was largely absent is that blog participants have the option of choosing which media representations to accept, and they know that everyone else does, too. So, while representations of political events and activities could still be contested, such fights might be less salient to political strategy than they were in past decades.

**Operant–activists subcategory**

To the extent that texts marked with this category were interesting or meaningful, it was due to the co-occurrence of other categories discussed elsewhere in this chapter. No significant patterns or themes could be found that pertained to the *operant–activist* category specifically.

**Method categorizations**

The difference between a *consequence* categorization and a *method* categorization is largely one of context. As explained in the previous chapter, voting behaviors, messaging, and policy decisions are all both causes and effects. An event of one type can lead to events of any of the other types, and changes in each spring from each. This is part of what makes politics an endlessly entertaining spectacle. It also means that there is essential ambiguity between *consequence* and *method* categorizations. A lot depends on what a given text’s author seems to be trying to emphasize, but oftentimes the line blurs between what is desired as a means to an end and what is desired on its own terms. For our purposes, this means it is useful to examine the *method* categorizations along with the *consequence* ones.

**Method–legislation subcategory**

Those texts categorized with *method–legislation* and one or more of the other three *consequence* categories are particularly relevant and interesting for discerning how participants in the discourse understand the ultimate outputs of the political system.
Looking at those comments in which consequence>legislation is paired with an antecedent method>legislation event, a couple of broad types emerge. First, there are many refreshingly straightforward descriptions of policy changes won or lost. In the following example, from RedState.com on October 1, 2013, a commenter tries to reassure others that even if the optics surrounding the shutdown hurt the image of the Republican party, it can all be worthwhile if they can win some policy concessions:

If you recall what the 1995-96 shutdown was over, the GOP won big on policy and marginally lost on politics. The fight was over two big ticket items. 1. The budget must balance within 7 years as scored by the CBO, and 2., there had to be across the board tax cuts. Clinton agreed to a 7 year balanced budget and accepted "middle class tax cuts." Remember that? The GOP gave on lowering the top marginal rate and cutting capital gains taxes and won on everything else.

Another interesting theme that emerged from a review of these texts was discourse that talked about legislative changes, but did so in service to a strong rhetorical thrust that disparaged the character or motivations of political opponents. I do not know why this type of comment was so numerous and conspicuous among texts categorized with consequence>legislation and method>legislation. They are an interesting complement to the nominal discourse that frames political struggle as an abstract, seemingly symbolic contest between right and wrong, winning and losing. An example, from DailyKos.com on October 1, 2013, illustrates this:

I would like to congratulate the GOP for getting what it wants again.

First a sequester is simply handed to them, accomplishing what is tantamount to an appetizer in terms of the realization of their entire agenda, which is to shut down the federal [sic] government.

Now they have managed to shut it down and the batshit crazies among them are now high-5ing each other for having accomplished it.
They are wholly insulated from consequences. While most Americans are going to be negatively impacted the GOP will be sipping champagne, toasting the success of their plans to curtail all government spending, the closing of parks, the delaying of social security checks to the sick, poor, and disabled. Everything that makes a republican happy.

And NOTHING will happen to them, least of all what should.

Clearly, the author of this text is concerned about the practical impact of the government shutdown on the wellbeing of sections of the public. However, I think it is a fair assessment that the author has at least as much concern about the moral injustice of Republican victory. The very first sentence is an expression of frustration that the G.O.P may be “getting what it wants again.” The next two sentences re-emphasize this sentiment, framing political events not in terms of how the public may be affected, or even in terms of Democratic defeat, but rather expressing outrage at Republican victories. Even when attention turns to the damaging effects of these Republican victories, the commenter’s emphasis is still on the outrageously unfair success of those awful, awful Republicans. This suggests an understanding of political events in nominal terms, in which the symbols employed are divorced from a stabilizing context. This would tend to support Dean’s (2010) theory of symbolic inefficiency.

Texts categorized with method>legislation and consequence>persuasion or consequence>elections have a large amount of overlap with those data sets categorized with consequence>persuasion or consequence>elections alone. The same distinctions and ambiguities outlined above apply here as well. It is worth briefly highlighting the data sets of the conjunctions of these categories because they provide good illustrative examples of the permeable barrier between legislative tactics, ostensibly designed to bring about policy changes, and political messaging that seems to just lead to more of the same. The following example is from RedState.com, from September 24, 2013, a week before the shutdown:

After each step Cruz has made he has had the next step already in place. He is being accused of grandstanding, but this is beginning to strike me as a deliberate strategic plan.
1) Convince the House to pass a defunded CR

2) Filibuster passed CR unless there is an agreement to apply normal rules to amendments (60 votes to end debate on amendments)

3) Filibuster is overridden and cloture is voted on. Amended CR goes back to house.

4) Convince House to again strip funding and pass back to Senate

5) All the time raise public awareness of the ability to strip money from Obamacare

6) Once 41 Republican Senators can see this is a winning gameplan the amendment procedure in the Senate ends and only a defunded version gets sent back to the House (or Reid has to admit he is unwilling to pass this at all at which point you skip to step 9)

7) Obama gets the defunded version on his desk and has to decide whether to shut down the government or keep it open.

8) He vetoes the funding, shuts down the government and blames it on House Republicans

9) House passes individual bills funding each section of government one at a time (while government is shut down, and starting with most critical like military)

10) Reid and Obama must now defend keeping [_____] shutdown until Obamacare is fully funded.

The weakest points are steps 4 and 6. All he has to do is convince enough Republicans to back the plan and 9 & 10 will decide public opinion. Cruz has a winning plan, even though step 2 is assumed to fail.
* Update - step 9 may appear to hinge on the House leadership having a spine, and it does. However, if we get that far then the House has already developed a spine and will be able to play this out. The House leadership will pass or fail at step 4, not 9.

What starts out seeming like an effort to defund or delay the ACA gets lost in a muddle of tactics and ends up just being about embarrassing one’s political opponents. Politics only seems to result in more politics, and reading comments like these one begins to wonder if there really is no freestanding goal or value at work. These findings do suggest symbolic inefficiency. According to Dean’s (2010) analysis, when symbolic efficiency declines, the only purpose of language is enjoyment. Communication is undertaken for its own sake, with no instrumental goal beyond immediate pleasure.

**Method>electioneering subcategory**

To the extent that texts marked with this category were interesting or meaningful, it was due to the co-occurrence of other categories discussed elsewhere in this chapter. I could not find any patterns or themes relevant to symbolic inefficiency that pertained specifically to the *method>electioneering* category.

**Method>signification subcategory**

To the extent that texts marked with this category were interesting or meaningful, it was due to the co-occurrence of other categories discussed elsewhere in this chapter. I could not find any patterns or themes relevant to symbolic inefficiency that pertained specifically to the *method>signification* category.

**Operand categorizations**

In strategic descriptions, *operand* refers to the person, group, or institution that the strategy acts upon, either through the strategy’s *method* or as part of its *consequences*. *Operand* categorizations were included in this study design because operand is an important component of any strategy, and I felt it was important to be as objective as possible about the meanings that were in the data sample. I had hoped that some interesting patterns might emerge within these
categorizations, but in the end the operand categories turned out to be much less significant for my research than the consequence and method categories.

Operand>politicians subcategory

To the extent that texts marked with this category were interesting or meaningful, it was due to the co-occurrence of other categories discussed elsewhere in this chapter. I could not find any patterns or themes relevant to symbolic inefficiency that pertained specifically to the operand>politicians category.

Operand>media subcategory

As discussed above, there was a notable scarcity of descriptions of strategy that involved media. This is regrettable because blog participants’ views about media and the way they frame political events could have illuminated a feedback loop of activism and media representations, similar to what Gitlin (1980) described in his scholarship. Whether such feedback loops exists in the present-day political blogosphere, I did not find evidence in a review of texts marked with the operand>media category, nor could I detect themes or patterns that might indicate the presence of symbolic inefficiency.

Operand>public subcategory

To the extent that texts marked with this category were interesting or meaningful, it was due to the co-occurrence of other categories discussed elsewhere in this chapter. I could not find any patterns or themes relevant to symbolic inefficiency that pertained specifically to the operand>public category.
Chapter 5
Discussion

In the previous chapter, I described an important theme that emerged from a review of the data sample. In many cases, the consequences of the political strategies described in these texts were expressed in nominal, rather than instrumental, terms. This distinction was most apparent in texts marked with the consequence>legislation category, but similar themes were apparent in texts marked with the other consequence subcategories and the method subcategories. In the most overt examples, blog posts and comments describe the means and ends of political strategy using stark, irreducible, categorical terms; words like win, lose, fight, or surrender. More often, nominal descriptions of strategy included language specifying a legislative outcome, or a within-the-realm-of-plausibility means of attaining it, and yet either lacked detail or appeared in a context that strongly suggested a preoccupation with political symbols as a means and an end unto themselves.

Evidence of symbolic inefficiency

The presence of this nominal type of political discourse is strong evidence that the dynamic Dean (2010) describes as declining symbolic efficiency is at work in political blogs. In this chapter, I will make this analysis more explicit, explain what this conclusion means, and discuss a few of its implications. A further example from the data sample will aid the discussion. This comment was written in response to a RedState.com blog post from September 24, 2013:

Senator Cruz is awesome because he stands on principle regardless of the electoral outcome. He would be willing to lose reelection in order to send 2,000 pages of legislation and 10,000 pages of regulations into the dustbin of history. We need more representatives who actually represent us. More people who expect to have a private sector (not lobbyist bottom feeding) jobs after they have fulfilled their mission in D.C. You can see this because he is doing his best to filibuster even though a vote has been scheduled. Every tool he has he is using.
Ted Cruz truly is "one man with courage" and so D.C. is finally hearing from the majority.

When drawing a portrait, children and untrained adults will usually place the eyes too close to the top of the head. There’s a simple explanation for this: Our brains are wired to read faces, to recognize people we know and gauge their emotional state. The face is shown larger relative to the size of the head because it captures our attention. This study’s methodology is premised on a similar assumption regarding the written descriptions of political strategy posted on blogs. The participants in this discourse are attempting to describe things as they are, but they naturally tend to give greater detail, and provide more emphasis, for the things they find the most meaningful.

In the example above there are two significant things that are not stated explicitly but can be inferred from the text. The first is that this commenter has one or more reasons why he or she would like to see the Affordable Care Act blocked in its implementation or repealed. The phrase “dustbin of history” indicates a belief that, ultimately, the ACA is a terrible piece of legislation, and as time goes by more people will recognize that. The second thing left unstated, but which the commenter would likely agree with, is that the future electoral defeat of Ted Cruz and, at least potentially, other politicians who support his position, could impact the implementation of a conservative legislative agenda. To continue my metaphor, these implicit readings are the shrunken forehead of this commenter’s description of these events. It would be conspicuous if the comment somehow implied the opposite, but as it is these beliefs are given neither prominence nor detail, an afterthought if anything.

With regard to the first implicit point above, it is significant that this commenter chose not to describe what he sees as the negative impacts of the ACA. What better way to praise Ted Cruz and emphasize the importance of what he was doing than to mention, however perfunctorily, that the ACA was going to harm people in some way? Instead of talking about its effects, this commenter chose to emphasize a property of the law itself, its page count. Of course, I am not suggesting the commenter meant to convey a type of green-eggs-and-ham disdain for things that are 2,000 pages long, on the surface of the moon or anywhere else, regardless of context. It’s likely that what this commenter really meant by this is that the law is very complex, and if prompted he or she would probably have something to say about the size and scope of
government. Nonetheless, there is a profound stasis to criticizing the ACA in this way. The law is bad, not because of what it does, but because of what it is.

This observation is compounded when we turn our attention to the means by which Ted Cruz is fighting the ACA. The commenter writes, “You can see this because he is doing his best to filibuster even though a vote has been scheduled.” Of course, the fact that the vote was already scheduled meant that Cruz’s filibuster – ostensibly an attempt to prevent Senate Democrats from stripping language defunding the ACA from the House-passed bill – had no chance at all of succeeding. This is something the commenter was implicitly acknowledging. If the earlier criticism of the ACA had been framed in instrumental terms, if the commenter had specified the negative effects of the implementation of the ACA, this failure would be much more difficult to reconcile, and this contradiction would be more apparent in the comment. Instead, the concept of the ACA as a symbol is flattened, abstracted from the (perceived) consequences of the law itself, becoming merely a symbol-as-such, a totem representing things about the world that this commenter dislikes. Framing opposition to the ACA as a nominal object, the logic of Ted Cruz’s filibuster – nominal opposition – starts to seem much more straightforward. The ACA is bad; Ted Cruz is opposed to the ACA; therefore, Ted Cruz is good.

This is what symbolic inefficiency looks like in the context of political discussion. Earlier in this thesis, pursuant to Dean’s (2010) definition, I described symbolic inefficiency as a reduced consistency of a symbol’s meaning when it appears in different settings. In the example above, it’s hard to know exactly what the symbol of the ACA has come to mean to this individual commenter, and it’s probably not a good idea to attempt to analyze someone’s psychology based on a few paragraphs of text. What is clear is that the concept has been alienated from any instrumental context, and as such the likeliest explanation is that the commenter engages with this symbol for the enjoyment it provides.

This inference is consistent with the analysis of both Dean (2010) and Rosenblum (2008). In describing the function of partisanship in democracies, Rosenblum explains that party ID is an expressive identity, similar to an ethnicity. Partisans help create narratives that transcend the divisiveness of instrumental goals, and by identifying with a political party they come to feel that they have a personal stake in the party’s victories and defeats. This is what Rosenblum describes as identity politics.
Symbolic inefficiency and identity politics

Looked at another way, it is precisely through the elision of policy details and divisive instrumental goals that unity and coherence is achieved in political coalitions. Some degree of symbolic inefficiency is required to make this work. Additionally, the enhanced participation that identity politics fosters works by making politics exciting and enjoyable. The shape of this analysis fits very well with Dean’s (2010) discussion of symbolic inefficiency. In her analysis, declining symbolic inefficiency coincides with the collapse of the Other, a Lacanian term for the symbolic order in which we constitute ourselves as subjects. In these circumstances, the motivating force is not desire, but drive. The difference is that, while desire attaches itself to an object, something that may have been possessed once and then lost, the object of drive is the loss itself, and behaviors motivated by drive reenact this loss. The key to this ambivalence is identity. Subjective identification is a form of alienation from wholeness, a loss. The drive to exist, to be someone or something, to not disappear, reenacts this loss. The ego experiences the pain of this loss as pleasure, because it is ego-reinforcing.

Dean (2010), drawing on the work of Žižek, argues that in the modern networked media environment, the loss that drive reenacts is the loss of symbolic efficiency itself. We derive pleasure from expressive communication in a networked environment, reinforcing our belief in our unique, irreducible identity. At the same time, our very participation in these networks, our attempt to ground our subjectivity in a symbolic order that is crumbling, only reinforces the uncertainty.

It is very difficult to find empirical support for all of the intricacies of these dynamics in the data sample. Nonetheless, I think there are striking parallels between Dean’s (2010) analysis and Rosenblum’s (2008) analysis of identity politics, and that the structure of these analyses are consistent with much of what was observed in the data sample. It’s easy to read these themes in the example provided earlier in this chapter. When the commenter writes, “We need more representatives who actually represent us,” it seems to be an expression of tension within the framework of Rosenblum’s identity politics. Within the context of the rest of the comment, which is to say the commenter’s preoccupation with nominal political symbols that eclipse instrumental goals, it’s likely that “represent” in this context is meant not as a desire for politicians to better represent their constituent’s interests, but to represent their identities as
conservatives. The last sentence reinforces the interpretation of identity politics – writing “...D.C. is finally hearing from the majority,” the commenter appears to be saying that what really matters, more than any instrumental goal, is recognition of and respect for a conservative political identity, at least as this commenter understands it.

This discussion of identity politics is a good time to re-examine some of the other findings from this study. In the last chapter, I explained that many texts mentioned legislative outcomes, or means of attaining those outcomes, but in a context that implied that the commenter’s real goal was to disparage the opposing political party, or members of that party. One such example is below, taken from a DailyKos.com post published on October 1, 2013:

They're not true anarchists...Some time ago, I used anarchists to imply behavior similar to an anarchist. Another member of the forum explained that anarchists want to abolish government because they do not want to be lead. Anarchists have no leaders.

The House Republicans appear to want to have leadership by allowing Cruz to fill the void of the hollow orange man. They just don't like the leader, Obama, we elected over their leader they wanted, Romney.

So, they're not anarchists but are certainly seditionists, causing disruption, rebellion

Their seditious acts consist of non-participation in the government. Avoiding any semblance of assisting or furthering any good the government might do.

AND, of course, shutting down the government.
So, the logo you seek should center around 'sedition'. I found one on the cover a book by Thomas Abrahams that seems appropriate:5

This example appears to fall closer to the nominal end of the spectrum. It includes descriptions of what the commenter believes House Republicans want, and want they are doing to achieve those goals, however these descriptions are clearly framed as a disparagement of Republicans. In fact, one could even argue this isn’t really a description of strategy at all. Pursuant to Rosenblum’s (2008) description of identity politics, a more likely interpretation is that this commenter is simply engaging in community-building dialogue. Rosenblum explains that one of the virtues of partisan identification is that a partisan necessarily identifies as only part of a whole; thus, an acceptance of pluralism is an essential part of partisanship.

Of course, this study’s methodology was designed to filter out this kind of community-building discourse. By focusing on descriptions of political strategy, the aim was to narrow the data sample to texts that could reveal how participants conceived of political efficacy. One might argue that the comment above is simple an example of someone establishing rapport with his or her peers, and was only included among the texts that discuss political strategy because of ostensible, rather than meaningful, similarities.

However, the vagueness and permeability of this distinction is precisely the point, and is one of the reasons symbolic inefficiency could be such a pernicious factor in political discourse. There is no clear or apparent distinction that can be made between engaging with political symbols as part of instrumental goals and using them as markers of shared identity. In a setting of reduced symbolic efficiency, any symbol can be recruited – nominalized, decontextualized, disassociated from action and consequence. In the next section I will discuss this further.

**The plasticity of inefficient political symbols**

While many of the texts analyzed for this study were relatively easy to classify as nominal or instrumental, most of them were not. As detailed in the previous chapter, many of these difficult-to-classify texts contained specifics about political goals and the means to achieve them, but in a

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5 There is limited value in reproducing the image that followed this text, but it showed a tea bag with a paper label decorated with an American flag pattern, under a title that read “Sedition.”
context that hinted that the true motivating desiderata might be nominal instead. It is revealing to take a closer look at some of the texts from the data sample coded with consequence\textgreater legislation, where we would expect to see discussion about the ultimate outputs of the political system. Often, we see statements like this instead:

Let me explain to you why I do not support the Vitter Amendment and we should oppose it.

Way back in 2010, David Vitter “submitted an amendment intended to be proposed by him to the bill H.R. 4872”. It was the original form of what he offers now. But there was one big difference. Back in 2010, Vitter had this provision in his amendment:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, a Member of Congress may not receive health care or medical treatment at any military medical treatment facility or at the Office of the Attending Physician.

In other words, back in 2010, Vitter’s amendment would have prevented Congress from using military physicians or setting up their own doctor’s office in the bowels of the Capitol. But the revised Vitter amendment at play now has removed that. Without that prohibition, Congress can simply jack up staff pay and create their own private hospital, which they assuredly will do.

This is excerpted from an October 1, 2013 blog post by Erick Erickson, editor of RedState.com. He is explaining why he opposes settling for the Vitter amendment as a concession from Democrats in exchange for reopening the government. At issue are employer-provided subsidies for Congressional representatives and their staffs to purchase health insurance on exchanges established by the Affordable Care Act. A provision of the ACA requires all Congressional employees to purchase their insurance on an exchange, in spite of the fact that their employer – the federal government – had previously offered insurance as part of a compensation package. The Office of Personnel Management determined that, the letter of the law notwithstanding,
Congressional employees should continue to receive their employer contribution for purchasing health insurance, because to do otherwise would be to effectively give them a large pay cut, and this was not the intention of the law. This, along with the one year delay of the so-called “employer mandate,” is what conservatives are usually referring to when they talk about “exemptions” and “carve outs” to the ACA.

On its face, Erickson’s comments are about the legislative changes he would and would not like to see, and he explains these preferences in terms of the consequences he expects to result from them. However, this interpretation doesn’t really explain his motivations. What is it about depriving Congressional employees of these health insurance subsidies that makes it a desirable goal for Erickson? These employer-provided subsidies have been in place for decades, but as far as I know no one ever objected to them as a matter of conservative ideology until they became associated, however timorously, with the ACA. What possible reason could Erickson have for being concerned that Congress will simply raise the pay of its employees to compensate? He doesn’t appear to feel the need to say anything at all about the purpose of denying these subsidies, as the moral outrage over Obamacare “exemptions” seems to have become an article of faith in the RedState.com community. Several comments quoted in the previous chapter talked about this issue. Another example serves as a useful illustration, also from RedState.com on October 1, 2013:

The thing that is supposed to check Obama's "power" to alter the implementation of ObamaCare in ways the law doesn't specify is the balance of powers between the branches of government - in this case, Congress. What would normally happen is that Congress would vote to "de-fund" whatever action the executive branch had taken. They don't generally do that when the action was popular (i.e. delaying the business mandate for a year). But the effort to defund Obama's illegal waiver to Congressional staff to keep them from having to go into the exchanges for coverage might be successful.

Of course, this commenter is confused about what the “exemptions” at issue are really for. Leaving that aside, this comment and the many others like it are fascinating because of what they
reveal about political participants’ motivations. There’s no sign of concern about an instrumental goal. An individual who is probably very sincere in his dislike for the Affordable Care Act says nothing at all about his feelings concerning the impact of that law, with or without the change in its implementation. Instead, the focus is on asserting that what Obama did was illegal, and suggesting that this might be an opportunity to defeat him.

The explanation is that, while these texts appear to discuss strategy, they are actually expressions of outrage. It’s a performance of opposition to what is perceived as the agenda of the Democratic party. The next paragraph in Erickson’s blog post makes this interpretation even more clear:

Conservatives should demand the House fight. A clean CR, the Vitter amendment, and the medical device tax are what surrender looks like. They’ve gone over the edge. Now they need to fight.

What’s fascinating is that, even though these goals are not instrumental, they don’t appear at first to be nominal. For the most part, participants in both RedState.com and DailyKos.com are very well informed about current events and public policy. However, often it is clear that this detailed knowledge has been separated from a context that could give it meaning. The Master signifier has been removed, symbolic efficiency reduced. If an individual or a group or a political movement derives enjoyment or satisfaction from re-defining the elimination of employer health insurance subsidies – subsidies that go to liberal and conservative lawmakers and staff alike – as a victory for conservatism and a defeat for liberalism, then the obstacles to doing so are lessened. In this particular example, opposition is likely the result of an accident of signification as much as anything else – the use of the word “exemption” to describe what is, when looked at in the context of the consequences of the policy, essentially a continuation of a status quo that has existed for many decades. Separated from this context, the word “exemption” can be reinterpreted as representing corruption, cronyism, and disregard for the rule of law.

In Rosenblum’s (2008) identity politics, the critical factor is not what one believes, but that one believes. The belief becomes a marker of identity and community. This is the essence of the critical shift brought about by symbolic inefficiency. The focus is no longer on the meaning of a symbol, but rather the mere fact of its existence, as a source of enjoyment. Thinking and communicating in this setting, the important thing is not what someone does, but what one is. There is a shift from the self as a subject desiring external objects, to the self as an object itself,
the object of Lacanian drive. This also speaks to the essence of Dean’s (2010) *whatever beings*; beings-as-such, communicating for the sake of communicating, belonging for the sake of belonging. Writing of the alienation of people from language, Dean remarks, “Failure to communicate provides its own satisfaction, the enjoyment of language itself.”

In our setting, democratic deliberation, the enjoyment comes from self-definition through the appropriation of signs and symbols. Participants in this discourse are granted a wide degree of latitude, due to symbolic inefficiency, to define themselves and their movement however they choose. But with this extreme freedom comes a loss of significance. If being a Democrat or a Republican means more than being a goth or a hipster, it is only to the extent that the symbols appropriated have a fixed, externally verifiable meaning. I have shown how, in the context of the institutional analysis of democracies, the essential meaning of policy choices as political symbols lies in their consequences. At the ground level, of course, the political system continues to operate, and consequences are unavoidable. What makes the decline of symbolic efficiency so potentially damaging is the arbitrary way political symbols are used. Dean (2010) talks about this in terms of the *plasticity* of psychological drive, the way a blind force with no goal beyond its own propagation adapts itself to circumstance and attaches itself to objects without respect to their real meaning or value. In a political context, this means that individuals and movements can attach themselves to policy choices that make no sense as instrumental goals, or even run counter to stated interests. It can be tempting to ascribe this to insincerity in the form of hypocrisy, or to simple ignorance. However, the participants in both of the blogs analyzed for this study are, by any reasonable standard, very well informed, and I found no evidence that would cast doubt on the sincerity of the beliefs held by adherents to political movements on the right or the left. The problem is rather that declining symbolic efficiency has made it harder to describe or comprehend the problems that impact our lives.

It is undeniably true that identity politics, as Rosenblum (2008) describes it, is necessary for the functioning of large-scale democracies. Additionally, Benkler (2006) and other exponents of networked communication’s role in democratic deliberation doubtlessly have it right that these technological affordances have given individuals greater freedom to define political agendas, and have empowered them to organize and more effectively influence the government to implement these agendas. If we value democracy as an institution because it empowers individuals, then this is all great. However, if we instead value democratic institutions because of the consequences
they produce, then there is at least cause for concern, if not alarm, at the effects of symbolic inefficiency.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to find evidence for symbolic inefficiency in U.S. political discourse, focusing on blogs as an example of participatory, networked media in order to gain insight into how online affordances may shape the way we use political symbols. One of the important themes that emerged from my literature review – particularly in the work of Gitlin (1980), Postman (1985), and Dean (2010) – is the decontextualizing effects that new media technologies and practices can have on information. Anything can be context, of course, and this ambiguity might be part of the reason we fail to notice the erosion of the Master signifier, as Dean describes it. The normative context for democratic discourse, however, is less ambiguous. Guided by Knight and Johnson's (2011) pragmatic justification for democratic institutions, I focused on the consequences of political decisions as the crucial context that makes democratic political symbols meaningful. I designed the system of categories used in my content analysis with this in mind: By focusing on statements about political strategy, I was able to make inferences about the kinds of consequences blog participants expect from the political system.

Applying the categories to an analysis of the sampled blog texts revealed a pattern of discourse that used political symbols as nominal objects, as if they possessed value in-and-of themselves. This discourse closely resembles the “whatever” or “now, this” form of communication (or anti-communication) of Dean (2010) and Postman (1985). My analysis in the previous chapter finds this type of nominal discourse to be evidence of symbolic inefficiency.

One limitation of this study is the difficulty of reliably distinguishing symbolic inefficiency from identity politics, as described by Rosenblum (2008), which is in many ways beneficial to the functioning of democratic institutions. Although in one sense these are competing explanations for observed phenomena, I think it is helpful to think of them as complementary analyses. The underlying structures of each are similar – identities formed through group belonging, strengthened paradoxically through the relative lack of an instrumental context or goal. The more important conflict, I think, lies in the interpretation of the theories of Knight and Johnson (2011) that underpin this study’s methodology. After all, if identity politics reigns supreme, if symbolic inefficiency doesn’t matter, if we do not value democratic institutions for the real-world consequences they produce, then what’s the point of any of it?
The purpose of my research was to find empirical evidence for symbolic inefficiency, and in this I believe the methodology I developed has proven its worth. My conclusions are strongest in pointing to the existence of symbolic inefficiency. I personally believe this is a very important and influential factor in U.S. politics, and that some of my research findings support this conclusion. However, it is more difficult to accurately or reliably assess the degree of symbolic inefficiency in a given discourse setting. This will be a critical question for further research.

Looked at one way, symbols function as symbols because they are not perfectly efficient. Because symbols are not rigidly tied to a particular object at a particular moment in time, they can refer to classes of objects. Symbols are useful for structuring knowledge only because their efficiency falls somewhere between two extremes – perfectly efficient or perfectly inefficient. When Dean (2010) writes about declining symbolic inefficiency, she is not making a categorical description, but rather a normative evaluation: Symbols are losing efficiency to such a degree that it interferes with peoples’ ability to communicate and comprehend. In my research I focused on the effects of symbolic inefficiency in a much narrower context, drawing upon Knight and Johnson’s (2011) analysis – which identifies pragmatism as an essential democratic virtue – in order to make some normative claims about the adverse effects symbolic inefficiency can have on democratic deliberation. However, as alluded to above, the validity of these claims is tempered by an inability to assess the extent or degree of symbolic inefficiency.

Important questions for future research might include: Is declining symbolic efficiency more prevalent in certain communications media than in others? Has this changed over time, and what is the direction and rate of change? Does decreased symbolic efficiency in political discourse correlate across time and geography with changes in economic or social well being, or with other measures of democratic efficacy? The question of whether or not my findings would pertain to other legislative systems or other cultures is an interesting one, although again at this time it is difficult to answer with confidence. Given that the analyses upon which my work relies – particularly Dean (2010), Postman (1985), and Gitlin (1980) – each emphasize the role of technology in fostering these changes in communication, identity, and relation to the world, I personally would not be surprised at all to find that similar conditions pertain in Canada or Europe, for example. Answering these questions is important in part because if symbolic inefficiency is shown to have wide ranging and far reaching effects, as I suspect it might, then
this could complicate analyses that emphasize the beneficial effects of online access and participation on democratic discourse.

It could be illuminating to investigate symbolic inefficiency in settings where we might not expect to see its effects. For example, I would hypothesize that the use of networked communication tools by dedicated political activists (in the usual sense of the word, not the “activists” of this thesis’ categorization scheme) would reveal much less symbolic inefficiency. This makes sense in light of Rosenblum’s (2008) explanation of identity politics: Activists for a particular cause do not meet this definition. Their political identity is pre-existing and closely wedded to instrumental goals. The office I work in provides another example. Poor communication and the loss of organizational knowledge have been a longstanding problem; presently I am engaged with trying to convince my managers to let my department use blogging tools to build a knowledge base on a network model – posts organized non-hierarchically with tags. Again, I think the crucial difference between this and national political blogs is the prominence of an instrumental goal – the work we do every day. I expect this to keep our communication grounded in the consequential.

I believe that the analytical methods used in this thesis have demonstrated their value in detecting reduced symbolic efficiency in the context of democratic discourse. This is an important first step, but it is a very small one. I believe that the methodology I have used here could be adapted to answer some of the questions posed above. However, in being adapted, it would need to be much more sophisticated.

This research could also be important to critical inquiry into other areas of information and communication studies, particularly areas that deal with identity and the way it shapes, and is shaped by, media environments that entice participation through the promise of unhindered, unbounded self expression. A study by Adriane Brown and Mary E. Thomas (2014), on the MySpace profiles of lesbian and queer teenage girls, provides an interesting example. Brown and Thomas did not look at symbolic inefficiency explicitly, but there are parallels between their study and this one. The authors are skeptical of recognition theory and underlying assumptions that subjects posses an authentic, essential, and pre-existing self that finds expression through social media tools. They are able to reach normative conclusions about the beliefs and motivations that underlie communicative behavior by developing an analytic framework based
on the context of the girls’ agency, the limits of that agency set in a symbolic order dominated by neoliberalism and postfeminism, and the psychological seduction of online participation and recognition.

Brown and Thomas’s (2014) most striking findings concerned explicit statements their study subjects made about their online selves and their motivations for participating on MySpace, statements which were convincingly contradicted by the context of participation. To me, this is a reminder that symbolic inefficiency is most destructive when it is the self-symbol that declines in efficiency, and it suggests that symbolic inefficiency could be useful for understanding many other participatory constructions of subjectivity. The methodology would have to be significantly adapted, however, and each new setting of inquiry would doubtless introduce new conceptual and analytical problems. Symbolic inefficiency is pernicious in part because it is so difficult to detect. For those who extol the benefits of participatory networked communication, however, the task is no less urgent.

When I consider the U.S. political landscape in light of my findings, I see a system profoundly influenced by chaos and randomness. Dean’s (2010) use of the term “acephalic,” or headless, is an apt metaphor for the blind convulsions of this thing, which we reassuringly imagine merely reflects the ideas and preferences of human beings, misguided though they may be. I do not want to overstate my case: One thing that I have learned from years of following national politics is that it is a very complex system which cannot be determined by any one factor or dynamic, and that common sense prevails far too often to allow one to become truly cynical. However, we have also seen in the last decade and a half many, many lives pointlessly ruined or destroyed. One need look no further than the invasion of Iraq or the 2008 recession, although one easily could. In contemplating these tragedies, I think too often we are blinded not only by our own ideologies, but also by their grotesque mirror reflections: what we imagine to be the ideologies of our opponents.

The reason it is interesting to study symbolic inefficiency in a political setting is that legislative systems often process political symbols differently from media systems that trade them as commodities. Symbols used in someone’s emotionally satisfying rant can become tremendously destructive when, propelled by feedback loops of ever-more-participatory democracy, they find their way into legislation or agency policy. Of course, this thesis is about more than politics and
communication. It’s also about the theories that scholars use to understand these phenomena, and some of the consequences of those theories. In keeping with the theme of reflexivity, even my own beliefs and perceptions were swept unavoidably into the analysis. If there are deeper applications for this understanding, I leave that for my readers to determine for themselves. What I can say I have learned is that an important part of the value of critical insight is the opportunity it provides to focus on things that truly matter.
References


