

# Information in Political Life, 2

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**Concepts of Information i218**  
**Geoff Nunberg**

**March 14, 2010**



# Agenda

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The internet: does it equal the informational playing field?

The transmission of information; the idea of the "meme"

Diffusion of political ideas and symbols



# The role of symbols



The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is not an Hegelian mystery... but an art well known to leaders, politicians, and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas.

## *Phantom Public*

The question of a proper fare on a municipal subway is symbolized as an issue between the People and the Interests, and then the People is inserted in the symbol American, so that finally in the heat of a campaign, an eight cent fare becomes un-American. The Revolutionary fathers died to prevent it. Lincoln suffered that it might not come to pass, resistance to it was implied in the death of those who sleep in France.



## The role of symbols



"When political parties or newspapers declare for Americanism Progressivism, Law and Order, Justice, Humanity, they hope to amalgamate the emotion of conflicting factions which would surely divide, if, instead of these symbols, they were invited to discuss a specific program. For when a coalition around the symbol has been effected, feeling flows toward conformity under the symbol rather than toward critical scrutiny of the measures." PO

[symbols] do not stand for specific ideas, but for a sort of truce or junction between ideas.



# Modern Symbolic Politics

## Varieties of “symbols”:

the flag, \$600 ashtrays, personal peccadillos, Terry Schiavo, bad bowling, the “War on Christmas,” the Ten Commandments monument, etc.

## “Symbol words”:

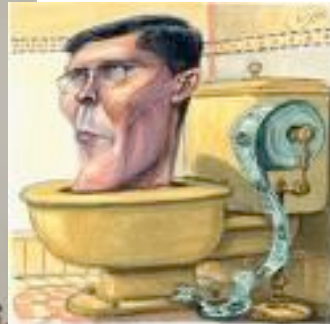
*values, tradition, freedom (economic, of contract, of choice, etc.) ownership, patriotism, government, choice, color-blind, preference, tradition...*

**appeasement:** “The policy of granting concessions to potential enemies to maintain peace.” Cf similar definitions of *palliation* or *placate*, *propitiate*, etc.

cf Richard Rorty on our “final vocabulary”: “All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes.



## Modern Symbolic Politics, 2



Lincoln Tax Freedom  
Tea Party  
4.11.09



## When are ISC's not Rational?

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How to distinguish "symbolic" and "substantive" issues?

What are the "rational" ends of political choices – particularly if voting is not a "rational" way of influencing outcomes?

Accounting for selective attention and selective belief

Why would rational voters listen to political talk radio?



# **Political Discourse Online**

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# Claims about online political discourse

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## **The internet**

Broadens access to information

Broadens the opportunity to speak.

Increases the number of information sources, bypassing media "gatekeepers" or official censors.

Offers information about a wider range of topics, and more information and opinion on any given topic.

Provides more reliable ways of checking or interpreting information, and gives citizens more opportunity to verify information



# Claims about online political discourse

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## **The internet**

Restricts the exchange of information and opinion to a more closed, like-minded group (silo effect)

Exposes people to more information that is misleading, inaccurate, extreme, inflammatory, etc.;

Eliminates the guidance that the traditional media provided.

Widens the divisions between the informed and ill-informed sectors of the public.



# Polarization of Political Discourse



# Polarization and the "Siloing" of Political Discourse



Online discourse facilitates "siloing" of political discourse...  
But siloing has independent offline roots



Polarization of political language on the Internet mirrors polarization of elite/activist views and the increasing importance of elective associations (geographical, occupational)

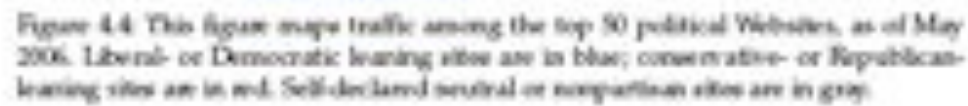


# Ruptured Discourses



Figure 1: Community structure of political blogs (expanded set), shown using utilizing a GEM layout [11] in the GUESS[3] visualization and analysis tool. The colors reflect political orientation, red for conservative, and blue for liberal. Orange links go from liberal to conservative, and purple ones from conservative to liberal. The size of each blog reflects the number of other blogs that link to it.

Lada Adamic & Nathalie Glance, 2005, "Divided They Blog"





# Ruptured Discourses

**Table 3.2**  
**Links to Allies and Adversaries, 2006**

<i>Political orientation</i>	<i>Links to opposition</i>	<i>No links to opposition</i>	<i>Links to like-minded sites</i>	<i>No links to like-minded sites</i>	<i>Total sites</i>
Republican	3	7	7	3	10
Democrats	5	5	5	5	10
Conservative	3	13	16	0	14
Liberal	6	8	13	1	14
All	17	32	41	9	50

From Cass Sunstein, Republic.com 2.0



## Polarization by gender?

Rank	Blog	Male readership (%)
1.	<i>DailyKos.com</i>	47%
2.	Instapundit	59 %
3.	<i>Eschaton (Atrios)</i>	52%
4.	Michelle Malkin	57 %
5.	<i>Crooks and liars</i>	32%
6.	Little Green Footballs	89%
7.	Powerline	74%
8.	RedState.org	68%
9.	<i>Wonkette</i>	46%
10.	Andrew Sullivan	53%
11.	<i>Kevin Drum</i>	55%
12.	Hugh Hewitt	80%





## Distribution by age

Rank	Blog	18-34	35-44	45-54	55+
1.	Daily Kos.com	34%	13%	29%	24%
2.	Instapundit	29%	22%	30%	29%
3.	Eschaton (Atrios)	26%	29%	37%	14%
4.	Michelle Malkin	19%	29%	19%	33%
5.	Crooks and liars	29%	16%	30%	26%
6.	Little Green Footballs	26%	22%	30%	32%
7.	Powerline	21%	16%	24%	40%
8.	EndState.org	29%	26%	26%	20%
9.	Wordkette	28%	19%	47%	12%
10.	Andrew Sullivan	31%	34%	12%	13%
11.	Kevin Drum	22%	24%	23%	30%
12.	Hugh Hewitt	31%	23%	29%	21%
Average		27%	23%	29%	25%

Table 4.2: The table presents Hitwise data on the age of visitors to prominent political blogs, as of October 2005. Because of rounding, each row may not add up to exactly 100 percent. The central finding here is that blogger readership is not just limited to the young. On average, half of the readership to these blogs comes from those 45 and older.



# **Participation in online political discourse**

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# Participation in online political discourse

Does the net level the informational playing field?

Initially, those with access \tend to be younger, college-educated, male, white...

Curves of access are flattening...

But among those w/access, older users are more likely to

	Millennials Ages 18-33	Gen X Ages 34-45	Younger Boomers Ages 46-55	Older Boomers Ages 56-64	Silent Gen. Ages 65-73	G.I. Gen. Age 74+	All online adults Age 18+
% who go online	95	86	81	76	58	30	79

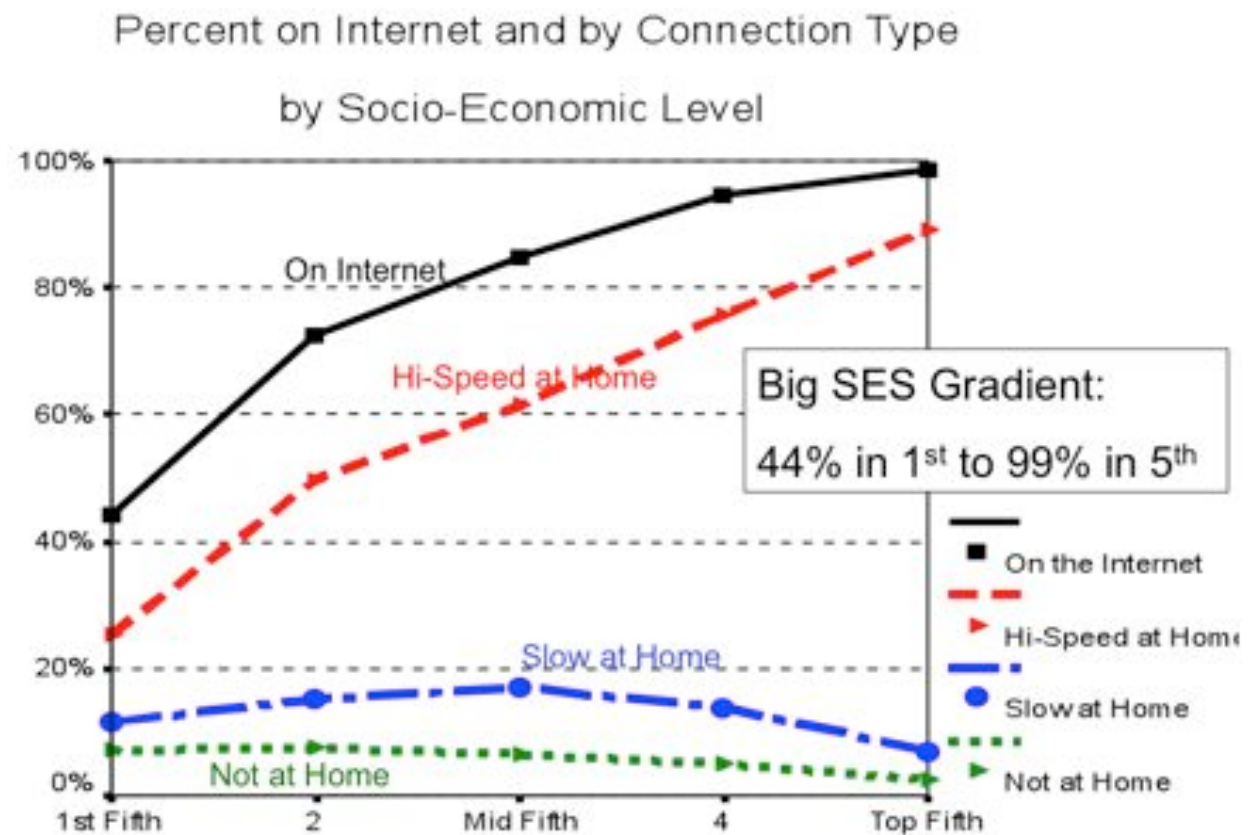
(Pew report "Generations 2010)

Note: total use is still far smaller than for other media.

But how much does access/daily use predict political engagement?



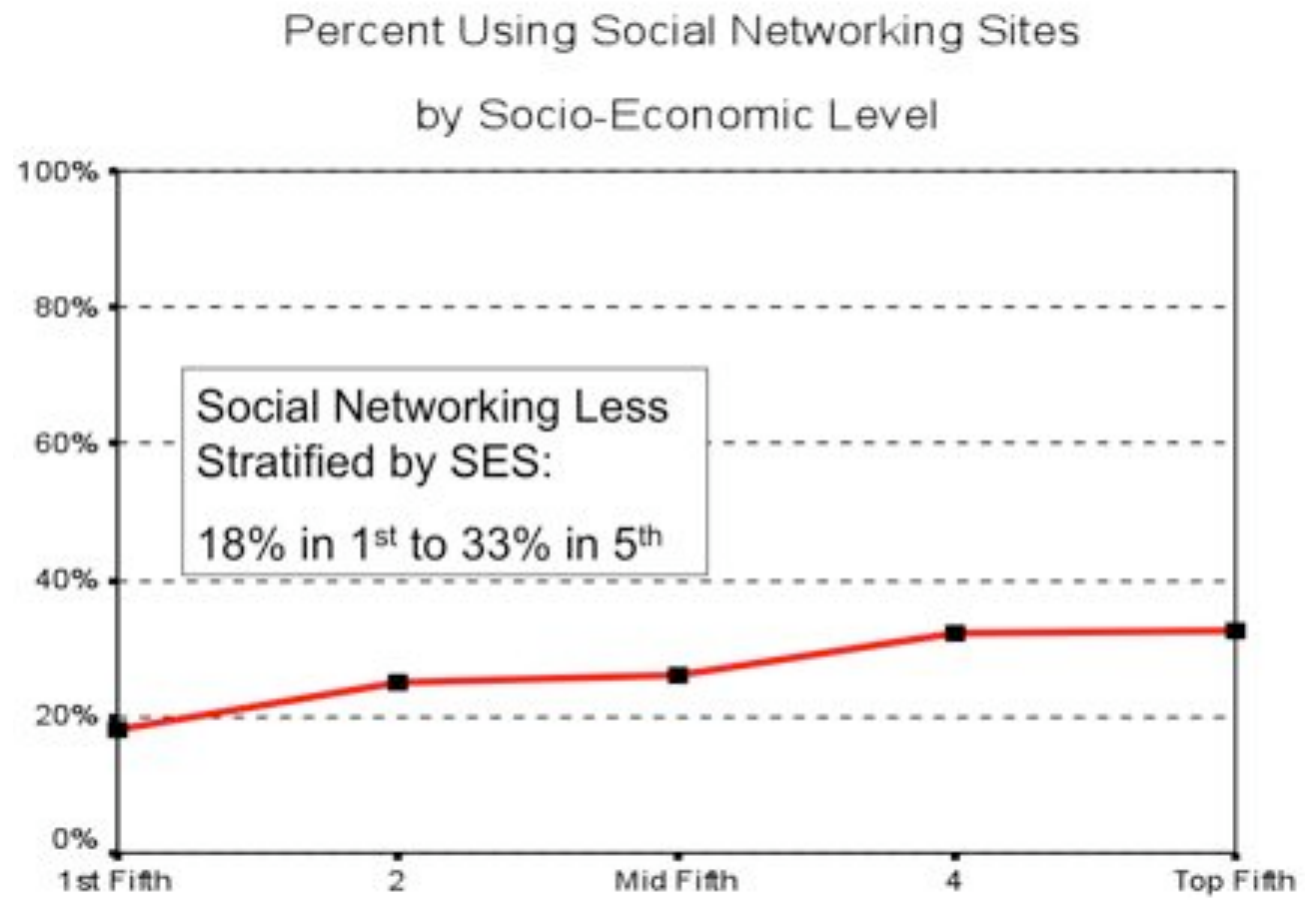
# Political Participation Online



Courtesy of Henry Brady

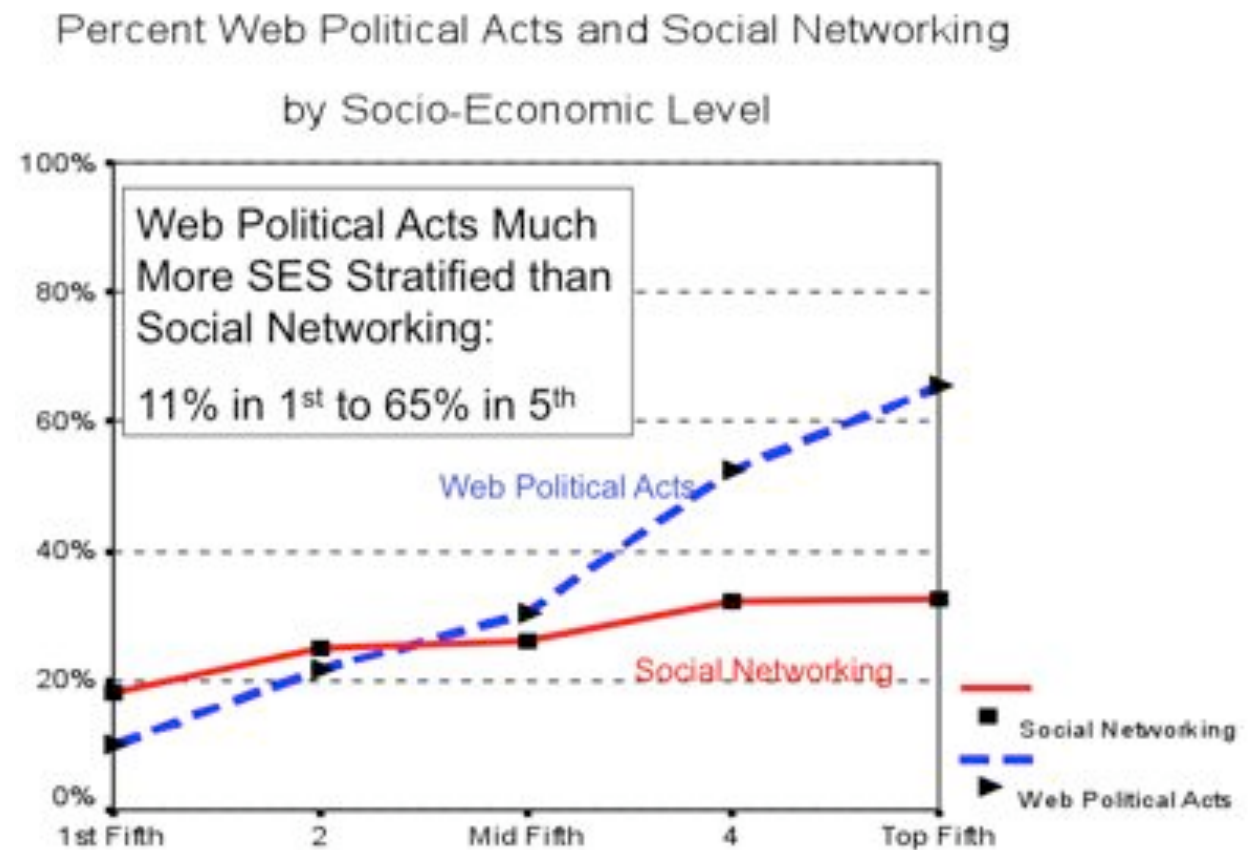


# Political Participation Online





# Political Participation Online



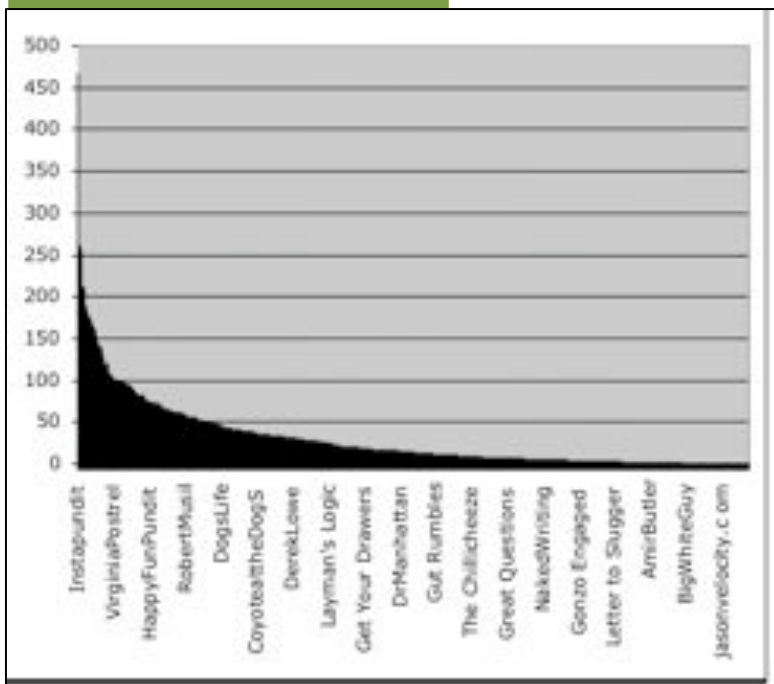


# Political Participation Online

"Winner take all" effects: Zipf's Law distributions

(note: Most influential bloggers are journalists etc.)

Internet doesn't level political participation or access to political information within society...





# Political Participation Online

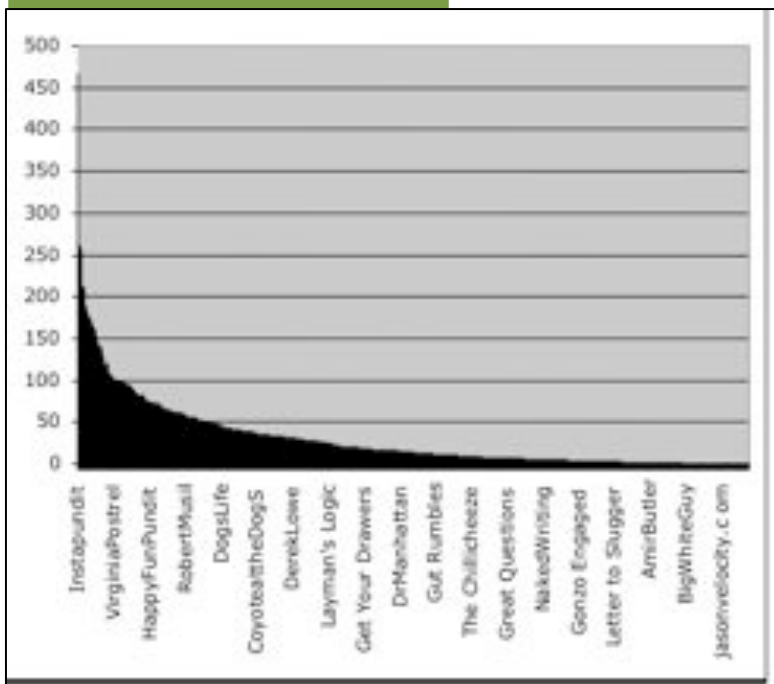
"Winner take all" effects: Zipf's Law distributions

(note: Most influential bloggers are journalists etc.)

Internet doesn't level political participation or access to political information within society...

But it may broaden participation & information flow among political classes...

And does facilitate lateral connections & organization







# The diffusion of (political) information

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How do new technologies affect the diffusion of information?





# Meme fever

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Memetics as a "new science of culture"

A response to sociobiology:

..my fellow-enthusiasts [Darwinians]... have tried to look for 'biological advantages' in various attributes of human civilization. For instance, tribal religion has been seen as a mechanism for solidifying group identity, valuable for a pack-hunting species whose individuals .... Frequently the evolutionary preconception in terms of which such theories are framed is implicitly group-selectionist, but it is possible to rephrase the theories in terms of orthodox gene selection... [But these theories] do not begin to square up to the formidable challenge of explaining culture, cultural evolution, and the immense differences between human cultures around the world... Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*



# Meme fever

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Darwinian/selectional models of cultural change

Memes as "bits of culture"

Memes replicate by (inducing) imitation/mimicry

Memes spread because its "good for them" not us

*The meme is not the dancer but the dance. We are their vehicles and their enablers. Gleick*

Cf memes that don't (seem to) benefit us

"patent medicines and psychic surgery, astrology and satanism, racist myths, superstitions..." Gleick

*Koslow's question: When I know that, what else do I know?*



## Meme fever

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When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this isn't just a way of talking—the meme for, say, "belief in life after death" is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over.'

The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal. It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence...

Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*



# the perfect meme

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## Chain letters:

Replication is almost perfect (unlike most memoids)

Letter coerces its replication (some better than others)

No apparent benefit to carrier



## imperfect memes

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### Chain letters:

Replication is perfect (unlike most memoids)

Letter coerces its replication (some better than others)

No apparent benefit to carrier

### But most other cases don't follow this pattern.

Memes change (but don't randomly mutate) and blend:

Nature cannot make a new mammalian species by mixing 20 per cent dugong with 30 per cent rat and 50 per cent armadillo. But cultural change works largely by an opposite process of joining, or interconnection of lineages. Steven Jay Gould



# What are(n't) memes?

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## Memes as "bits of culture"

Gleick: ideas, catchphrases, images, tunes...

Dennett: language, the arch, wearing clothes, vendetta, alphabet, the Odyssey, calculus, evolution by natural selection, Greensleeves, "read my lips," teaching assistants, TV advertising, anti-semitism...

## Issues: What are the "natural units" of selection here?

'are the smallest elements that replicate themselves with reliability and fecundity' Dennett

Some seem too fine, others too coarse, others not "units" at all ("the founding memes for language," the meme for "faith")

A circular argument? -- 'Memes spread because they are infectious.'



## Resistance to memetics

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The study of memes has attracted researchers from fields as far apart as computer science and microbiology. Gleick

One source of resistance...was the shoving of us humans toward the wings. ...No one likes to be called a puppet. Gleick

I don't know about you, but I am not initially attracted by the idea of my brain as a sort of dung heap in which the larvae of other people's ideas renew themselves, before sending out copies of themselves in an informational diaspora. Dennett

I think that what happened to the meme meme is quite obvious: "humanist" minds have set up a particularly aggressive set of filters against memes coming from "sociobiology." ... this almost guaranteed rejection of whatever this interloper had to say about culture-not for good reasons, but just in a sort of immunological rejection. Dennett





# Memes as "culture"

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## Confusion about "culture"

In 1976 I coined the word meme... for these self-replicating units of *culture* that have a life of their own. Since then, like any good meme, it has infected the *culture*. Dawkins

La culture, c'est ce qui reste dans l'esprit quand on a tout oublié. Edouard Herriot (?)

(Cf Renan "the essential element of a nation is that all its individuals must ...must have forgotten many things.")

"Culture" explains infectiousness...

"culture comes from culture" – Franz Boas



# **"memes" without Darwin**

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## "memes" without Darwin



In popular usage: **meme**: an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture."

But cf

"club soda is good for removing wine stains"

"the Giants could use another fifth starter"

Gore-Tex



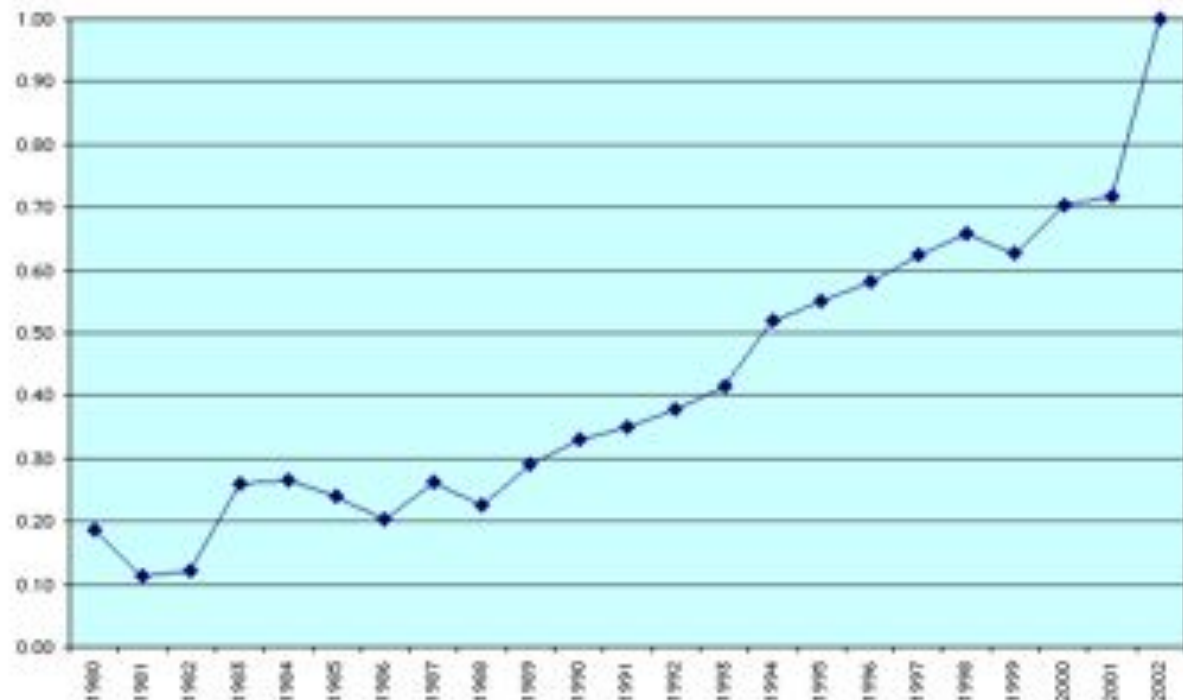
The \_\_\_\_ from hell  
Not your father's \_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ is the new \_\_\_\_



# Are some memes inexplicable?



Relative Frequency of 'roil' in major newspapers





## Successful memes as ISC's?

Cf Heath & Bender on spread of "Gore claims he invented the Internet" vs Buddhist temple story

"exceedingly compact and self-evidently false."

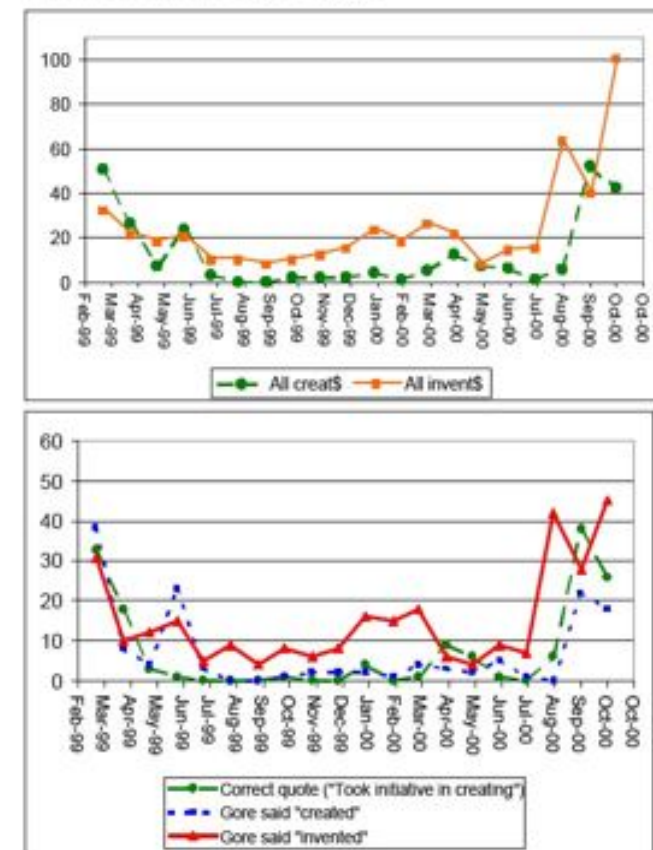
"surprising" (unmotivated, unlike lies about ideology, infidelity, etc.): suggests personality flaw

Increasing simplification or rumors

What would Popkin say?

Figure 1

Time Series of Attributions in Top 50 Newspapers

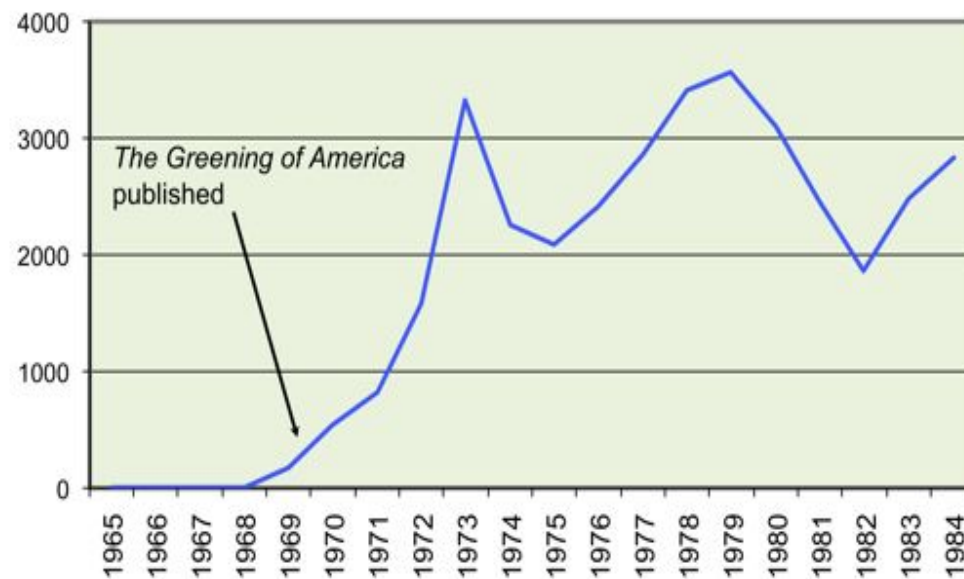




# Interconnections

Appearance vs emergence of words; cf *lifestyle*  
(first use listed in OED from 1929)

**Annual Occurrences of *Lifestyle* in  
*Chicago Tribune***





## Emergence of Vocabularies

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Cf reconfiguration of vocabulary of class in terms of consumer categories in 1970's & 1980's:

Appearance of *middle America* (1969), *upscale* (1966), *trendy* (UK 1962), *yuppie* (1984), etc.

Shifting meanings of *preppie*, *blue-collar*, etc.

Also: shifting meanings of *elite*, *populist*...



## The Diffusion of *Demographic*

Cf Increasing frequency of *demographic* (OED: 1882)

**Occurrences of *demographic* by  
decade,  
*Chicago Tribune***

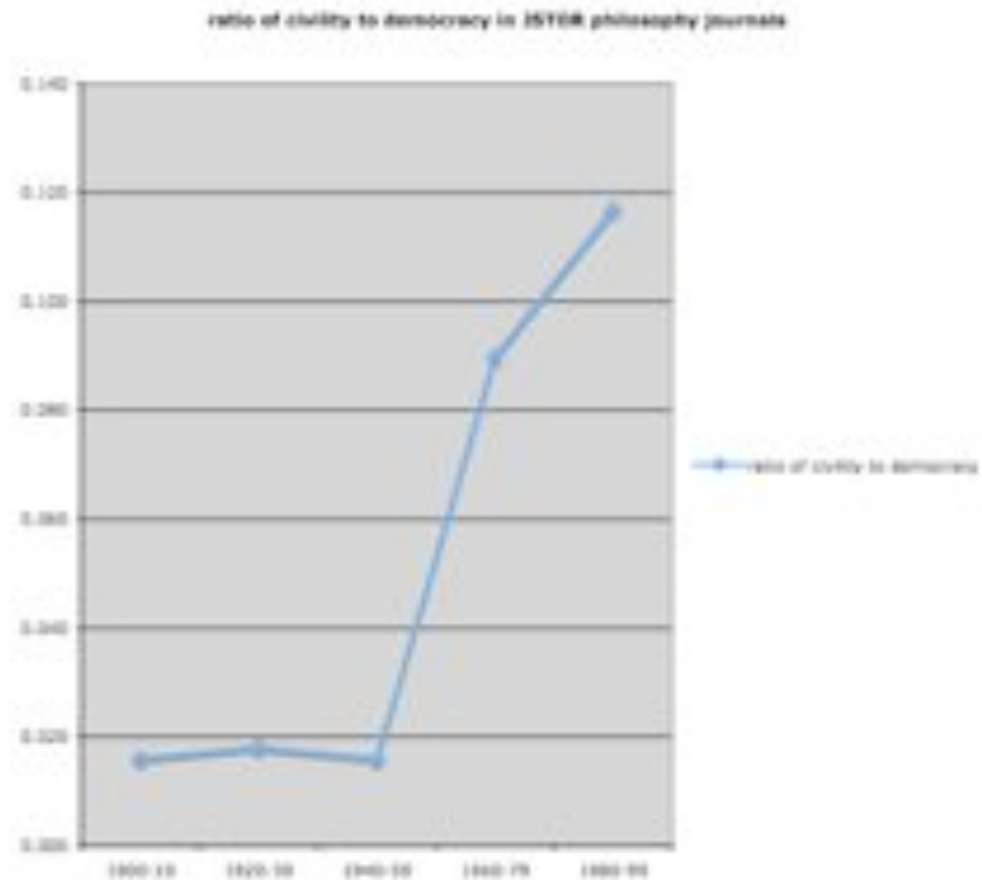
1950-59	13
1960-69	129
1970-79	547
1980-89	730

Note also appearance of *demographics* (n.) 1965





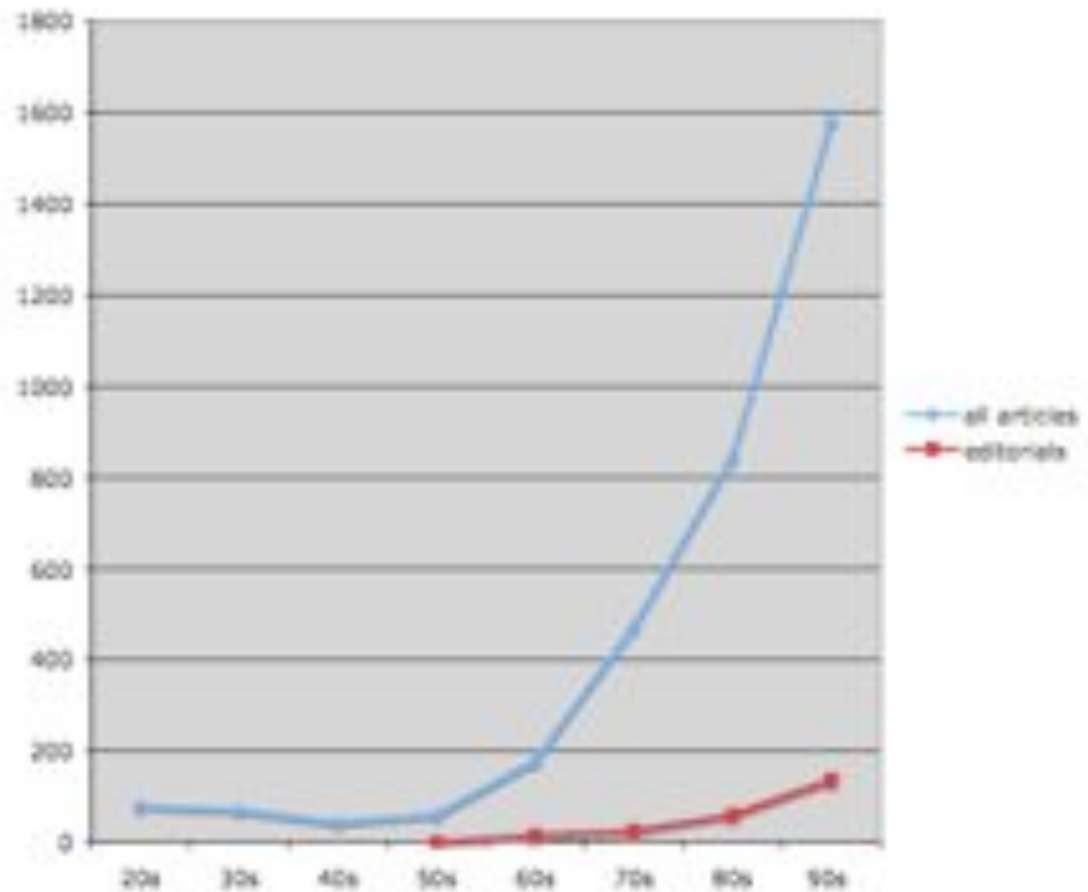
# The "new incivility"





# The "new incivility"

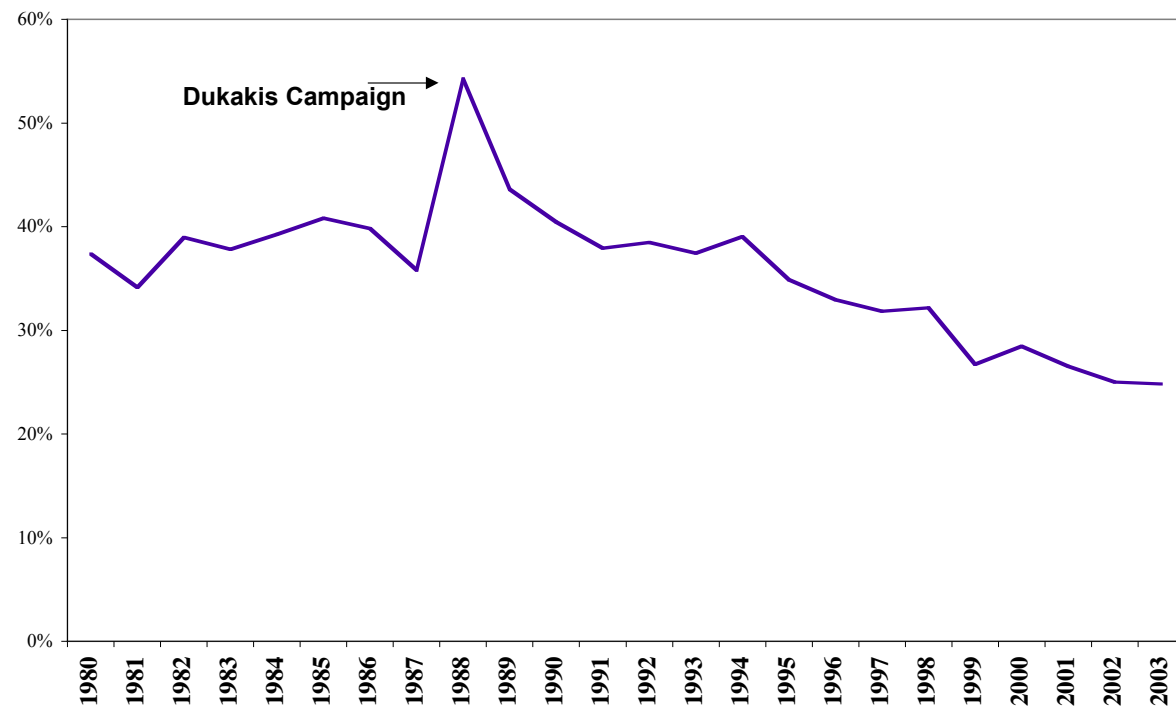
Frequency of "civility" / "incivility" in NYT





# The Decline of "Liberalism"

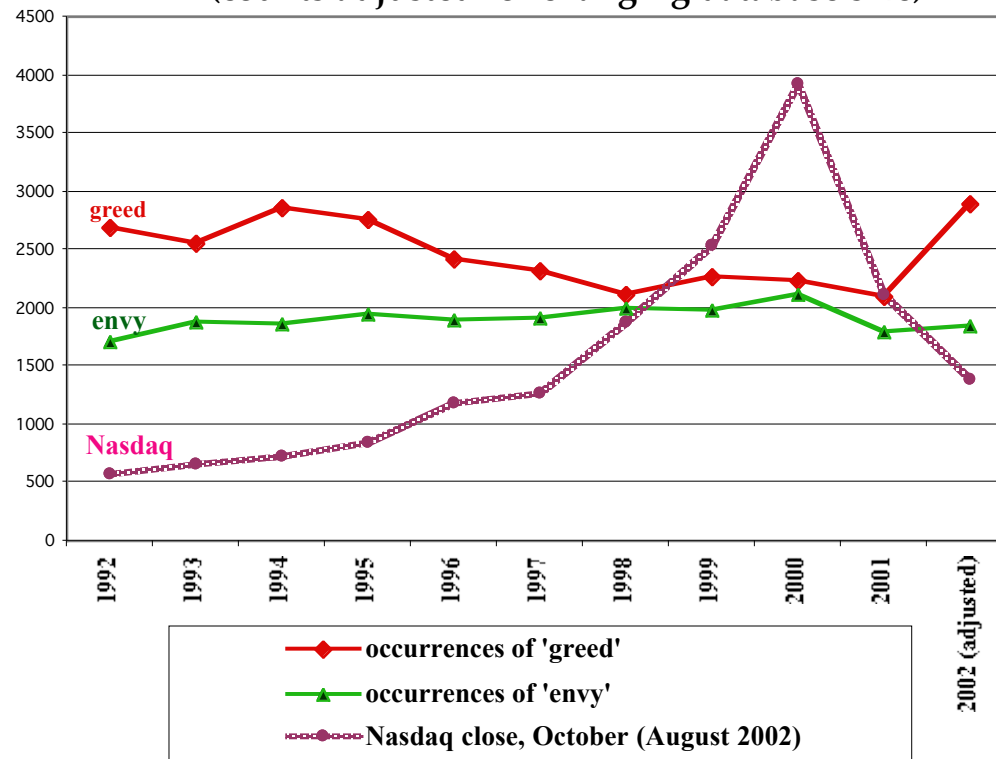
Use of "liberalism" in relation to "conservatism" in major papers: 1980-2003





# Correlating Changes in Frequency

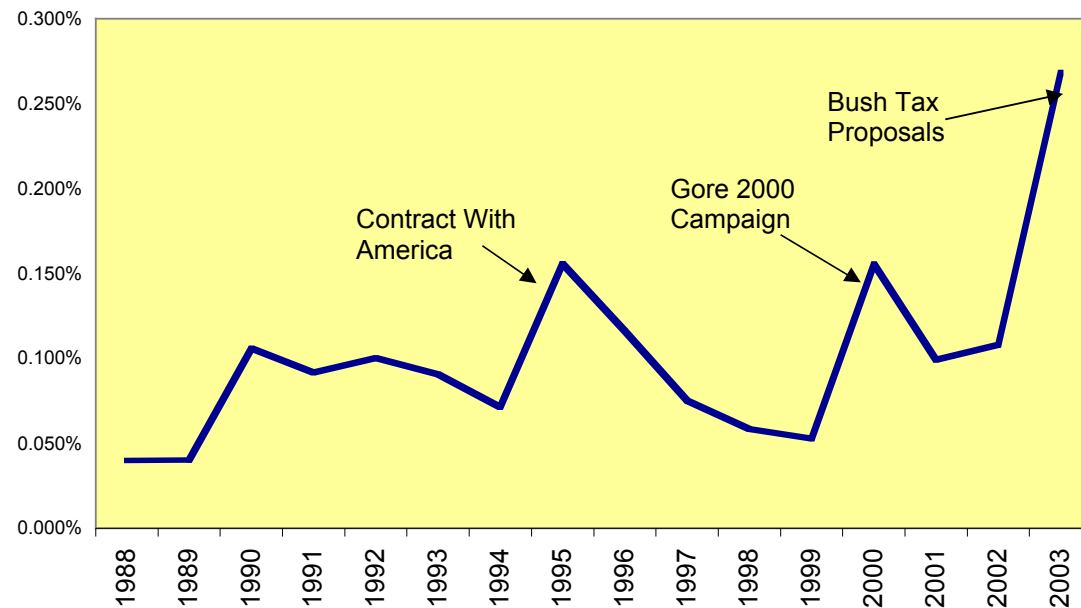
Frequency of 'Greed' in Major Newspapers  
(counts adjusted for changing database size)





# What evokes "memes"?

Frequency of "Class Warfare" in the Press:  
1988-2003





## Shifting frames

Documenting appearance of unrecorded collocations; e.g., “traditional” of values, grammar, weddings, houses, families, etc.

	CONTEXT	TOT	1920s	1930s
1	POLICY	27	5	6
2	WAY	47		1
3	ROLE	48		4
4	HOME	19	1	4
5	RIVAL	12	1	4
6	METHOD	18		1
7	PATTERN	15		2
8	ENEMIES	12		2

*traditional* + noun  
(1926-1960)

	CONTEXT	TOT	1920s	1930s
1	VALUES	71		1
2	FAMILY	43	1	
3	ROLE	48		4
4	WAY	47		1
5	METHODS	29		2
6	WAYS	22	1	
7	VIEW	18	1	
8	SENSE	20		

*traditional* + noun  
(1960-2006)

But no hits for "traditional grammar" in 100m words of *Time*



# Polarized Language

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For external consumption:

Policy-related:

*undocumented vs. illegal*

*pro-life vs pro-choice*

*estate tax vs death tax*

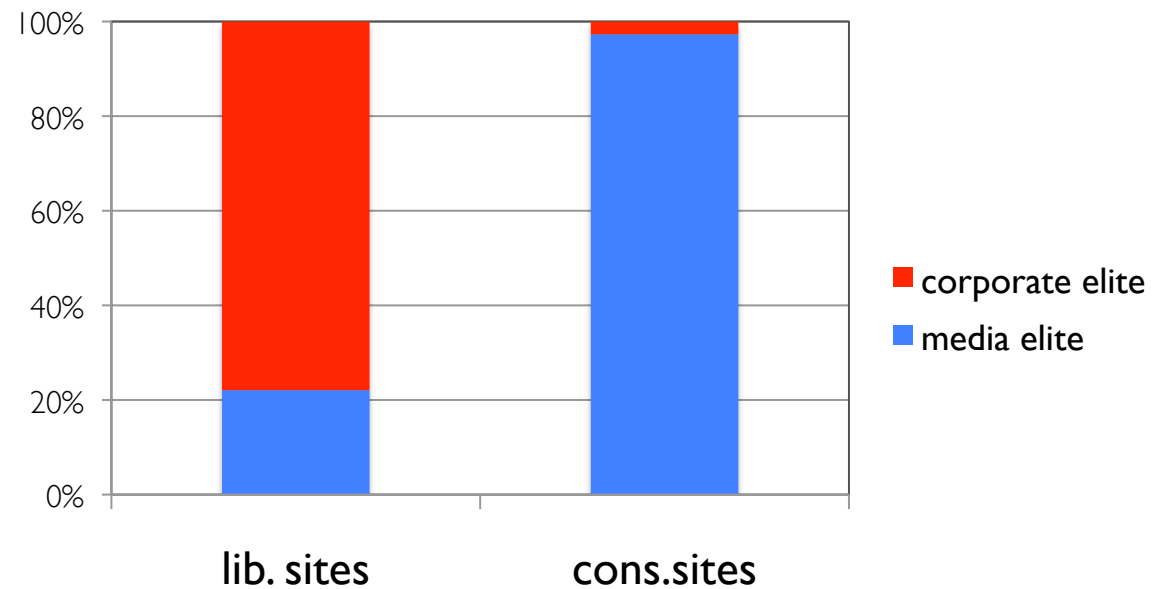
*personal accounts vs private accounts etc.*

*government takeover vs public option*



# Polarized Language

Ideologically contested concepts: the "final vocabulary" of American politics



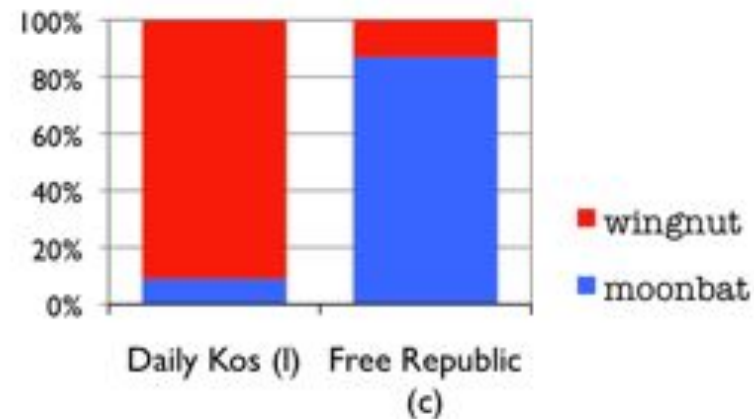


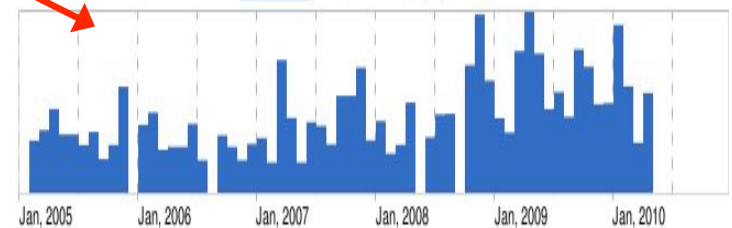


# Polarized Language

Ideologically contested concepts: the "final vocabulary" of American politics

Differences in political epithets

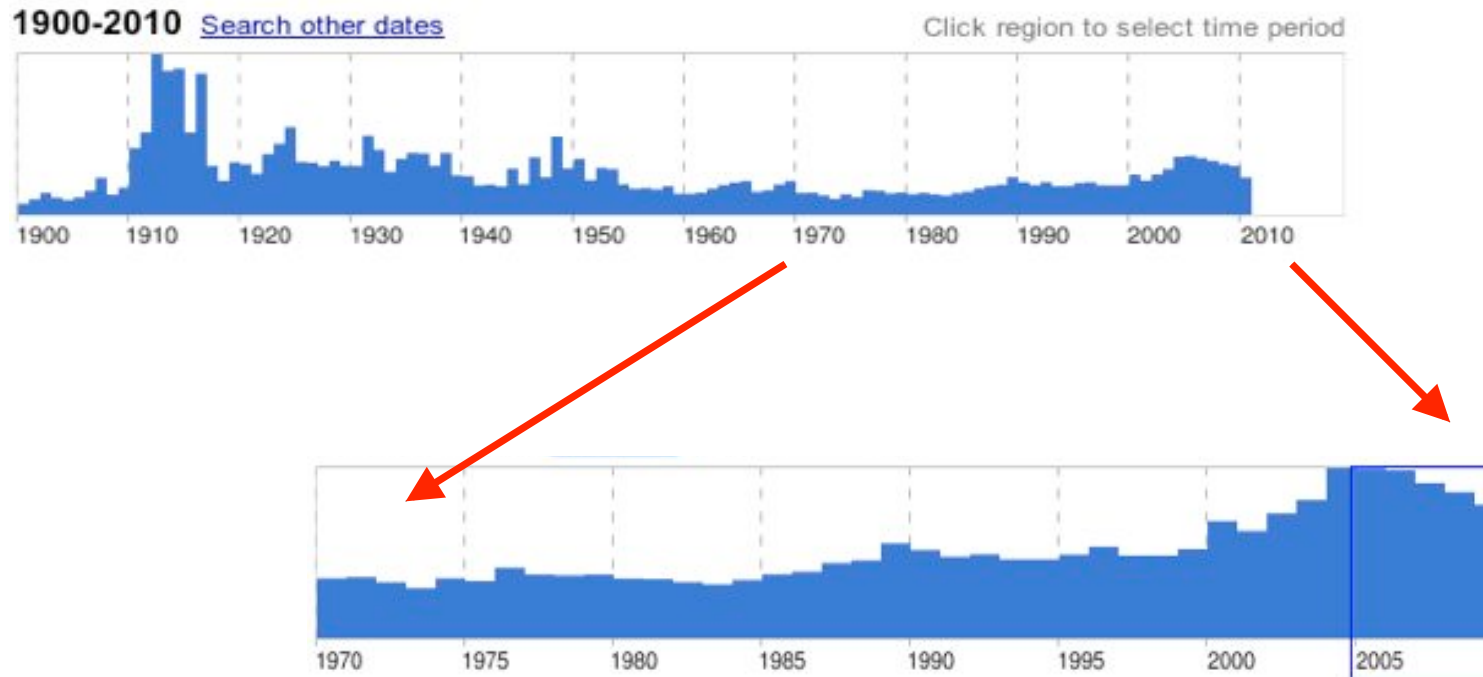






# "Hearth Languages" of Right and Left

***progressives* in Google News archives, 1900-2010**





## Assignment for 4/19

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Pick two political memoids (i.e., things that memeticists might identify as memes) of two different types -- the types might include phrases, narratives, graphic representations or videos, jokes, slogans, etc. They should be memes that people have in fact circulated with more or less success [see suggestions for sources on Web page]

See if you can track the growth & spread of these items (ask me for help if you need it). Try to explain why they did or didn't catch on, and what purpose they achieve. How might they be explained in Popkin's framework, or some other -- can we analyze them as cognitive shortcuts or Lippmann-type symbols? Are some inexplicable?