

Economic Security and Elite Discourse in U.S.-China Relations: Evidence from the Senate

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Discourse as a dependent variable

- Studies of the effects of elite discourse often assume elite discourse reflects elite interests or beliefs. Discourse is an independent variable and not disaggregated.
- We need to also explain *why* and *how* discourse emerges. Political structures and institutions condition discourse.
- Specific case study: the narrative of China as an economic threat.
- New analytic tool: models of text as data

Changing U.S. Perceptions of China, 2007-11

Perceptions of China as an Economic Threat, 2011 vs. 2007			
<i>DV: % saying that China is an economic threat to the United States</i>			
	2007	2011	DiD
Democrats	0.55	0.56	0.01
Republicans	0.56	0.74	0.18
Effect (R – D)	0.01	0.17	0.16
T Statistic	0.37	4.30	2.86
P> t	0.71	0.000***	0.004***
N	606	558	1164

Source: German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends Surveys, 2007 and 2011

U.S. Perceptions of China

- China as a rising power across many domains (Friedberg 2011, Pillsbury 2015, many others)
 - Evidence: actions (interests are hidden)
- Constructivist critique: ...but discourse on China conditions how non-experts understand China's actions (Johnston 2013, Fravel and Twomey 2015).
 - Evidence: manual (or keyword-based) content analysis.

Theory

- Discourse as an independent variable in explaining elite influence on public opinion
 - Content analysis + surveys (Zaller 1992, Berinsky 2007)
 - Surveys only (Gabel and Scheve 2007)
- Discourse as a subject of interest and a source of information about ideas (constructivist IR)

Method

- Probabilistic topic models: latent variable models that infer structures of meaning in large text corpora.
- Specifically,
 - Structural topic model (stm) (Roberts, Stewart, Tingley and Airoldi 2013)
 - Online LDA (Hoffman and Blei 2010)
- Both are hierarchical Bayesian models that treat each document as a “bag of words.” “Topic” = distribution of word frequencies.

Inferential tasks

- Estimating thematic contours of a political discourse from many texts
- Estimating prominence of different topics over time
- Estimating individual-level correlates of topics – why do people say what they say?

Estimating the structure of discourse

- Clusters of words corresponding to topics are inferred.
- Advantages to observing a “universe” of discourse.
- Generally speaking, fewer topics = topics that make more sense to domain experts (Mimno et al. 2011)

Taiwan	Budget deficit	Human rights	Jobs and labor	Investing in education
china	money	right	job	educ
taiwan	billion	china	worker	research
unit	debt	human	compani	scienc
state	spend	govern	china	engin
relationship	budget	chines	tax	china
polici	pay	freedom	move	percent
relat	tax	prison	manufactur	student
chines	borrow	religi	hour	invest
republ	percent	democraci	pay	competit
econom	cut	polit	say	india

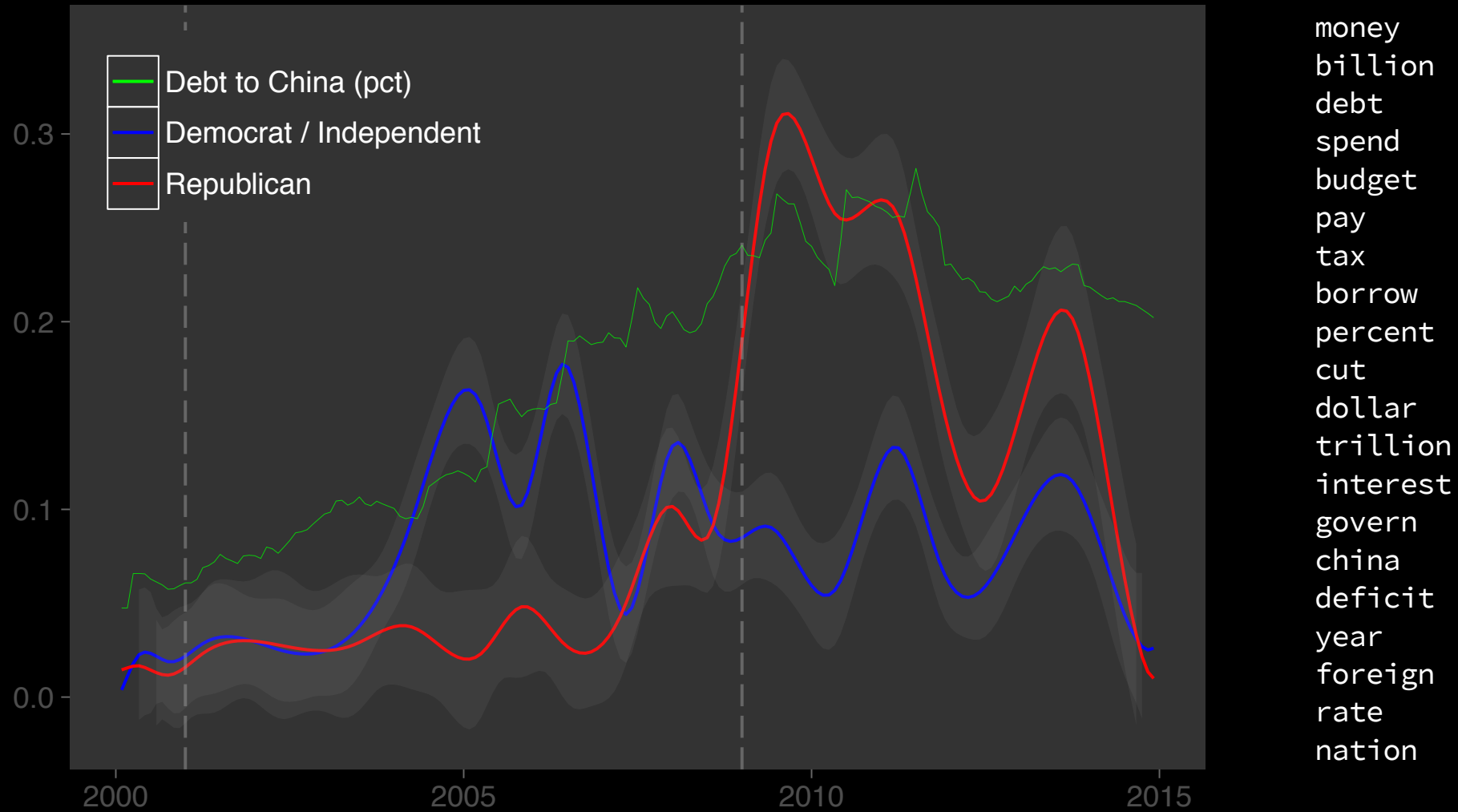
Kent Conrad, D-North Dakota, September 2004

I hope someone is listening out there. The debt of the United States in 1 year is going to increase by over \$630 billion, \$422 billion of deficits plus \$149 billion borrowed from the Social Security trust fund, every penny of which has to be paid back. The President has no plan to do it. On top of that, another \$60 billion from other trust funds the President is borrowing. That is not the only place the President is borrowing. He has borrowed over \$600 billion from Japan, over \$150 billion from China. He has even borrowed tens of billions of dollars from South Korea. This is a course that is utterly unsustainable. If we look to the future, the President is telling the American people he has a plan to cut the deficit in half over the next 5 years. My advice to the American people is, do not believe it, because it will not happen. The only way the President comes up with that calculation is he leaves big chunks of spending out of the calculation.

Jeff Sessions, R-Alabama, September 2009

We have to borrow that money. Over the 10-year budget window, as assumed by the CBO, the deficits will never fall below \$600 billion. In fact, it will average over \$900 billion--almost \$1 trillion a year. That is how you get to \$17 trillion after 10 years. So we have to borrow that money in the world marketplace. Countries such as China bought huge amounts of our Treasury. We pay them interest on that money. What does this mean over the 10 years? I think this can help the American people understand how sizable this debt is. As I noted, we spend \$100 billion on education federally and \$40 billion on transportation. This year, 2009, we spent \$170 billion on interest.

Estimating variation over time: The “borrowing from China” topic, 2000-2014



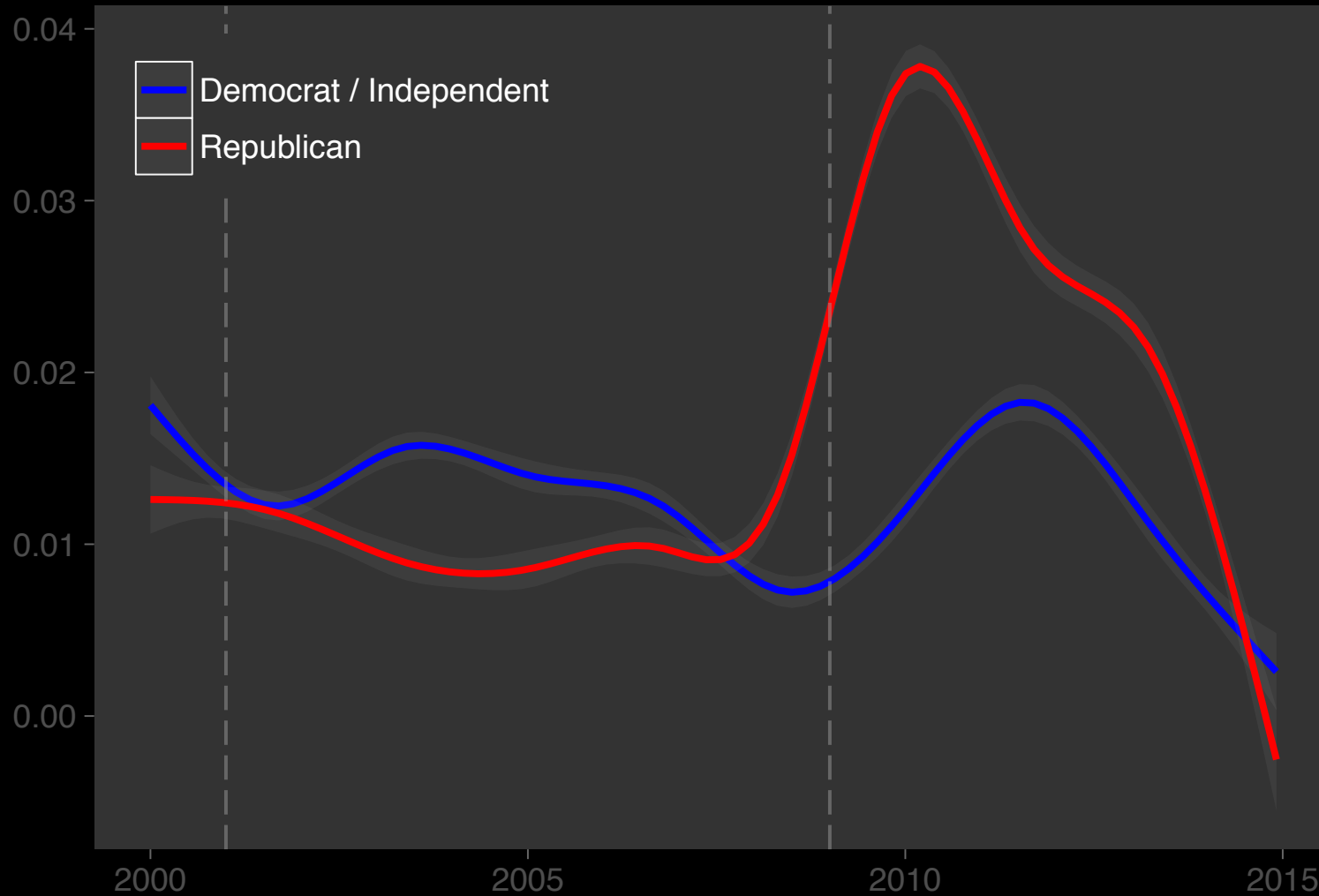
Individual-level correlates, 2000-2014

Opposition (dy/dx)	0.09 ***
	(0.02)
Republican (dy/dx)	0.04 ***
	(0.02)
Republican × Opposition	0.04
	(0.04)
% debt from China	0.08
	(0.25)
Unemployment (lag)	-0.01 *
	(0.00)
Income, immigration, export dependence	(not significant)
n	4,664

Note: A 10-knot cubic b-spline time function is included in the model as a control but is not reported here. Standard error and coefficient of variables opposition and republican are the marginal effect of the variable and the interaction term.

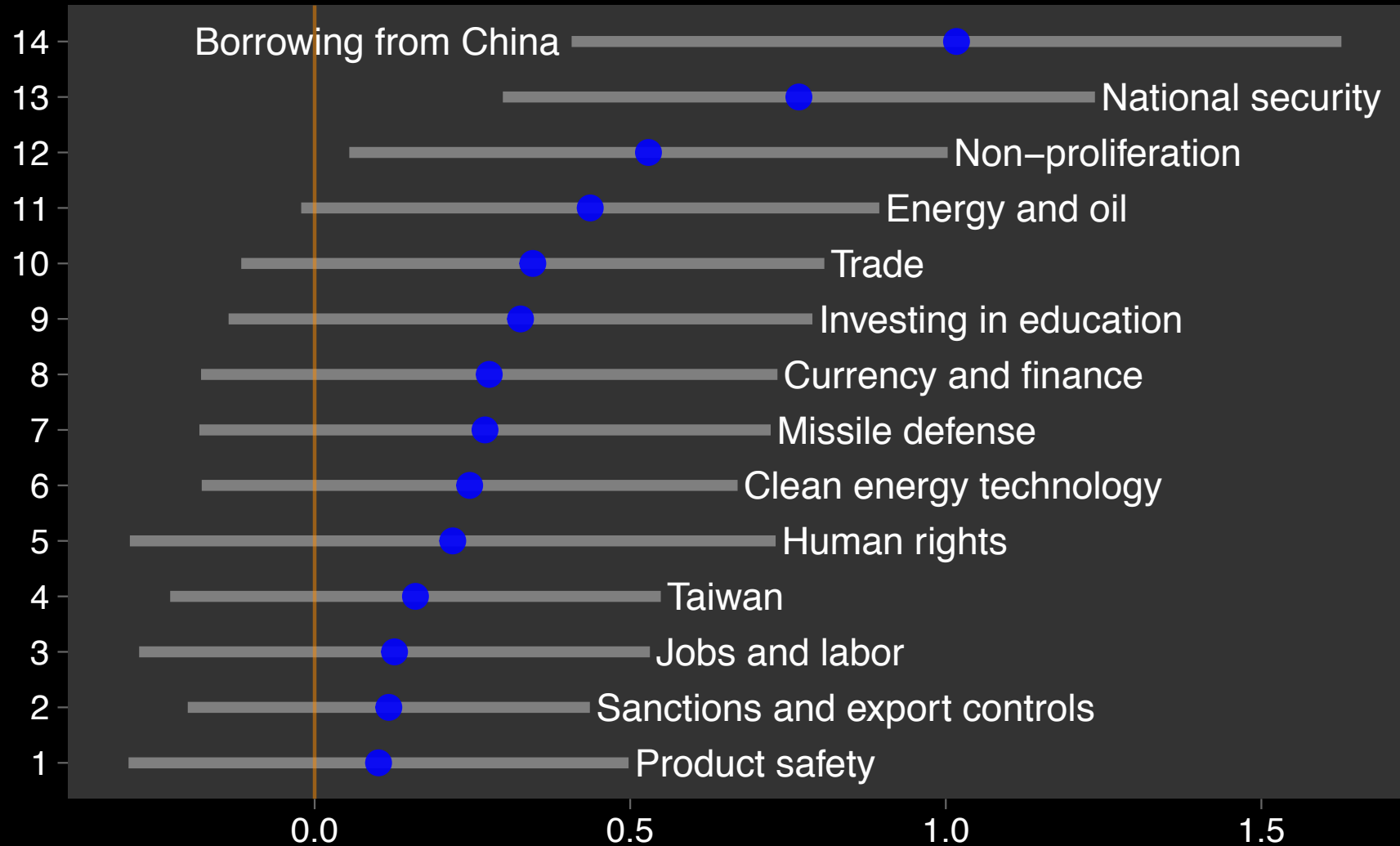
* $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$, *** $p < 0.0001$

The budget topic in *all* senate speeches looks similar...



cut
billion
spend
trillion
deficit
percent
increas
budget
propos
reduct
reduc
next
save
money
program
medicar
cost
pay
dollar
let

... and the budget topic is unusually partisan.



Conclusions

- Separating the consequences from the causes of elite discourse.
- Findings support Berinsky (2007) on the coalitional politics of support for war.