



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

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Collective Victimhood Narratives in Legislative Speeches from the United States and Northern Ireland

Callum Mervyn Craig

Supervisor: Dr. Constantine Boussalis

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the use of victimhood narratives by legislators in the United States Congress and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Collective victimhood is a form of highly emotive and moral rhetoric which depicts groups as having been unjustly and intentionally harmed by another. As victimhood becomes increasingly important in the U.S. context and remains central to post-conflict Northern Irish politics, understanding when, why, and how elites use these narratives takes on importance for those seeking to understand polarization, radicalization, and reconciliation. I utilize an array of computational text analysis methods to detect and classify millions of speeches across both cases and as the basis for my analyses.

In the U.S. chapter, two main analyses are conducted. First, I assessed the relationship between constituency, individual, and geographical characteristics and legislators' use of victimhood narratives. I find that the identity of legislators and ideological positions have significant effects on the use of victimhood narratives. Second, I employ a difference-in-differences design to evaluate the impact of the introduction of C-SPAN, and thus greater public attention, finding that this leads to a notable rise in the use of victimhood narratives. In the Northern Ireland chapter, I explored the roles of legislator characteristics, identity salience, and competitive victimhood. The results show that exclusive victimhood narratives are used in a competitive, often oppositional manner toward outgroup claims, with less conclusive findings around legislator characteristics and ethnic saliency.

My findings suggest that legislator identity indicators, public attention, and political competition are central in understanding the use of victimhood narratives in legislatures. I also demonstrate that quantitative text analysis can effectively identify and measure victimhood narratives in two diverse legislative contexts.

1. Introduction

Collective victimhood is the perception that a group has been intentionally harmed by the actions of another (Vollhardt, 2012). Narratives which draw upon this feeling are highly affective and inherently draw upon morality and moral condemnation (Chouliaraki, 2024). The assignment of victimhood offers both motivation for action and moral virtue, whilst accusations of harm can also function as an effective rhetorical attack (Gray & Kubin, 2024). Given the inherently emotive nature of moral appeals and discussions of harm, this style of communication is highly effective in provoking strong reactions.

Feelings of collective victimhood have been demonstrated to have a strong effect on intergroup bias, outgroup hostility and support for violence (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992a; Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017). However, little attention has been paid to the use of narratives which appeal to or stoke awareness and feelings of collective victimhood within legislative contexts despite their rhetorical effectiveness and potential to mobilize groups for political action. I expect that victimhood narratives, due to their extremity and polarizing nature, will be relatively rare in formal legislative speeches due to norms of civility and formality. Despite this, their use represents calculated decisions by legislators to strategically mobilize certain sections of the electorate. Legislative debates are an important context in which to assess the use of these narratives given concerns around dynamics of polarization and populism. Narratives which categorize groups as perpetrators and victims has the potential to weaken social cohesion and reify intergroup hostility whilst benefiting political entrepreneurs positioning themselves as the solution to past injustice (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Vollhardt, 2020). Scholars have also emphasized the potential positive impact of acknowledging victimhood across communities if done in an inclusive manner, especially in post-conflict settings (Vollhardt, 2020). Given the socio-political power of legislators and the public attention paid to what they say, I expect that both the positive and negative impacts of these narratives are greater than in many other contexts.

Given the unique constraints on speeches in legislative contexts there are some unique difficulties not seen in other contexts such as political rallies or extremist

communication where victimhood claims are more brazen and less constrained by social rules. These challenges will be discussed further in the methodology section. Despite these challenges, this important context of elite-elite communication in highly publicized environment allows me to explore numerous dynamics in both a relatively stable democracy in the United States and a post-conflict democracy in Northern Ireland.

Following an introductory chapter and a literature review, I assess the use of collective victimhood narratives in both of these case studies across two substantive chapters. Across these chapters I answer two main research questions:

RQ1 - Why do legislators use victimhood narratives?

RQ2 - How do legislators use victimhood narratives?

In the US chapter, along with a descriptive analysis of victimhood narratives in congress, I argue that political elites will utilize these narratives to build support and direct attacks against their political opposition. I first assess how individual, constituency and donor characteristics may influence the use of victimhood narratives by legislators between 1960-2022. I then narrow focus to assess the relationship between publicity and the use of victimhood narratives. I leverage the 7 year time gap between the introduction of C-SPAN to both chambers of Congress for a difference-in-differences design, expecting a significant rise in the use of victimhood narratives as legislators become more able to communicate directly with the public. Finally, I test theories around inclusive/exclusive victimhood and competitive victimhood in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In both cases, I analyse a large time window of multiple decades with 62 years in the U.S. and the entire 26 years of the Northern Ireland Assembly's functioning. Alongside practical considerations of speech availability and language, covering both of these cases over long-time windows allows me to analyse how the use of victimhood narratives evolves in two contrasting democratic contexts.

The U.S. is a highly diverse society in which legislators have important decisions to make around which identity groups and interests they seek to win support from. The use of victimhood narratives is one potentially costly strategy that legislators could

utilize and given the evolving context from the civil rights era through to the present day these decisions are likely heavily influenced by temporal contexts. This large time-window, while posing important research limitations that will be discussed throughout, was chosen due to the emergence of the Civil Rights movement and the realignment in U.S. politics occurring. While the realignment was not entirely complete by 1960 with the existence of the Southern Democrats, the core voter blocs to which parties were attempting to appeal and could rely upon remain relatively stable from this time onwards (A. L. Campbell, 2007; Manza & Brooks, 1999). Given the centrality of race, this also provides a natural starting point for considering racial victimhood narratives while the 1960s and 70s saw a notable rise in identity-based organizing and social movements that are likely to increase the salience and visibility of related victimhood narratives (Bernstein, 2005; Horwitz, 2018).

In the case of Northern Ireland I focus exclusively on the primary ethnic cleavage in the Northern Ireland context which provides a comparatively easier to detect and understand range of victimhood narratives. The entirety of the post-conflict Stormont Assembly presents an important post-conflict context in which to assess how, as society moves further past the conflict, victimhood narratives and their uses change. Understanding how elites communicate victimhood and conflict during power-sharing could provide important indicators of the successes and limitations of reconciliation.

To answer my research questions and measure victimhood, I design a number of novel machine-learning classifiers and utilize large-language models as part of a classification pipeline. I also design a parser for the collection and processing of data from the Northern Ireland Assembly. Alongside these classifiers and the data collection tool, I also test these theories of collective victimhood over long periods of time in routine plenary debates within two distinct legislatures. This extends current understandings of the elite use of victimhood narratives by looking beyond specific leaders, speeches or debates to get a more general overview and allow the testing of hypotheses around identity, electorate characteristics and opportunity.

Following a literature review introducing and explaining collective victimhood and how this related to deliberative or legislative speech, I move onto studying Collective Victimhood in the United States Congress. Following the introduction of relevant re-

search questions, the data, and explaining the construction of the classifier I introduce the two substantive studies on legislator characteristics and then the introduction of C-SPAN. The next chapter then shifts focus to the use of collective and competitive victimhood narratives in the Northern Ireland assembly. In this chapter I also introduce the Northern Ireland Assembly Parser and a more complex classification process before testing a range of hypotheses on legislator characters and competitive victimhood.

2. Literature Review

In this section I will discuss the theoretical background of this thesis and how the project will further develop the literature throughout the chapters and across the cases.

2.1. Social Identity Theory

Collective victimhood narratives such as claims that "elites" are manipulating, suppressing or otherwise harming "the people" rely upon socially constructed understandings of the types of people which belong in these two subjective classifications. In modern right-wing Republican discourse for example, elites are understood to be cosmopolitan urban liberals whilst "the people" are conservative, Christian and suburban or rural with often racialized connotations (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019). To understand how these narratives function and how collective victimhood claims can mobilize the groups which these narratives are appealing to, social identity theory provides essential theoretical context.

The central theoretical grounding of collective victimhood as a concept is social identity theory. This work originates with Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, and Flament (1971) in their attempt to explain the origin and maintenance of intergroup hostility and cooperation. Rather than intergroup conflict originating in purely rational competition over limited resources, social identity theory asserts that conflicts can also originate in social/psychological processes of identification with groups. Social conflict can occur when individuals begin to identify with an ingroup in a process of 'social categorization' (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 40). When individuals categorize themselves as belonging to a group, this group becomes a vehicle for personal identity as positive and negative values of the group are perceived as being reflective of the individuals within the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 40). Whilst value judgements of the individual's own group can be negative, individuals will generally 'strive to maintain or enhance their self esteem' and advance this goal through attempting to improve the standing and perception of their social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 40-41). One way in which the value of a group can be modified is through comparison. This can include compar-

isons which attack or degrade an outgroup (e.g. describing individuals of a certain nationality as lazier than the ingroup) or a positive claim of the ingroups distinctive positive traits (e.g. claims that co-ethnic are uniquely dedicated workers) (Turner, 1975). Experimental studies have found that, even in cases where relatively arbitrary ingroup/outgroups are constructed, individuals are biased towards those from the same group and are more likely to discriminate against the outgroup (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1970). This process has been used to explain a wide range of phenomena in which group conflicts occur (Burn, Aboud, & Moyles, 2000; Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Oliveira & Murphy, 2015; Wood, 2008).

Individuals do not have a singular social identity but rather have overlapping and complex identities representing their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, language and other traits. However these identities are not necessarily all equally salient or politicized, but can be activated through a variety of processes (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). For example, nationalist movements engage in attempts to increase the salience of nationality through narratives, music, and symbols. The increasing salience of a social identity has been shown to heighten hostility towards those perceived as outside of the groups, such as increasing identification with national identity leading to greater opposition to immigration and minority rights. (Breton, 2015; Luedtke, 2005) Ideological and partisan identities interact with other types of social identity with differing effects, identities such as race and gender can be cross-cutting or aligned with partisan or ideological identity (Mason, 2016, 4-5). If they are aligned, then this means that the identities can be mutually reinforcing and can often lead to stronger, more emotional responses to challenges than if an individual's identities are more conflicted or less synergistic. (Mason, 2016).

An example of this in the Northern Ireland context, is that of religion and national identity. While the conflict was fought primarily along the lines of British and Irish nationalisms, key political figures such as Reverend Ian Paisley and his Free Presbyterian Church were staunchly anti-Catholic and frequently discussed the conflict and Ulster's position within the United Kingdom along the lines of Protestant evangelical theology. This does not mean that the conflict was a holy war, but rather that the overlapping of religious and political identity reifies and solidifies difference through

increasing ingroup cohesion and differentiation with the outgroup (Wallis, Bruce, & Taylor, 1987).

The ability for social identities to interact, reinforce and conflict is also important in the context of electoral politics and legislative speech. The importance of ethnic, religious and gender is well-noted in the literature and by political operatives, as politicians craft their image to appeal to core demographics (Mason & Wronski, 2018; Reicher & Haslam, 2017). In the US case, this is illustrated by the deliberate activation of the White Evangelical vote by influential right-wing Christian activists and the Reagan campaign which has remained a consistently reliable voter bloc for the Republican Party to the present day (Armaly, Buckley, & Enders, 2022; Grose, 2018). Similar dynamics can be observed by consistent use of anti-communist political language and hard-line stances on Cuba, to court the Cuban exile vote in the key swing state of Florida (Girard, Grenier, & Gladwin, 2012; Portes, 2007). The use of identity focused politics is more obvious in elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly, where parties are explicitly organized along ethnic lines with this ethnic designation forming a key constitutional mechanism within the power-sharing framework. The solidification of the social cleavage in which the conflict originates via political parties and electoral politics is a key challenge and consequence of power-sharing discussed widely in peace building literature (Horowitz, 2014; Rothchild & Roeder, 2005). In post-conflict societies this often leads to what referred to as “tribal politics”. In these contexts, parties rarely attempt to appeal to the outgroup and competition is instead fought between co-ethnic parties to become the largest representative of their respective communities due to perceptions that the outgroup is simply unreachable (Tonge, 2003).

2.2. Collective Victimhood

Simon and Klandermans (2001) argue that there are three key stages in the politicization of identity. First, a shared sense of grievance emerges and this is then attributed to an adversary as the source of this grievance, which then leads to a call for societal change or action (Simon & Klandermans, 2001, 324). Collective victimhood and victimization is a small but well developed sub-field of the social identity theory literature, which expands on this core process by analysing the causes, dynamics and

consequences of perceived and real victimization of social groups. While a victimhood narrative can be either collective or singular/personal (i.e. individuals discussing their own personal experiences not clearly linked to wider identity group relations). However, in this thesis when I refer to “victimhood narratives”, I am focusing exclusively on collective victimhood narratives.

There is an important distinction between victimhood and victimization. While collective victimization describes a process of a group being targeted and harmed by another, collective victimhood is the perception that the ingroup has been unjustly harmed by another regardless of if there has been real victimization (Vollhardt, 2012, 137). This means that claims to victimhood can draw from many aspects of a group’s experiences irregardless of relative levels of power, privilege, and discrimination. Both across and within my two cases, this distinction between victimhood and victimization is important. For my analysis of Northern Irish Assembly, a very large proportion of victimhood narratives are based in cases of clear victimization by armed actors against other combatants, prisoners and civilians in a conflict largely stemming from a long history of legal, economic and political discrimination. Other victimhood narratives are grounded more in psychological processes of victimhood, for example debates around cultural esteem and equality for the Irish and Ulster Scot languages or the sustained protests around which flags and how often those flags should fly on government buildings (Hearty, 2015; McMonagle, 2010). In the case of the United States there is not a recent history of intergroup war, but there is nonetheless a array of narratives that range from being grounded in actual victimization (extreme examples include the horrors of slavery, acts of terrorism, and discrimination against marginalized communities) to more conspiratorial narratives, such as entirely false claims of election fraud around the 2020 elections (Armaly et al., 2022; Boussalis, Craig, & Rudkin, 2024). These differences in victimhood narratives are distinct in important ethical and theoretical ways as they tie into marginalization, oppression, and at times the weaponization of identity by the powerful. However due to this project’s focus on the use of victimhood narratives by political elites rather than the legitimacy of these claims, I will generally group these types of narratives together without making normative judgements as to which claims by which actors are legitimate.

A sense of collective victimhood creates intragroup solidarity whilst increasing hostility to those who are seen to harming the ingroup (Noor et al., 2017, 125). One particularly powerful and influential set of studies carried out by Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992a, 1992b) measured and tested the effects of a ‘siege mentality’ in Israeli society. In this study they find that those whose views of the present world and other groups are heavily defined by the horrors of the Holocaust and historical oppression, tend to score higher on a Siege Mentality Scale. Those who score higher on the scale are more supportive of Israeli military actions, are more ethnocentric, and experience more intergroup paranoia (as well as a more slight positive relationship with interpersonal paranoia)(Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992a, 643). This Israeli case is a very powerful case study and experiment, assessing how collective victimization and victimhood can create group norms which justify violence and hostility towards outgroups. Collective victimhood has not only been used to explain dynamics of intractable conflicts such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, it has also been used to explain intergroup conflict occurring as a result of social prejudice, structural inequality and both the occurrence of civil war and its effects on reconciliation after civil war in Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland, South Africa and the Balkan conflicts (Antonioniou, Dinas, & Kosmidis, 2020; Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014; Lynch & Joyce, 2018; Mari, Bentrovato, Durante, & Wassermann, 2020).

The literature on emotional and cognitive effects of collective victimhood is broad and goes beyond the siege mentality idea identified by Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992b). Collective victimhood has been found to alter how individuals within groups assess trustworthiness, being more forgiving and trusting of ingroup members even following betrayals than they are towards those from outside of the group who have not harmed them (Çelebi, Verkuyten, Köse, & Maliepaard, 2014a; Rotella, Richeson, Chiao, & Bean, 2013). Similar findings were noted by Schori-Eyal, Klar, and Ben-Ami (2017) who observed that those who viewed ingroup victimization as salient and perpetual were more likely to assume negative intentions from outgroup members in ambiguous situations (Schori-Eyal et al., 2017). Sustained attitudes of distrust and assumptions of hostility against outgroups will create and sustain intergroup hostility, as feelings of victimhood continue to be perpetuated even if attempts to reconcile are made. How-

ever, victimhood narratives are highly varied in topic, style and in some cases the effect. The current literature has identified important subtypes or dynamics within collective victimhood, such as inclusive/exclusive victimhood and competitive victimhood.

Inclusive victimhood narratives claim that the ingroup has been victimized, but does not attempt to deny or downplay the victimization of other groups.(Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015, 491-492) This can lead to greater levels of solidarity for other victimized groups and more universal empathy than strictly pro-ingroup claims of victimhood, which can help to reduce or overcome intergroup conflicts(Adelman, Leidner, Ünal, Nahhas, & Shnabel, 2016; Alarcón-Henríquez et al., 2010; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015; Vollhardt, Nair, & Tropp, 2016). In the US, some groups within the Black Lives Matter movement make use of such framings explicitly. This is a movement founded primarily upon victimization and victimhood of Black people in America, however messaging of many organizations within BLM refer to the victimization of indigenous peoples, queer people, and women with their intersectional messaging (Bonilla & Tillery, 2020). In contrast, exclusive victimhood holds up that the ingroup has suffered uniquely and that this justifies strengthening or maintaining the power of the ingroup against those who are perceived to have victimized them (Vollhardt et al., 2016, 492). This type of victimhood is especially likely in post-conflict societies with high levels of multi-directional violence. Political elites and masses in post-conflict societies often heavily mediate acceptable victims and perpetrators through legal, political, social and economic means as part of peace processes and reconciliation following a conflict (Jacoby, 2015; Jankowitz, 2018a; Mijić, 2021). While more inclusive narratives allow space for mutual recognition of harm, they can also be deployed strategically or selectively (Cohrs, McNeill, & Vollhardt, 2015). Examples in the Northern Ireland case include inclusive acknowledgements of shared struggles with Black South Africans, Palestinians, and Catalans by Nationalists whilst Unionists make similar claims in relation to White South Africans and Israelis. These claims, whilst acknowledging the victimhood of other groups, are used as references for the present identity conflict to illicit outside sympathy and attempt to further legitimize their own victimhood.

Exclusive claims of victimhood allow outgroup claims of victimhood to be ignored, downplayed or compared dismissively to the supposedly more important victimization

of the ingroup (Jeffery & Candea, 2006). Competitive victimhood literature builds upon this aspect of victimhood to assess how groups attempt to portray themselves as more victimized and how they respond to claims that their group is responsible for victimization (Young & Sullivan, 2016). This process is important for understanding many contemporary victimhood narratives, especially those by more privileged groups. D. Sullivan (2012) finds in two studies that individuals respond to claims of their ingroup victimizing another, by making stronger ingroup claims of discrimination and victimhood. One of these studies carried out by Sullivan focused on men claiming greater levels of discrimination and victimization against them, when confronted by women's victimhood narratives where men are identified as the source of discrimination and victimization (D. Sullivan, 2012, 9-17). This shows how victimhood narratives of groups can become reflexive attempts to maintain group (and therefore self-) esteem even in cases with observable power imbalances and more unidirectional victimization. This process was also tested in the contemporary context of US politics by comparing the pro-Police 'Blue Lives Matter' v 'Black Lives Matter', which demonstrates that despite important differences in threat and power even relatively privileged groups may resort to exclusive claims to protect their group's esteem against outside criticisms (Solomon & Martin, 2019).

In deeply divided societies, competitive exclusive victimhood narratives attempt to attack the narratives that legitimize the political inclusion of the outgroup(s) and leverage for greater legitimacy of the ingroup seeking a greater share of post-war power and resources. This can manifest as outrage against specific commemorations or the inclusion of controversial political figures/groups such as ex-combatants in the Northern Ireland context (most notably in the IRA-linked Sinn Féin) or in some extreme cases outright denial of atrocities or genocide, like in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hopkins, 2015; Parent, 2016). In contrast, inclusive victimhood narratives are instead often associated with more conciliatory rather than competitive politics and are argued to be effective perspectives and narratives to encourage intergroup cooperation and a more durable peace, even if it is difficult to mobilize these sentiments from a policymaker perspective (Cohrs et al., 2015; Vollhardt, 2015). However, it is important to note that divisions between competitive/non-competitive or exclusive/inclusive

victimhood are never binary. In the Northern Ireland case, representatives from both communities often refer to ideas of a 'hierarchy of victims' (Jankowitz, 2018b). This idea is multi-faceted, but has been used in attempts to delineate victims from perpetrators and vice versa. For example acknowledgements by unionists of everyone having suffered during the conflict may appear inclusive, but often excludes members of Republican paramilitaries despite many having become involved in the conflict due to having been personally victimized or witnessing victimization (Cohrs et al., 2015). Similarly, republican politicians may call for inquiries and justice for all victims of the conflict but shy away from assigning blame to the IRA (Irish Republican Army) of the Troubles and instead focus on loyalist/state violence or the actions of dissident republicans. As claims to victimhood are in many ways claims to moral virtue or moral outrage, political actors will deploy these narratives strategically and in complex ways as the post-conflict political climate evolves.

2.3. Deliberative and Persuasive Speech

An influential body of literature on deliberative debate views the act of debating as a form of cheap talk (Austen-Smith, 1990; Farrell & Gibbons, 1989; Matthews, 1989). This means that the act of debating has little to no impact on the outcome of a legislative session. There are two primary reasons for this. Firstly, legislator preferences are to some extent 'fixed', meaning that debate will not change these preference as a result of partisan and personal ideology (Bächtiger, Spörndli, Steenbergen, & Steiner, 2005). A debate, in some cases, where the speaker and audience have similar preferences, may lead to a different calculation of what legislative action may best serve these interests, but these instances are relatively rare. Secondly, information shared in the debate is unlikely to be previously unknown or trustworthy (Bächtiger et al., 2005). The legislative process means that once a bill reaches a plenary debate the legislators will have already acquired significant information from party officials and political aides on top of their pre-existing stances. If new information is produced by political opponents, it's highly unlikely that this information will be viewed as trustworthy in comparison to the more established information the legislator has acquired prior to the debate. These problems exist in all cross-party political deliberation but is especially true in

the case of plenary Congressional debates. A bill will have already passed through the committee stage, where legislators with much greater level of expertise, time, and a superior environment for deliberation will have already considered the legislation in detail (C. R. Berry & Fowler, 2018; Lorenz, 2020; Maltzman & Smith, 1994). If preferences are already essentially fixed with significant intra-party consensus having been built prior to the debate, then what is the purpose of lengthy rehearsed plenary speech-making? Rather than influencing the outcomes of legislation, legislative debate allows legislators to communicate their own or the party's positions to an audience of potential voters (Kam, 2009; Maltzman & Sigelman, 1996; L. W. Martin & Vanberg, 2008). Therefore there is an incentive for legislators to use narratives and styles of language that are convincing and attract attention to them. One technique of persuasion may be the use of victimhood narratives. Victimhood narratives can be understood as sub-types of both emotive and moral language, making them potentially highly persuasive.

Moral language is communication which refers to core values and beliefs, usually drawing from Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) which conceptualizes several key axes of morality (Graham et al., 2013). Victimhood narratives, depending on their formulation, could touch upon most if not all of these central moral dimensions. Most obviously, this includes discussions of harm but some victimhood narratives also touch on cheating, disloyalty, unfairness, subversion, and degradation (Graham et al., 2013, p.12-14). Focusing on the harm dimension specifically, Gray and Kubin (2024) argue that victimhood is "the most powerful force in morality and politics" due to the control of harm as a central motivation in cooperation, conflict, and organization. These arguments again emphasize the social and psychological construction of victimhood by focusing on power. Moral value can be assigned or denied based both on socially interpreted events/histories and the degree to which an individual or group has access to the power required to legitimize this victimhood narrative (Chouliaraki, 2024; Gray & Kubin, 2024; Kahalon, Shnabel, Halabi, & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2019). Although it is argued that these moral values and axes are present across all human societies, different societies and groups will express and prioritize them in varying ways and to different degrees (AlSheddi, Russell, & Hegarty, 2020; Graham et al., 2013, p.10).

Scholars have also argued that ideological and partisan differences can be observed in how individuals both perceive and discuss morality (Frimer, 2020; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Wang & Inbar, 2021). The foundational study by Graham et al. (2009) argues that rather than liberals and conservatives differing on degrees of moral thinking, they instead differed on which elements of morality they valued most highly. Liberals tended to value harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, whereas conservatives tended to value binding moral foundations such as group loyalty, authority, and purity to a greater degree. This greater concern with fairness and harm informs some hypotheses around the role of ideology, with the expectation that victimhood narratives are the most likely to be derived from concerns around harm. However, as previously stated victimhood narratives can touch on most of these moral foundations so we may also observe a generally heightened use of victimhood narratives by those with stronger ideological positions.

Moral and emotional language are heavily related concepts, with discussions of morality being significantly more likely to prompt highly emotive language and reactions (Avramova & Inbar, 2013; Huebner, Dwyer, & Hauser, 2009; Prinz, 2006). A victimhood narrative which refers to harms inflicted on civilians by the IRA is inherently discussing moral dimensions of harm but is also highly likely to be expressed and/or trigger feelings of anger, fear, or sadness. It has been demonstrated that emotional appeals can be an effective tool of persuasion by influencing how audiences process information and potentially manipulating their attitudes (Nabi, 1999; Petty, Fabrigar, & Wegener, 2003). Politicians are aware of this, and have been shown to increase their emotional appeals during highly publicized debates in the UK and when C-SPAN was introduced to Congress (Gennaro & Ash, 2022b; Hobolt, Osnabrügge, & Rodon, 2021; Osnabrügge, Hobolt, & Rodon, 2021). Building upon this work I argue that victimhood narratives are a highly affective style of moral narrative triggering powerful emotions such as fear and anger. These narratives combine language intended to display and stir emotion with a moral dimension offering a highly appealing rhetorical strategy for legislators (Gray & Kubin, 2024). These narratives can be effective in mobilizing an ingroup against a perceived injustice, conveying a virtuous sense of victimhood, and a desire to rectify the past injustices (Elster, 1999).

As yet, victimhood has not been measured systematically in day-to-day legislative speeches in either the US or Northern Ireland contexts. Some work has examined the use of these narratives by specific political elites in both stable democracies and deeply divided societies in non-legislative contexts, i.e. public speeches or rallies such as those of Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Slobodan Milošević’s and David Ben-Gurion (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Lerner, 2020). Similar analysis has also highlighted the use of victimhood narratives by political parties and movements including white nationalists as well as populists, highlighting that one core aspect of populism as a style of politics is this attribution of harm against the “people” by the “elites” with these labels referring to different ingroups and outgroups depending on who deploys the narrative (Gerodimos, 2015; Mudde, 2007; Oaten, 2014). I extend this research by looking not only at party or group recruitment and electoral material or speeches intended to rally the public, but in routine speeches by all legislators in the US Congress and NI assembly.

Other related work has examined how legislator characteristics such as gender, race or ideology shapes the communication strategies of legislators (Boussalis, Coan, Holman, & Müller, 2021; Dietrich, Hayes, & O’Brien, 2019; Raubach, 2019; Rittmann, 2024). This research has shown how legislators communicate and behave differently in relation to issues involving identity components, such as minority legislators being more responsive on ethnic issues (Dinesen, Dahl, & Schiøler, 2021; Juenke & Preuhs, 2012). Importantly, the identity of the legislator also shapes voter perception of their behaviour, competency and communication (Fairdosi & Rogowski, 2015; N. S. Martin, 2016; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, & Nitz, 1995). While female legislators generally display more emotion in speeches, they are also more likely to be punished for these displays by potential voters (Boussalis et al., 2021; Gennaro & Ash, 2022a). Given this literature, I also examine how legislator identity may shape the deployment of victimhood narratives. I expect that legislators will be more likely to deploy victimhood narratives on issues that affect those that share their identity markers (i.e. female legislators will be more emotive on issues related to gender). This could be both due to a genuine issue of saliency to that individual legislator, but also as a way to improve their image with voters who share the identity marker.

3. Victimhood Narratives in the United States Congress

This chapter assesses the use of victimhood narratives in the United States Congress from the 1960 through to May 2022. This introductory section will provide an overview of the motivation, research questions, data, and methodology and provide descriptive statistics covering the period of interest. In [the first section](#) I make use of logistic regression models to assess the influence of legislator characteristics, constituency demographics and financial support on the use of victimhood narratives. In the [second](#), I test the effects of increasing visibility of congressional speeches on the use of victimhood narratives by leveraging the staggered introduction of C-SPAN in a differences-in-differences analysis.

3.1. Motivation and Research Questions

While the current literature on collective victimhood has asserted the utility of these narratives for political mobilization and the influencing of the public, the use of this narrative is mostly studied within the context of deeply divided societies and in relation to recent or ongoing conflicts ([Antoniou et al., 2020](#); [Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992a](#); [Vollhardt, 2012](#)). Within the US and similar cases such as the UK, analysis of victimhood narratives has largely focused on either specific ideological/social groups or leaders such as President Trump ([Al-Ghazzi, 2021](#); [Maronitis, 2021](#); [Oaten, 2014](#)). I expand on the current understanding of collective victimhood by examining how and when these narratives are used by political elites in daily deliberative and legislative discussions across two chambers, both main parties and six decades. This is a period of radical changes in U.S. society such as the passage of the Civil Rights Act leading to a rise in female and ethnic minority representation in Congress. This large time-frame also allows me to examine long term patterns as well as shocks such as elections, conflicts or how the introduction of C-SPAN influence the deployment of this highly emotive style of narrative by legislators.

Given that victimhood narratives are shown to be powerful and able to mobilize audiences in much more extreme circumstances such as civil war, I argue that victimhood narratives could be an appealing rhetorical strategy “routine” politics especially

in highly diverse and pluralistic societies such as the U.S. ([Çelebi, Verkuyten, Köse, & Maliepaard, 2014b](#)). I argue that if victimhood narratives are emotionally resonant and effective at mobilizing individuals due to their emotive appeals to moral foundations, then it is worth paying attention to how politicians use these narratives in mundane speeches within congress, especially when discussing related topics ([Graham et al., 2013](#)).

For example, the use of victimhood narratives is highly evocative and commonly used during debates on desegregation and the Civil Rights Act (1964), commonly referred to horrific acts of discrimination such as lynching counteracted with narratives of government overreach and attacks on “Southern values” ([Horwitz, 2018](#)). We can see echoes of this into the modern day, with reactions to police shootings and racial discrimination by the police becoming highly partisan with both parties attempting to utilize victimhood narratives in the debate competitively ([Lavelle, 2017](#)). Understanding victimhood takes on further importance as we see a rise in the prevalence and reach of conspiracy theories and narratives, stemming from political elites primarily from the right including members of congress (MOCs), media figures and former President Trump. Conspiracy theories have included lies about the legitimacy of the 2020 election, vaccine misinformation, and climate change denial.

This style of politics and narrative has also been applied to social groups, with politicians and mainstream news outlets platforming ideas of a “Great Replacement” drawing on a conspiracy theory deeply associated with the post-Nazi far right to claim that Democrats (often associated with famous Jewish people in these narratives such as George Soros) are trying to replace white people with immigrants to sway elections and undermine democracy in an intentional and nefarious scheme ([Ekman, 2022](#)). Similar highly racist conspiracy theories, such as the entirely false claim that Haitian immigrants in Ohio were eating the pets of locals, were similarly spread through conservative news sources to the point of being controversially stated as fact by former President Trump leading to attacks on Haitian immigrants and a bomb threat against Springfield City Hall ([Washington Post, 2024](#)). These victimhood narratives have been repeatedly referenced by far-right terrorists in Europe and the US including Anders Breivik, the Tree of Life synagogue and Buffalo shooters which targeted ethnic mi-

norities and supposed race traitors to “protect” white people from replacement and subjugation by these marginalized groups (Baele, 2019; Obaidi, Kunst, Ozer, & Kimel, 2022; Vanderwee & Droogan, 2023). Legislators validating and propagating victimhood narratives, especially of the conspiratorial type, can therefore risk not only undermining democratic and liberal norms but also providing political support and inspiration to violent extremists.

This chapter therefore uses every speech in the plenary sessions of the United States Congress from 1960 - May 2022 to answer three main research questions:

RQ1 - How prevalent are victimhood narratives and what temporal trends can we observe?

RQ2 - What characteristics of MOCs and their constituencies influence the use of victimhood narratives?

RQ3 - Do MOCs use victimhood narratives instrumentally?

3.2. Data

The main source of data for this chapter is the government maintained *Congressional Record*. Data is taken from 1960 through to May 2022. Data from 2017 and later was collected and parsed using the Python Congressional Parser (Judd, Drinkard, Carbaugh, & Young, 2017). To cover the period from 1960-2017 I use the Stanford collection of parsed congressional records, which stopped updating its records after 2017 (Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Taddy, 2017).¹ This period includes nearly 4.2 million utterances in both chambers of Congress. After collecting the speeches and the name of the MOC, each speech was then enriched using GovTrack’s legislator data to get individual details such as their gender, terms, party, and date of birth (Govtrack, 2024). The racial background of legislators was added manually using the congressional archive (History, Art & Archives, 2024) I also use the DW-NOMINATE dataset to provide a crude measure of the general ideological position of all MOCs (Lewis et al., 2019).

I then collected important constituency level data including racial demographics

¹Speeches were preprocessed together to ensure that formatting remained consistent across years to avoid creating a bias in the classifier

and a range of economic indicators using the American Community Survey Data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). This is further complimented by a measure of how urban or rural the constituency is using the Congressional District Health Dashboard dataset (Dashboard, 2022). As an incomplete but useful measure of lobbyist backing, I make use of OpenSecrets’ PAC and individual donations for each election cycle at the MOC level (OpenSecrets, 2024). These datasets unfortunately do not cover the entirety of my time-frame, with the American Community Surveys only beginning in 2010. This limits some of my analyses around research question 2, when assessing how constituency demographics may effect a legislator’s speeches as in most cases a decade is not a large amount of time to see significant demographic transformations with the exception of significant redrawing of electoral constituencies.

3.3. Constructing the Classifier

Detecting victimhood on a large scale is a complex task, especially when considering the diversity of victimhood narratives from diverse and at times contradictory perspectives. Very little work in the field of quantitative text analysis exists in detecting this style of narrative, with the few examples that exist being heavily domain specific such specific types of extremism or victimization (Boussalis et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024). Rather than relying on a dictionary approach, I decided that a semi-supervised machine-learning classifier using the XGBoost algorithm was the most appropriate method for the task (Chen & Guestrin, 2016). Given that in both the United States and Northern Ireland chapters I am analysing speeches from all parties, ideological perspectives, sexes, and ethnicities represented in these legislatures across many decades any method used must be highly flexible and adaptable. Using a machine-learning classifier trained on a considerable sample of speeches is the most appropriate tool for this problem due to the complexity, variation, and specificity of a victimhood narrative as will be explained throughout this section.

With 4.2 million speeches collected, I proceeded to train a machine-learning classifier on a sample of 13,000 speeches in total. One methodological challenge raised due to the nature of congressional speeches, is that of speech length. Natural language transformers allow models to consider the context of sentences (i.e. grammar

and the position of words), however the performance of these models are limited by their “attention”, meaning that long texts often make the application of these techniques impossible or methodologically invalid. This can lead to large segments of text being lost or losing meaning when applied to very long documents. In the case of the roBERTa transformer, this attention limit is 512 tokens (i.e. words, punctuation symbols or parts of more complex/longer words) (Liu et al., 2019). Often classifiers are trained at the sentence level, however I expect and observe that many victimhood narratives require more than a single sentence to fully articulate, especially when using polite and formal language in the context of a congressional speech. Some Long Range Transformers with an impressive attention limit are available, however they introduce substantial noise especially when the techniques are applied to texts where there’s considerable variation in the length of speeches (Beltagy, Peters, & Cohan, 2020; Qin, Feng, & Van Durme, 2023). Given that some speeches are a few words whilst others contain thousands, this would be a very pronounced issue in my dataset. Instead I split speeches into chunks of sentences that fit within the attention of roBERTa, turning 4.2m speeches into just over 5.6m documents. The classifier is trained from and applied to these documents, with documents being merged back together for the analyses.²

With the documents suitably preprocessed to allow the training of a classifier, there were two challenges posed by trying to classify victimhood, which were:

- (1) Victimhood narratives are complex and diverse
- (2) Victimhood narratives are relatively rare

Due to the complexity and diversity of victimhood narratives, more simplistic text analysis tools such as a lexicon or topic modelling would not be effective. For example, a victimhood narrative discussing gender relations and domestic violence is linguistically much different from someone discussing crime at the border beyond potentially sharing some verbs. This means that existing lexicons such as the Moral Foundations Dictionary which capture language around harm or morality would not be appropriate. While significantly easier to apply and they would likely capture a considerable number of victimhood narratives they would also capture all other discussions of harm

²In cases where a speech contains multiple documents, if any of these documents are flagged as containing victimhood the entirety of the speech is considered to contain victimhood when merged back together.

unrelated to collective victimhood such as for example references to harmful regulation on trade or banking, recounting of individual experiences of being harmed unrelated to intergroup relations, and a multitude of other possible discussions that simply contain a specific verb or adjective ([Hopp, Fisher, Cornell, Huskey, & Weber, 2021](#)).

Given the 60 years of data to be assessed, certain words that may be identified to be highly present in victimhood narratives will likely not be indicators of victimhood for the entirety of the period. The changing meaning of words both in time and context remains an issue with a classifier approach as these models will treat a word vector as essentially carrying the same meaning whenever it is observed ([Rodman, 2020](#)). As I do not train multiple classifiers for different time windows to avoid potential issues with validity of comparing results from distinct models, this problem likely introduces a considerable amount of noise to the classifier. However, given enough training data sampled from across the time period I aim to create a classifier capable of detecting the underlying structure(s) of victimhood narratives that is not overly dependent on specific vectors or words to limit this problem.

As the literature largely focuses on the psychological feeling of victimhood and how leaders attempt to activate this feeling, less attention has been paid to how victimhood claims or narratives are structured linguistically or how to define a victimhood narrative. However, some work has analysed specific leaders or political movements through detailed discourse analyses, which traces specific features of victimhood narratives deployed by leaders ([Cole & Riley, 2008](#); [Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024](#)). These works largely focus on who is framed as victim and perpetrator, as well as the type of harm that is perpetuated, such as supposed attacks on white Americans by a broadly defined elite seeking to degrade and weaken American society to establish partisan or ideological domination over conservatives. As defined earlier, collective victimhood is a perception or feeling that a group has been unjustly and intentionally harmed by another ([Vollhardt, 2012](#)). A simple working definition of a collective victimhood claim or narrative would therefore be the use of language to illicit either the feeling of or perception of group-based victimhood in the audience. But to offer a sharper definition, a collective victimhood narrative assigns blame for the unjust harm suffered by one group on the intentional behaviour of another group. A similar definition is

used in [Gray and Kubin \(2024\)](#) for both individual and collective victimhood, framing discussion of victimhood as essentially being a question of ”whether someone has been unjustly harmed at the hands of another person?”

Taking these definitions, the rubric used to annotate the training data required that a speech must contain the following to be considered a collective victimhood narrative:

- An ingroup or victim group that the speaker sympathizes with.
- An outgroup or perpetrator that the speaker disagrees with.
- An accusation of intentional unjust harm, with harm broadly defined.

A speech in which all of these components are obvious and explicit is considered the “ideal” type of victimhood narrative. However, given the complexity of victimhood narratives, there are a number of important exceptions and nuances which are detailed in [Appendix A](#) along with the full rubric. While using this rubric ensured that each text was analysed in a consistent manner throughout consecutive rounds of annotation, the diversity of these narratives combined with the relative rarity of this style of narrative raised further methodological problems. Given that a classifier must have enough annotated training data to distinguish between positive and negative cases, this becomes more complicated if there’s a large number of distinct types of victimhood narratives that are themselves diverse in presentation and styling. To account for this problem, the sampling of data to construct the training set was essential.

Overall, I hand-annotated 13,000 documents over three rounds each with distinct sampling strategies. An initial pilot round found that annotating randomly with a balance between parties lead to a massive class imbalance that made this approach unfeasible. In order to solve the class imbalance I first used topic-modelling and the candidate NOMINATE ideology scores to increase the likelihood of finding positive cases of victimhood. Using LDA topic modelling, I over-sampled from topics that I expected to be more likely to include victimhood narratives such as discussions of human rights, race, and war especially from those that are the most ideologically extreme on both the left and the right ([Ramage, Hall, Nallapati, & Manning, 2009](#)). This round was more effective, but still suffered from quite a large class imbalance. To augment the training set further, I used an LLM to automatically annotate a large

number of speeches. For this I made use of the open-source LLM model Mistral 2 (Karamcheti et al., 2021). Early tests and validation showed that this was not a viable strategy for annotating the text directly, but it did significantly increase the number of positive cases when these machine-labelled texts were hand-coded.³ The prompt used for this step is included in Appendix B. With each sampling technique, I ensured that samples were taken equally from each chamber, congressional session, and both parties as well as being balanced with some truly random sampling to limit potential biases introduced through the targeted sampling strategies. Finally, the annotated data still had a significant imbalance towards negative cases due to the earlier rounds of annotation. To limit, though not entirely resolve this class imbalance, I under-sampled from the negative cases to create a final training set of 7898 with 1500 positive cases.

Classifier	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1 Score	AUC	Brier Score
XGBoost	0.86 ± 0.02	0.81 ± 0.03	0.79 ± 0.03	0.80 ± 0.02	0.84 ± 0.02	0.11
Random Forest	0.85 ± 0.02	0.81 ± 0.02	0.75 ± 0.03	0.78 ± 0.03	0.82 ± 0.02	0.12
AdaBoost	0.83 ± 0.01	0.77 ± 0.02	0.76 ± 0.01	0.77 ± 0.01	0.82 ± 0.01	0.23
SGDClassifier	0.85 ± 0.03	0.80 ± 0.1	0.77 ± 0.2	0.76 ± 0.09	0.82 ± 0.06	0.11
SVM	0.79 ± 0.02	0.68 ± 0.02	0.83 ± 0.01	0.74 ± 0.02	0.80 ± 0.01	0.13

Table 1. Classifier performance metrics

With the training data labelled and the text optimized for modelling, I then tested five models including Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forests, Gradient Boosting, Stochastic Gradient Descent (SGD) Boosting and eXtreme Gradient Boosting (XGB) (Breiman, 2001; Chen & Guestrin, 2016; Friedman, 2001, 2002). All classifiers were trained with binary labels, with a document either being classed as containing or not containing a victimhood narrative. Each of these models are arguably appropriate for the problem posed, though some more than others. Imbalanced training data is always a challenge in machine-learning contexts, but each of these models can in different ways limit the impact of this on the performance of the classifier. SVM and Random Forests are the least suited towards this task as their ability to adjust for class imbalance is less sophisticated with reliance on resampling or increasing the

³Inter-coder reliability between Mistral’s labels and hand-coded labels reached a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.57. This meant that taking cases where the LLM labelled the speech as containing victimhood was more likely to be correct than false. However this is still too low and would significantly harm the accuracy of the classifier if used directly.

weight of the imbalanced class during training often introducing significant issues with over- and under-fitting (More & Rana, 2017; Sun, Lim, & Liu, 2009). The Gradient Boosting models, while still sensitive to class imbalance, have been found to provide significant performance improvements over Random Forests and other classification methods (Bentéjac, Csörgő, & Martínez-Muñoz, 2021). Similarly to Random Forests, these algorithms are decision tree ensemble methods meaning that they are a combination of weak predictors to make an overall more effective predictor. In contrast, gradient boosting involves the iterative improvement of the algorithm by focusing on resolving misclassifications. Given that these predictors will be more likely to get the minority class incorrect, this means that the algorithm ‘focuses’ more attention on learning from these minority classes (Cahyana, Khomsah, & Aribowo, 2019). While this can introduce problems with over-fitting, the use of k-fold validation as discussed below provides a measure of how problematic that is for each classifier. As shown in Table 1 XGBoost performed the best with an F1 accuracy score of 0.8, with quite small differences across most metrics with not only the other gradient boosting models but also the Random Forests model. The SVM classifier was by far the weakest, although the Brier score of the AdaBoost model indicates that while its predictions are generally accurate the probability assigned to class estimates are highly unreliable to the point of having almost the same score as completely random predictions of probabilities. This means that the model is either over- or under-confident in its predictions likely driven by the noise of the data and complexity of victimhood narratives as a observable element of speeches. Comparatively, the other models are all significantly more accurate in their assignment of probabilities but retain significant degrees of uncertainty in their predictions. To validate the performance of this model and as significant class imbalance remained in the training set, I made use of stratified k-fold validation (Rodriguez, Perez, & Lozano, 2009). This involves comparing numerous iterations of the classifier trained and tested on different balanced samples of the data and assessing how much this influences the overall performance of the model. In the XGBoost model, all key metrics varied by only 0.02-0.03 across all 5 k-folds. This provides some indication that this model will generalize onto unseen data and across multiple types of victimhood. I chose the XGBoost classifier due to these performance

metrics with Gradient Boost models being the natural choice for a high noise and imbalanced dataset.

Looking beyond these metrics of statistical validity, we can also assess face validity by investigating the outputted classifications. A few illustrative examples demonstrate that this model is capturing the intended phenomenon.

Example 1

“Yesterday I was discussing the strange judicial decisions which have been handed down to implement the demands of certain pressure groups and the demands of certain very sincere citizens that the public schools should be forcibly integrated regardless of the wishes of the parents and the schoolchildren attending the schools. [...] The only reason they gave for this was that the children given the freedom of choice to go to any school did not mix themselves racially in the undefined proportions which the Supreme Court Justices sitting in that case thought they should have done. In other words, schoolchildren and the parents of schoolchildren can have freedom in this land of ours if, and only if, they exercise their freedom in an undefined manner pleasing to Supreme Court Justices. But if American citizens who happen to be children or the parents of children elect to exercise their freedom according to their own judgments rather than in the manner in which Supreme Court Justices think they ought to exercise it, they can have no freedom. I deny that under the Constitution of my country the freedom of Americans hangs on such an arbitrary and such a capricious and such a tenuous judicial thread as that.”

These excerpts from a speech by Southern Democrat Senator Ervin in 1970 display a clear victimhood narrative opposing desegregation generally and bussing specifically. There is an attribution of explicit harm with the denial of freedom/parental choice, an attribution of a perpetrator (Supreme Court explicitly, Civil Rights movement implicitly), and a broad reference to victims, including both the American people and affected parents/children denied this freedom.

Example 2

“Mr. Chairman. as a recent Forbes magazine article conveyed: For going on 40 years. the United States has been sacrificing national economic Interests to the bigger cause of keeping the free world prosperous. Simple arithmetic says the party is over. Since World War II. the United States has permitted foreign countries to freely use their advantages of domestic subsidies. national export targeting strategies. and lower defense spending burdens to bite off huge chunks of the U.S. market. This must be stopped. Provisions of H.R. 3 go a long way toward ending unfair practices which rob American industry and workers of a fair shake when competing in world markets.”

Example 3

The Homeland Security Act brought together a number of Federal agencies with homeland security functions into one collaborative effort. joining resources. information and missions to defend our Nation. Protecting our Nation from attack requires strengthening our border defenses. We must know who and what is passing through our country.”

These two examples demonstrate somewhat similar victimhood narratives of national victimhood and imperilment, with the first explicitly referring to foreign countries taking advantage of the U.S. to 'rob' American industries and workers from 1987. The second is a post-9/11 victimhood narrative about strengthening border security. This narrative is less explicit in terms of perpetrator, however there is an implied threat from the "who and what" which the nation requires defence from.

Example 4

This lectern holds the faces of about 55 or 60 children who have been damaged, their parents believe, by vaccines that contain mercury and they have become autistic. One of those is my grandson. It is very interesting. Madam Speaker, that today we found out that there is a justpublished report in the ""Journal of the American Association of Physicians and Surgeons"" that involves a research study on autism. [...] We had a big problem in the last session. Right at the end in the homeland security bill, there was an amendment stuck in at the 11th hour which took away any liability that the pharmaceutical companies might incur because of mercury related damage done to children. We were able to get that out early this session. But now in the other body they are trying to put that back in in a bill that was introduced today by the majority leader. That is something that is intolerable.

This final example gives some reassurance that this classifier is capable of capturing at least some form of an underlying structure to victimhood narratives. As anti-vaccine victimhood narratives, at least prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were relatively rare in U.S. legislative speech I did not capture any vaccine hesitant victimhood narratives in my training set. Despite this, the model has accurately captured a clear instance of a victimhood narrative informed by anti-vaccine misinformation organizations about supposed harm inflicted upon children by pharmaceutical corporations. This is a reassuring sign that the classifier is capable of detecting types and expressions of victimhood narrative beyond the exact types that it was trained upon.

To provide a more nuanced understanding of what type of victimhood narrative is deployed in a positive case, I made use of a lexicon approach to detect several topics of interest.⁴ This allows the analysis to distinguish between victimhood narratives occurring within speeches discussing race relations versus those discussing international relations or international terrorism. The full lexicon can be found in [Appendix C](#). These were created by an initial collection of seed words (e.g. ‘african american’ for

⁴This approach was chosen after a number of iterations of a seeded LDA model failed to produce coherent topics related to the narratives of interest. This was likely due to the length of speeches introducing too much noise for the LDA method to produce converging and meaningful results.

the topic of race), which was then enriched further word2vec to find other words or phrases that were highly related in semantic meaning and co-occurrence within the corpus of documents (Mikolov, 2013).

With these steps, I produced a validated classifier that is able to detect victimhood narratives across the entirety of my corpus. Despite encouraging results in the k-fold validation, there are two main limitations to the approach.

The first is that significant class imbalance remains within the training set. Although the samples were drawn from across the entirety of the period and from both main parties, it is possible that certain narratives are either over or under-represented in the positive cases due to the random nature of sampling. Figure 3 indicates that the classifier is certainly capable of identifying victimhood narratives across the diverse set of topics. However, given that I have no *a priori* expectations on the actual distribution of victimhood narratives between topics, there remains a chance that the classifier is more capable on certain topics than others.

The second is that while the lexicon approach may indicate the general topic of the victimhood narrative, some characteristics of the victimhood narrative remain unclear following classification. For example, we might be able to tell if a narrative relates to race, but not if this speech is referring to attacks on the police relating to protests around racial issues or the murder of ethnic minorities by police officers. We may be able to make some assumptions from the speaker’s party as to who is being framed as the victim, but this would be a very crude measure. Some methods to extract the contextual relations between groups exist. However the length and complexity of congressional speeches limits their effectiveness as often references to groups can be implicit and multiple groups may be referred to with complex webs of inter-relation which become impossible to interpret at the individual speech level in a large-N analysis (Baele, Boyd, Coan, & Naserian, 2023). A secondary limitation posed by the lexicon approach is shown in Appendix C. Some important words such as “white” or “black” are not included as terms, due to the limitation that lexicons ignore context entirely and would therefore pick up any discussion of the colour regardless of if it was referring to people.

3.4. Descriptive Statistics

This section provides an exploratory analysis of how collective victimhood has varied in congressional speeches from 1960-2022 across parties and chambers of congress. While these descriptive statistics can not directly test hypotheses, we can begin to assess patterns and dynamics that will be evaluated in more detail in the remaining chapters of this section. I make three assumptions:

- (1) Victimhood narratives will increase over-time.
- (2) Representatives will make use of more victimhood narratives than Senators
- (3) Democrats will make use of victimhood narratives more regularly

I expect to observe an overall rise in victimhood narratives throughout the time series. As victimhood narratives are likely to be highly emotive, this assumption is built upon existing literature which has found that US legislative speech has become more emotionally with a significant upsurge in the 70s coinciding with a surge in polarization in American political culture ([Gennaro & Ash, 2022a](#); [Poole & Rosenthal, 2007](#)). Similarly, I expect this rise will be more pronounced for representatives as stronger incentives for more emotional, extreme and polarizing narratives appear obvious given the quicker election cycles for representatives in contrast to the Senate that is conventionally valued for its more courteous culture and higher quality debates ([Uslaner, 2000](#)).⁵ The expectation that Democrats will deploy more victimhood narratives is largely derived from the expectation that it is easier for the average MOC to deploy a victimhood narrative if it is both relevant to those most likely to vote for them and is more easily tied to observable victimization, discrimination, or marginalization. As the Democratic Party has increasingly come to represent and rely on ethnic minority and female voters, I expect they will discuss bigotry, marginalization and discrimination more frequently than Republicans and are more likely to frame these issues in an emotive way likely referring to victimhood narratives ([Harris, 2014](#); [Haynie & Watts, 2010](#)).

The following two figures compare the use of victimhood narratives over-time using

⁵There is some debate as to how true this perception is in the modern day with evidence that the Senate has gone through a significant upswing in polarization through the latter half of the 20th century [Abramowitz \(2012\)](#); [Theriault and Rohde \(2011\)](#).

the monthly percentage of speeches that contained a victimhood narrative.

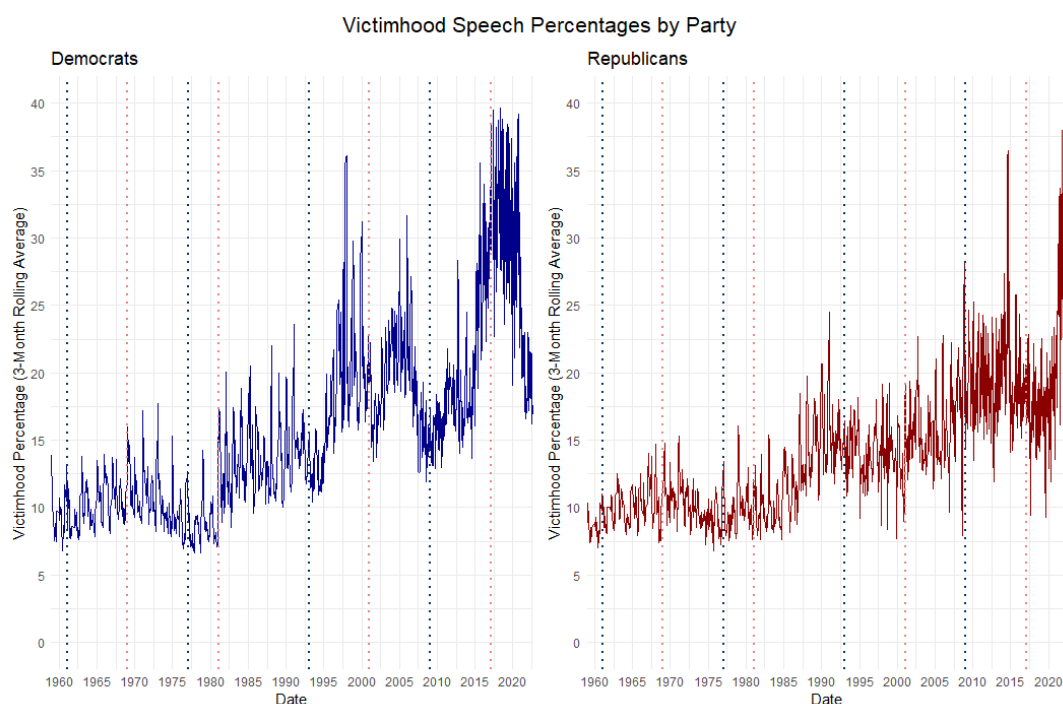


Figure 1. Victimhood Comparison by Party

As can be seen in [Figure 1](#), Democrats do appear to be more willing to use victimhood narratives. The dotted lines indicate when control of the Executive switches between parties. While there are a number of considerable spikes around these dates, these upswings seem to occur to both parties regardless of if they lost or gained the presidency in a relatively symmetrical manner. There are some considerable spikes in the monthly percentages that are primarily caused by recesses in congress where very few speeches are made leading to outlier high or low monthly averages. This does give an early indication that Democrats will make use of victimhood averages more often than Republicans, which will be investigated more thoroughly when analysing the effect of legislator characteristics.

In [Figure 2](#) it appears that the House tends to trend slightly higher and more consistently, but not by a large margin, compared to the Senate. In both figures we see a large upswing starting in the 90s, and another upsurge in the 2010s with further peaks around the Trump presidency.

To get a sense of the type of victimhood narratives being deployed, [Figure 3](#) shows

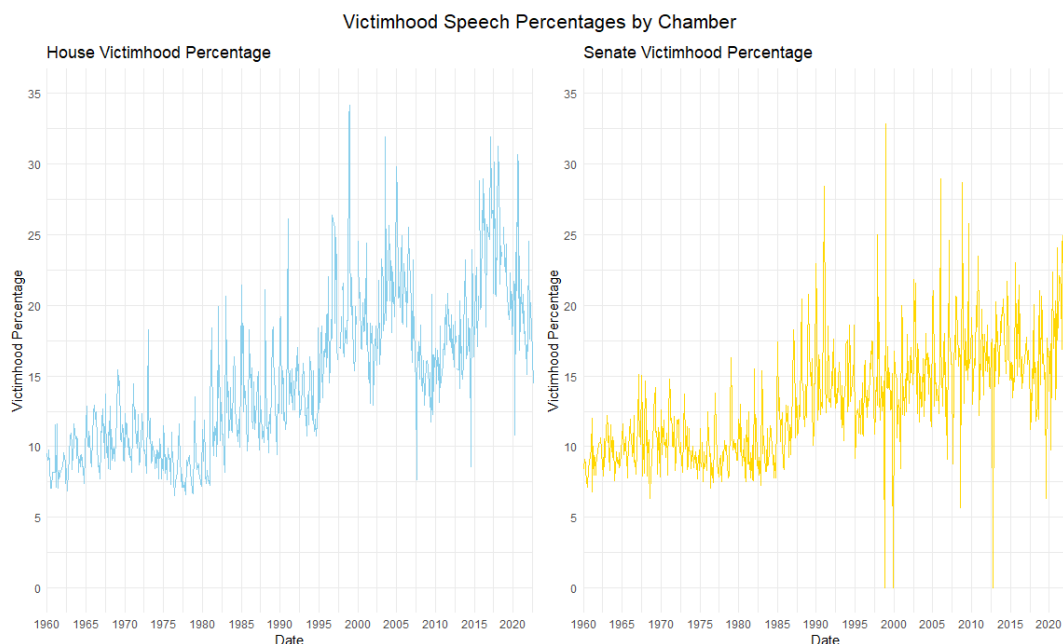


Figure 2. Victimhood Comparison by Chamber

the prevalence of topics of interest assigned according to my lexicon. This shows the total percentage of speeches that refer to these topics in the entirety of the corpus as well as what proportion of speeches mentioning these topics contains a victimhood narrative. These results are generally intuitive, in that broader and more commonly discussed topics such as geopolitics and party politics appear more often. The classifier seems able to capture victimhood narratives regardless of the topic to some degree. A limitation of the lexicon approach may explain the relatively low proportion of speeches discussing gender, as key words such as “man” or “woman” are too broad to be used as terms in lexicons which are held back by being unable to use the context of words or sentences. More specific topics such as abortion and gun-rights appear less frequently, but significant proportions of these topics remain victimhood narratives. Given the taboo against queer communities and the discussion of issues related to them, especially in the earlier decades of the dataset, it is not surprising that this is the least common topic. [Figure 4](#) shows how commonly these topics appear across the time series. Some of these remain quite stable, for example geopolitics even with identifiable peaks around pivotal events such as 9/11 or the fall of the USSR. Others see quite sudden changes, such as religion which in the 80s becomes a lot more prevalent

then again seeing a large spike around 9/11. Narrower topics such as abortion and LGBTQ+ see periodic spikes and rises but otherwise remain quite low, tending to become more present around salient events such as supreme court challenges or rulings on cases related to these topics. Many of these topics are highly partisan issues such as guns, immigration and race and I expect that these topics are most likely to be deployed closer to elections.

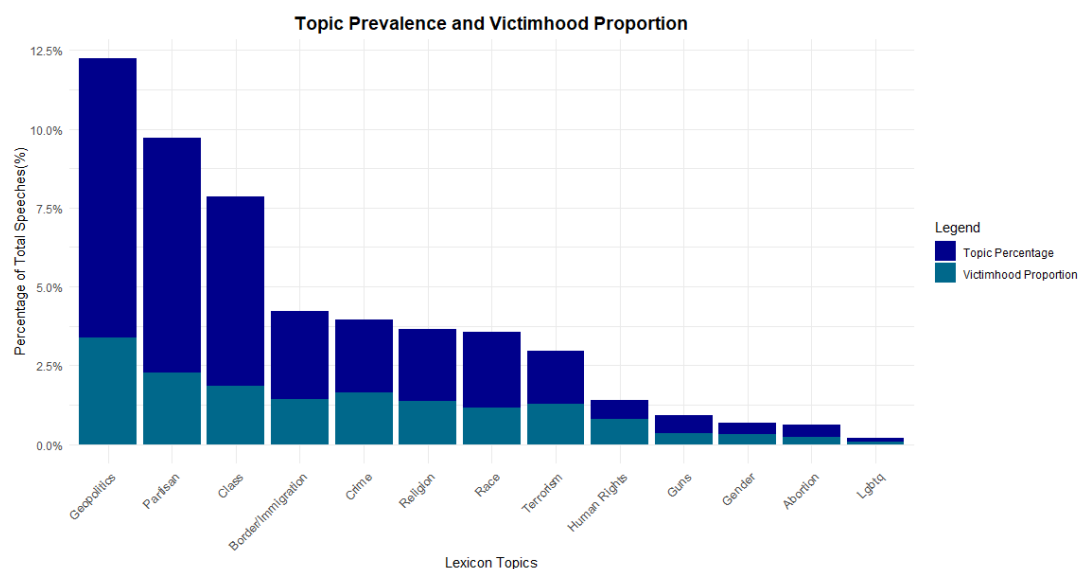


Figure 3. Percentage of speeches relevant to topics of interest

Overall we can observe that there seems to be an upward trend in the use of collective victimhood narratives across both chambers and parties with a diverse and heterogeneous distribution across the topics of interest. There is some initial support to the idea that Democrats are more likely to use victimhood narratives and that these are becoming more common overtime, however the difference between the Senate and the House is less clear from the visual comparisons. These dynamics will be assessed and identified more clearly in the following sections.

Percentage of Speeches containing Victimhood by Topic

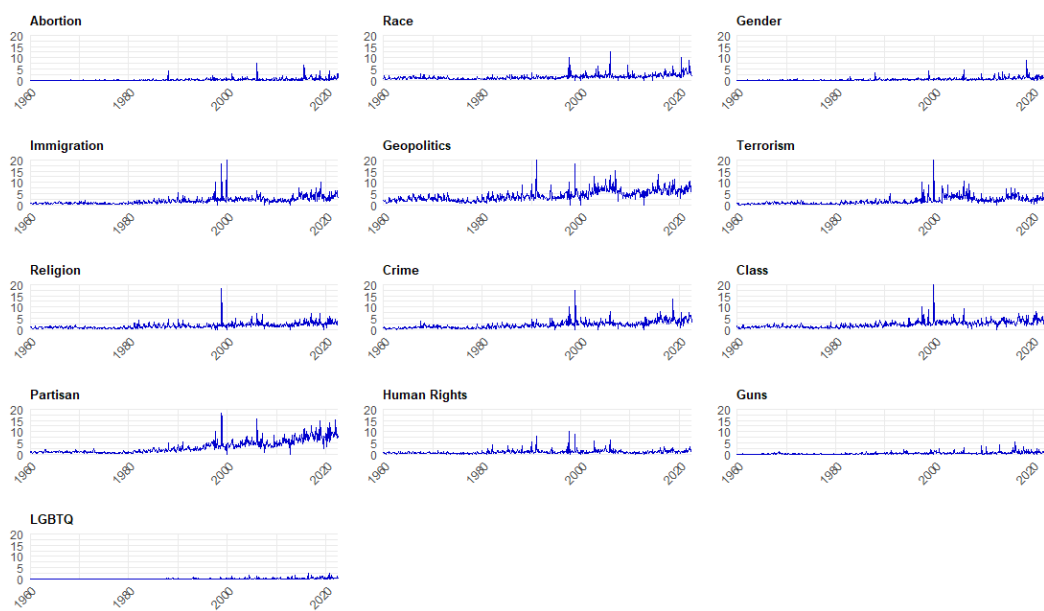


Figure 4. Percentage of speeches relevant to topics of interest

3.5. Legislator and Constituency Characteristics: Who uses victimhood narratives?

In this section, I will assess the influence of legislator characteristics and constituency demographics on the use of victimhood narratives in Congress. Understanding who uses these narratives will allow us to understand some of the mechanisms by which an individual might choose to deploy this extreme style of narrative.

Theory and Hypotheses

Victimhood narratives are a highly affective rhetorical tool as they draw upon feelings of both group identity and morality (Chouliaraki, 2024; Gray & Kubin, 2024). The intentional and strategic use of emotive language can be an effective tool to signal a legislator's position, appeal to voters, or attack opposition (Kosmidis, Hobolt, Molloy, & Whitefield, 2019). However, the social identity of legislators plays an important role in both explaining their behaviour and understanding how they are perceived by voters.

Research has shown that voters are often more mobilized by candidates who share their identity markers. For example, minority voters are more likely to support candidates who share racial characteristics (Fairosi & Rogowski, 2015; N. S. Martin, 2016). At the same time, a large body of literature notes that majority groups tend to evaluate minority legislators less favourably, and in some cases, may be less willing to vote for them (Lerman & Sadin, 2016; Sigelman et al., 1995; Terkildsen, 1993). Minority legislators are also found to respond differently to constituent needs. Moving beyond symbolic representation, evidence suggests that minority legislators are more attentive to minority constituents, relevant issues, and debates (Dinesen et al., 2021; Griffin, 2014; Juenke & Preuhs, 2012). The impact of identity on behaviour and voter evaluations is nuanced, as various elements of a legislator's identity including gender, class, partisanship, and lobbying intersect with both self-interested political posturing and genuine intragroup loyalty (Berkman, 1994; Ward, 2016).

Social identity also shapes political communication, not only in topic selection but also in strategy. Studies document that both online and congressional communication

reflect aspects of identity such as emotional expressiveness and style in speech and body language (Butler, Kousser, & Oklobdzija, 2023; Gennaro & Ash, 2022a; Osborn & Mendez, 2010). Social identity can shape the strategies of speakers who intentionally choose to speak for certain identity groups, such as expressing remorse or sympathy for those that have been victimized. However, the speaker's rhetoric is also deciphered by audiences which can vary according to the identity of the speaker. For instance, stereotypes around identity markers can lead to audiences viewing a man's anger as more legitimate or permissible than a woman's anger (Boussalis et al., 2021). This could also influence how audiences interpret victimhood narratives or their reaction to them. For example, victimhood claims on behalf of or by a Black American may be rejected outright either by people of other communities as entirely false or rejected for entirely different reasons by those within the community who prefer more positive self-perceptions of their identity groups (Nair, 2024; Selvanathan, Jetten, & Umeh, 2023). Building on these findings, I argue that understanding both the characteristics of the legislator and the intended audience is essential for analysing the use of collective victimhood narratives in congressional speech.

This section evaluates the factors that influence the use of victimhood narratives in Congress, including:

- Legislator personal identity markers and characteristics
- The demographics of each MOC's constituency
- Financial support from single-issue and industry donors

Across two analyses, I test seven hypotheses. The first two hypotheses are focused on testing whether marginalized groups are more likely to employ victimhood narratives. For legislators from groups historically and presently targeted for victimization and marginalization due to their personal characteristics, such as women and ethnic minorities, it is expected that narratives addressing these experiences will be more salient for those that belong to these social groups. Additionally, since minority and female candidate often receive greater support from those who share these identity markers, discussing these issues in compelling ways may be an effective strategy for mobilizing their supporters (R. Campbell & Heath, 2017; Dolan, 1998). However, some

literature which focuses on the role of power in mediating the use of victimhood narratives suggest alternative dynamics for the marginalized. [Chouliaraki \(2024\)](#) argues that victimhood claims are inherently about power, and if one claims victimhood this can be as a consequence of lacking power or in an attempt to gain power. From this we can draw two contradictory expectations. The first is that as marginalized communities have been denied power on the basis of their identity, they will be more likely to make claims of victimhood as an attempt to remedy this. However, if a group is sufficiently marginalized, members of this group could feel that they are not entitled to claim victimhood or avoid making these claims to avoid consequences from the more powerful ([Kaiser & Miller, 2001](#)). If we follow this second expectation then we may expect that majority and more powerful groups would be more likely to use victimhood than minorities and marginalized ([Chouliaraki, 2024](#)). But given the context of legislative speech, I expect that both the lived experience of these relatively powerful individuals (as elected MOCs) and the need to appeal to their specific electorate (which was likely at least partially influenced by the legislator's identity signifiers) that we will observe a greater use of victimhood narratives amongst minority and marginalized groups.

I expect that both ideology and partisan identity will significantly influence the use of victimhood narratives. As discussed in the literature review, [Graham et al. \(2009\)](#) argues that liberals and conservatives draw upon different moral foundations when making political judgements and discussing issues. Given that liberals are more concerned with harm and fairness, which I expect is more central to being concerned about victimhood, I expect that Democrats are more likely to use victimhood narratives than Republicans. This may also be amplified by the reliance of Democrats on voters from marginalized groups who expect to be advocated for and their concerns heard ([Harris, 2014](#)). I also expect that more ideologically (both left and right) extreme legislators will use more victimhood narratives. Ideologically-driven legislators are noted for using more emotionally varied and intense speech, which may correlate with a higher frequency of victimhood narratives ([Diermeier, Godbout, Yu, & Kaufmann, 2012](#); [Raubach, 2019](#)). Not only do individuals with more radical political ideologies tend to be more expressive and emotive, but studies on populist and extremist movements also argue that a sense of victimhood is core to a diversity of political

ideologies (Furlow, 2012; Gerodimos, 2015; Gray & Kubin, 2024; Marcks & Pawelz, 2022). I therefore expect that a more ideologically radical Democrat or Republican is significantly more likely to deploy victimhood narratives than more centrist colleagues. Despite expecting to observe this on both the left and the right, I expect that due to differences in moral foundations that there will be a greater effect for left-wing ideology.

The first four hypotheses are therefore as follows:

H1: *Female MOCs will use victimhood narratives more often than male MOCs*

H2: *Ethnic minority MOCs will use victimhood narratives more often than White MOCs*

H3: *Democrats will be more likely to use victimhood narratives than Republicans*

H4: *Legislators with less moderate ideologies will use more victimhood narratives, especially when they are left-wing*

I expect that generally these effects will be additive. For example, a female Black Democrat will use more victimhood narratives than a female white Democrat but I will also test for interaction effects to check for more complicated relationships between certain demographic variables. Literature on intersectional identity and discrimination has highlighted how individuals who are both privileged in one aspect and marginalized in another may emphasize their privilege as a tool to maintain social esteem and position at the cost of other marginalized individuals (Hale & Ojeda, 2018; Hooks, 2004; Ware, 2015). In some cases this could mean that for example black men may discuss their racial victimhood less and emphasize the more powerful social position as men.⁶

Finally, I examine the role of constituent demographics and donor support in shaping the use of victimhood narratives. As representatives, MOCs are expected to reflect the concerns of their constituents. Specifically, in districts with marked racial and class dynamics, victimhood narratives may resonate more with the experiences of their constituents.

⁶This specific interaction effect between gender and race is tested in Table G which suggests that these effects are additive rather than multiplicative.

H5: *MOCs representing poorer districts will use more victimhood narratives related to class*

H6: *MOCs representing more ethnically diverse states will be more likely to use victimhood narratives related to race*

H7: *MOCs with greater levels of support from donors relevant to a type of victimhood narrative will be more likely to deploy these victimhood narratives*

Methods and Data

These hypotheses will be assessed over two sets of analyses on different samples of the data.

The first analysis leverages the full dataset, concentrating on characteristics specific to legislators, including ideology, race, age, chamber, and tenure. Initially, I conduct t-tests to compare mean differences across these key attributes, providing insight into distinctions between groups of legislators. Following this, I apply mixed effects regression models at the legislator level to evaluate how these demographics influence the yearly percentage of speeches made by each legislator that contain a victimhood narrative. This mixed effects model includes year fixed effects to control for unobserved time-specific influences, while incorporating random effects for legislators to account for unobserved individual-level variation. These analyses enable a comparison across demographic and ideological profiles, highlighting which characteristics most significantly influence a legislator's use of victimhood narratives. This analysis allows me to assess how legislator identity influences use of victimhood narratives but as I do not have adequate census or lobbying data stretching across my time series this will be supplemented with a second set of analyses.

This secondary analysis narrows the scope to a subset of data from 2010 to 2022, allowing for the incorporation of additional demographic and lobbying related variables. While this limits my ability to make inferences prior to this time window, I am able to merge constituency demographic and economic measures as well as high quality data on lobbying activity. Specifically, this subset facilitates the use of data from OpenSecrets and the American Community Survey, adding measures of each leg-

islator’s constituency demographics alongside data on campaign funding from diverse interest groups ([OpenSecrets, 2024](#)). OpenSecrets systematically tracks campaign financing for each election cycle at the candidate level, categorizing contributions by industry and issue area. As illustrated in [Table 2](#), the typology of donors includes various single issue groups as well as major industries, enabling an examination of how funding sources align with narrative styles in debates.

For both sets of analyses I also provide some important controls such as the length of the MOC’s tenure, the chamber the legislator is in, partisan controls of different branches of governance and the partisan balance within the legislator’s chamber. In these analyses I also assess the relative effect of left and right ideology. This involves transforming the DW-NOMINATE ideology score from a scale between -1 (left) and +1 (right) to two distinct absolute scores scaled from 0-10. This means that all of those considered left will be a 0 on right ideology and vice versa, with each unit of the new variables corresponding with 0.1 in the original scale. This transformation was important, as I expect a non-linear relationship between the original ideology variable and victimhood, as those closer to 0 are less ideological, and thus I expect would use victimhood narratives less than those closer to -1 or 1.

Results

In my first set of analyses on the entirety of the dataset, I begin with a range of group-level t-tests across legislator characteristics, assessing whether there are significant differences in the likelihood that any single speech contains a victimhood narrative across these groups. As seen in [Figure 5](#), this covers legislator ethnicity, party, gender, and terms in office. I then also further combine and sub-categorize some of these variables to assess combinations of characteristics as gender, race, or party relate to the group-level probability.

These group-level comparisons provide support to *Hypotheses 1-3* in that we observe women, ethnic minority (with the exception of Arab and indigenous), and Democratic legislators have a higher probability of deploying victimhood narratives in each speech they make. Minority legislators make use of between 3-4% more victimhood narratives than white legislators on average per year, with the exception of Arab legislators that

Industry	Issue
Agriculture	Union
Construction	Anti-Union
Entertainment	Pro-Gun
Defense	Anti-Gun
Energy	Arab
Finance	Israel
Communication/Technology	LGBTQ+
Health	Christian Conservative
	Hawks
	Doves
	Ethnic Minority
	Conservative
	Liberal

Table 2. OpenSecrets Donor Categories

use them the least. We also observe clear differences along gender lines. White women and minority women have a yearly average of 11.8% and 12.1% respectively in comparison to 7.8% and 10.8% for white and minority men. This primacy of gender also holds when considering partisan identity, with female Democrats and Republicans being significantly more likely to use victimhood narratives than both their co-partisans and male opponents ⁷.

At the party level there is a small difference between Republicans and Democrats with means of 7.9% and 9.1%, but with Independents reaching 13%. During the observed time period, nearly all independent members of Congress either caucus with the Democrats, have a background as former Democrats but moved leftwards, or were former liberal Republicans. The combination of these factors, alongside the relatively small sample size, provides a potential intuitive explanation as many of these independents possess distinct and strongly held ideologies tying into hypothesis 4.

I also observe that first-term legislators use slightly more victimhood narratives on

⁷In total there are 221 female Democratic legislators in my dataset, 69 of whom belong to an ethnic minority group while there are 113 female Republican legislators of whom only 10 represent a minority group. This imbalance should be kept in mind when assessing these group level differences

average, with a gradual and mostly linear decline per subsequent term.

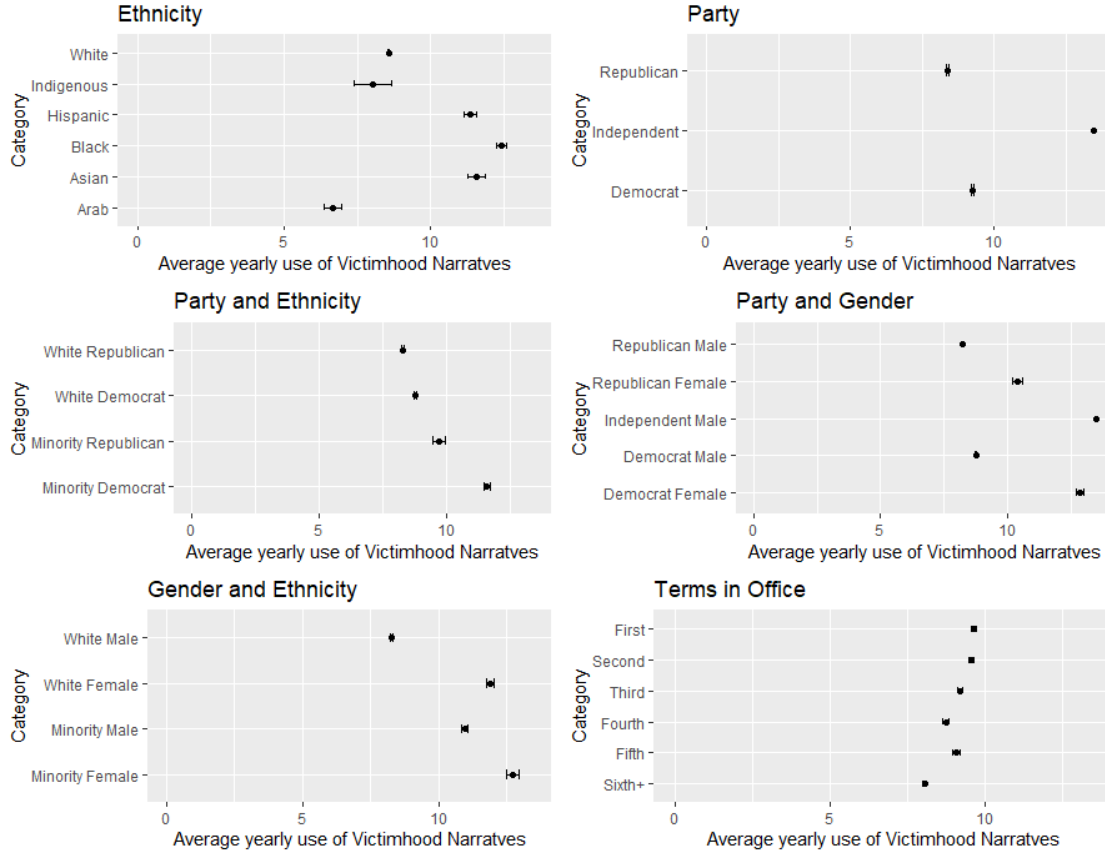


Figure 5. Comparison of Group Means 1960-2022

While these results provide some initial evidence to support my first three hypotheses, I further test these at both the general victimhood narrative level and with sub-types of victimhood narrative using mixed effects linear regressions models.

As illustrated in [Table 3](#), men on average use 1.8% fewer victimhood narratives than women lending support to *hypothesis 1*. This is quite a large effect given the relatively rare usage of victimhood narratives across all groups as show in [Figure 5](#). I also find support for my second hypothesis, as minority legislators use 1% more victimhood narratives than white legislators on average. In contrast, my findings do not provide support for *hypothesis 3*, as partisan identity does not appear to be statistically significant. Finally, I find substantial support for *hypothesis 4*: for each unit increase in a legislator's left ideology scale, there is a 0.95% increase in the percentage of victimhood narratives used while a smaller effect of 0.48% is observed for right

Table 3. Regression of Victimhood by Legislator Characteristics

<i>Dependent variable: Victimhood Narratives</i>	
Male	−1.817*** (0.378)
Minority	1.043*** (0.390)
Republican	−0.169 (0.284)
Left Ideology	0.954*** (0.082)
Right Ideology	0.478*** (0.067)
Age	0.102 (0.132)
Years in Office	−0.018** (0.008)
Senate	2.380*** (0.219)
Executive Control	−0.629*** (0.090)
Chamber Control	−1.593*** (0.112)
Balance of Power	−0.623*** (0.064)
Constant	10.031*** (0.606)
Observations	30,213
Log Likelihood	−104,567.000
Akaike Inf. Crit.	209,162.000
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	209,278.500

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

ideology. These dual observations suggests that the ideological positioning on both sides of the spectrum is relevant in shaping the prevalence of victimhood narratives within congressional speeches. [Appendix G](#) also provides additional support to this hypothesis by illustrating the substantial effect of ideology amongst co-partisans in both parties. Given the different effect sizes between left and right ideology variables this also conforms with my expectations that victimhood narratives are more likely to be used by those with more liberal moral foundations.

As a further step in this analysis, I test the same model on each sub-type of collective victimhood narrative to assess whether we can observe differential impacts of legislator characteristics when they're discussing different topics. Overall these findings are surprisingly consistent across topics. As seen in [Figure 6](#), some relationships change to a degree. For example in the Abortion graph, we see that both left and right ideology have little effect on the likelihood that victimhood narratives will be used. Across most other issues, both right and left ideology remain significant and positive with a roughly similar effect size per unit increase. This indicates that the use of victimhood narratives is quite ubiquitous in abortion debates. This is likely due to the fact that this a heavily emotive, moral issue in which discussions of women's rights and the rights of fetuses will be the main points of contention with victimhood and harm being central ([Derin, 2022](#)). The largest effect in this abortion model is gender, with a 0.5% decrease for men. Given the highly gendered nature of abortion debates this is an intuitive finding. Similarly, the largest effect across any of the models is that of ethnicity in relation to racial victimhood narratives. Minority legislators on average use 2% more racial victimhood narratives than white legislators, indicating strong support for hypothesis 2.

In some issue domains we do observe a significant effect for partisan identity. These include class, partisan, race, and gun victimhood narratives where Republicans are significantly less likely to use victimhood narratives. This nuances the findings in relation to hypothesis 3, as while there may not be a general partisan difference in some issue domains it seems that Democrats are more likely to use victimhood narratives. This may signal a degree of issue ownership as well as the incentives for Democrats to appeal to their traditional voter bases. In the case of partisan victimhood the relationship is

less obvious, but this could simply be capturing a greater likelihood for Democrats to use moralizing victimhood narratives when discussing the behaviour of Republicans. In no issue do we see a reversal where Republicans make use of victimhood narratives with results either supporting the idea that Democrats use more victimhood narratives or null findings. Strangely, senators are consistently and to quite a large degree more likely to use victimhood narratives across all results. One potential explanation might be that as senators have more time to speak uninterrupted, thus a single speech in the Senate is more likely to at some point contain a victimhood narrative even if this is not the focus of the discussion. I will address this concern further in the discussion section.

Victimhood by Category

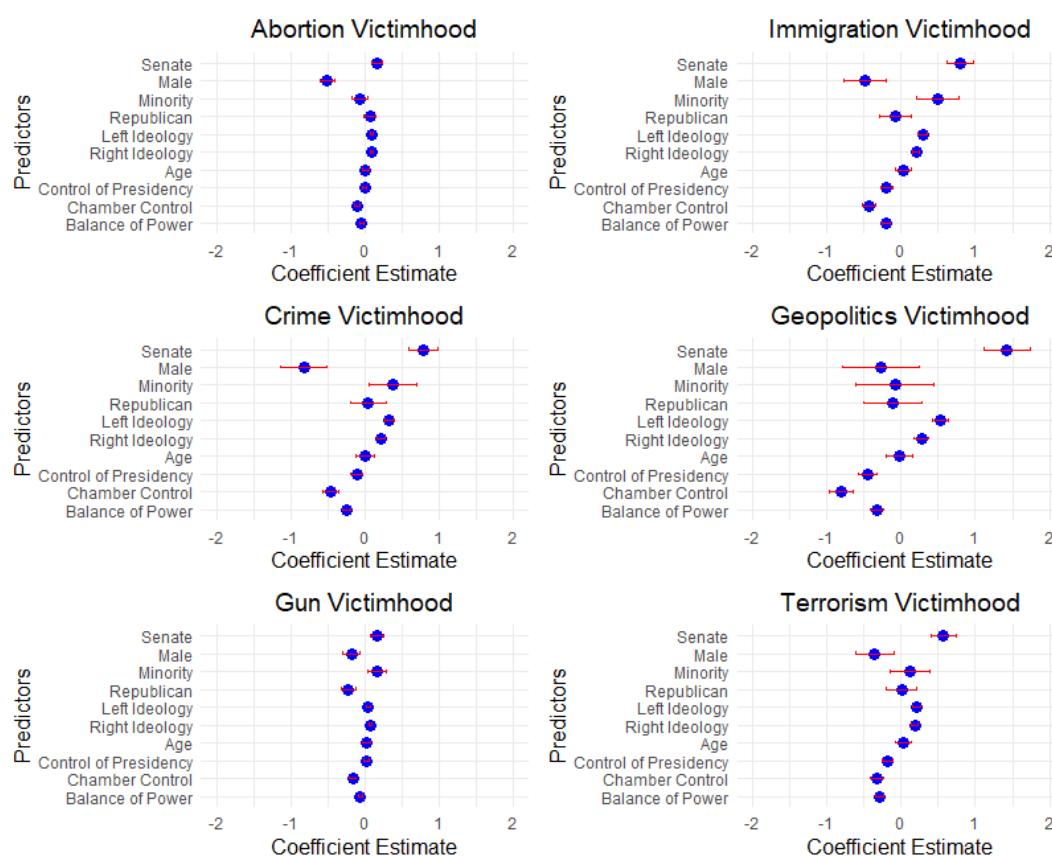


Figure 6. Legislator characteristics and Victimhood Narrative types (Part 1)

Victimhood by Category

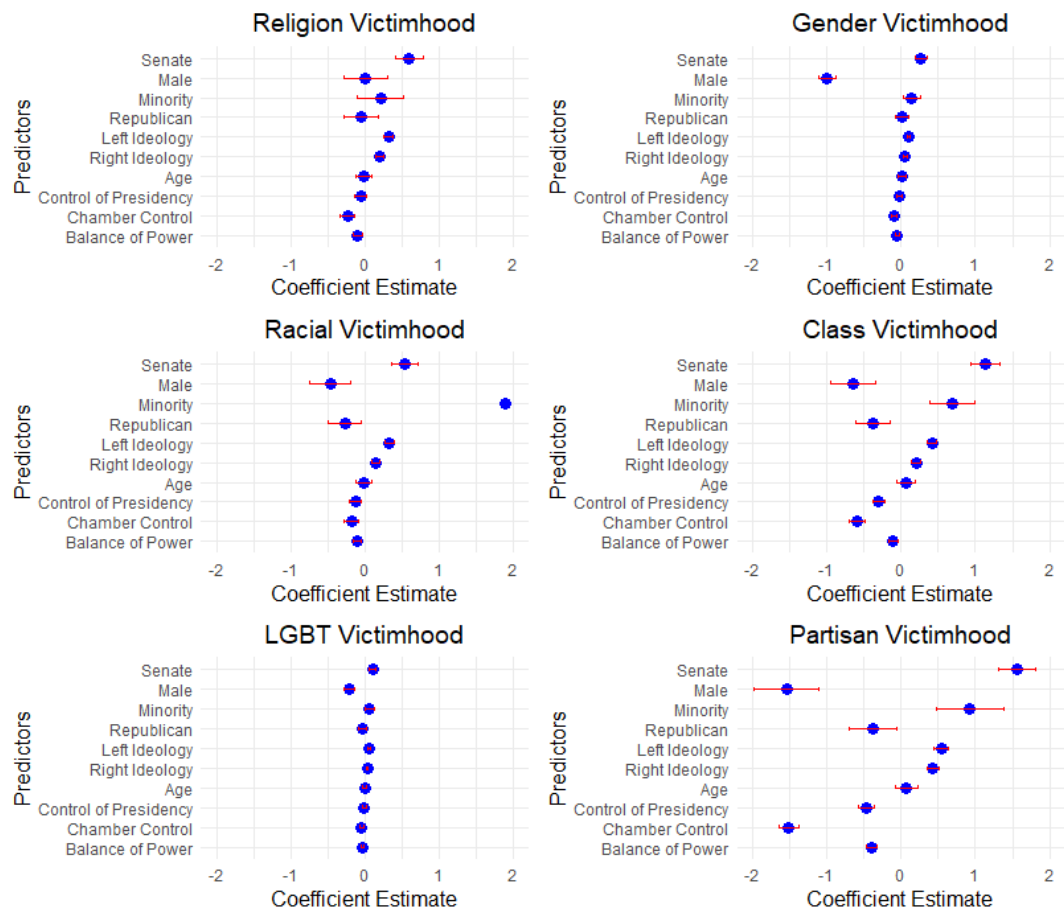


Figure 7. Legislator characteristics and Victimhood Narrative types (Part 2)

In the second set of analyses I narrow the range of my data between 2010-2022 due to the availability of high quality census and campaign donation data. As the demographic data is at the congressional district level, this analysis also focuses exclusively on Representatives rather than Senators. With this data I can examine the impact of constituency and donor characteristics on victimhood. Alongside the general victimhood measures, I will also focus on abortion, immigration, race, and class. I chose these victimhood types as they more clearly relate to certain demographic and donor categories, such as class being associated with the economic demographics of the constituency and union or corporate donations. I also control for geographic factors such as measure of how urban the constituency is and if it is along the Southern border. These measures allow me to assess if relevant constituency level and donor level context influences the use of victimhood narratives generally and in reference to specific types of victimhood narratives.

I first incorporate the constituency level variables while retaining legislator characteristics as a control [Table 4](#). I observe weak or null results for economic and racial demographics on the use of victimhood narratives. While poverty and family income is completely insignificant, we can observe a small effect positive effect between the proportion of the population that is not white and victimhood narratives indicating that for every percentage increase in the non-white population there is a 0.2% increase in the average use of victimhood narratives. However, this is only marginally significant. Overall these results indicate, that at least when measuring general uses of victimhood narratives, that I fail to reject the null hypotheses that racial and economic demographics have no significant relationship to the use of victimhood narratives. As shown in [Figure 8](#), these results are also consistent when looking at the four victimhood types of interest with the exception of racial victimhood narratives where a similarly small effect is more statistically significant.⁸ This means that I completely fail to reject the null hypotheses for Hypotheses 5 and 6.

⁸For visualization purposes, the non-white variable is scaled so that each unit represents a 5% increase, while donations are scaled so that each unit corresponds with \$1000

Table 4. Regression of Victimhood with Demographics, Ideology, and Year Fixed Effects

<i>Dependent variable: Victimhood Narratives</i>	
Male	−1.040* (0.570)
Minority	0.130 (0.650)
Republican	−0.190 (0.770)
Left Ideology	0.620*** (0.180)
Right Ideology	0.550*** (0.140)
Non-White Percentage	0.180* (0.090)
PovertyLine%Families	−0.060 (0.070)
Median Family Income	0.010 (0.010)
Urban-Rural [Suburban]	0.790 (0.490)
Urban-Rural [Urban]	2.210*** (0.670)
Executive Control	−1.180*** (0.280)
Chamber Control	−1.030*** (0.270)
Balance of Power	−0.030*** (0.010)
Constant	7.810*** (2.030)
Observations	4876
Log Likelihood	−17465.02
Akaike Inf. Crit.	34962.03
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	35065.91

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Finally, regarding donor-level hypotheses, I find entirely null results. Results indicate generally very small effects none of which reach the required thresholds to be considered statistically significant in any of the plots. I therefore cannot reject null hypothesis for Hypothesis 7.

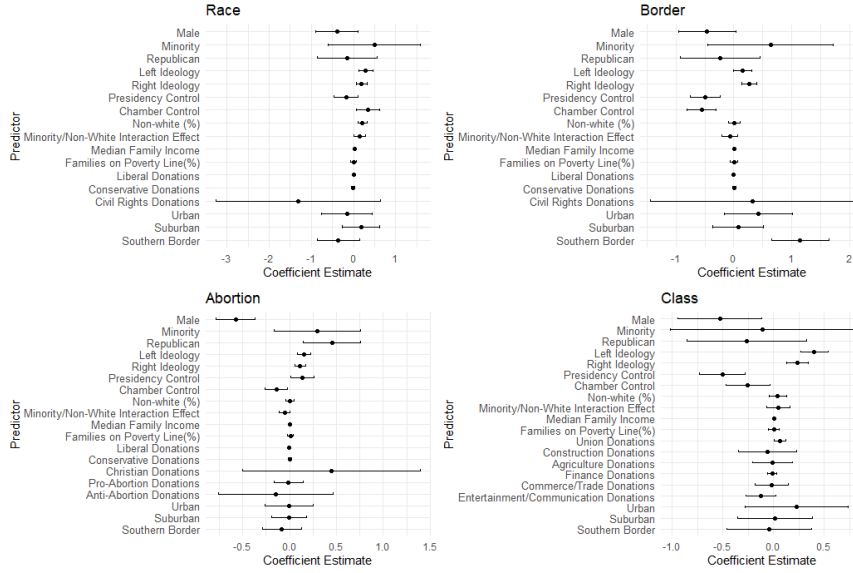


Figure 8. Constituency, Donor and Legislator Characteristics Regressions

Discussion

In these analyses I find strong support for the role of both legislator identity (specifically with race and gender) and ideology in the use of victimhood narratives by legislators. These conform with my theoretical assumptions, as I expected that more marginalized legislators will make more victimhood claims relevant to their own marginalization. These emotive and moral claims about justice and harm will also be more likely to appeal an electorate sympathetic to voters from these groups. In contrast, I do not find support for a partisan difference despite my expectations that as Democrats position themselves as champions of marginalized groups they will be more likely to use victimhood narratives to appeal to them. However, this could be due to the argument made by (Graham et al., 2009) around the differing moral foundations of liberal and conservative world-views. Rather than being comparatively more/less “moral”, the difference is more in which foundations are emphasized. So while I argued that victimhood is likely more related to the harm/fairness foundations that liberals tend to cherish, Republicans could also be making a similar amount of victimhood claims even if motivated more by foundations such as sanctity or ingroup loyalty.

A clearer result emerged with the test of hypothesis 4 where I find that a higher score on ideology will increase the use of victimhood narratives with a more noticeable effect for left-wing ideology ⁹. These ideological findings are some of the largest and most consistent findings across all models and both sets of analyses. These results also largely conform with existing literature on identity, ideological polarization, and emotive rhetoric (Gennaro & Ash, 2022a; Rhodes, 2014; Yu, 2014). Controls such as party control of the executive and the balance of power within a chamber are highly negatively and significantly correlated across all models. These indicate that when political enemies have more power and there is greater competition within a chamber a legislator is more likely to make use of victimhood narratives. These variables will be investigated more closely in the subsequent section. I find no support for my other hypotheses regarding constituency characteristics, electorate composition, or donor influence. This suggests that a legislator’s personal identity and the broader political context play a much greater role in shaping the use of victimhood narratives in

⁹The effect of ideology is consistent when only comparing co-partisans as illustrated in [Appendix G](#)

Congress than the characteristics of their electorate. A key limitation of this analysis is the challenge of disentangling the direction of relationships between donors, demographics, legislator identities, and the use of victimhood narratives. Demographics influence which candidates are elected in the first place, and within the time frame of this study, few constituencies would have experienced severe changes in their demographics within just over a decade meaning that I lack leverage to meaningfully assess the effect of within constituency demographics. Similarly, donor influence is not necessarily a simple relationship in which more aligned legislators earn more donations. Donors choose legislators based on existing information, whether to ensure that aligned candidates have the necessary resources to compete or as part of a strategic effort to sway those who may be more persuadable (J. M. Berry, 2015; McKay, 2018). This may help explain the null results. Legislators who have already secured support from relevant groups may have less incentive to rely on victimhood narratives compared to those still working to solidify their appeal.

An important limitation on these analyses is posed by the time-window of the analysis. As the first analyses covers over 60 years of speeches, Republican and Democratic values and rhetoric have changed substantially. This means that at different times each party may use victimhood narratives differently. While this is an important caveat for the findings, this time-window mostly covers the post-civil rights movement realignment on racial and social issues between the two parties. So while there are significant evolutions in rhetorical style and ideologies within the parties, the target voter blocs for both parties remain largely consistent especially following the passing of the Civil Rights Act 1964 (A. L. Campbell, 2007; Manza & Brooks, 1999). While this large time-window is a potential limitation in the first set of analyses, the inability to collect comparable census data prior to 2010 provides a distinct limitation in the second set of analyses. This means that the results include only findings from the House of Representatives and within a relatively small time-window in a highly turbulent political environment with the evolution of political rhetoric from both parties in opposition to Obama and Trump (Bostdorff, 2017; Parker, 2016). It is possible that these results are not representative of general trends in electorate and donor influence over legislator rhetoric prior to 2010.

Conclusion

These analyses provide strong evidence that legislator identity plays a significant role in shaping the use of victimhood narratives in Congress. As expected, legislators from marginalized backgrounds are more likely to invoke victimhood claims, aligning with broader theories of identity-based political expression. Additionally, ideological extremity, especially on the left, consistently correlates with an increased use of victimhood rhetoric, reinforcing findings from literature on polarization and emotive discourse. However, contrary to expectations, partisan affiliation itself does not appear to drive differences in victimhood narratives, suggesting that both Democrats and Republicans engage in these rhetorical strategies somewhat equally, albeit potentially motivated by different moral foundations. Constituency characteristics, electorate composition, and donor influence do not appear to have a measurable effect on the frequency of victimhood rhetoric. This suggests that the decision to employ these narratives is primarily shaped by personal identity and ideological commitments rather than external electoral or financial pressures.

Further studies could explore whether these rhetorical patterns persist in response to changing party coalitions by focusing on more micro-examples such as within-state/constituency political developments, demographic shifts, and specific shocks such as Nixon's Southern Strategy. Understanding the conditions under which legislators deploy victimhood narratives can deepen our broader understanding of political communication, ideological strategy, and the ways in which identity and power intersect in legislative contexts. In the subsequent section I will also develop upon the findings that the balance of power and political control seems to have highly significant relationships with the use of victimhood narratives by legislators.

3.6. The introduction of C-SPAN and Collective Victimhood Narratives

In this section, I examine how legislators strategically leverage victimhood narratives to bolster their political careers by signalling allegiance to their party and appealing to potential voters. While the previous chapter focused on the influence of legislator, electorate, and donor characteristics on the use of these narratives, I will now shift my attention to how increased publicity of legislative speeches affects the decision to employ victimhood narratives.

I theorize that as legislative speeches become more visible to those outside of the chamber including the media and wider public, victimhood narratives become one effective rhetorical tool for an individual legislator to influence potential voters and strongly signal their position. Victimhood narratives are attractive options for legislators as they emotive and moral appeals are effective persuasive techniques which if used in the correct context can mobilize and earn support (Masch & Gabriel, 2020; Wang & Inbar, 2021). C-SPAN is perhaps the largest “shock” to the publicity of congressional debates in their existence. I argue that this shock of publicity incentivizes legislators to make instrumental use of victimhood narratives to appeal to a newly widened audience.

C-SPAN was founded in 1979 as a non-profit public service broadcasting service and for the first time allowed Americans to view proceedings in Congress live alongside some specialized programming. Although audience estimates vary considerably across its 45 years existence, a survey in 2004 found that 12% of Americans consider themselves regular C-SPAN viewers (Marcus, 2004). The organization also has other indirect effects on the publicity of legislator speeches, by taking extensive efforts to work with media organizations to make video coverage of proceedings easier and also alert journalists of upcoming debates that may be of special interest to them (Carter, 2024). Although the audience for C-SPAN proceedings are far from a general audience and the availability of C-SPAN was uneven across the U.S. until the late 90s, this still represents an unprecedented and impressive expansion in the numbers of those observing congressional proceedings. Other scholars have noted both the impact on the congressional debates and concerns from MOCs that introducing cameras to the

proceedings would change how legislators behave (Fenno Jr, 1989; Gennaro & Ash, 2022b; Mixon Jr, Gibson, & Upadhyaya, 2003). High-profile spats between parties over camera angles have occurred, and Newt Gingrich credited C-SPAN's introduction with changing the course of his political career, indicating its impact and how both parties have carefully considered ways to exploit it. (Lamb, 2013).

This chapter builds upon existing work on C-SPAN to examine specifically how the increasing publicity influences the use of victimhood narratives. As C-SPAN initially televised only speeches made in the House of Representatives in March 1979, I leverage the later introduction of C-SPAN 2, which televised Senate debates beginning in June 1986, to estimate the effect of greater public attention to speeches on the use of victimhood narratives. Using a research design pioneered in Gennaro and Ash (2022b), I use a difference-in-difference analysis to estimate the effect of C-SPAN's introduction on the average monthly percentage of speeches that contain victimhood narratives. I find significant and largely robust results across three models that assess this effect on each party and on both parties together. I also discuss potential limitations in this study, primarily the lack of a cohesive measure of chamber/congress level polarization and the ideological shifts of the 1980s in American politics. My findings are largely in line with existing literature, which argues that polarizing and emotional language can be instrumentally utilized by legislators to craft their image with the electorate and their party. These results provide credence to the theory that victimhood narratives are deployed instrumentally by legislators in Congress.

Theory and Hypotheses

Viewing legislative speech as “cheap talk”, speeches delivered in plenary legislative sessions rarely succeed in persuading opposing members or directly influencing policy outcomes, particularly across party and ideological divides (Austen-Smith, 1990). Nevertheless, the ways in which legislators engage in these speeches have significant implications for their career prospects, as they can enhance publicity and influence within both their electorate and party (Grimmer, 2013; Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2019; Poyet & Raunio, 2021). Rather than persuading other legislators, plenary sessions are an effective stage for legislators to make highly emotive and engaging narra-

tives as a means of signalling their positions to both voters and party members. This approach enables legislators to craft their image while balancing party positions with constituent expectations, potentially reaping both electoral rewards and intra-party advantages (Kalaf-Hughes, 2013, 2020; Proksch & Slapin, 2012). The incentives to use more dramatic and emotive language are intensified when the potential for electoral gain or loss is high. The likelihood that more extreme rhetoric will be used is also influenced by the publicity of the speeches. If more potential voters and attention can be gained through speeches, legislators have been shown to adopt more extreme or emotionally charged language, particularly around election cycles or on topics with heightened public attention (Jerit, 2004; Osnabrügge et al., 2021; Stuckey, 2017). Research using both experimental and quasi-experimental methods, demonstrated that politicians and parties can effectively leverage emotive appeals and expression to bolster their popularity among voters (Boussalis et al., 2021; Brader, 2005; Masch & Gabriel, 2020; D. G. Sullivan & Masters, 1988).

The advent of C-SPAN coverage in the United States Congress introduced a significant shift in the publicity of legislative speeches. Early concerns that televising congressional proceedings might alter the quality and tone of debate have been validated by research, indicating that televised sessions encourage shifts toward more emotive and sensational language (Gennaro & Ash, 2022b; Mixon Jr, Hobson, & Upadhyaya, 2001). As victimhood narratives are a highly affective style of communication, effective in mobilizing supporters even in much more extreme ways than voting behaviour, I expect that C-SPAN's introduction will also increase their prevalence (Antonioni et al., 2020; Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014; Lynch & Joyce, 2018; Mari et al., 2020). Gennaro and Ash (2022b) demonstrate through a difference-in-differences approach that the introduction of C-SPAN led to an increase in emotional appeals in the House of Representatives, with this effect further moderated by the level of access and popularity of C-SPAN in a legislator's district. My research employs a similar design to test whether increased publicity influences legislators' use of victimhood narratives, which could be conceived of as a distinct sub-type of both emotional and moral language which also activates psychological processes related to belonging to social groups. This analysis seeks to determine whether victimhood narratives, like other emotive

appeals, are strategically used by legislators to align themselves with their electorate's sentiments and the expectations of their parties.

While the previous chapter provided a descriptive analysis of the long-term trends in the use of victimhood narratives, this chapter specifically hones in on the years between the introduction of C-SPAN to the House of Representatives until the extension of C-SPAN2 into the Senate. By focusing on this period, I am able to test the effect of the increasing publicity using the House of Representatives as the treatment group and the Senate as the control group.

The primary hypothesis of this chapter is therefore:

H1: *The introduction of C-SPAN will increase the use of Victimhood Narratives in the House of Representatives*

This hypothesis examines the strategic use of victimhood narratives in Congressional speeches by analysing how Members of Congress adjust their communication tactics when debates are televised. I anticipate that the introduction of C-SPAN will produce a modest yet positive impact on the frequency of victimhood narratives, as this represents just one form of persuasive rhetoric that legislators might be incentivized to adopt in response to the heightened publicity of their speeches.

I also test a range of secondary hypotheses around how the political landscape may influence the likelihood that victimhood narratives are deployed. In times when political competition is at its highest, I expect that more victimhood narratives will be deployed. These hypotheses are as follows:

H2: *The closer the balance of power between parties, the more victimhood narratives will be used by Representatives*

H3: *Representatives from the party with less power will utilize more victimhood narratives*

H4: *Representatives from the party which has executive control will utilize less victimhood narratives*

H5: *Victimhood narratives will be deployed more actively during Election years*

A closer balance of power indicates a more competitive political environment, as control over the chamber, legislature or presidency appears more within grasp of the weaker party whilst the stronger party has more to lose.¹⁰ Close elections and small majorities are associated with higher levels of polarization, a greater focus on partisan campaigning throughout the legislative calendar, and may even influence the preferences and attitudes of the electorate (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019; B. Lee, 2021; F. E. Lee, 2016). I expect that the use of victimhood narratives will be to some degree asymmetric with the weaker party, as I draw from the literature on negative campaigning in the U.S. It is both less advantageous for the stronger party to evoke negative emotions and practically speaking easier for the weaker party to assign blame and criticize when they have less ownership of the current political, economic or social environment (Lau & Pomper, 2002; Nai, 2020). These dynamics will be further heightened the closer one gets to an election period, and I expect that this will be especially pronounced for presidential elections.

Methods and Data

I test the hypotheses using differences-in-differences models, leveraging the staggered introduction of C-SPAN between the House of Representatives and the Senate for a quasi-experiment. The model treats the launch of C-SPAN in the House on March 19, 1979, as the treatment, with the Senate serving as a control group until June 2, 1986, when C-SPAN 2 began televising Senate debates. To ensure balanced pre-treatment and post-treatment windows, I limit the sample to the period from 1971 to 1986. While I use the same classifier as the previous chapter, I instead aggregate speeches at the monthly level to get a percentage of the speeches per month that utilizes a victimhood narrative, allowing for an examination of temporal trends in the use of collective victimhood narratives across both chambers.

To estimate the causal effect, it is essential to confirm that both the treatment and control groups follow *parallel trends*. This is especially important given the complexity of a changing political landscape and the differences in how members of each chamber

¹⁰This is a very narrow definition of power, focusing exclusively on directly observable seat numbers and control of chambers/the presidency. As discussed in the literature review and previous chapter, power is significantly more complicated in how it interacts with the use of victimhood narratives. Other contextual factors such as political scandals, hostile media environments, or lame duck presidencies are also not captured in this hypothesis

may respond to distinct stimuli. An initial visual inspection in [Figure 9](#) suggests that, while the proportion of collective victimhood narratives fluctuates significantly in both chambers, these fluctuations appear broadly parallel when examining Congress as a whole and within each party. Notable deviations from parallel trends often coincide with congressional recesses. For example, the sharp divergence observed among Republicans in late 1975 is largely due to the August recess, during which fewer than 200 speeches were made compared to the monthly average of 1,967. To account for these systemic outliers, I will exclude the months of August and October from the analysis.

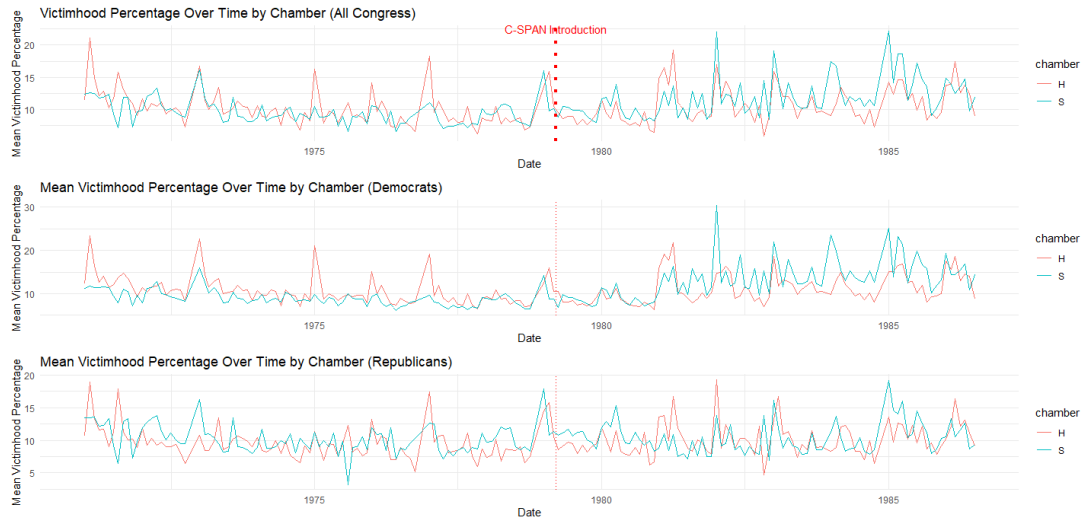


Figure 9. Mean percentages of speeches containing Collective Victimhood Narratives

While this visual check is reassuring that the core assumption of the identification strategy is intact, I perform a range of robustness checks and alternative specifications. These alternate specifications include creating separate models for each party, with the assumption that there are less threats to the parallel trends assumption as comparisons between co-partisans across both chambers may be a strong comparison group, without having to also account for different influences on each party. While the cross-party model does control for party designation, these alternate specifications allow me to better understand underlying trends across the two parties. I also perform a range of placebo tests that further allow me to assess the robustness of the findings.

To better defend the parallel trends assumption and reduce bias from potential confounding variables, I also make use of a number of chamber and party level controls.

These include whether the party controls the chamber, the balance of power within that chamber, a dummy variable indicating whether it's a presidential election year, and if a co-partisan is President. These controls focus on the potential impact of differential balances of power within government and each chamber, as well as an increase in publicity during an election year. This allows a more accurate measurement of the effect of C-SPAN by accounting for the change in presidencies from Carter to Reagan, Republicans gaining control of the Senate and the gradually weakening grip of Democrats over the House of Representatives in the period. These variables are also used to test the hypotheses 2-5. All models are calculated with robust standard errors.

Results

I find a highly significant positive effect across all three models as shown in [Table D2](#). These indicate that the introduction of C-SPAN led to an increase in the monthly proportion of speeches containing victimhood by between 0.499% and 1.294% with the effect being much more pronounced for the Democrats. Some potential explanations for these party differences along with the much smaller Adjusted R^2 will be discussed in the limitations section. The merged model shows an effect of 0.79% across both parties. This means that we can reject the null hypothesis that the introduction of C-SPAN has no effect on the use of victimhood narratives within the House of Representatives across both parties.

The results from the other variables are more mixed, though still provide support for some of my hypotheses. With *Hypothesis 2* I find generally significant but very small effects across all three models. However, in the case of Democrats, there is a positive relationship indicating that as the chamber becomes less competitive they are more likely to use victimhood narratives while with Republicans this is reversed. Given the very small effect size and differing relationships, I consider these results to be highly inconclusive and fail to convincingly reject null or alternate hypotheses. In comparison, *Hypothesis 3* is supported and highly significant across all three models as shown by the Chamber Control variable. This indicates that the party which has control over a chamber is significantly less likely to deploy victimhood narrative. This effect is the largest in the Democrats model, where control of the chamber leads to a

Table 5. Differences-in-Differences Regression Results

	<i>D Model</i>	<i>R Model</i>	<i>Cross Party Model</i>
Treatment (DiD)	1.294*** (0.474)	0.499*** (0.087)	0.788*** (0.305)
Chamber Control	-4.931*** (1.027)	-0.224*** (0.084)	-2.023*** (0.638)
Chamber Balance	0.008** (0.003)	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.012*** (0.002)
Presidential Election	-0.688 (0.917)	-0.072 (0.529)	-0.441 (0.444)
Executive Control	-2.277** (0.998)	0.215 (0.314)	-0.919*** (0.145)
Party			-1.898*** (0.498)
Constant	15.323*** (0.185)	10.520*** (0.153)	13.688*** (0.272)
Observations	290	290	580
R ²	0.338	0.040	0.150
Adjusted R ²	0.326	0.023	0.141
Residual Std. Error	3.129 (df = 284)	2.336 (df = 284)	2.975 (df = 573)
F Statistic	28.950*** (df = 5; 284)	2.354** (df = 5; 284)	16.818*** (df = 6; 573)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

4.9% decrease in the monthly share of victimhood narratives. However, given that the only change of control of a chamber in this period occurs in 1981, when the Republicans take the Senate, this single instance may limit the robustness of the estimate, as the single transition can not necessarily be generalized across both chambers or across time. I observe similar results with the Executive Control variable, where the effect is much larger for Democrats, however it is not significant in the Republican model. This lends mixed support to *Hypothesis 4* with an estimated effect size of -2.7% for Democrats and -0.919% in the Cross-Party model. These results may indicate that the impact of losing control of the Presidency was more pronounced for Democrats. As this analysis covers the period from 1971-1987, the presidency changes hands across the partisan divide twice between Ford-Carter and Carter-Reagan. This allows us to trust the robustness of this estimate more than with Chamber Control, but some caution is warranted given the highly irregular and short presidencies of Nixon, Ford, and Carter. I completely fail to reject the null hypothesis for *Hypothesis 5*, as I observe no significant effect of a presidential election year on the use of victimhood narratives despite the increased incentive and publicity granted by such an important political contests ¹¹. As expected from the analysis in the previous chapter, partisan identity also has a highly significant and substantial effect with Republicans using the narrative 1.7% less than Democrats in the Cross-Party model.

To assess the overall validity of the models, I perform a range of placebo tests for all three models. For these placebo tests I introduce a false treatment at an earlier time point in the analysis and perform the same analyses with this false treatment to validate that the real treatment effects are not spurious. I performed three placebo tests for a year, two years and three years before the treatment ¹². If these tests do not have a similar significant effect in the same way as the real treatment, this provides more support to the idea that the treatment had an effect rather than that we are capturing preexisting trends regardless of if CSPAN was introduced. As seen in [Appendix D](#) two year and three-year placebo tests show insignificant or opposite effects as that of

¹¹Null results are also found when considering all election years rather than just presidential elections

¹²These windows were chosen as the placebo test requires the removal of data from after the real treatment occurs. Therefore shorter windows such as a matter of months would lead to highly biased estimates as they would be estimating the effect based on a few months of this imaginary treatment leading to high levels of bias in the case of outliers

the real treatment, providing support that the real treatment is robust. However, the results of the one-year placebo test is less clear as seen in [Table 6](#).

Table 6. Placebo Difference in Differences Test (One Year)

	Democrat Model	Republican Model	Cross Party Model
Treatment (DiD)	0.854 (0.555)	1.134*** (0.027)	0.211 (0.182)
Chamber Control	-0.293 (1.255)	-0.293 (1.255)	-0.293 (1.255)
Chamber Balance	0.012 (0.004)	-0.009 (0.002)	-0.0005 (0.003)
Presidential Election	-1.175 (0.622)	0.187 (0.495)	-0.099 (0.378)
Executive Control	-2.400 (1.098)	0.191 (0.353)	-0.629*** (0.157)
Party			1.012** (0.472)
Constant	10.115*** (1.036)	10.337*** (0.256)	10.496*** (0.054)
Observations	156	156	312
R ²	0.135	0.052	0.013
Adjusted R ²	0.113	0.027	-0.003
Residual Std. Error	2.665 (df = 151)	2.165 (df = 151)	2.532 (df = 306)
F Statistic	5.913*** (df = 4; 151)	2.058* (df = 4; 151)	0.798 (df = 5; 306)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This result raises significant doubts about the validity of the treatment effect observed for the true differences-in-differences result in the case of Republicans. As we observe a significant and importantly more positive relationship than with the real treatment, indicating that the real treatment effect may be highly biased, this could indicate that other confounding unobserved variables could be driving an already pre-existing trend that is spuriously captured by the treatment effect. Given that longer placebo windows support my initial findings, this could also simply be due to the fact that these one year placebo estimates remain potentially quite vulnerable to outlier results. This placebo treatment assigns a false treatment in March 1978 and cuts off just prior to the real treatment in March 1979. There is a significant rise in victimhood narratives in January and February 1979, but given that the result remains even if

these months are dropped, this remains an important caveat to my findings.

Discussion

These findings have important caveats, especially in reference to Republicans, but do provide some significant support for the idea that legislators are more likely to use victimhood narratives when their speeches are more visible to the electorate. I find that the introduction of C-SPAN is associated with a small increase in the use of victimhood narratives across all three models. Given that this model is significantly more explanatory and robust for Democrats, there's a number of potential explanations for why we might observe this difference.

An important unobserved and difficult to quantify variable is the ideological backdrop of the environment of both Congress and the parties. This data covers a range of pivotal events in American political culture, including the downfall of Nixon, the highly volatile presidency of Jimmy Carter and the emergence of Ronald Reagan. Reagan is especially associated with the rise of a new rhetorical style of Conservatism. This style of rhetoric has been associated with a greater focus on social issues driven by the rise of the Christian Right, important court rulings such as *Roe v Wade* and the continuing reaction to the Civil Rights Act and related advancements on racial issues ([Abramowitz & Knotts, 2006](#); [Clawson & Clawson, 1987](#); [Smith, 2017](#)). These narratives were highly polarizing and affective, with even issues such as welfare beginning to be framed as a conflict between a heavily racialized categorization of “welfare queens” as contrasted against hardworking Americans that were having their tax money misappropriated ([Crafton, 2014](#); [Roper, 2012](#)). While Reagan-era Republicanism demonstrates perhaps the most well-documented shift in rhetorical style, scholars have noted the clear rise of partisanship, polarization and the use of harsher rhetoric among both parties since the 1970s-80s ([Poole & Rosenthal, 2007](#)). Given the limitations of the Differences-in-Differences design as a chamber level measure and the lacking of existing quantitative analysis of historical polarization in Congress, the major confounders of ideology and polarization are likely severely biasing my estimates, as I am not controlling for individual ideological positions or a convincing measure of chamber polarization. While the chamber balance variable perhaps offers something of a crude proxy for this, in

that we generally expect greater polarization when politics is more competitive, this is a very weak and noisy estimate of shifts in rhetoric and shifts in party platforms during ideological transformations.

Two other possible alternate explanations could be important for understanding the party differences. The first is that of party strategy. As I find that the introduction of C-SPAN had a larger and more robust effect on the use of victimhood narratives by Democrats, this could be a sign that they adapted their communication strategy more quickly however I lack the means to measure and test the effect of party strategy in this case. Another possible explanation is that of how legislator characteristics vary between parties. As observed in chapter 1, Democrats, women and ethnic minorities are more likely to use victimhood narratives. The impact of increasing publicity may simply intensify the willingness of female and ethnic minority legislators to talk about victimhood in the Democratic Party due to an interaction with ideology. Given that in this time period there are only at most two female senators and at most twenty-five representatives, testing this alternative explanation is not feasible in the differences-in-differences design, due to the small number of speeches, especially when using the Senate as the control group.

Conclusion

These results indicate that increasing publicity of speeches as a result of C-SPAN does increase the use of victimhood narratives. These results conform with similar findings by [Gennaro and Ash \(2022b\)](#) who argue that the implementation of C-SPAN did increase the emotiveness speech in Congress. The results for the other variables are highly mixed, but generally indicate that victimhood narratives are more likely to be used by those with less political power. I do not find convincing support for hypotheses related to political competition, such as closer chamber balances or election years, but I find that losing control of the chamber or presidency does cause an increase in the use of victimhood narratives. However, the results for Republicans are less robust and as such the estimates are likely to be biased and indicate that some or most of the effects for Republicans are driven by previous trends towards using more victimhood narratives. This analysis is limited by being unable to adequately measure the wider

political context that influences legislator rhetorical style. Overall this gives rather mixed and unclear answers as to whether MOCs use collective victimhood narratives instrumentally, at least in the context of the increasing publicity offered by C-SPAN.

Future research could expand upon this by using alternate shifts in the publicity of congressional speeches in different periods of American politics to observe if these results are robust in different situations. The introduction of radio, advances in the availability of news for general audiences and the rise of social media or the internet, could be potential candidates for periods to ascertain how the use of victimhood narratives change. This work could also be significantly improved by extending the limited work in quantifying historical polarization at a chamber level and party level such as [Hill and Tausanovitch \(2015\)](#), to improve the explanatory power of the models used in this analysis. Additionally, supplementing this analysis with quantitative or qualitative analysis of presidential speeches and party official communication could begin to unpack the role of party strategy and ideological shifts that remain somewhat opaque in this analysis.

4. Victimhood Narratives in the Northern Ireland Assembly 1998-2024

All victimhood narratives are grounded in morality, with the assignment of blame and innocence (Gray & Kubin, 2024). The importance of these narratives and their moral weight is further amplified in post-conflict societies during times of reconciliation and peacebuilding. Previously warring sides must now negotiate how the conflict is to be remembered and commemorated (Kevers, Rober, Derluyn, & De Haene, 2016; McGrattan & Hopkins, 2017; Pinkerton, 2012). These are not only deeply emotive and traumatic issues, but they come with significant material interests, such as amnesties, trials, and reparations which further ensure that these issues often dominate post-conflict politics (Adhikari & Hansen, 2013; Nytagodien & Neal, 2004). Distinguishing between the victim and perpetrators, negotiating the line between these distinctions and often re-litigating individual decisions made by those being framed as both potential victims and potential perpetrators become highly salient topics in (Jacoby, 2015; Lawther, 2023). A potent example of this in the context of Northern Ireland, include the Ballymurphy Massacre. British Paratroopers entered Ballymurphy in 1971 as part of an operation to intern supposed members of the IRA before proceeding to murder eleven Nationalist civilians. The majority of these civilians proceeded to be accused by the British military and unionist politicians of having been Republican gunmen or unfortunate victims of cross-fire between the British military and the IRA. The families of the victims insisted that no shots were fired at the paratroopers and mobilized around this for decades before eventually receiving an apology from Boris Johnson in 2016. This same unit participated in the Bloody Sunday killings in 1972, where there was a similar blaming of the incident on Republicans and smearing of victims which led to a similar public apology by David Cameron in 2015. (Bentley, 2021; McNeill, Lyons, & Pehrson, 2014).

Alongside the important emotional feelings of vindication and justice, these successes also often lead to significant payouts to the families and victims but are also quickly politicized by outside actors. This includes sympathizers such as republicans, who frame this as a justification for the previous or even continuing armed resistance against British involvement in Northern Ireland (McGrattan & McGrattan, 2013).

But this has also sparked competitive victimhood claims from loyalists who have displayed public murals and flags in support of the actions by Paratroopers whilst unionist politicians have attempted to delay inquiries and prevent prosecutions of security forces charged for conflict related crimes (Hearty, 2024). The often repeated phrase by unionist and nationalist politicians alike, refers to the idea of “a hierarchy of victims” where some victims are given more importance and respect than others (Jankowitz, 2018b). Controversial policies promoted by Sinn Féin have for example attempted to award access to schemes or grants for victims to convicted former-combatants and were heavily criticized for multiple incidents of hiring former combatants into well-paid special adviser and party roles (Joyce & Lynch, 2018; McGrattan & Lehner, 2012). These discussions are highly sensitive, even at times leading to bitter disputes between Sinn Féin and other nationalists such as those within the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) whilst being obviously offensive to most unionists. Given that a post-conflict power-sharing system often necessitates the sharing of power with at least one party that represents the former rebels or insurgents, debates around the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator become fundamentally linked to the question of the legitimacy of these former combatants and their involvement in society and politics (Corcoran, 2002; Hopkins, 2015). Depicting Republican prisoners and their families as equal victims to British soldiers or Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers, confers greater legitimacy upon Sinn Féin whilst it claims to be legitimate head of the Republican movement. On the other hand, unionist attacks on, for example, the hiring of convicted murderer Mary McArdle as a special adviser to Sinn Féin minister Carál Ní Chuilín, leading to her eventual removal from the role, serves to de-legitimize the party’s involvement in politics given that Carál Ní Chuilín and several other Sinn Féin ministers had high-profile convictions for their involvement in violent republicanism.

These dynamics illustrate how competitive and inclusive or exclusive victimhood narratives can be used in post-conflict societies to gain political, moral or social benefits for the certain groups. These negotiations of victimhood assign not only moral culpability and virtue, but also legitimacy and political power (Chouliaraki, 2024). Alongside the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the Troubles has been studied through the lens of victimhood perhaps more than any other conflict. This work has largely orig-

inated in the field of social psychology, examining feelings of victimhood and their consequence on attitudes often through interviews, experiments, or observations of spaces such as memorials, murals, museums and residential areas (Baumann, 2010; Cohrs et al., 2015; Jackson, 2019; Lynch & Joyce, 2018). These works highlight the competition between communities and supposed representatives of these communities to control the narrative as well as the psychological effects of victimhood or victimization across communities in Northern Ireland. Murals and other pieces of public history attempt to frame who was responsible for starting the conflict, perpetrating violence during the conflict, then often attempting to link this to the present grievances that the ingroup has with the outgroup (Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2010). Defining the victim and the perpetrator remains highly politically and socially salient. Expensive, widely discussed but ultimately unsuccessful attempts, such as the Haass Talks in 2013, focused on trying to negotiate about the oft-repeated “Flags, Parades, and the Past” by bringing together all political parties and major community groups once again with American diplomatic support. All three of these broad themes directly tied into feelings of unionist and nationalist victimhood and victimization. With flags and parades there was a focus on trying to quell Loyalist fury over a decision by Belfast City Council to fly the flag of the United Kingdom only on certain days, viewed as an attack on their Britishness. Discussion around parades focused on trying to build confidence in the Parades Commission from both communities and limit the yearly disruptions and disorder around the Unionist marching season, viewed as provocative to nationalist as they often commemorated historical events associated with subjugation and harm of the catholic minority (Bryan, 2015). The strand of the talks focused on the past covered not only historical resentments and grievances, but also the material concerns of funding pensions and benefits for victims as well as organizing truth and reconciliation processes such as recovering the bodies of those “disappeared” primarily by the IRA.

Despite Northern Ireland being one of the most widely studied modern civil conflicts, this literature heavily focused on processes of conflict and peacemaking. Whether this be explanations of the behaviour of armed actors, analysis of the institutional design, or trying to explain why the peace process in Northern Ireland was so successful in

comparison to many other attempts to resolve deeply embedded civil conflicts (Clark & Wilford, 2012; Dixon, 2002; Horowitz, 2002; Jarman, 2004; McLaughlin & Baker, 2010; Wilford & Wilson, 2001). While the conflict is an undoubtedly important case study in many strands of literature, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to the Northern Ireland Assembly that was born from the peace process beyond its design and establishment. This is especially pronounced within the quantitative political science literature. A sizeable body of literature on party behaviour examines the influence of the conflict and ethnicity on Northern Ireland elections, providing insights into how legislators arrive and remain at Stormont but not so much what they do once when they are in the chamber (McGarry, Hainsworth, & Gilligan, 2008; McGlynn, Tonge, & McAuley, 2014; Mitchell, Evans, & O’leary, 2009). Some scholars have used transcripts from the assembly around specific debates assessments of discussion around issues such as equality bills or abortion, but studies on behaviour and communication strategy of parties remain scant (Bloomer, Roberts, & Campbell, 2024; Whitaker, 2010).

This chapter seeks to contribute to literature on both victimhood and the Northern Ireland Assembly more broadly in two main ways. Firstly, I create a tool to collect, preprocess and collate all speeches since the meeting of the Northern Ireland forum in 1996 that laid the groundwork for the devolution of powers and establishment of the Northern Ireland.¹³ For this chapter the gathering and processing of this data allows the application of computational text analysis approaches, which to my knowledge has not been utilized in the study of the Northern Ireland legislature. It is also hoped that this will assist others in carrying out research on the floor by transforming the Northern Ireland Hansard into a more easily manipulated dataset, connected to legislator and chamber level meta-data such as party affiliation or ministerial positions. Secondly, I advance the currently sizeable literature on victimization in Northern Ireland by examining how parties discuss and compete over victimhood within assembly debates whilst in direct contact with one another. I argue that the way in which legislators communicate with one another in these highly public debates could be an important indicator of cross-community attitudes at the elite level. I chart the use of victimhood narratives overtime, and assess how inclusive or exclusive these narratives are. While as

¹³This will be made available at: <https://github.com/Callumit/NorthernIrelandAssemblyScraper.git> following some efforts to make the program more user-friendly for other researchers

noted by [Cohrs et al. \(2015\)](#) we cannot perfectly correlate inclusive and less competitive feelings of victimhood with a greater support or readiness for reconciliation, it is likely that if elite narratives around victimhood soften or harden this may be an indicator of developments or degeneration in the maintenance and building of peace.

4.1. Research Questions and Motivation

This chapter assesses collective victimhood within the Northern Ireland context. As this is to my knowledge the only work to apply quantitative text analysis methods to the entirety of the modern Northern Ireland Assembly's transcripts, my first research question is largely descriptive. Alongside a more general descriptive assessment of the Northern Ireland Assembly, I also hone in on patterns of discussion around cross-community tensions and conflict and when victimhood narratives related to this ethnic cleavage are deployed by members.

I also test the exclusive/inclusive and competitive/non-competitive victimhood paradigms within the literature in this context. Inclusive victimhood acknowledges the suffering of outgroups including likely at the hands of ingroup members ([Vollhardt et al., 2016](#)). As discussed in the literature review, this ties into important mechanisms within social identity theory, primarily that of a positive self-image ([Tajfel et al., 1971](#)). As individuals, we attempt to maintain a positive self-image including through our associations with our groups. As a result, individuals will often attempt to either mitigate, deny or otherwise avoid recognizing harm committed by those they consider part of the ingroup ([Vollhardt, 2015](#)). Competitive victimhood is one way in which an individual can respond to claims of ingroup harm or outgroup suffering ([Jackson, 2019](#); [Solomon & Martin, 2019](#)). This involves the ingroup or an individual asserting itself as having suffered more compared to the outgroup. Those who display high levels of exclusive victimhood are more likely to view victimhood as a competition, which is associated with antisocial attitudes such as low intergroup trust and higher hostility ([Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015](#)). This is especially concerning within the context of a post-conflict society, as rebuilding trust along their ethnic cleavage is a core pillar of peace building and durability ([Jankowitz, 2017](#)).

While one aspect of competitive and exclusive victimhood is this psychological drive

to maintain a positive self-image, in the political context the defining of one's own community as victims whilst denying that to the outsider also brings instrumental political benefits (Horwitz, 2018). Especially in cases where there are pre-existing strong cleavages, depicting one's group as the pure and uniquely mistreated people in comparison to a malicious outsider can enable political entrepreneurs to effectively leverage existing grievances and anxieties to mobilize supporters behind themselves. These feelings were activated in extreme cases by Serbian Politic elites during the collapse of the Yugoslav Republic and likewise by Hutu elites to mobilize the populace to genocide (Lindner, Robins, & Jones, 2009; Ritz-Deutch, 2023). These narratives of competitive or exclusive victimhood often refer to real historical events, such as massacres or displacements and existing "threats" among the outgroup in order to build intragroup solidarity and mobilize effectively. In the Northern Ireland context, these narratives were frequently deployed by those attempting to prevent or undermine the functioning of the devolved assembly. Republican paramilitaries contested the idea of disarmament due to the track record of security forces and traumatic instances of mob violence to drive nationalist communities out of areas. Likewise, unionists contested the idea of police reform due to both the symbolic importance of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the heavy casualties that members of this organization suffered at the hands of those now pushing most strongly for the reforms.

Building upon this discussion and relevant literature, I ask two core research questions in this chapter:

RQ1 - How and when are victimhood narratives used in the Northern Ireland Assembly?

RQ2 - When are legislators more likely to use exclusive victimhood narratives and vice versa?

4.2. Theory and Hypotheses

Northern Irish political culture is often depicted as "tribal", where members of political parties are driven by a constant incentive to appeal to their own group as bombastically as possible (Gormley-Heenan & Macginty, 2008; Mitchell & Evans, 2009). Even

as the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) transformed from permanent roadblocks on peace to governing Northern Ireland alongside former IRA commanders, their pragmatism in sharing power is rarely reflected in their communication around ethnic and identity issues. While framing this as being driven by “tribal” animosities is reductive and ignores the strategy behind party decisions, the system of consociationalism which forces the two largest ethnic parties to work together gives little reason to moderate and all the reason to rile up the ethnic base (Mitchell, 1995; Wilson, 2020). Even with voting systems such as Single Transferable Vote, within the context of a society still recovering from the conflict it is difficult for anyone to meaningfully make electoral gains by reaching across the ethnic divide given the punishment by co-ethnics for this behaviour. In that context, whilst collective victimhood often necessitates discussing the outgroup in negative ways, these attacks are rarely to weaken cross-identity political opponents but rather as a way to signal a greater ability to stand up for your own ingroup co-ethnic political rivals (De Fazio, 2016). While the DUP outflanked the UUP through cunning ethnic outbidding in the collapse of the Good Friday Agreement arguing that they were the true voice of a stronger unionism, they face similar but less coordinated attacks from the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) (Moore, Loizides, Sandal, & Lordos, 2014). Those seen to be too weak on the ethnic issue may leave themselves open to accusations of treason, such as the frequent accusations of “Lundyism” brandished by disaffected loyalists against those seen to be allowing Republicans too much leeway and influence. Building upon present understandings of these dynamics, I expect that when identity is especially activated victimhood narratives will become more common and more exclusive. I test the following hypotheses:

H1: *Elections will increase the use of victimhood narratives, especially exclusive victimhood narratives*

H2: *Contentious events with an ethnic component such as the loyalist marching season will increase the use of victimhood narratives and make them more exclusive*

H3: *As distance from the conflict increases, the use of victimhood narratives will decrease and become more inclusive*

H4: *Legislators who were involved earlier in the peace processes will use more vic-*

timhood narratives than other MLAs

These hypotheses are focused on testing how the salience of the conflict and identity influence the use of victimhood narratives. When these issues are salient I expect that in an attempt to appeal to co-ethnic supporters, elites will use more extreme rhetoric to describe the ethnic outgroup and position themselves as the defender of the ingroup. It has been observed in research on truth and reconciliation that even at the societal level, time generally softens intergroup relations whilst those most involved in the conflict leave the political stage such as war-time leaders and militants (Mullet, López López, & Pineda Marín, 2021).

At the legislator and speech level, I test the following hypotheses:

H5: *Use of victimhood narratives by one group will lead to a subsequent rise in the use of victimhood narratives by the other*

H6: *Members will be more likely to use exclusive victimhood narratives in response to an outgroup exclusive victimhood narrative during a debate*

These hypotheses focus on competitive and exclusive uses of victimhood narratives, with the expectation that legislators will emphasize their ingroups suffering in response to claims that their group has caused harm. This may be driven by both a genuine emotional response due to the recent history of the conflict as well as by incentives to appear stronger on ethnic issues to the electorate. Similarly, I expect that there will be reflexive use of exclusive victimhood narratives when an outgroup legislator denies or neglects the harm that has been inflicted on the ingroup.

4.3. Methods and Data

This chapter utilizes a combination of computational text analysis methods including utilizing Large Language Models (LLMs), semi-supervised text classifiers, and topic modelling to analyse all texts from the modern Northern Ireland Assembly between June 1998-May 2024, with considerable periods of inactivity due to collapses in power-sharing.

4.3.1. *The Northern Ireland Assembly Parser*

To collect the data for the chapter I developed the Northern Ireland Assembly Parser. This parser consists of a series of Python scripts designed to download all digitally available Hansard reports of Assembly proceedings within a specified date range. The parser needed to account for several unique challenges related to the structure and consistency of these records.

The Assembly’s historical records of debates are still hosted on its original website, but they are presented across multiple formats due to periodic updates in link architecture and document formatting. To address these changes, I built multiple versions of the parser, each tailored to one of five major shifts in the format and structure of the Hansard reports. Each version accounted for changes such as URL structure, page layout, and HTML structure, ensuring that the scraper could accurately access and extract text from each document version. This process was essential for correctly associating each speech with the appropriate topic, speaker, and date, despite the variation in record formats.

Given these formatting variations, I dedicated significant effort to preprocessing and standardizing the text data with a uniform preprocessing pipeline, to handle discrepancies across formats and ensure consistency. This included steps such as text cleaning, error handling for irregular HTML or XML structures, and protocols to identify and fix common issues in encoding. These measures helped avoid gathering incomplete, garbled, or misattributed text and ultimately allowed me to compile a coherent, unified dataset.

After preprocessing, I collated a final dataset comprising 174,449 documents ¹⁴. To enrich the data, I manually added critical legislator information to enhance the analytical value. This included details on each legislator’s current party affiliation, any past party affiliations, constituency, ministerial roles, term lengths, and age. Where possible, this information was gathered from official sources, such as the Northern Ireland Assembly’s website, ¹⁵ In the end, this process created a reliable dataset capable of

¹⁴As the speaker is required to remain neutral in debates despite being an MLA, I do not consider speeches from the speaker and other similar roles such as a Presiding Officer in the analyses. This brings the total speeches in my analyses down to 149,987

¹⁵Available at <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/your-mlas>

supporting robust analysis of Assembly discussions and the use of victimhood narratives over the lifespan of the Assembly. The final dataset is comprehensive, consistent, and enriched with contextual information about each legislator, allowing comparisons between parties, traditions and over time.

Building the Text Classifiers

This chapter necessitated three main classification tasks. In order I created classifiers to perform the following tasks:

- (1) Determine whether a speech refers to the conflict, its legacy or cross-community tensions broadly.
- (2) Determine whether a speech contains a victimhood narrative
- (3) Determine whether a speech displays an exclusive framing of both the victim and perpetrator of conflict related victimization

For the first classifier, I used the open-source LLaMa3 70b model, leveraging 3,000 hand-annotated texts to build a training set of 9,000 texts. These hand annotations served as a validation metric to gauge the model’s performance ([Dubey et al., 2024](#)). LLaMa3, while significantly smaller than its contemporary competitor GPT-4, which has over 1 trillion parameters, offers a competitive performance despite its reduced size. A major advantage of LLaMa3 is that it can be run locally for free, making it accessible for iterative experimentation. Although it is generally less effective than larger models in complex reasoning tasks, LLaMa3 still produced reliable results for this classification task.

Following an iterative process inspired by [Törnberg \(2024\)](#), I conducted multiple rounds of validation checks. These involved analysing the model’s justifications for incorrect annotations and refining the prompt accordingly. The final prompt, which also served as a rubric for classification, can be found in [Appendix E](#). In this final iteration, the model achieved a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.73, indicating ”substantial” agreement between my annotations and those produced by LLaMa3. While I could likely have improved this to over 80% by using GPT-4o-mini, I chose to reserve resources for more complex tasks ahead, as this agreement rate is usually considered acceptable

even for human co-annotators.

Using these annotated texts, I then trained an XGBoost binary classifier, which performed very well, achieving an F1-score of 0.87.¹⁶ This high score suggests robust performance across both classes. To further validate the model and ensure that this performance wasn't due to over-fitting, I used 5-fold cross-validation, a method where the model is trained five times on different sub-samples of the data to check consistency. As the model showed close to zero variance across the folds, this indicates that its performance is stable and not overly sensitive to the specific sample used for training.

Table 7. Conflict - Classifier Performance Result

Class	Precision	Recall	F1-Score	Support
0	0.86	0.88	0.87	1147
1	0.87	0.86	0.87	1141
Accuracy		0.87		2288
Macro avg	0.87	0.87	0.87	2288
Weighted avg	0.87	0.87	0.87	2288

Table 8. Victimhood - K-Fold Average and Variance

Metric	Average	Variance
Accuracy	0.8664	0.0001
Precision	0.8721	0.0001
Recall	0.8608	0.0001
F1-Score	0.8664	0.0001

As collective victimhood is a more complex and nuanced concept to capture in a text, I approached building this second classifier using a similar approach as above. For this task, both LLaMa3 and OpenAI's GPT-4o-Mini did not prove sufficiently capable of this complex reasoning task.¹⁷ Instead I combined the state-of-the-art GPT-4o with a dynamic few-shot approach to boost the performance of the machine annotations to an acceptable level making use of the Python package by [Malla, Coan, Srinivasan, and Boussalis \(n.d.\)](#). This is a commonly used technique when utilizing LLMs, which provides relevant examples to the LLM within the prompt giving additional informa-

¹⁶All classifiers in this chapter are trained using embeddings generated by roBERTa. Unlike in the US chapter, legislator texts are significantly shorter and come with natural splits that reduce the difficulties with long texts discussed previously ([Liu et al., 2019](#)).

¹⁷Initial tests with LLaMa3 reached a Cohen's Kappa of 0.57 compared to GPT4o-Mini's 0.59. Neither score could be considered sufficient to build a classifier upon

tion and context that may allow the model to detect patterns and perform better in reasoning tasks for many distinct use cases (Gidaris & Komodakis, 2018; Parnami & Lee, 2022). In this case, this involved providing a small subset of hand-annotated examples of which a small number dynamically provided to the LLM based on co-sine similarity between the text being annotated and these examples. Although using the GPT-4o model was costly, this approach performed the rather complex task quite well, reaching a Cohen’s Kappa agreement rate of 0.73. This again indicates a good level of agreement, within an acceptable bound for a human co-annotator. with 2,000 hand annotations and 4300 machine-annotations, I train another XGBoost model with this balanced training set. This model again performs very well, with an F1 Score of 0.86 and even less variation in the k-fold cross-validation than the conflict classifier.

Table 9. Victimhood - Classifier Performance Report

Class	Precision	Recall	F1-Score	Support
0	0.86	0.89	0.87	680
1	0.88	0.85	0.86	666
Accuracy		0.8678		1346
Macro avg	0.87	0.87	0.87	1346
Weighted avg	0.87	0.87	0.87	1346

Table 10. Victimhood - K-Fold Average and Variance

Metric	Average	Variance
Accuracy	0.8594	0.0000
Precision	0.8602	0.0000
Recall	0.8594	0.0000
F1 Score	0.8593	0.0000

To demonstrate the face validity of these results, we can observe some correct classifications as well as common errors. To first demonstrate the ability for this classifier to detect explicit victimhood narratives in relation to the conflict the following represent both nationalist and unionist versions of this narrative.

Victimhood Narratives discussing Violence

Mr. J Kelly (Sinn Féin): "The DUP is a party that has consulted, and continues to consult, Loyalist paramilitaries. In particular, it consults with those Loyalist paramilitaries who are presently engaged in attacking Nationalists throughout the Six Counties. The DUP has connived with, and continues to connive with, those Loyalist paramilitaries who are murdering and attempting to murder Nationalists throughout the Six Counties. And yet they, who sleep in the same bed as the Loyalist paramilitaries, come here with a motion that condemns paramilitary activity. The political hypocrisy of the DUP was amply demonstrated last Thursday—[Interruption]."

Diane Dodds (Democratic Unionist Party): "There is no doubt that violence in Northern Ireland has left a terrible legacy of tears. I want to focus my remarks and my question on the issues that the Minister has raised about the legacy process. I welcome her assertion that the process should be transparent and justice-based. However, many of us in Northern Ireland have listened over the past weeks to the Irish Republic's Foreign Minister pontificate and lecture us on the issue of legacy while there are many cases that concern his Government, including, in particular, allegations of collusion between Garda officers and the Provisional IRA in the case of prominent members of the judiciary in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister take action to ensure that the victims in those cases have a right to redress, to the truth, and to justice?"

These types of narratives are very present within the training data and are perhaps the most obvious style of victimhood narrative in a post-conflict society. They directly assign blame for acts of physical violence to specific actors or groups of actors against certain communities or society as a whole. The classifier is also effective at capturing discussions of less material harm, such as supposed violations of rights about national identity and equality.

Victimhood based on equality and symbols

Gavin Robinson (Democratic Unionist Party): As a unionist, I am not blind to the fact that this motion is a cynical attempt to hide the moves in Belfast City Hall and some other council-owned buildings throughout Northern Ireland. In my council in Limavady, the Union flag and other symbols, even a mug belonging to Princess Diana, were removed by the republican/nationalist bloc a few years ago, and that has caused great resentment in the unionist community ever since. Members should also remember the indefensible violent response that their actions in December provoked in the wider unionist community.”

Caitríona Ruane (Sinn Féin): ”I welcome the fact that councils throughout Ireland have passed motions, and, today, I ask that all parties support our joint motion. I call on those on the unionist Benches who have set their heart against it, even at this stage, to support the motion. There is no partial equality; there is no selective equality.”

A common misclassification in both the conflict and victimhood classifiers are detecting discussions of collective victimhood not directly related to the conflict or central identity cleavage. While these sometimes allude to relevant identity groupings for conflict such as religious labels, these narratives are focused on unrelated issues such as institutional abuse scandals or violence against women. Despite targeted training to limit the problem, a small number of these errors appear in the validation sets. This is likely complicated by the occurrence of gendered-violence and institutional abuse tied to the conflict, such as sexual abuse by paramilitaries, military, and political elites during the conflict which are likely very linguistically similar.

Missclassification Examples

Mrs. Courtney (Social Democratic and Labour Party): "I support the motion. The Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre (NI) is associated with the Network of Rape Crisis Centres Ireland. As was mentioned earlier, a helpline is provided free of charge for victims of sexual violence.

Some time ago, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety passed an application for research funding to the Minister. Disappointingly, there has been no response to date."

Jim Allister (Traditional Unionist Voice): "I am not quite sure what 'non-aligned' means in this matter. However, if a member of the clergy abuses a child who comes across his path, in whatever way, there is likely to be as much of a breach of trust as there would be if that abuse were carried out in an institution. I suppose the point that I am really making is that when we look retrospectively over the sorry history of abuse and pick out some of the low points — for example, the behaviour of Fr. Brendan Smyth — and ask whether this legislation would permit the investigation of that abuse, we see that the answer would be no, it would not."

The final step in the text classification process is to distinguish between inclusive and exclusive victimhood narratives. Given that this represents an even more complex sub-type of victimhood, I split this into four separate stages. To add more granularity to the analysis, I split exclusive victimhood into two dimensions. The first dimension is perpetrator, which determines if the perpetrator of the harm belongs to the ingroup or the outgroup. This would also count as exclusive, if it denies wrongdoing of the ingroup. Similarly, I need to determine who the victim of the victimhood narrative is, and if this refers to an outgroup or ingroup member. Again denying the victimhood of the outgroup would qualify as an exclusive victimhood narrative. Given my victimhood classifier detected just over 10,000 victimhood narratives, rather than training two classifiers I instead use GPT-4o to directly annotate the texts. To simplify the prompts and reasoning task I also split these by tradition of the speaker (i.e. nationalist or

unionist).¹⁸ Using the same dynamic few-shot approach I used the LLM to annotate all unionist and nationalist texts to determine if they take an exclusive victimhood stance on the perpetrator and/or victim. I perform the same validation as in the previous steps to assess the effectiveness of each prompt by dimension and community.

	Victim	Perpetrator
Nationalist	0.74	0.85
Unionist	0.70	0.86

Table 11. Cohen’s Kappa Values for Exclusive Victimhood

We can see that GPT4o is better able to distinguish between exclusive framings of perpetrators than with victims across in both communities. This imbalance in performance should be kept in mind when making comparisons, however for most of the analyses in this chapter I consider a speech to contain an exclusive victimhood narrative if either perpetrator or victim are exclusive. Examples of exclusive and inclusive victimhood narratives identified by the model are illustrated below:

¹⁸As those who self-designate in the Assembly as ‘Other’ do not have a clearly defined ingroup or outgroup, I do not annotate these texts for exclusive victim or perpetrator narratives

Exclusive Victimhood Examples

Rev Dr Ian Paisley (Democratic Unionist Party): Mr Dallat implied that the parties to the agreement agreed that we are part of the United Kingdom, but he then dished up a diet of tattered flags and talked about why we are having this debate. The fact is that the SDLP is opposed to the flying of the Union flag. If it had not been opposed, then the Unionists in partnership with it in the Executive could have passed this; the issue would have been all over and the flag would have been flying. It was SDLP opposition, and not opposition from the Sinn Féiners, that brought this about. The SDLP then lectures us about building blocks, tattered flags and the DUP flying the flag upside down. I am the only man that taught Europe how to fly the flag—the European Union was flying it upside down. Of course, I would not expect Mr Dallat to be even interested in how the flag was flown—he would be delighted it was flying upside down because he would hope that it meant that the Union was in distress. As long as the ordinary people of this land are in a majority, the Union will not be in distress, and they will not bow the knee to the policy of Mr Dallat and his party.

Barry McElduff (Sinn Féin): It perpetuates historical and present economic realities. In a way, it reveals a mindset of economic apartheid west and east of the Bann. Do it at your peril because the people west of the Bann and people in the north-west of Ireland are citizens with full and equal rights. We do not want big house unionism to re-emerge in 2011.

Inclusive Victimhood Examples

David McClarty (Ulster Unionist Party): We condemn the recent violence in east Belfast that has terrorised both communities. We stand ready to support any local initiative aimed at allowing communities to resolve their differences peacefully. As in north Belfast, the solution will be found only in dialogue.

Claire Hanna (Social Democratic and Labour Party): Much will revolve around how we imagine ourselves as a society. Large sections of our community have been brutalised by the past 30 years. We must build a civic and caring society and re-examine our values and our attitudes to alcohol and drugs. We need to recreate a sense of community.

Finally, to provide a measure of if a topic is related to the conflict or not, I use the same model to classify all 6000 unique topics according to the prompt included in Appendix D. This will provide an important control for assessing competitive victimhood during the analyses. This performed very well, reaching a Cohen's Kappa of 0.87 indicating excellent agreement. ¹⁹

¹⁹All prompts for LLM analysis can be found in Appendix F

4.4. Descriptive Statistics

With my classifiers trained and texts annotated, I first assess the spread of victimhood narratives across parties and designations. We can see some quite obvious differences, especially between unionist and nationalist parties. The DUP uses victimhood narratives significantly more than all other major parties. Considering its history as a party of protest that rose to become the largest due to its opposition to the Good Friday Agreement, this makes intuitive sense. Indeed in [Figure 14](#), we can see that their use of victimhood narratives quite rapidly declines once they become the largest unionist party and commit to power-sharing following the St. Andrews Agreement. Small unionist parties are also significantly more likely to use victimhood narratives, however this is partially driven by the very short existence of these parties and the low number of members. The TUV with its singular MLA and party leader Jim Allister single-handedly use more exclusive victimhood narratives than the SDLP. Caveats such as differences in party duration and number of MLAs do bias certain results, but these results seem to indicate that there are significant differences between nationalists and unionists in the use of victimhood narratives which will be investigated throughout the chapter.

I then applied an LDA topic model to assess the prevalence of topics within Assembly debates, which demonstrates that while conflict related topics such as victims, borders, and discrimination represent significant topics - most discussion is along relatively routine topics for a legislative body.

However, issues not strictly related to the conflict are often framed along ethnic lines even in topics such as sports, culture, or funding as groups representing different traditions. For example, the funding of Irish sports associations or the accusations being made that education policy was intentionally marginalizing Protestant boys in favour of Catholic education ([Mitchell, 1995](#)). This can be seen in plots [Figure 12](#) through [Figure 15](#), which indicates that the ethnic conflict, the related social cleavage, and its consequences remain highly salient throughout the entirety of Stormont's history. Similarly, victimhood narratives are also highly prevalent in speeches throughout the period to a slightly lesser degree.

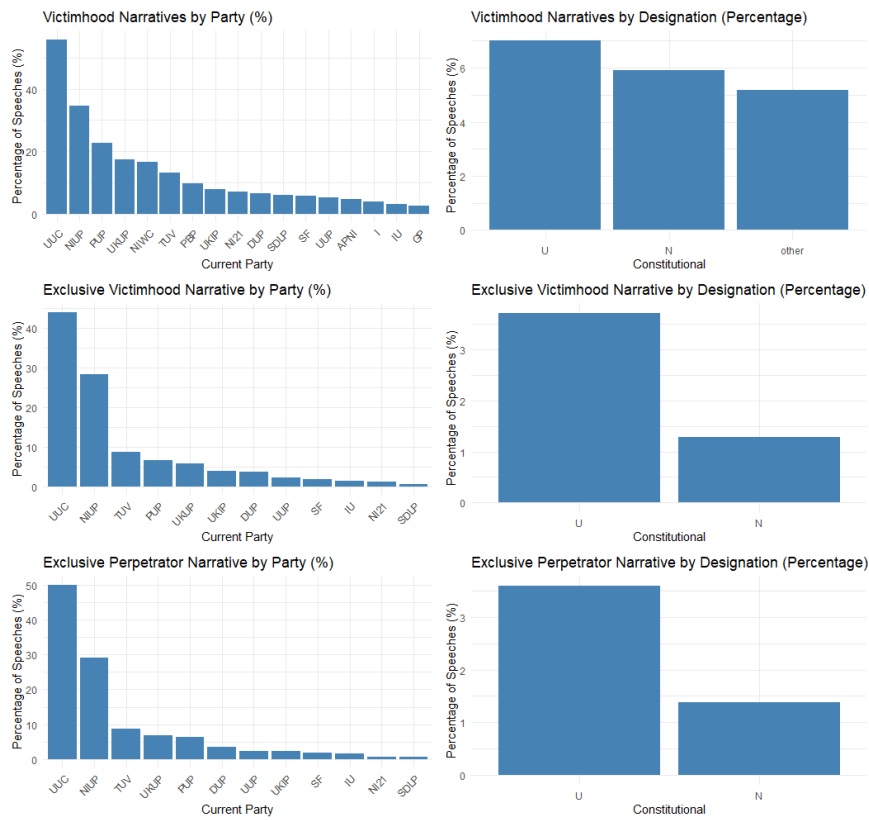


Figure 10. Types of Victimhood Narratives by Party and Designation

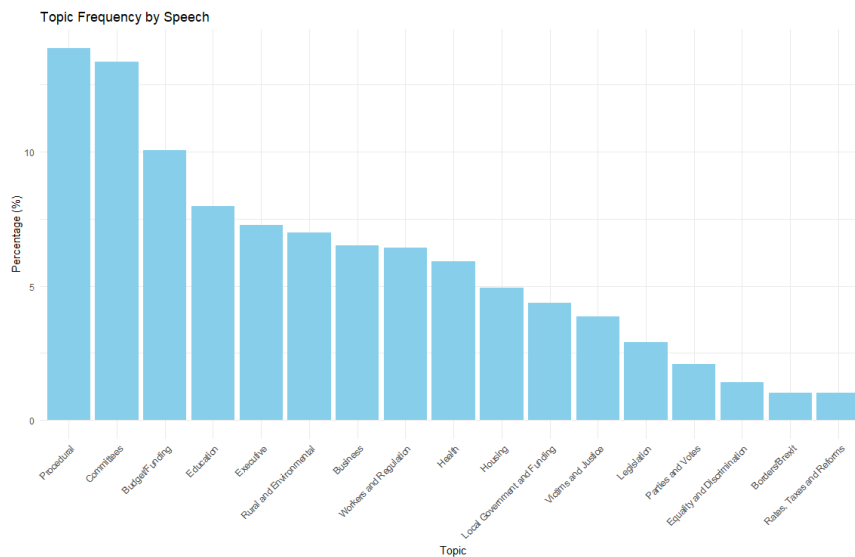


Figure 11. Northern Ireland Assembly Speeches by Topic

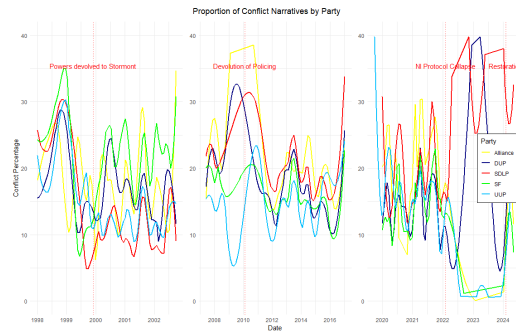


Figure 12. Conflict by Party

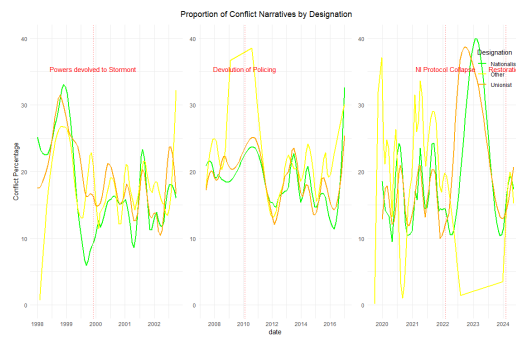


Figure 13. Conflict by Designation

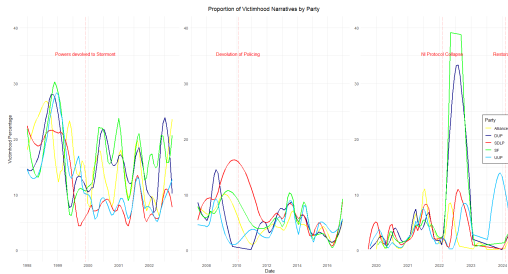


Figure 14. Victimhood by Party

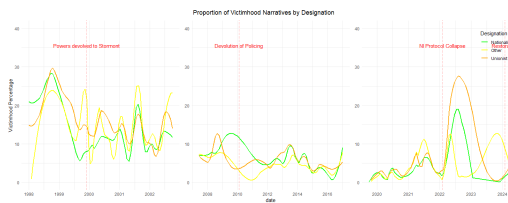


Figure 15. Victimhood by Designation

Results

For my analyses I use a series of logistic regressions to estimate the relationship between victimhood, legislator characteristics and debates within the Assembly. The first analysis focuses on personal characteristics of the MLA, the political/social context and the distance from the end of the conflict to estimate their effect on the likelihood that this legislator's speech will contain a victimhood narrative with year fixed effects.

In [Table 12](#), I apply this approach to the use of any type of victimhood narrative. I find some support for several of my hypotheses. Those who are veterans of the peace process having been elected at the beginning of the power-sharing assembly, are more likely to use victimhood narratives. I expect this is due to a combination of both the greater prevalence of victimhood narratives in the initial years and also that these legislators were more directly involved with both the conflict and its cessation. This result also does not reach the highest level of statistical significance. I expect that the degree of variation between parties and temporal variation means that this is overall a weak finding. These legislators are just over 7.5% more likely to use a victimhood narrative providing than those who were elected after the Assembly was operational. I fail to reject the null hypothesis entirely in the case of the effect of elections, with this result indicating that speeches within 6 months of an election are less likely to contain a victimhood narrative. These results also indicate that a female legislator's speech is 27% more likely to contain a victimhood narrative.

In contrast, the marching season is correlated with an 8.6% rise in the likelihood of victimhood narratives as expected. There is a small positive effect with the ceasefire variable. This indicates that rather than victimhood narratives decreasing as distance from violence increases, there is instead a monthly increase of 0.002%, but given this small effect size I expect that this is likely a spurious correlation.²⁰ Whether the topic title is conflict related is also included as a highly significant control, which almost doubles the odds that a speech contains a victimhood narrative. I observe no significant effect between unionists and nationalists, however those designating as 'Other' are 18.7% less likely to use victimhood narratives. When an ethnic party becomes the

²⁰Alternative specifications such as models without year fixed effects leads to this coefficient displaying a similarly small but negative relationship with victimhood further indicating that this result is far from robust

major partner in the constitutionalist system, like with the supplanting of the UUP and SDLP by the DUP and Sinn Féin respectively, their use of victimhood narratives decreases.

Table 12. Logistic Regression Model: Victimhood Narrative

Variable	Coefficient (Log Odds)	Odds Ratio
Elected 1996-1998	0.072** (0.026)	1.075
Gender	-0.311*** (0.032)	0.733
Designation - Other	-0.187*** (0.041)	0.829
Designation - Unionist	0.038 (0.025)	1.039
Conflict Topic	1.946*** (0.042)	6.986
Election	-0.149** (0.052)	0.861
Marching Season	0.083*** (0.024)	1.086
Largest Party	-0.271*** (0.023)	0.762
Ceasefire	0.002** (0.001)	1.002
Constant	-1.486*** (0.108)	0.226
Observations	147,977	
Log Likelihood	-32,792.560	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	65,641.120	
Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

Table 13 examines the use of exclusive victimhood narratives and therefore necessitates the removal of those not designating as Unionists or Nationalists. The veteran MLAs from the beginning of the conflict no longer seem to significantly differ from others in this table, while the relationship between gender and exclusive framings of victimhood remains similar to a more general use of victimhood. Overall these results are very similar to the previous, with the effects of elections, marching season, largest party and time passed since the ceasefire all retain very similar and significant coefficients. In the case of elections, while the relationship remains directionally the same, the effect is much larger with exclusive victimhood narratives where they are 43% less likely to occur.

Table 13. Logistic Regression Model: Exclusive Victimhood Narratives

Variable	Coefficient (Log Odds)	Odds Ratio
Elected 1996-1998	-0.011 (0.038)	0.989
Gender	-0.386*** (0.054)	0.680
Unionist	0.771*** (0.039)	2.158
Conflict Topic	2.215*** (0.054)	9.138
Election	-0.560*** (0.108)	0.571
Marching Season	0.074* (0.035)	1.077
Largest Party	-0.301*** (0.033)	0.740
Ceasefire	0.003* (0.001)	1.003
Constant	-2.398*** (0.167)	0.091
Observations	130,347	
Log Likelihood	-16,911.160	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	33,876.330	
Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

I next assess the influence of exclusive victimhood narratives deployed by the out-group on the use of victimhood narratives by the opposite ingroup. To assess this, I narrow the focus down to this relationship within each debate. This means that in my analyses on unionists, I assess the influence of a nationalist exclusive victimhood narrative being used either immediately prior to the unionist speech or in the second model within five speeches.

In [Table 14](#) I find a strong positive relationship in unionist exclusive victimhood narrative with a preceding exclusive victimhood narrative from a nationalist MLA. This effect is highly significant with a large coefficient, whether it be in cases where the unionist is speaking directly after the nationalist who used this narrative, or within 5 turns. This effect remains even when controlling for if the debate is focused on an issue related to the conflict where it is likely expected that MLAs would focus on specific cases of victimization or victimhood, compared to those where these narratives are more likely to have been employed as a rhetorical tool. This finding is supported

in Table 15 where a nationalist MLA is around twice as likely to use an exclusive victimhood narrative if immediately preceded by another used by a unionist. Given the temporal relationships between speeches in this model, this provides strong evidence that legislators are more likely to use more exclusive victimhood narratives as a competitive response to those made by the outgroup. These provide strong support for hypotheses five and six.

Table 14. Comparison of Logistic Regression Models: Unionism (Log Odds)

Variable	Unionist Model (1)	Unionist Model (5)
Intercept	-1.598*** (0.320)	-1.877*** (0.188)
Nationalist Excl. Victimhood	1.688*** (0.133)	1.767*** (0.070)
Male	-1.021*** (0.174)	-0.769*** (0.087)
Conflict Topic	1.976*** (0.125)	1.945*** (0.066)
Stormont Election	-0.374* (0.210)	-0.583*** (0.122)
Marching Season	0.035 (0.077)	0.049 (0.041)
Largest Party	-0.331*** (0.071)	-0.255*** (0.038)
Ceasefire	0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.001)
Significance Codes	*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05	

Table 15. Logistic Regression Model: Nationalist (Log Odds)

Variable	Nationalist Model (1)	Nationalist Model (5)
Intercept	-2.829*** (0.331)	-3.498*** (0.313)
Unionist Excl Victimhood	1.995*** (0.108)	2.197*** (0.078)
Gender	0.094 (0.077)	0.130 . (0.077)
Conflict Topic	2.069*** (0.116)	1.663*** (0.115)
Stormont Election	-0.445* (0.228)	-0.779* (0.382)
Marching Season	0.158* (0.077)	0.176* (0.076)
Largest Party	-0.381*** (0.071)	-0.339*** (0.070)
Ceasefire	0.005* (0.002)	0.006* (0.002)
Significance Codes	*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05	

Discussion

In the preceding analyses, I find little evidence to support an increase in the use of victimhood narratives around elections. This is a very surprising finding, given that parties frequently focus on cultural issues as part of their election strategies (Tonge & Evans, 2015). This may support arguments made by Gormley-Heenan and Macginty (2008) that, while parties will behave intransigently on community issues for their own gain, some degree of pragmatism may limit this style of communication when in the legislative context. In comparison, the marching season which brings with it yearly disturbances or fears of violence in interface areas, does seem to increase discussions of victimhood but this is less significant when specifically looking at exclusive victimhood narratives. The hypotheses around distance from the cessation of violence, and whether those most involved in the early stages of the peace process were more likely to use victimhood narratives, provide little clear evidence due to mixed levels of significance across models and generally very small effect sizes. Future studies could improve on this by providing a more granular analysis of individual involvement with the conflict. One approach could be to compare former combatants, or those who experienced personal victimization in the conflict. This would be a difficult dataset to construct, as with the

exception of those who were imprisoned during the conflict such as a significant number of Sinn Féin members, involvement in the conflict especially amongst unionism is a regular sources of rumours, denials and misinformation. This is even more difficult in the cases of identifying victims, due to a lack of information and requirement to define the levels of victimization that would satisfy the criteria to be considered victimized.

I found strong evidence for the competitive victimhood dynamics. There is a large and significant relationship between the use of exclusive victimhood narratives by members from one designation and the subsequent use of an exclusive victimhood narrative by the other. This allows me to convincingly reject the null hypotheses for hypotheses 5 and 6, with all four models showing support. Some limitations remain with separating the effect of a debate being scheduled on a topic in which victimhood is the actual subject of the debate, and the perhaps more theoretically interesting cases where identity and victimhood are inserted into a not entirely related topic. Although I do have an effective way of predicting if a topic is highly likely to be about the conflict/victimhood which I include as a control, this depends upon the title provided by the Hansard report. A significant amount of time in session is spent on Private Members Bills or questions to the minister where there is often no indication of what these questions will be in the topic title beyond the proposer of the bill or the minister to be questioned. Another limitation of the approach taken in this chapter, is the exclusive focus on intergroup victimization. Ethnic outbidding can position the co-ethnic rival elite as too weak, or too incompetent to stand up for the ingroup. But it may also at times accuse co-ethnics of treason or complicity in the harm of the outgroup (Bachar & Weiner, 2014; Verwoerd, Little, & Hamber, 2022). In the Northern Ireland case, this was most pronounced following the Good Friday Agreement and release of Republican prisoners with persisting concerns about the quantity and quality of the remaining IRA arsenal by agreement between the SDLP and UUP. These accusations and anger over the decisions even caused many members of the UUP to split, joining the DUP which would proceed to support an agreement which kept most of the terms they had previously claimed would destroy the union and unionism causing similar splits within the DUP from hardliners (Moore et al., 2014). This chapter has focused exclusively on assessing how intergroup victimhood is

discussed, but building upon frameworks such as those proposed by Baele (2019) for conceptualizing malicious actors beyond the ingroup/outgroup binary could further unpack this complex rhetorical style. Theoretically, we might also assume that these attacks are more likely to have an electoral effect, as co-ethnic parties are competing for the same electorate. Similar methods could also be used to further explore elite uses of collective and competitive victimhood in other contexts, such as in televised political debates and party electoral material.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the use of collective victimhood narratives in the Northern Ireland Assembly. With special attention focused on exclusive victimhood, I created two classifiers and five LLM prompts to detect conflict, victimhood and distinct types of victimhood at the community level. My findings provide strong support that victimhood is used competitively by both nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. While my findings are mixed, I do find some differences between types of legislators and their use of victimhood narratives as well as the effect of outside stimuli such as the marching season and party strength. In this chapter, I also introduced the Northern Ireland Assembly Parser. It is hoped that this parser could be used by both those interested in examining post-conflict legislatures, but also as one tool to expand research on Northern Irish politics beyond simply discussing the past. This tool could be used as a data collection tool for the basis comparative work with other post-conflict societies such as in the Balkans, but could also be compared to the Westminster, the Dáil Éireann, or other devolved governments in the UK for use by scholars of legislative studies.

5. Thesis Conclusion

This thesis has examined the use of victimhood narratives by legislators in two distinct political environments: the U.S. Congress and the Northern Ireland Assembly. In both cases, the analysis demonstrates the complex ways in which collective victimhood can be strategically utilized by political elites, shaped by their identity, ideological position, and the political context they operate within. Despite differences in the political systems and cultural backgrounds of these two legislative settings, key patterns emerge that highlight the centrality of legislator identity and political competition in shaping the use of victimhood rhetoric.

In the U.S. chapter, I carried out two main sets of analyses. In the first set I assessed a range of constituency, individual, and geographical characteristics and their relationship with the use of victimhood narratives by the legislator. These results support theories of identity-based political expression and indicate that marginalized groups, such as racial minorities and women, are more likely to invoke victimhood claims in an attempt to mobilize and rally support. The role of ideology also provides further support to literature on morality and ideology that the attribution of harm is a core aspect of politics and political identity. In the second section of the U.S. chapter I leveraged a difference-in-differences design to test the effect of increased publicity on legislator use of victimhood narratives. I found a significant effect with the introduction of C-SPAN to the House, indicating that legislators may adopt more victimhood narratives when a larger audience is observing their speech. This indicates that legislators may shift their rhetorical strategy to use the emotive and moral nature of these narratives in an attempt to appeal to audiences. The consistent importance of variables around power-balances and control of government across both analyses further support the idea that these narratives may be used instrumentally in legislative speech.

In the Northern Ireland chapter I test the effect of legislator characteristics, identity salience and competitive victimhood. While I find mixed results for variables related to legislator identity and ethnically salient events, I find strong evidence to suggest that legislators are substantially more likely to use exclusive victimhood narratives in

a competitive manner against outgroup claims.

The results and validation processes demonstrate that quantitative text analysis methods can be effectively deployed to measure and detect victimhood narratives within legislative contexts. However, several significant challenges persist, particularly regarding the length and complexity of long legislative speeches, which introduce a degree of error into the classifications. This was especially problematic in the U.S. context, where attempting to capture victimhood in a broad sense—spanning over six decades—was a substantial undertaking. The complexity of clustering narratives about the same concept (e.g., race) over such a prolonged period revealed profound technical and substantive obstacles. The ways in which both politicians and society conceptualize and discuss critical issues like race have evolved dramatically over time, further complicating the analysis.

In contrast, when the focus was narrowed to a specific type of victimhood within a more defined and circumscribed context—such as the post-conflict setting of Northern Ireland—the methods proved far more effective and manageable. This demonstrated that computational text analysis, while promising, is most potent when the scope of the analysis is clear and well-defined. The use of large language models (LLMs) in the Northern Ireland chapter, after careful validation, produced strong results, showcasing their capacity to handle complex legislative data in a post-conflict context. However, it is impossible to ignore the significant concerns raised by the reliance on closed platforms like OpenAI’s GPT models. The costs, limitations in accessibility, and sustainability of these tools as core research methods need urgent attention if they are to become viable for broader academic use in the future.

This work could have been improved by operationalizing a more nuanced perspective of victim and perpetrator drawn from the literature. Whilst turning this into a binary concept likely improved the performance of classifier and overall feasibility of the project, important elements of victimhood are rendered invisible by this. Important connections drawn between and within ingroups and outgroups, such as those that form the basis of conspiracy theories or narratives around betrayal, do not always fit cleanly into the narrow definition of a collective victimhood narrative used in this thesis (Baele, 2019). While I was able to test a more nuanced form of victimhood

when assessing inclusive and exclusive victimhood in the Northern Ireland context, unpacking the typology of actors within a victimhood narrative would likely require either a change in methodological approach or an evolution in existing tools to produce more meaningful results.

This work has made some progress in understanding how and when elites make use of victimhood narratives. Given potential associations between intergroup trust, attitudes towards reconciliation and societal cohesion, further work that develops more complex frameworks of victimhood and tools to capture it are essential. Collective victimhood remains a central dynamic and force in both cases. In Northern Ireland a persistent feeling of betrayal has severely strained relations between Northern Irish Unionism and the British political system. This could develop into a substantial challenges to the state where the once dominant majoritarian group feels increasingly aggrieved, often to the point of advocating for the intentional collapsing of power-sharing or even violence. Likewise in the U.S. context, many within the MAGA Trump movement views their campaign as an almost messianic mission against conspiratorial forces within government for the life of the nation.

Further research in the Northern Ireland case could also potentially benefit from a comparativist approach. Academic scholarship of other post-conflict power-sharing legislatures is similarly scant such as in the post-war Balkan parliaments. Comparisons which leverage both expert knowledge of the context and effective tools for analysing large numbers of speeches open up the potential for more theory development around how victimhood narratives are deployed by elites forced to share power with former enemies. Likewise, the Northern Ireland Assembly Scraper could form the basis for work on other topics by allowing comparisons with Westminster, Dáil Éireann, or other devolved legislatures. Developing work on this further could provide insights on how to design post-conflict legislatures, manage devolution, and aid reconciliation.

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6. Appendices

Supplementary Materials

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Appendix A. Victimhood Rubric

The definition of a collective victimhood narrative is a statement which vilifies an outgroup and accuses it of intentionally and explicitly harming an ingroup.

There are three key components to a victimhood narrative:

- A sympathetic ingroup that the speaker either belongs to or is sympathetic towards
- An outgroup which is depicted as dangerous or in an unsympathetic way.
- An intentional, malicious harm.

All three of these components can vary in the degree of their explicitness.

Ingroups should be those that the speaker is sympathetic to. The type of group can vary broadly including partisan, ethnic, religious, regional, and some politicized professional groups (such as police officers, small business owners). Some individuals may become symbols, such as political leaders like Trump where an attack on the individual is framed as an attack on what they also represent provided the attack is being perpetuated by a collective outgroup (e.g. "They are trying to steal the election from Trump" would be a victimhood narrative, but "Clinton keeps attacking Trump" would not be). These ingroups can also be implicit, such as 'we' or 'our'. Society/the nation can also in some cases be an ingroup.

Outgroups are much the same, except they are groups or sometimes symbolic individuals that are responsible for the harm. Similarly, "they" and other implicit references to outgroups can be accepted based upon hints or wider context that are detected within the speech.

Harm is an intentional and malicious act that negatively impacts the ingroup. This can include physical, mental, spiritual, social, and economic harms.

Appendix B. Mistral Prompt for US classifier

Instructions

You are an expert political scientist, the text you are provided are segments from congressional speeches. These texts are quite long, so please consider the whole text when classifying the narrative. This is a high-stakes assignment, an expert will verify your labels so ensure your accuracy.

The definition of victimhood narrative is a statement which vilifies an outgroup and accuses it of intentionally and explicitly harming an ingroup. This can be implicit references to an ingroup and an outgroup (e.g., They are stealing from us). Groups can be references to political affiliations, religious groups, economic classes, geographical regions/entities, and racial groups. An individual can be used as a symbol for victimhood narratives, e.g., "The media is attacking Trump" could be a victimhood narrative, though do not classify instances of two individuals attacking each other as victimhood (e.g., "Clinton attacked Trump" would not be a victimhood narrative). Harms can include physical, economic (e.g., stealing of land/resources), and moral or spiritual. The focus of the statement is irrelevant, so long as it mentions an act of harm committed by one group against another.

Here are some stylized examples of victimhood narratives:

- "Republicans are fighting a war on the poor by cutting welfare"
- "President Obama is pursuing radical policies that undermine the values of this nation"
- "The Soviet Union is oppressing the people of Poland"
- "The North is trying to force their way of life upon the South"
- "State rights are suffering from a greedy and growing federal government"
- "Black Lives Matter is a terrorist organization trying to destroy America"
- "Women's rights are being restricted by Republican lawmakers"

Here are some examples that may appear to be victimhood narratives but are not:

- "Democratic welfare spending has bankrupted the nation" – Lacks designation of intentional harm, rather neglect or accidental harm.
- "The President's policies have left our allies weak" – Lack of intentionality in accusation.
- "Women can not access safe and affordable healthcare" – Lack of assigning blame to an outgroup.
- "The most vulnerable in this society are suffering" – Lack of assignment of blame.

Respond with a float between 0.0 and 1.0 indicating your confidence that the text includes a victimhood narrative, with a higher number indicating a higher level of confidence that victimhood is present. Do not justify or include any additional text beyond this number.

Appendix C. US Topic Lexicon

Topic	Terms
Abortion	abortion, partialbirth, lateterm, prochoice, prolife, pro-choice, planned parenthood, terminate pregnancy, roe v wade, dobbs, contraception, antiabortion, antilife
Race	asian american, chinese american, african american, black american, white american, civil rights, naacp, mlk, malcolm x, black lives matter, negro, hispanic, latino, slavery, kkk, racism, segregation, dredd scott, xenophobia
Gender	gender role, sex discrimination, sexual violence, rape, masculinity, femininity, domestic labor, feminism, sexist, pay gap, patriarchy, domestic violence, suffragette, misogyny, objectification, patriarchal
Immigration	border, immigrant, alien, mexico, border wall, refugee, southern border, crossing, undocumented, deportation, smuggling, asylum, xenophobia
Geopolitics	russia, iran, ussr, china, war, imperialism, iraq, afghanistan, korea, vietnam, israel, nuclear weapons, rogue state, putin, kim jong un, north korea, nato, occupation, palestinian, insurgent
Terrorism	terrorism, terrorist, qaeda, isis, bombing, radical, extremist, al-qaeda, boko haram, jihad, war on terror, hezbollah, islamic state, militant
Religion	secular, christian, catholic, protestant, judaism, jewish, christ, god, muslim, islam, antisemitism, shia, atheist
Crime	law and order, crime, criminal, thug, gang, murder, robbery, rape, assault, theft, drug dealer, heroin, meth, prostitution, gangster, burglary, arson, cartel
Class	employer, teamster, united steelworker, teacher union, worker, working class, middle class, poverty, labor, wage, minimum wage
Partisan	republican, democrat, socialist, liberal, conservative, libertarian, radical, progressive, partisan, bipartisan, gop, far-right, reactionary
Human Rights	dictatorship, human rights, genocide, torture, repression, tyrant, crimes against humanity, persecution, oppression
Guns	second amendment, firearm, nra, gun control, gun violence, school shooting, gun lobby, gun right
LGBTQ	homophobia, drag queen, nonbinary, transphobia, gay, lesbian, trans, transgender, crossdress, lgbtq, gender identity, gay marriage, conversion therapy

Table C1. Topics and Associated Terms (Condensed)

**Appendix D. Robustness and Validity Tests: Congressional
Difference-in-Differences Analysis**

Table D1. Placebo Test (2 years))

	<i>Dependent variable: Victimhood Percentage</i>		
	Democrat	Republican	Merged
Treatment (DiD)	−0.361 (0.482)	0.005 (0.677)	−1.140*** (0.217)
Chamber Control			−0.334 (1.206)
Chamber Balance	−0.007 (0.002)	0.013 (0.005)	0.003 (0.002)
Presidential Election	0.156 (0.533)	−1.187 (0.615)	−0.278 (0.581)
Executive Control	−0.109 (0.156)	−2.268 (1.053)	−0.670*** (0.206)
Constant	10.534*** (0.151)	10.073*** (1.067)	10.475*** (0.064)
Observations	156	156	312
R ²	0.043	0.132	0.026
Adjusted R ²	0.017	0.109	0.010
Residual Std. Error	2.175 (df = 151)	2.671 (df = 151)	2.515 (df = 306)
F Statistic	1.678 (df = 4; 151)	5.734*** (df = 4; 151)	1.625 (df = 5; 306)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table D2. Regression Results with Clustered SEs

	<i>Dependent variable: Victimhood Percentage</i>		
	Republican	Democrat	Merged
Treatment (DiD)	−0.937** (0.470)	0.169 (0.132)	−1.207*** (0.220)
Chamber Control			−0.293 (1.255)
Chamber Balance	0.017 (0.006)	−0.009 (0.002)	0.006*** (0.001)
Presidential Election	−1.140* (0.602)	0.162 (0.509)	−0.198 (0.488)
Executive Control	−1.941 (0.655)	0.073 (0.166)	−0.629*** (0.157)
Constant	9.892*** (0.983)	10.432*** (0.095)	10.349*** (0.068)
Observations	156	156	312
R ²	0.137	0.042	0.029
Adjusted R ²	0.115	0.016	0.013
Residual Std. Error	2.662 (df = 151)	2.176 (df = 151)	2.511 (df = 306)
F Statistic	6.015*** (df = 4; 151)	1.637 (df = 4; 151)	1.808 (df = 5; 306)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix E. LLM Prompts for Chapter 3

Instructions

You are an expert in Northern Irish politics. You are being given speeches made by MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Please determine if the following texts refer to ‘The Troubles’ and conflict or tensions between loyalist/unionists and nationalist/republicans. This is included but not limited to discussion of the conflict directly, the impact of the conflict and its causes, discussion of relevant treaties and processes to solve the conflict, as well as sensitive topics related to cross-community issues such as commemorations, cross-community relations, peace, recognition/legitimacy of policing, terrorism (unless specifically cited to be Islamist or far-right etc) paramilitaries, sectarianism (between catholics/protestants), Irish/Ulster Scots language, inequality along nationalist/unionist lines, peace agreements in Northern Ireland, parades, prosecutions for historical conflict-related offenses and any discussion of the constitutional question around Northern Ireland’s position in the UK or a United Ireland

Any mention of any of these topics regardless of the surrounding message or tone is enough to consider this a conflict related speech. Do not consider investigation of historical abuses to be about the troubles unless it is directly related to the conflict by the speech, as many of these discussions will be about the catholic church rather than the conflict.

Important elements to consider:

- All of these speeches are made following the creation of powersharing assembly in the 90s.
- Not all mentions of political parties are therefore about the troubles given their involvement in governing Northern Ireland.
- Focus only on divisions or cross-community tensions in reference to Nationalist/Unionist division rather than along gender, sexuality or racial lines.
- Make sure that procedural speech around parliamentary procedures is not classified as about the conflict (e.g. Members being asked to give way or being given extra time to make their speech.)
- Please use only the text provided rather than an additional context outside of the speech that you may be aware of such as the name of the speaker or their party.
- For empty or incredibly short irrelevant speeches please class them as 0 (e.g. ‘Yes.’ is clearly not about a conflict given only this information.)

Instructions for Annotating Collective Victimhood Narratives

You are an expert in Northern Irish Politics. Please consider the following text from a speech in the Northern Ireland Assembly by an elected politician. Take your time and ensure that your annotations are logical and correct.

Text:

The Text to be Annotated is added here.

Please determine if the texts above refer to collective victimhood or victimization around **The Troubles** and **inter-community relations** across the nationalism and unionism divide.

Return a **1** if this speech contains a victimhood narrative relevant to the conflict between nationalists and unionists, and **0** otherwise.

An archetypal collective victimhood narrative includes the following three core features:

- (1) A social group responsible for the harm or carrying out harm on behalf of that social group related to the nationalism/unionism divide or the ethnic conflict more broadly.
- (2) An indication that this harm is either intentional or malicious (e.g., discrimination, disrespect, damage) related to the nationalism/unionism divide or the ethnic conflict more broadly.
- (3) An innocent or sympathetic group that this harm is inflicted upon, or an individual representative of that group related to the nationalism/unionism divide or the ethnic conflict more broadly.

Harm is broadly defined, including physical, social, economic, or symbolic harm by any group against any other group. Individuals may sometimes be symbolic of their group, for example figures who were perpetrators or victims of conflict-related violence that are used to refer to collective victimhood (e.g., accusing a prominent loyalist or republican leader of terrorizing a community or referring to high-profile murders such as Jean McConville).

Victimhood narratives should assign **responsibility or blame**; however, blame/responsibility can be assigned broadly, vaguely, or very narrowly (e.g., to terrorists, to the IRA, to 'both sides'). Blame may also be assigned to actors such as the British or Irish State if they are linked to the victimhood narrative.

Unintentional harm is not victimhood. Discussion of gender, abortion, class, or racial victimhood are not relevant unless linked to the unionism/nationalism conflict. Accusing political parties of improper behavior is only victimhood if this is linked to conflict-related intentional harm.

Examples:

Few shot examples are added to the prompt here based on co-sine similarity with the text to be annotated.

Constraints: Answer with only one number. You cannot return anything except **1** or **0**.

All of the speeches are related to Northern Irish politics, so read deeper to identify if they refer to conflict-related victimhood. For example, mentioning Sinn Féin is not necessarily conflict-related, as they are a current political party, unless they/their behaviour is linked to victimization/victimhood.

Procedural speech such as "Will the member give way?" or a string that simply contains only a title such as "Presiding Officer:" or "Mr. Kelly:" are not conflict relevant and should be given a **0**.

A very vague and unclear short speech that doesn't directly refer to the conflict or victimhood should also be given a **0**, e.g., "Order!" or "My constituents are concerned."

Discussion of political disagreements/debates should only be considered relevant if they deploy a victimhood narrative related to the conflict, its causes, or its legacy, even if otherwise aggressive or highly critical.

Unionist Victimhood Narrative Instructions

You are an expert in Northern Irish Politics, please consider the following text from a speech in the Northern Ireland Assembly from a unionist politician. Take your time and ensure that your annotations are logical and correct.

Text:

These texts are all victimhood narratives from unionist politicians. We need to focus on who is referred to as the victim in this narrative (i.e. who is being harmed). We are not interested in who is being depicted as doing the harm, only who is depicted as the victim either implicitly or explicitly.

Return a 1 if this speech exclusively refers to harm visited upon unionist or unionist associated groups/organizations and individuals, including but not limited to unionists, protestants, orange order, security forces or those with British identity more broadly. If the speech attempts to deny, minimize or reject harm caused to nationalists/republicans explicitly, then also return a 1.

Return a 0 if the speech either acknowledges the victimization of nationalists, society as a whole or is too vague to be sure. Those that refer to the victimhood of all people in Northern Ireland should be a 0.

If the speech is too vague, you can't see any attribution of harm or the speech doesn't seem to refer to victimhood related to the Northern Ireland ethnic conflict/tensions then return a 0.

The following texts are examples which you may use to help guide your decision: Examples: Inserted for dynamic few-shot using co-sine similarities.

Constraints: Return only the one number indicating whether this speech is a 1 or 0. You cannot return anything except 1 or 0. These speeches are all focused on Northern Ireland Politics and victimhood, so read carefully to understand who is the victim in this text.

Unionist Perpetrator Narrative Instructions

You are an expert in Northern Irish Politics, please consider the following text from a speech in the Northern Ireland Assembly from a unionist politician. Take your time and ensure that your annotations are logical and correct.

Text:

These texts are all victimhood narratives from unionist politicians. We need to focus on who is assigned responsibility as perpetrators of the victimhood, i.e. who is to blame. We are not concerned with who is depicted as the victim, just who is the perpetrator. Return a 1 if this speech exclusively blames harms/victimhood on nationalism, republicanism, the Irish government or representatives of any of these groups such as the IRA, Sinn Féin, or the Garda. Please also return a 1 if this speech denies, undermines or otherwise raises doubts about the role of unionists, loyalists or British associated actors in harm, violence, or discrimination.

A speech which acknowledges the role of unionists/loyalists/British actors in causing harm without minimizing this should be given a 0. Speeches which don't assign specific blame to either community in favour of more broad/vague recognition those who perpetrated harm should be given a 0. for the harm will receive a 0. If the speech is too vague, you can't see any attribution of harm or the speech doesn't seem to refer to victimhood related to the Northern Ireland ethnic conflict/tensions then return a 0.

The following texts are examples which you may use to help guide your decision:

Examples: Inserted here for dynamic few-shot.

Constraints: Return only one number. You cannot return anything except 1 or 0. No other text is acceptable. These speeches are all focused on Northern Ireland Politics and victimhood, so read carefully to understand who the blame for harm is being applied to.

Nationalist Victimhood Narrative Instructions

You are an expert in Northern Irish Politics, please consider the following text from a speech in the Northern Ireland Assembly from a nationalist politician. Take your time and ensure that your annotations are logical and correct.

Text:

These texts are all victimhood narratives from nationalist politicians. We need to focus on who is assigned responsibility as perpetrators of the victimhood, i.e. who is to blame for the harm. We are not interested in who is being depicted as doing the harm, only who is depicted as the victim either implicitly or explicitly.

Return a 1 if this speech exclusively refers to harm visited upon nationalist or republican associated groups, organizations and individuals.

A speech which acknowledges the victimization of unionists/loyalist/British individuals or groups should be given a 0 so long as this victimhood is not mitigated or minimized. Speeches which refer to victimhood of society as a whole without being explicit or implicit in which community was victimized should be given a 0.

If the speech is too vague, you can't see depiction of victimhood or the speech doesn't seem to refer to victimhood related to the Northern Ireland ethnic conflict/tensions then return a 0.

The following texts are examples which you may use to help guide your decision:

Examples: Inserted here for dynamic few-shot.

Constraints: Return only one number. You cannot return anything except 1 or 0. No other text response will be accepted. These speeches are all focused on Northern Ireland Politics and victimhood, so read carefully to understand who is the victim in this text.

"""

Nationalist Perpetrator Narrative Instructions

You are an expert in Northern Irish Politics. Please consider the following text from a speech in the Northern Ireland Assembly from a nationalist politician. Take your time and ensure that your annotations are logical and correct.

Text:

These texts are all victimhood narratives from Return a 1 if this speech exclusively blames harms/victimization on unionism, loyalism, the British government, or representatives of any of these groups such as the UDA, DUP, or British state forces. Please also return a 1 if this speech denies, undermines, or otherwise raises doubts about the role of nationalists, republicans, or Irish associated actors associated with harm, discrimination or violence. We are not concerned with who is depicted as the victim, just who is the perpetrator.

A speech which acknowledges the role of nationalists/republicans/Irish actors in causing harm to unionists or Northern Ireland more broadly without minimizing this should be given a 0. Speeches which don't assign specific blame to either community in favor of more broad/vague recognition of those who perpetrated harm should be given a 0.

If the speech is too vague, you can't see depiction of victimhood or the speech doesn't seem to refer to victimhood related to the Northern Ireland ethnic conflict/tensions then return a 0.

The following texts are examples which you may use to help guide your decision:

Examples: Inserted here for dynamic few-shot.

Constraints: Answer with only one number. You cannot return anything except 1 or 0. These speeches are all focused on Northern Ireland Politics and victimhood, so read carefully to understand who the blame for victimization is being applied to.

Appendix F. White States and Legislators Regression Results

Table F1. Regression Results: Class (High White % and White Legislators)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Class (High White % and White Legislators)
Male	0.098 (0.114)
Republican	0.054** (0.024)
Left Ideology	0.433 (0.329)
Right Ideology	0.567* (0.307)
Presidency Control	−0.701 (1.343)
Chamber Control	0.337 (1.462)
Median Family Income	0.135 (1.019)
Families on Poverty Line(%)	−0.002 (0.600)
Union Donations	−2.782*** (1.007)
Anti-Union Donations	0.387* (0.209)
Construction Donations	−1.939 (1.212)
Agriculture Donations	0.139 (0.467)
Finance Donations	0.062 (0.154)
Commerce/Trade Donations	0.275 (0.561)
Entertainment/Communication Donations	−0.290 (0.239)
Urban	−1.248 (1.664)
Suburban	0.897 (0.576)
Southern Border	−2.857 (3.791)
Observations	340
Log Likelihood	−995.016
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,030.032
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	2,106.611
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table F2. Regression Results: Race (High White % and White Legislators)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Race (High White % and White Legislators)
Male	−0.002 (0.155)
Minority	0.029 (0.033)
Republican	0.796* (0.435)
Left Ideology	0.627 (0.414)
Right Ideology	−0.482 (1.737)
Presidency Control	0.057 (1.895)
Chamber Control	−1.013 (1.320)
Median Family Income	0.692 (0.845)
Families on Poverty Line (%)	−3.306** (1.300)
Union Donations	0.094 (0.291)
Anti-Union Donations	−1.112 (1.684)
Construction Donations	0.420 (0.652)
Agriculture Donations	−0.009 (0.210)
Finance Donations	0.228 (0.780)
Commerce/Trade Donations	−0.249 (0.332)
Entertainment/Communication Donations	−1.820 (2.222)
Urban	2.610*** (0.807)
Suburban	−0.942 (5.154)
Observations	340
Log Likelihood	−1,104.330
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,248.660
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	2,325.239
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

**Appendix G. Party Specific Regression Results - Legislator
Characteristics**

Table G1. Regression of Victimhood Narratives by Legislator Characteristics -
Republicans

<i>Dependent variable: Victimhood Narratives</i>	
Age	0.115 (0.185)
Senate	2.391*** (0.295)
Minority	0.373 (0.755)
Male	-1.484** (0.586)
Years in Office	-0.003 (0.012)
Ideology	4.958*** (0.828)
Executive Control	-0.050 (0.124)
Chamber Control	-1.034*** (0.165)
Balance of Power	-0.546*** (0.099)
Constant	8.797*** (0.855)
Observations	13,540
Log Likelihood	-45,885.340
Akaike Inf. Crit.	91,794.680
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	91,884.840

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table G2. Regression of Victimhood Narratives by Legislator Characteristics - Democrats

<i>Dependent variable: Victimhood Narratives</i>	
Age	0.076 (0.187)
Senate	2.694*** (0.332)
Minority	1.426*** (0.471)
Male	−2.090*** (0.499)
Years in Office	−0.028** (0.011)
Ideology	7.001*** (0.989)
Executive Control	−1.195*** (0.128)
Chamber Control	−2.264*** (0.184)
Balance of Power	−0.457*** (0.101)
Observations	16,673
Log Likelihood	−58,540.120
Akaike Inf. Crit.	117,104.200
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	117,196.900

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Gender/Ethnicity Interaction Effects

Table G3. Gender - Minority Interaction Effects (Female)

<i>Dependent variable: Victimhood Narratives</i>	
Senate	2.379*** (0.219)
Female	1.885*** (0.423)
Minority	1.110** (0.433)
Democrat	0.171 (0.284)
Left Ideology	0.954*** (0.082)
Right Ideology	0.478*** (0.067)
Age	0.102 (0.132)
Years in Office	−0.017** (0.008)
Executive Control	−0.629*** (0.090)
Chamber Control	−1.594*** (0.112)
Balance of Power	−0.622*** (0.064)
Minority × Female	−0.330 (0.928)
Observations	30,213
Log Likelihood	−104,566.100
Akaike Inf. Crit.	209,162.200
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	209,287.000

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table G3 suggests that the effects of gender and minority status are additive, with an insignificant interaction effect.