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978-1-107-01992-8 - Making Sense of Public Opinion: American Discourses About Immigration
and Social Programs

Claudia Strauss

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PART I

OVERVIEW

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I

Conventional Discourses, Public Opinion, and Political Culture

HOW AMERICANS TALK ABOUT IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL PROVISION

To appreciate the power of conventional-discourse analysis, it is best to start where I did, listening to the way some of my interviewees talked about immigration and government social programs.

The first time I spoke with Daniel Shane was in the summer of 2000. We met in his pleasant home in the suburbs of Raleigh, North Carolina. At the time he was in his late twenties and was taking over the family printing business. Daniel Shane is a registered Republican. (All names of interviewees are pseudonyms they chose.)

In the following excerpt I ask Shane a common survey question about whether the government is responsible for improving people's standard of living or whether people should take care of themselves. This was one of the questions in the phone survey I used to recruit my interviewees, and like a great many other U.S. Americans,¹ Shane said over the phone that he agreed with both statements included in the question. Here is his response when I repeated that question in the course of the interview. Ellipses indicate long pauses.

CS: [*showing card with response scale*] Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans and they are over there on the left side at point one. And other people think it is not the government's responsibility and that a person should

¹ See further discussion of national responses to this survey question later in this chapter and in Chapter 9.

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take care of himself/herself, and they are over there at point five. I'm wondering if you could kind of tell me again your thoughts about this.

Daniel Shane: I really think ... people themselves ... there is enough opportunity here, in America, for people to be able to look after themselves. It's kind of tough, that's a tough question to answer, especially with the April 15 thing and I just had to pay taxes at work, so my answer may be a little biased. You do feel like with all the money you pay in taxes for everyone, whether it's a business or personal income tax, you should be getting a lot more from the government than what you are. You look at some of these other countries that have free Medicare, or free medicine, free hospitalization, all that kind of stuff. Everybody, the doctors here are mainly out for a dollar and that's a shame because there are a lot of people that really need help, but they can't get it and can't afford insurance. Then again, like I said earlier, people should be able to take care of themselves, but there are those that really can't; it's impossible for them to. I think the government should give some help on those. I don't think the government, I think the government should stay out of people's lives as much as possible. It's up to, if you're going to make it or break it, it's up to you. If you want to be lazy and you sit around your house not doing things, so be it, but I don't think you should have the same privileges and be able to do the same things as somebody who really busted their butt at work and you're just lazy and sitting at home. I don't think that's fair. I don't think it is. So, kind of – like I said, today is a tough day to answer that question; tomorrow I may feel different after the taxes are gone. When you think about the taxes you pay, for what taxes keep going up and up, and it seems like you're getting less and less.

This is a puzzling answer because of the mix of ideological positions Shane takes. His initial comment is the conservative response one would expect from a registered Republican. Given the choice between government and individual responsibility for people's living standards, he picks the latter, saying that there are sufficient opportunities in this country "for people to be able to look after themselves." Near the end, he returns to this theme: The government should "stay out of people's lives as much as possible," it should be up to individuals how they fare economically, and lazy people do not deserve the same benefits as those who work hard.

However, sandwiched between those points his comments take a surprising turn. He starts out talking about taxes, a topic that came to mind because he had just paid the quarterly estimated taxes for his business. The subject of taxes, however, leads him not to oppose government social programs, as we might expect, but to complain that for all the taxes we pay, we should be getting more from the government, such as the universal healthcare provided in other countries. ("You look at some of these other countries that have free Medicare, or free medicine, free hospitalization, all that kind of stuff.") He criticizes doctors who "are mainly out for a dollar" and expresses concern for people who cannot afford

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health insurance. Shane recognizes that this seems to conflict with what he said earlier about self-reliance but notes that some people are not able to be self-reliant and feels that “the government should give some help on those.” The topic of the government returns him to his initial point that the government’s role should be minimal because people should be responsible for themselves, but he ends by repeating that for all the taxes we pay, we should really be getting more benefits in return.

If we expect people to have an overall opinion that derives from a broad ideology, how would we make sense of this? In some places Shane sounds very conservative, in other places he sounds like a liberal in contemporary political terms, and in still others he reaches a progressive liberal conclusion (in favor of national healthcare) but not using typical liberal reasoning (“for what taxes keep going up and up, and it seems like you’re getting less and less”).²

If we are familiar with conventional discourses, Shane’s comments are no longer so surprising. Conventional-discourse analysis assumes that people encounter political messages from many sources. From each source people acquire not an overall ideology but something narrower in scope, a common way of talking and thinking about one aspect of a topic. Each of these familiar points and its associated rhetoric is a conventional discourse.³

The first step in conventional-discourse analysis is to read or hear enough comments on a topic from different sources to start identifying the shared discourses in them. In Shane’s comments I recognize points I have heard from other interviewees and read in national debates about government social programs, sometimes in nearly the same words. We can label Shane’s comments with shorthand names we have created for those discourses including their underlying assumptions and typical rhetoric (see Table 1.1). These descriptions are excerpted from the complete list of social welfare discourses in Table 1.4 at the end of the chapter.

We could make a similar analysis of the mixture of views in another interviewee’s comments, this time on immigration. The following comments occurred in an interview conducted in the spring of 2000 in a coffee shop in Burlington, North Carolina, with Paul Davis, a recent college graduate in his twenties then working as a sales representative for a trucking business. Paul Davis is a registered Democrat. In the following

² Unless I indicate otherwise, I will use “liberal” in its contemporary American meaning of someone on the ideological Left, rather than in the classic Lockean sense.

³ Compare with discussion of social discourse analysis in Strauss (2005). Social discourses are somewhat broader in their focus.

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[More information](#)TABLE 1.1. *Daniel Shane's Discourses About Social Programs*

Shane's Comment	Conventional Discourse	Assumptions (abbreviated)	Typical Rhetoric
<p>"people themselves." (i.e., he agrees that it is not the government's responsibility and that a person should take care of himself/herself)</p> <p>"I don't think the government, I think the government should stay out of people's lives as much as possible. It's up to, if you're going to make it or break it, it's up to you."</p>	Self-Reliance	Working-age adults are responsible for taking care of themselves if they are able to do so.	<i>Personal Responsibility rhetoric (personal responsibility, individual, decision, choice, accountable, blame, wallow, sit back, You make your bed, you lie in it; often a moralizing, hortatory style) + depend, self-reliant, self-sufficient, take care of yourself/ government take care of you, responsible for yourself, the Lord helps those who help themselves</i>
<p>"there is enough opportunity here, in America, for people to be able to look after themselves."</p>	Land of Opportunity	There are plenty of opportunities in this country for economic mobility; anyone who makes the effort can get ahead.	<i>work, opportunity, America, American Dream; optimistic tone</i>
<p>"You do feel like with all the money you pay in taxes for everyone, whether it's a business or personal income tax, you should be getting a lot more from the government than what you are."</p> <p>"When you think about the taxes you pay, for what taxes keep going up and up, and it seems like you're getting less and less."</p>	Contributors Deserve Benefits	People should not be given things for free, but if you have contributed economically in the past, you deserve economic benefits.	<i>put money in, as much taxes as we pay; identity as deserving potential recipient</i>

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Shane's Comment	Conventional Discourse	Assumptions (abbreviated)	Typical Rhetoric
<p>"You look at some of these other countries that have free Medicare, or free medicine, free hospitalization, all that kind of stuff."</p> <p>"there are a lot of people that really need help, but they can't get it and can't afford insurance."</p>	Providing Americans' Basic Needs	Some needs are so basic (e.g., food, housing, and medical care) that we cannot let people in this society go without them, or at least vulnerable groups (children and the elderly) go without them. This is a moral imperative, based on compassion or universal human rights.	<i>necessity, needs, social needs, basic needs, richest nation in the world, in a country this rich, safety net, fall through the cracks, human being, children, help, starve/starving, hungry, break my heart, heartbreaking;</i> often emotional language and appeals to compassion, sometimes nationalistic arguments
<p>"Everybody, the doctors here, are mainly out for a dollar and that's a shame because there are a lot of people that really need help, but they can't get it."</p> <p>(Same comments as above)</p>	The Dollar Versus Good Values	Excessive consumption and the pursuit of material goals are morally suspect.	<i>quality of life, keeping up with the Joneses, money, dollar bill, the dollar, the almighty dollar;</i> usually moralistic arguments
(Same comments as above)	Greed of Corporations and the Rich	The rich and large corporations exploit the system for their own advantage. They do not pay their fair share of taxes, and big businesses get too many tax breaks. Many of the rich	<i>corporations, big business, executives, rich, wealthy, obscene wealth, the system, bottom line, fair/unfair, share, fair share, taxes, tax breaks, stepped on people, the system, lining their pockets/ fattening their pockets, maximize profits;</i> often a cynical, resentful, or angry tone

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Overview

TABLE 1.1 (continued)

Shane's Comment	Conventional Discourse	Assumptions (abbreviated)	Typical Rhetoric
		are too rich and should share more. Corporations only care about their bottom line and can't be trusted.	
"people should be able to take care of themselves, but there are those that really can't, it's impossible for them to. I think the government should give some help on those."	Incapacity Exception to Self-Reliance	People with serious mental and physical disabilities are an exception to self-reliance principles.	<i>not able, incapable, handicap, disabled;</i> comparison of adults who are capable of being self-supporting with those who are not
"If you want to be lazy and you sit around your house not doing things, so be it, but I don't think you should have the same privileges and be able to do the same things as somebody who really busted their butt at work and you're just lazy and sitting at home. I don't think that's fair."	Work Ethic	Work makes you deserving; people who don't work should not be given financial benefits equivalent to someone who works hard.	Personal Responsibility rhetoric + <i>work, hard work, effort, drive, ambition, goals, initiative, adversity, attitude, determination, dedication, lazy, sit on your butt, sit back, fall in your lap, busted my butt, worked my tail off, choice, paid dues, do something, make the best of it, Where there's a will there's a way, It's not what you have but what you do with it; productive, contribute, good feeling, learning experience;</i> personal hard work narratives

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discussion I began with an open-ended question, then followed up to see how he would respond to specific ways of framing the issue. Ellipses in brackets indicate deletions.

CS: Another whole issue I wanted to talk about was immigration. Do you have any feelings about that topic?

Paul Davis: Without immigration I don't think you'd be here, I don't think I'd be here. I think there does have to be a point where we say, okay, you've got to, we've got to cut it off, I don't want to say there's a problem with overcrowding but you run into language barriers, you run into culture barriers. And I'm sure this is stuff that all happened in the 30's with the mass immigration through Ellis Island and everything. But with the ... something I don't understand is we won't let Haitian refugees or, or Cuban refugees come across the border, but, or we turn them away and send them back in exile or whatever, but we don't stop people from coming across the border in Mexico.... It's either all or none, you got to say, okay, you can't come over or you can. And if, but I think if they come over they should make every effort to fit in, and adapt to the culture here. If home's so good, why did they leave it? [...] I feel they try to impose, immigrants try to impose languages, by only speaking in Spanish or not going to take the immigration test and becoming a U.S. citizen. I think if you come over you should have every intention of becoming a citizen at some point. [...]

CS: Now in this area do you get the sense that immigration is taking the jobs that nobody else would take or that they're taking jobs away from Americans?

PD: I feel that the immigrants that come here come in search of a better life, and what they've been accustomed to is getting being paid 90 cents a day or 90 cents an hour or whatever. They're coming over here and taking the jobs that pay 6.50 or 6 dollars an hour that nobody else would take that's got an education really or wants something better. [...] I feel a lot of times they do the work that nobody else in the past wanted to, like the tobacco industry for instance. Everybody, my parents worked in it, I worked in it, hopefully my kids won't have to, but, I mean, it went on down the line before that that people worked in the tobacco industry before then and that's, it's really hard work. And now you're getting to where it's all outsourced and people, farmers hire Mexicans to do it. Or immigrants to do it. Because it's *such* backbreaking labor that they can't pay Americans per se to do it, but somebody else will gladly take the four dollar raise and do it, from what they've been making a dollar fifty an hour.

CS: So you don't have any sense of resentment about, you know, that Mexicans are taking jobs away

PD: [*interrupting*] No

CS: because that's not work that you (*laughs*) particularly want or want your kids to do?

PD: No, I don't have any resentment towards it, and ... they're just doing what our forefathers did. They're coming and looking in search of a better life.

CS: I think when I asked you [*in the preinterview phone survey*] whether immigration levels should be increased, decreased, or kept at their present level, I think you said decreased. Didn't you?

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PD: I think I did too. It makes me, it concerns me a little bit to the point that, you know, they're all coming over here, well who's working over there? If all of our industries are going down there to work, why are they still coming across the border?

As we saw with Daniel Shane's comments about the government's role in supporting people's standard of living, Paul Davis's views about immigration policy mix positions on different sides of the issues, some more favorable toward immigrants and supportive of inclusive immigration policies ("Without immigration I don't think you'd be here, I don't think I'd be here," "I feel a lot of times they do the work that nobody else in the past wanted," "They're just doing what our forefathers did. They're coming and looking in search of a better life"), others that are more critical of immigrants and supportive of restrictive immigration policies ("I think there does have to be a point where we say, okay, you've got to, we've got to cut it off," "immigrants try to impose languages, by only speaking in Spanish," "If all of our industries are going down there to work, why are they still coming across the border?"), and still others that are hard to categorize ("we won't let Haitian refugees or, or Cuban refugees come across the border, but, or we turn them away and send them back in exile or whatever, but we don't stop people from coming across the border in Mexico.... It's either all or none, you got to say, okay, you can't come over or you can.").

As was the case with Shane's comments, however, those of Paul Davis can be broken down into common U.S. conventional discourses about immigration. The ones in Table 1.2 are taken from Table 1.5 at the end of this chapter.

Neither Daniel Shane nor Paul Davis is exceptional. Almost all of my interviewees seemed in favor of social welfare programs and immigration in some remarks and opposed in other remarks. Even if they did not do so in short succession, they all expressed apparently conflicting opinions at some point during our discussion. This is a commonplace finding by researchers, as I explain later in this chapter. With conventional-discourse analysis we do not ignore or try to average out these varied responses to find where the speaker really stands. Instead, we carefully note the variety of conventional discourses people use to construct their opinions. From this starting point we can go on to investigate why people combine them in the ways they do or use some discourses in some circumstances but not in other circumstances; why some conventional discourses circulate more than others locally, nationally, or among certain demographic groups; and how expressed opinions are affected by conventional discourses.