CORPUS-BASED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL SHUTDOWN NARRATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATS' TOWN HALL COVERAGE

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Abstract

Political discourse during government shutdowns reveals ideological positioning and strategic communication patterns that shape public perception. This study employs corpus-based critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine linguistic features and rhetorical strategies in media coverage of progressive Democrats' stance during a hypothetical government shutdown. Using CNN's town hall coverage as a case study, this research analyzes reporting verbs, quotation patterns, lexical choices, and discourse prosody to uncover how political actors construct narratives of accountability, legitimacy, and urgency. A specialized corpus of 1,847 words was compiled from CNN political reporting, with analysis conducted using concordance analysis and collocation examination. Findings reveal three dominant discourse strategies: (1) adversarial framing through contrastive rhetoric, (2) legitimation through policy-focused discourse, and (3) de-legitimation of opposing positions through characterization. The study identifies systematic patterns in reporting practices, including neutral reporting verbs ("said," "asked") contrasted with evaluative language in quoted speech ("inane and silly," "refuse to work"). Results demonstrate how corpus-based CDA illuminates power dynamics and ideological positions embedded in political news discourse, contributing methodological insights for analyzing contemporary political communication.

Keywords: corpus-based critical discourse analysis, political discourse, news media, government shutdown, reporting strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Government shutdowns represent critical moments in democratic governance, characterized by intense political maneuvering, public communication, and media coverage. During such periods, political actors deploy strategic discourse to frame issues, attribute responsibility, and mobilize support. News media serve as primary channels through which these narratives reach public audiences, making journalistic reporting practices central to understanding how shutdown politics are discursively constructed.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has established itself as a powerful framework for examining relationships between language, power, and ideology in political contexts

(Fairclough, 2010). By analyzing linguistic choices, rhetorical strategies, and discursive patterns, CDA reveals how political discourse naturalizes particular worldviews while marginalizing alternatives. When combined with corpus linguistic methods, CDA gains quantitative rigor and systematic analysis capabilities that complement close qualitative reading (Baker et al., 2008).

Recent scholarship has documented how corpus-based CDA effectively illuminates media representation of political events, national images, and policy debates (Liu, 2024). Studies examining news discourse on topics ranging from public health emergencies to geopolitical conflicts demonstrate that systematic linguistic analysis reveals patterns of bias, ideological positioning, and power dynamics that might escape notice in traditional qualitative analysis alone (Gao et al., 2025). Corpus techniques enable researchers to identify statistically significant linguistic features, collocational patterns, and discourse prosodies across large textual datasets.

This study applies corpus-based CDA to examine media coverage of progressive Democrats' political positioning during a government shutdown scenario. Specifically, it analyzes CNN's reporting of a town hall event featuring Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, two prominent progressive politicians discussing shutdown politics and healthcare policy. The analysis focuses on three research questions:

1. What linguistic features characterize the reporting of progressive political discourse during government shutdown coverage?

2. How do journalists employ reporting verbs and quotation strategies to frame political actors and their positions?

3. What discourse strategies do political actors deploy to legitimize their positions and delegitimize opponents?

By examining these questions through corpus-based CDA, this research contributes to understanding contemporary political communication, media framing of progressive politics, and methodological approaches to analyzing political news discourse.

RESEARCH METHODS
Research Design

This study employs corpus-based critical discourse analysis to examine linguistic features and discursive strategies in political news reporting. The approach combines quantitative corpus linguistic techniques with qualitative interpretation grounded in CDA frameworks. This mixed-method design enables identification of systematic patterns across the text while maintaining attention to contextual meanings and ideological implications.

Data Collection and Corpus Construction

The primary data source consists of CNN's news article reporting on a town hall event with Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez discussing government shutdown politics. The article, published October 15, 2025, was accessed from CNN's

Politics section (https://edition.cnn.com/2025/10/15/politics/sanders-aoc-takeaways-cnn-town-hall).

The corpus comprises 1,847 words of continuous news text, including:

- Journalist-written narrative and analysis
- Direct quotations from political actors (Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez)
- Indirect reported speec
- Contextual information about political dynamics

This relatively small specialized corpus is appropriate for intensive discourse analysis, following established practices in CDA research where detailed examination of specific texts yields insights about broader discursive practices (Fairclough, 1995). The single-source nature allows focused analysis of one news organization's framing practices while the topic's significance makes findings relevant beyond the specific case.

Analytical Framework

The analysis draws on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis, examining:

Text**:** Linguistic features including vocabulary, grammar, textual structures, and semantic relations. Specific focus is given to reporting verbs, attribution strategies, lexical choices with evaluative prosody, and rhetorical devices.

Discursive practice: How the text is produced, distributed, and consumed. This includes journalistic conventions for political reporting, quotation practices, and intertextual relationships between multiple voices in the text.

Social practice**:** Broader ideological and power relationships instantiated in the discourse, including political positioning, legitimation strategies, and construction of political identity (Van Dijk, T. A., 2008).

Analytical Procedures

Analysis proceeded through multiple stages:

Stage 1: Initial reading and coding

The text was read multiple times to identify recurring themes, prominent voices, and overall narrative structure. Initial codes were applied to mark quotations, reporting verbs, evaluative language, and oppositional framing.

Stage 2: Systematic linguistic analysis

Specific linguistic features were systematically examined:

- Reporting verbs: All instances were extracted and categorized as neutral, assertive, or evaluative
- Quotation patterns: Direct and indirect speech were identified, noting which actors receive which types of quotation
- Lexical choices: Evaluative vocabulary was analyzed for semantic prosody
- Modality: Modal verbs and expressions indicating certainty, obligation, or

possibility were catalogued

Stage 3: Collocation and concordance analysis

Key terms were examined in context to identify collocational patterns and discourse prosody. Particular attention was paid to:

- Terms describing political actors ("progressives," "Republicans," "GOP leaders")
- Action verbs associated with different political groups
- Evaluative adjectives and their targets

Stage 4: Discourse strategy identification

Based on linguistic analysis, broader discourse strategies were identified and categorized. These strategies reflect how political actors and journalists construct narratives about shutdown responsibility, policy priorities, and political legitimacy (Wei, L., 2023).

Stage 5: Critical interpretation

Findings were interpreted in relation to broader political context, considering how linguistic patterns instantiate ideological positions and power relationships. Particular attention was paid to whose voices are amplified, how legitimacy is constructed, and what political positions are naturalized or questioned (Zhang, Y. et al., 2023).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, analysis of a single news article from one media outlet provides limited generalizability. Broader conclusions would require comparative analysis across multiple sources and time periods. Second, the relatively small corpus size, while appropriate for intensive CDA, limits quantitative statistical analysis. Third, the study examines only textual features, not multimodal elements (images, layout, video content) that contribute to meaning-making in digital news contexts. Finally, as a case study, findings illuminate specific discursive practices but may not represent broader patterns in political news coverage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Reporting Verbs and Attribution Strategies

Analysis of reporting verbs reveals systematic patterns in how journalists attribute speech and position political actors. The CNN article employs primarily neutral reporting verbs when introducing quotations from Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, with "said" appearing most frequently (12 instances), followed by "asked" (3 instances). This neutral attribution is standard journalistic practice, presenting political speech without explicit editorial evaluation.

However, interesting patterns emerge when examining which statements receive direct quotation versus indirect paraphrase. Policy-focused statements and specific demands are typically presented as direct quotes: "I don't accept IOUs. I don't accept pinky promises. That's not the business that I'm in" (Ocasio-Cortez). This direct quotation strategy lends authenticity and immediacy to policy positions, allowing readers to access political actors' exact words.

In contrast, more inflammatory or potentially controversial statements receive mixed treatment. Ocasio-Cortez's criticism of House Speaker Mike Johnson as focusing on "inane and silly" things appears in direct quotation, but the journalist frames this within narrative context emphasizing political tensions. The article notes that "the White House's rapid response account was calling her and fellow progressive Bernie Sanders 'not serious people,'" creating a he-said-she-said dynamic that presents competing characterizations without adjudicating between them.

This pattern aligns with findings from corpus-based studies of reporting practices in political news. Research examining COVID-19 pandemic coverage found that journalists tend to use neutral reporting verbs like "say" while allowing evaluative content to reside in quoted speech itself (Frontiers in Psychology, 2023). This strategy maintains journalistic objectivity norms while still conveying political actors' evaluative stances.

Adversarial Framing and Oppositional Discourse

A dominant pattern throughout the text is adversarial framing that constructs Democrats and Republicans as opposing forces in stark disagreement. This framing appears in multiple linguistic realizations:

Contrastive structures: The text repeatedly employs contrastive constructions that highlight opposing positions. The opening paragraph establishes this frame: "As Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez accused Republicans of refusing to work to end the government shutdown...the White House's rapid response account was calling her and fellow progressive Bernie Sanders 'not serious people.'" This structure juxtaposes Democratic accusations against Republican counter-accusations, creating a discursive battlefield.

Spatial metaphors: Geographic and spatial language reinforces oppositional positioning. The article notes that Democrats and Republicans are "far apart from resolving their differences" and describes policy positions as having "demands" that must be met. Republicans are described as refusing to "bring the House back to DC," with Sanders questioning "How do you negotiate with people who refuse to even show up and do their job?" This spatial language metaphorically represents political disagreement as physical distance, reinforcing perceptions of intractable conflict.

Agent-action patterns: Analysis of who does what to whom reveals systematic patterns in action attribution. Democrats are described as: "warning" (about healthcare system collapse), "insisting" (on policy conditions), and "refusing to budge." Republicans, meanwhile, are characterized as: "refusing to work," "keeping the House out of session," and "grasping for straws." Both sides receive action verbs suggesting obstinacy and inflexibility, but the specific verbs carry different evaluative prosodies.

Notably, negative actions attributed to Republicans often appear in direct quotations from Democratic politicians, while the journalist's narrative voice maintains greater neutrality. This allows the news organization to present criticism while maintaining deniability through attribution to political sources.

Legitimation Strategies in Progressive Political Discourse

Examination of quoted speech from Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez reveals systematic legitimation strategies deployed to justify their shutdown position:

Policy-focused framing: Both politicians consistently frame their position in terms of policy substance rather than political tactics. Ocasio-Cortez states: "I think we know what we will not accept, and what we will not accept is for the ACA premiums to skyrocket on the American people." This construction emphasizes constituent welfare over partisan positioning, attempting to establish moral high ground.

Accountability and transparency discourse: A recurring theme involves demands for concrete policy commitments rather than promises. Ocasio-Cortez's statement "I don't accept IOUs. I don't accept pinky promises" constructs her position as representing accountability and reliability. The metaphor of requiring "ink on paper" – actual legislative votes and presidential signature – frames the Democratic position as reasonable insistence on verifiable commitments rather than mere political theater.

Characterization of opponents as unserious: Both politicians deploy language that questions Republican seriousness and work ethic. Ocasio-Cortez states: "I've never seen people who hate working so much in my life." Sanders adds: "Republicans aren't in town. How do you negotiate with people who refuse to even show up and do their job?" This discourse strategy attempts to delegitimize Republican positions by questioning their basic commitment to governance.

Populist appeals: Both politicians employ populist rhetoric that positions them as advocates for ordinary Americans against elite interests. Sanders references income inequality, homelessness, and climate change as issues "nobody cares" about in political media coverage, contrasting substantive policy concerns with what he characterizes as frivolous political gossip.

These legitimation strategies align with broader patterns identified in corpus studies of political discourse (Partington, A. et al., 2013). Research on crisis communication shows that political actors typically frame their positions through appeals to constituent welfare, demands for accountability, and characterization of opponents as failing basic governance standards (Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 2023).

De-legitimation Through Characterization

While legitimation strategies enhance political actors' own positions, de-legitimation strategies undermine opponents. The corpus reveals several de-legitimation techniques:

Questioning motives: Republicans are repeatedly characterized as acting from questionable motives rather than principled positions. The text notes GOP leaders "need Democratic support" but are unwilling to negotiate, suggesting they're operating from political calculation rather than governance imperatives. Democrats suggest Johnson refuses to bring the House back specifically to avoid voting on Jeffrey Epstein files, implying Republicans prioritize political embarrassment avoidance over governing.

Competence questioning: Language choices question Republican competence and seriousness. Ocasio-Cortez's characterization of Republican actions as "inane and silly" explicitly questions the gravity and appropriateness of their priorities. Her statement about "people who hate

working" implies laziness or dereliction of duty rather than strategic positioning.

Emotional appeals: The text includes emotional appeals from federal workers affected by the shutdown: "A federal worker with four children asked how he's supposed to feed his family and another woman said her housing situation is in jeopardy." While these voices express genuine hardship, their inclusion in an article about Democratic political positioning implicitly frames Republicans (who oppose Democrats' conditions for reopening government) as responsible for this suffering.

Interestingly, the article also includes a White House response characterizing Democrats as responsible for the shutdown, creating what might be termed "competing de-legitimation." The automatic email reply noting "staff shortages resulting from the Democrat Shutdown" demonstrates Republicans deploying similar characterization strategies to attribute blame and question Democratic seriousness.

Discourse Prosody and Evaluative Language

Systematic examination of evaluative language reveals patterns in discourse prosody – the cumulative evaluative meaning that words acquire through repeated contextual associations. Key terms show consistent prosodic patterns:

"Progressive" terminology: References to Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez as "progressives" or "the most progressive members of Congress" appear in neutral descriptive contexts. However, the White House characterization of them as "not serious people" attempts to attach negative prosody to progressive identity, framing it as ideologically extreme rather than policy-focused.

"Demand" versus "propose": Democratic policy positions are consistently described as "demands" rather than "proposals" or "requests." While technically accurate, "demand" carries connotations of inflexibility and ultimatum-issuing that "propose" would lack. This subtle framing choice influences reader perception of Democratic negotiating posture.

Work-related vocabulary: Language about work and labor shows interesting patterns. Democrats describe Republicans as "refusing to work," "hate working," and "refusing to even show up and do their job." This vocabulary constructs a narrative where governance is labor, and refusal to govern represents dereliction of duty. The prosody associates Republicans with laziness, avoidance, and irresponsibility.

"Shutdown" attribution: The phrase "Democrat Shutdown" in the White House response attempts to attach responsibility through possessive construction, while Democrats frame it as a "government shutdown" caused by Republican intransigence. These competing attributions reveal how linguistic choices in naming events encode blame assignment.

These prosodic patterns demonstrate how repeated linguistic associations shape evaluative meanings that extend beyond individual word definitions. Corpus-based approaches excel at identifying such patterns, which might escape notice in traditional close reading but become apparent through systematic analysis (Kim, K. H., 2014).

Intertextuality and Voice Construction

The article demonstrates complex intertextuality, weaving together multiple voices and perspectives. This polyphonic structure serves several functions:

Objectivity performance: By including voices from multiple political positions (progressive Democrats, Republican White House, affected federal workers), the article performs journalistic objectivity. No single perspective dominates entirely; instead, competing viewpoints receive representation.

Source credibility establishment: The article establishes credibility through specific attribution and contextualization. Sanders is identified as "the independent Vermont senator" and Ocasio-Cortez as "the Democratic congresswoman from New York," providing credentials. Historical context noting Ocasio-Cortez "began her work in politics as an organizer for Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign" establishes their political relationship and ideological alignment.

Strategic voice amplification: While multiple voices appear, the article's structure amplifies progressive Democratic voices through extended direct quotation and detailed explanation of their position. Republican voices appear primarily through brief attributed statements or the automated email response, receiving less elaborated treatment. This asymmetry, whether intentional or structural, affects whose perspectives receive more fulsome representation.

Federal worker voices: The inclusion of affected federal workers' questions adds emotional dimension and human stakes to political positioning. These voices serve particular rhetorical functions, instantiating abstract policy debates in concrete human consequences. Their placement in an article largely focused on Democratic political strategy implicitly frames Democratic positions as responsive to constituent hardship.

This intertextual analysis reveals how news discourse constructs complex layered narratives that present political conflict through multiple lenses while maintaining journalistic conventions of balance and objectivity.

Ideological Implications and Power Dynamics

Critical interpretation of linguistic patterns reveals underlying ideological positions and power dynamics:

Adversarial democracy framing: The pervasive oppositional framing constructs democratic governance as inherently conflictual rather than cooperative. Political actors are positioned as combatants in a zero-sum game where one side "wins" negotiations. This framing naturalizes political polarization while obscuring potential for compromise or collaborative governance.

Legitimacy through policy substance: Both progressive Democrats and the article's narrative structure privilege policy-focused discourse over purely political positioning. This reflects an ideological commitment to substantive governance as legitimate political activity, in contrast to what's characterized as political theater or strategic maneuvering.

Populist versus establishment tension: While not explicitly thematized, tension emerges between populist rhetoric (appeals to ordinary people suffering from shutdown, criticism of political games) and establishment politics (questions about Schumer primary challenges, insider political dynamics). The text both presents and somewhat questions traditional political media focus on electoral strategy rather than policy substance.

Accountability discourse: The emphasis on requiring "ink on paper" rather than promises reflects broader themes in contemporary political discourse about trustworthiness, verification, and the reliability of political commitments. This discourse simultaneously legitimates demands for concrete commitments while implicitly characterizing the opposition as potentially unreliable.

These ideological dimensions reveal how linguistic choices in political news reporting naturalize particular understandings of democratic processes, legitimate and illegitimate political action, and the nature of political conflict itself.

CONCLUSION

This corpus-based critical discourse analysis of political shutdown coverage reveals systematic linguistic patterns and discursive strategies that construct political narratives, legitimize positions, and frame political actors. Three primary findings emerge from the analysis.

First, reporting practices combine neutral attribution verbs with strategic quotation selection to maintain journalistic objectivity norms while conveying political actors' evaluative stances. Journalists employ primarily neutral verbs like "said" and "asked," but choices about what receives direct quotation versus paraphrase influence how political positions are presented. Policy-focused statements receive prominent direct quotation, lending them authenticity and immediacy.

Second, the discourse employs pervasive adversarial framing that constructs Democrats and Republicans as opposing forces in fundamental disagreement. This framing manifests through contrastive structures, spatial metaphors of distance and division, and agent-action patterns that emphasize obstinacy on both sides. While this framing reflects genuine political conflict, it also naturalizes polarization and frames democratic governance as inherently conflictual rather than collaborative.

Third, political actors deploy systematic legitimation and de-legitimation strategies to justify their positions and undermine opponents. Legitimation operates through policy-focused framing, accountability discourse demanding concrete commitments, and populist appeals to constituent welfare. De-legitimation questions opponents' motives, competence, and seriousness. These competing strategies create a discursive battlefield where political actors vie for legitimacy and moral high ground.

The study demonstrates how corpus-based CDA illuminates patterns in political discourse that might escape notice in traditional qualitative analysis. Systematic examination of reporting verbs, lexical choices, discourse prosody, and rhetorical strategies reveals how linguistic features encode ideological positions and power relationships. The combination of quantitative corpus techniques with qualitative critical interpretation provides robust methodology for analyzing contemporary political communication.

Several implications emerge for understanding political news discourse. The pervasive adversarial framing raises questions about media's role in constructing political polarization. While journalists report genuine conflicts, framing choices influence whether readers perceive political disputes as principled disagreements amenable to compromise or intractable opposition requiring victory for one side. The strategic use of quotation and attribution enables news organizations to convey evaluative positions while maintaining objectivity norms, but this also obscures how editorial choices shape narratives.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates value in applying corpus-based approaches even to relatively small, specialized corpora. Intensive analysis of single news articles yields insights about broader discursive practices and journalistic conventions. The systematic examination of linguistic features complements close reading, revealing patterns that might otherwise remain implicit.

Future research should expand analysis to comparative studies across multiple news outlets, time periods, and political events. Such comparison would reveal whether patterns identified here represent general features of shutdown politics coverage or are specific to particular actors, outlets, or moments. Additionally, multimodal analysis incorporating visual elements, layout, and digital affordances would provide more complete understanding of how contemporary political news constructs meaning.

The intersection of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis offers powerful tools for examining how language shapes political reality. As political communication increasingly

occurs through mediated channels, understanding linguistic patterns and discursive strategies becomes essential for critically engaging with political information. This study contributes to that understanding while demonstrating methodological approaches applicable to diverse political discourse contexts.

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