Modeling of Political Discourse Framing on Twitter

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Abstract
Framing is a political strategy in which politicians carefully word their statements in order to control public perception and discussion of current issues. Previous works exploring political framing have focused on analysis of frames in longer texts, such as newspaper articles, or tweets relevant to specific events. We present the first in-depth analysis of issue-independent framing for political discourse in social media, specifically the microblogging platform Twitter. Building upon the fifteen frames designed by Boydstun et al., we propose three additional frames relevant to Twitter and provide insights into the dynamic usage of frames by party and over time. Finally we present a global probabilistic model for combining linguistic, issue, and party bias features of the tweets of politicians for the task of tweet frame prediction.

1 Introduction
Today’s social media venues, specifically microblogging platforms such as Twitter, are widely used by politicians to communicate with the public and share their stances. These platforms allow politicians to react quickly to events as they unfold and control the resulting discussion according to their views. Framing is one strategy which politicians can use to bias these discussions towards their stance. By emphasizing specific aspects of the issue, politicians create an association between the issue and a specific frame of reference, allowing them to influence public perception of an issue. For example, the debate around increasing the minimum wage can be framed as a quality of life issue or as an economic issue.

Different from previous works which concentrate on specific issues or focus on political discourse analysis in congressional speeches or newspaper articles, Twitter requires users to compress their ideas and reactions to only 140 characters. In this paper, we take a first step towards dealing with the unique challenges of modeling political discourse framing on Twitter and suggest weakly supervised models for automatically identifying the frames used in tweets. Given the highly dynamic nature of political discourse on Twitter, such models can easily adapt to new policy issues and variability in the language used to discuss them on Twitter. Our global model builds on several indicators capturing frame similarity (using a small seed set of keywords inspired by Boydstun et al.), tweet policy issues, user party affiliation, and frequent phrases used by politicians on Twitter. These indicators are extracted via weakly supervised models and then declaratively combined into a global model using Probabilistic Soft Logic (PSL), a recently introduced probabilistic modeling framework (Bach et al. 2013). PSL specifies high level rules over a relational representation of these features, which are compiled into a graphical model called a hinge-loss Markov random field that is used to make the frame prediction.

In summary, this paper makes the following contributions: (1) This work is among the first to look into general framing analysis of U.S. politicians on Twitter. Extending the annotation guidelines of Boydstun et al., we annotated 2,050 tweets, a subset of our total evaluation set of 92,457 tweets, for 17 different frames. (2) We suggest computational models, which easily adapt to new policy issues, for predicting frames on Twitter. Our results show the importance of global modeling, which increases the weighted average F1 score from 52.21 when using linguistic information alone to 75.95 when using the joint model (party affiliation, issue, and linguistic information). (3) We evaluate the model empirically on real world events to show how it can help shed light on general framing trends in political discourse on Twitter.

2 Related Work
To the best of our knowledge this work is among the first to computationally model the general frames used by U.S. politicians on Twitter for a variety of political issues. Several previous NLP works have explored framing in public statements, congressional speeches, and news articles (Tsur, Calacci, and Lazer 2015; Card et al. 2015; Baumer et al. 2015). Our approach builds upon the previous work on frame analysis of Boydstun et al. by adapting and applying their annotation guidelines for Twitter. Other works focus on identifying and measuring political ideologies (Iyyer et al. 2014; Bamman and Smith 2015; Sim et al. 2013; Djemili et al. 2014), policies (Nguyen et al. 2015), and voting patterns (Gerrish and Blei 2012). Predicting political affiliation and other characteristics of Twitter users has also been explored (Volkova et al. 2015; Volkova, Copper smith, and Van Durme 2014; Yano, Yogatama, and Smith ; Conover et al. 2011). Works focusing on inferring signed social networks (West et al. 2014), stance classification (Sridhar et al. 2015), social group modeling (Huang et al. 2012),
and collective classification using PSL (Bach et al. 2015) are similar to our modeling approach.

From communications and political and social science research, several works have studied the role of Twitter and framing in shaping public opinion in specific situations, e.g., the Vancouver riots (Burch, Frederick, and Pegoraro 2015) and the Egyptian protests (Harlow and Johnson 2011; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). Others have focused on sentiment and framing analysis of opponents (Groshek and Al-Rawi 2013) and network agenda modeling (Vargo et al. 2014) in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Lastly, Jang and Hart studied frames used by the general population specific to global warming. Different from these works, we model the general frames, which are issue-independent, used by U.S. politicians to describe six different political issues.

3 Data Collection and Annotation

We collected 184,914 tweets from all members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. These tweets were filtered by keywords, with an average of 20 words per issue, to remove any tweets not related to the following six issues: (1) abortion access, (2) the Affordable Care Act, (3) gun rights versus gun control, (4) immigration policies, (5) acts of terrorism, and (6) LGBTQ rights. Forty politicians (10 from each party of each branch), were chosen randomly for annotation.

Two graduate students used the Policy Frames Codebook developed by Boydstun et al. to annotate each tweet with one of 15 frames which generalize across issues. Figure 1 shows examples of tweets and their corresponding frames. Based on the possibility of multiple frames per tweet and difficulty of labeling (as discussed in Card et al.), annotators used the following procedure: (1) assign a primary frame to the tweet if possible, (2) if not possible, assign two or more frames to the tweet where the first frame is the most comprehensive of all the frames, (3) when assigning frames 12 through 17, ensure that the tweet cannot be assigned to any other frames. Annotators spent one month labeling the randomly chosen tweets and then met to decide the appropriate frame(s) for tweets with more than one frame.

We observed that the first 14 frames outlined in the Codebook are directly applicable to the tweets of U.S. politicians. We propose the addition of the 3 frames (Frames 15, 16, and 17) at the bottom of Figure 1 for Twitter analysis: Factual (tweet presents a fact with no detectable spin), Promotion (discusses appearances, statements, or refers to political friends), and Personal Sympathy and Support (offers condolences or stands in support of others). For many tweets, one frame is not enough because of the compound nature of tweets, i.e., some are two separate sentences, each with a different frame (e.g., tweet (2) in Figure 1), or begin with one frame and end with another (e.g., tweet (1)). Another trait which makes labeling difficult is the appearance of subframes within a larger frame and the lack of context, e.g., tweet (3) contains two separate frames, but the entire tweet may fall under the Policy Frame (number 13).

4 Weakly Supervised Feature Extraction for Global PSL Models

We are interested in designing PSL models which are capable of predicting the frame of a given tweet and also adapt easily to the dynamic nature of language used in Twitter. Our approach consists of 6 weakly supervised models (whose only supervision is initial keywords and party) which extract tweet features for each PSL model. These features are represented as PSL predicates which are combined into the probabilistic rules of each model, as shown in Table 1. Each PSL model builds upon the previous model by combining rules to improve the overall prediction, e.g., PSL Model 5 incorporates the following features: unigrams, author party, issue of tweet, maximum similarity, and party-based bigrams.

PSL Model 1 captures the belief that if a tweet and frame have a matching unigram, then that tweet may have that frame. Based on the Codebook descriptions of the 14 frames, we designed a list of 20 unigrams that are typically associated with each frame (e.g., possible unigrams of Frame 1 (Economic) include economy, taxes, etc.). If a tweet T has unigram U, it is represented in PSL notation via the binary predicate: \text{HASUNIGRAM}_P(T, U), where P represents 1 of the 17 possible frames. This feature is input to PSL Model 1 via the rule shown in line 1 of Table 1. Political party affiliation may indicate framing behavior and is represented by Model 2 (line 2). PSL Model 3 rules represent the idea that different parties will present issues differently, i.e., Republicans are known for discussing gun control in terms of an individual’s rights (Frame 5), while Democrats frame the issue as a need for safety (Frame 7). A weakly supervised model extracts tweet issue information to be used as features for PSL Model 3. PSL Model 4 rules represent a Maximum Similarity metric that captures the idea that at least one word in a tweet should be similar to the unigrams used in Model 1. A weakly supervised model computes the word2vec similarity of each word in the tweet with every unigram associated with a frame, and uses this information as features.
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with bag-of-words, achieves a weighted average \( F_1 \) score of

558

Table 1: Examples of PSL Model Rules. Each model builds successively on the rules of the previous model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODEL</th>
<th>RULE COMBINATIONS</th>
<th>EXAMPLE OF PSL RULE ADDED BY EACH SUCCESSIVE MODEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Unigrams</td>
<td>HasUnigram((T, U)) → Frame((T, F))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 1 + Party</td>
<td>HasUnigram((T, U)) ∧ Party((T, P)) → Frame((T, F))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Model 2 + Issue</td>
<td>HasUnigram((T, U)) ∧ Party((T, P)) ∧ Issue((T, I)) → Frame((T, F))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Model 3 + Similarity</td>
<td>HasUnigram((T, U)) ∧ Party((T, P)) ∧ Issue((T, I)) ∧ MAX((T, F)) → Frame((T, F))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 5</td>
<td>Model 4 + Bigrams</td>
<td>HasUnigram((T, U)) ∧ Party((T, P)) ∧ PartyBigram((T, B)) → Frame((T, F))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 6</td>
<td>Model 5 + Trigrams</td>
<td>HasUnigram((T, U)) ∧ Party((T, P)) ∧ PartyTrigram((T, TG)) → Frame((T, F))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Scores of PSL Models. The highest prediction per frame is marked in bold. Frame numbers 1-14 are the frames of Boydstun et al.; 15-17 are our proposed Twitter-specific frames.

PSL Models 5 and 6 capture the presence of bigrams and trigrams used by each party. Following the intuition that there will be differences in the way political parties frame issues, we use our entire tweet dataset, including unlabeled tweets, to extract the top 20 bigrams and trigrams per party, with no associations to any frames. Our idea is that bigrams and trigrams will represent common phrases used on Twitter, which we observe are different across parties. Corresponding rules are shown in the last two lines of Table 1.

5 Experimental Results

We evaluated our PSL models under supervised settings to learn how different attributes of the tweets and their authors interact with each other to contribute to the prediction. In these experiments we used five-fold cross validation with randomly chosen splits, while also ensuring that all frames were represented in these splits. Because we allow each tweet to have more than one frame, the prediction becomes a multilabel classification task. To evaluate our results we use the standard metrics for precision and recall, which are used to compute the \( F_1 \) scores shown in Table 2.

Overall, prediction improves as the model has access to more information. Unlike text-categorization problems which can often achieve near-optimal performance using bag-of-words features alone, frame prediction requires more nuanced information. Model 1, which uses features similar to bag-of-words, achieves a weighted average \( F_1 \) score of 52.21. Our experiments show that including lexical features with additional information improves the per-model \( F_1 \) score dramatically, up to 75.95 for Model 6.

6 Observations from Real World Events

In this section, we explore the ability of our model to locate framing trends which can be used to analyze political discourse on Twitter around real world events. We first learned the weights of PSL Model 6 using the labeled data and performed MPE inference on the 90,407 remaining unlabeled tweets to obtain their predicted frames. Figure 2 shows the unsupervised frame predictions for gun issue related tweets surrounding the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. There are three interesting peaks of activity: (1) June 12th, the day of the shooting, has the following top three frames for Republicans and Democrats: 17 (Personal Sympathy & Support), 9 (Quality of Life), 3 (Morality & Ethics). (2) June 15th, the day Democrats filibustered for gun reform, has Frame 7 (Security & Defense) as the top frame for both parties. (3) June 22nd was the day Senators proposed a bipartisan ban on gun sales to people on the “no fly” list. Both parties use Frame 7 as their top frame these days but in different ways, as further highlighted in Table 3.
We conducted this experiment for two additional gun violence events and found similarities in the top frames used (17, 9, 3, 7, 6) and patterns over time. The general trend is to tweet frequently the day the event occurs and gradually become more silent until another event occurs. The frequencies of each frame vary across events and days, possibly indicating a change of focus as new information becomes available or a response to other politicians.

7 Conclusion

In this paper we present the problem of issue-independent framing analysis of U.S. politicians on Twitter, propose new Twitter-specific frames, and provide weakly supervised models which extract tweet information to be used as input for six global PSL models. Our global PSL models serve as an interesting exploratory tool to study the changing trends in framing patterns of political discourse on Twitter.

References


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