

Is it guns, people, or both?

A Critical Discourse Analysis of discursive strategies and topoi in United States' gun control speeches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden in 2022

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This study examined the political messaging related to the gun control discourse of the United States during 2022. This particular year was chosen as focal point for the study due to a significant change in the gun legislation, which may have been influenced by two mass shootings that took place in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas in 2022. The significant attention of U.S mass shootings also contributed to the choice of topic.

Data for this study consisted two public speech videos, one from ex-president Donald Trump and the other from then-president Joe Biden who were chosen due to their significance in the United States politics. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was adopted as the main theoretical approach for the analysis to assess each speech through a critical lens for power structures, stances, and ideologies. This framework was further complimented by discursive strategies and *topoi* adapted from the Discourse-historical approach (DHA) to examine the specific elements present in the messages each speaker conveyed in their respective speeches.

The main findings made were that despite being generally very different in their discursive strategy and *topoi* use, both Trump and Biden did share similarities and that many of their statements did reflect their respective parties' ideological views on gun control. Both also oversimplified the solutions to gun violence.

For future studies, the examination of organisations and institutions related to the United States' gun control is recommended to get a more comprehensive outlook on the discussion surrounding gun control.

Key words: critical discourse analysis, discursive strategies, topoi, critical linguistics, united states, gun control

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1 Introduction

Every now and then, the speculation about the causality between the wide availability of firearms and the numerous occurrences of gun-related violence in the United States sparks up conversation in the political field, which in turn often receives additional attention in media outside America. Unlike in Europe, for example, many Americans tend to view guns as more than tools for hunting and self-defence: they represent the values of strength, freedom and safety, symbolising independence, and signifying self-determination (Joslyn 2020, 15). To other Americans, however, firearms may also act as unfortunate reminders of deliberate aggression and power (ibid.), brought by the past tragedies involving firearms which have started become more and more common as the years have passed.

According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2023), 32 percent of Americans adults reported personally owning a firearm, while another ten percent reported not owning a gun themselves but living in household where someone else owns one (Gramlich 2023). Even though the survey acknowledges that “there is not a definitive data source from the government or elsewhere on how many American adults own guns” (Pew Research Center 2023), it still provides a general estimate of civilian-held firearms. Another high statistic related to also persists within the United States: in 2021, 48,830 Americans died of gun-related injuries, more than in any other year on record (Gramlich 2023) as of writing this thesis. While this statistic includes gun-related murders, accidental deaths, those involving law enforcement, deaths whose circumstances could not be determined and suicides, which count for more than a half of the reported deaths (ibid.), the high number of these fatalities and the overall high availability of firearms leaves room for speculation about the potential causality between them.

However, perhaps the most tragic form of gun violence is mass shootings, which often garner international media attention despite being a domestic issue. Even though these kinds incidents are not, by any means, phenomena exclusive to the United States, speculation about the connection between the high-number of firearms and high number of gun violence-related incidents has persisted for quite some time and continues to garner much discussion and debate in United States.

In 2022, two mass shooting incidents took place in the United States, with both shootings occurring in a rather short amount time from each other: a gunman assaulted a Tops

supermarket in Buffalo, New York on May 14th and just ten days later, another lone gunman attacked an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas on May 24th. Both Buffalo and Uvalde incidents, while tragic and extremely unfortunate events, are mere examples of growing gun violence in the United States. While the mass shootings may not be the greatest contributing factor to the gun-related fatalities, these kinds of incidents certainly gather the most amount of attention and discussion.

As of writing this thesis, the Uvalde incident is the deadliest mass shooting incident of 2020s in the United States in terms of death toll and it alongside the Buffalo shooting greatly influenced the conception and implementation of the first federal gun control law in over 28 years, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022, which contained several measures to try and prevent future tragedies involving gun violence. While neither incident is the deadliest incident in United States' history in terms of fatalities, the combined impact of Uvalde incident and the shooting in Buffalo played a significant part in nudging the legislation makers into introducing the first federal gun legislation in almost 30 years, which is why this timeframe was chosen as a focal point for this study.

Both then-president Joe Biden and ex-president Donald Trump have contributed their fair share to gun control discussion during their respective presidential terms, which is why their speeches were chosen as the study material. However, this topic also contains much historical background that also affects the present discourse, often in an indirect manner. Therefore, theoretical approach offered by the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and analytic tools of discursive strategies and *topoi* from its extension, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), were chosen to better examine how gun control is discussed by these major political figures of the United States. The research questions for this thesis are:

1. In what ways were *discursive strategies* used by Donald Trump and Joe Biden in their respective speeches?
2. What *topoi* did they use to argue for or against gun control-related issues (e.g. Second Amendment rights, school safety etc.) and how?
3. How do the differences in their discursive strategy and *topoi* use reflect conservative and liberal ideologies, and what are the broader implications for the gun control debate?

The structure of the thesis will be as follows: the background section will focus on introducing the theoretical framework and concepts featured in the analysis and discussion in addition the necessary sociopolitical knowledge for understanding the vast and complex topic of United States gun regulation. The research data and methods of analysis will be covered in more detail in the data and methods section. Additionally, this section will also detail the process of data collection. The analysis section will then proceed to present the data and analyse for how discursive strategies are used and examine the argumentation for their use of *topoi*. The fifth section will then focus on the third research question, examining how differences in Trump and Biden's use of discursive strategies and *topoi* reflect their respective ideologies and what broader implications they have for the U.S gun control.

To be clear, purpose of this thesis is not to focus on the shooting incidents or their perpetrators more than what is necessary for explaining the discussion surrounding the incidents. Furthermore, this thesis does not aim to give an all-encompassing review of US gun politics, nor seek to give explanations about the right approach regarding the US firearm regulation as the cultural significance of firearms is vastly different from the European standpoint. Instead, the study's main purpose is to uncover what kinds of strategies underlie the statements of major political figures like Trump and Biden and how they are used in the gun control context, in addition to contributing to the few CDA studies on United States gun control discourse.

2 Background

This section presents the theoretical key concepts used in the study as well as give background information regarding the US gun control discourse in 2022.

To be crystal clear about the terminology in this thesis, the terms ‘gun control’ and ‘gun rights’, which may seem synonymous with each other, are rather distinct in their meaning. ‘Gun control’ refers to the advocacy for more control-oriented approach to gun legislation, such as restricting the sale of certain types firearms, calling for universal background checks etc. Conversely, ‘gun rights’ refers to the other side of the discussion that advocates for less overall legislative control and regulation on acquiring and owning firearms.

2.1 Sociopolitical background

This subsection will cover the historical and cultural aspects of gun-related politics. First, the gist of the Second Amendment of the United States constitution, its different interpretations and general significance to gun control discussion are presented. Then, the cultural significance of firearms, their ownership in the United States is explained. Then, the views of Donald Trump and Joe Biden regarding gun control are elaborated. The final two entries focus on covering the Buffalo and Uvalde shooting incidents and the content of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, respectively.

2.1.1 The Second Amendment and United States gun regulation

Included in the United States Bill of Rights and ratified in 1791 alongside nine other amendments, the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution, or the Right to Bear Arms reads as follows:

A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed. (Baldrige 2009, 6)

Influenced by the English Bill of Rights, the interpretation of the Second Amendment has evolved from a passage guaranteeing a state militia system to being understood as protecting the individual’s right to self-defence (Ryan 2021, 123), though its wording has remained the same across its existence. As the times have changed, the exact and correct interpretation of the Second Amendment has been up for debate for quite some time due to its somewhat archaic and ambiguous terminology that lends itself to different interpretations. Additionally,

there is some lack of clarity about what the founding fathers exactly meant with the amendment, as notes and records about the proceedings regarding the amendment are either incomplete or unavailable (Corti 2022, 7). Due to the ambiguity of the wording and insufficient records, three main lines of interpretation have emerged: *individual rights*, *collective rights*, and *civic rights* interpretations:

The individual rights interpretation claims that the Second Amendment guarantees the right of every individual to own arms for personal use. *The collective rights* interpretation asserts that owning and using firearms is restricted to the functions of a militia organization. Carefully splitting the difference between these two views is the *civic rights interpretation*. This interpretation asserts that all rights carry responsibilities and that individuals have a right to bear arms in order to fulfill their civic responsibility to ensure public safety and defense. (Briggs 2017, 8: italics added for emphasis).

The individual rights side of the argument focuses on the latter clause “the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed” and interprets that “this right has always belonged to the citizens individually, since the body of the Militia corresponded to the body of the people, who were expected to perform in the Militia bringing privately owned weapons whenever called” (Corti 2022, 7). On the collective rights side, the main emphasis is on the first clause “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State” (ibid.). In this interpretation, the purpose of the Second Amendment is “to help maintain state militias and avoid giving the federal government exclusive access to military power, not to create a universal and indiscriminate right to possess guns for the entire population” (ibid.). The civic rights interpretation serves as somewhat of a middle ground between the other interpretations. At first, this interpretation may appear to be the same as the individual rights argument, but the key difference is that civic rights interpretation emphasises the individual’s responsibility to uphold the public safety in exchange for their right to bear arms, whereas the individual rights argument does not state any requirements for citizens.

The interpretation of the Second Amendment has occasionally caused some controversy in the Supreme Court, such as with the case of *United States vs. Miller* of 1939, which “involved an appeal by two individuals convicted of transporting an unregistered sawed-off shotgun across state lines” (Utter 2016, 332), and *District of Columbia vs. Heller* of 2008. The appeal in the *Miller* case was based on the defendants’ “claim that the National Firearms Act [of 1934], in restricting their right to bear arms, violated the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and that the act could not be justified under Congress’s commerce power” (ibid.). For context,

the National Firearms Act involved calls for “the taxation of the manufacture, sale, and transfer of weapons” as well as the requirement for weapon be registration, transfer tax for weapon sellers and finally, requirement for people “to gain the approval of local law enforcement officials to have the weapon in that local jurisdiction” (Utter 2016, 213–214). The *United States vs. Miller* essentially outlined that the right to keep and bear arms had to do with states’ right to protect themselves by maintaining an armed militia, and that the amendment protected a collective right (Corti 2022, 13), therefore leaning towards the collective rights interpretation as the decision was interpreted as pertaining to militias, not to individuals (Ryan 2021, 129).

However, this interpretation changed because of *District of Columbia vs. Heller* in 2008, in which the defendant argued that the Columbia District’s firearm legislation was in violation of the Second Amendment that guarantees a right for an individual to keep and bear arms (Utter 2016, 91). Specifically, the defendant was allowed to carry a handgun in their work as a security guard but was prohibited from having one in their home due to District of Columbia banning handguns from private possession in legislative decision made in 1976 (Ryan 2021, 132–133), thus clashing with the Second Amendment. As a result, the *Miller* decision was overturned by ruling that the Second Amendment pertains to the rights of individuals, not collectives (Utter 2016, 91), thus leaning towards the individual rights interpretation. Both cases demonstrate the impact the of different interpretations of the Second Amendment and the issues it may cause.

Historically, the debate about how much firearms should be regulated has been affected by the idea of the federal government of the United States resorting to tyranny to rule over its citizens. This ‘tyranny angle’, that results from “oversimplification or distortion of history” involves thinking that dictators like Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and Stalin would not have become mass murderers, if their citizens had been armed to resist them (Corti 2022, 17). Therefore, in the eyes of its supporters, the citizen’s right to keep and bear arms is intended to protect citizens from an arbitrary government and tyrannical leaders (Corti 2022, 18). Furthermore, these supporters may also share a mistrust in the government, viewing it as conspiring against them and their right to keep and bear firearms in order to control their lives (Corti 2022, 18).

As expected, firearm policies are a hotly debated topic of discussion, with majority of the Republicans considering the access to firearms to be a constitutional right which should not be restricted, while most Democrats are in favour of more restrictions on firearms (Yousaf

2021, 2771). In cases of mass shootings, there is also some disagreement about what factors contributed to their occurrence:

Most **Republicans** blame the shooters' personal characteristics, especially mental health conditions, as the primary determinant of mass shootings. They propose that law-abiding citizens should have access to guns to protect themselves and foil these shootings. Most **Democrats**, on the other hand, blame weak gun control laws as the main reason for these events and advocate tightening access to guns to prevent shootings. (Yousaf 2021, 2772: bolding added for emphasis)

This dichotomy of personal and governmental responsibility for the causes of gun violence rears its head almost every time when mass shootings take place. It is important to note, however, that while mass shootings understandably receive most attention, the leading reason for gun-related deaths are suicides. In 2022, for instance, gun suicides accounted for 56% of all firearm deaths according to data by Kaiser Family Foundation (2024). This debate, as with many, if not all other political topics has led to a juxtaposition between gun owners and non-gun owners. To conceptualize this issue, Joslyn (2020, 1) uses the term “gun gap”, which describes the “differences in political behavior and attitudes between gun owners and those who do not own a gun.”

While the Second Amendment applies to the entirety of the United States, there exists some geographical variation about in gun rights and regulation due to the federalist government structure that splits the legislative powers between the general government and the states (Briggs 2017, 123). Federal law requires that “anyone who buys a gun from a licensed firearm dealer must undergo an instant criminal background check” which includes recognizing any red flags, such as “a prior felony conviction, certain domestic violence misdemeanors, unlawful use of controlled substances, or [...] commitment to a mental institution” (Vernick, Alcorn and Horwitz 2017, 98). What makes this problematic, however, is that “federal law does not require a background check when a gun is purchased from someone who is not a licensed gun dealer” (ibid.). Despite the many issues, banning firearms outright or even having stricter gun laws in manner similar to many other developed countries is unrealistic, as “other developed nations simply had adopted strict gun control before such a high number of firearms wound up in private hands” (Corti 2022, 19). Moreover, there are just simply too many guns and gun owners to supervise effectively, and a considerable majority of these owners would simply ignore the law, rejecting to hand in their guns to government (ibid.). The main government institution responsible for the enforcement of the federal laws as well as issuing licenses for gun manufacturers and dealers, the *ATF*, or the *Bureau of Alcohol*,

Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, lacks regulatory authority over gun control and has only limited access to relevant information concerning the sale of firearms (Utter 2016, 54–55).

2.1.2 Gun culture, gun politics and arms industry in the U.S

The concept of gun culture, referring to the cultural significance and importance of firearms in the United States, started to take shape in the 19th century. In the colonial days of the United States, firearms were rather scarce, often poor in quality and were mostly used for hunting. In the wake of the American Civil War in the latter half of the 19th century, however, the production of firearms grew exponentially, which led to better-quality firearms and opening shops exclusively specializing in the sale of arms, thus giving rise to gun enthusiasm (Corti 2022, 9). The general birth of gun culture in the United States has its roots in the 1920s during which the numerous gang wars of the era gave birth to “the belief that the federal government should do something to fight criminals and their guns, who thrived in the jurisdictional cracks between the states” (ibid.). Movies and pop-culture in general also played a part in the birth and maintenance of gun culture, beginning with the western-genre with their depictions of cowboys defending a town against outlaws being treated as symbolizing personal responsibility, competence, and independence (Joslyn 2020, 16). This ‘cowboy mythos’ has been further expanded in modern films by placing their heroes in similar roles with their firearms being used as means to dispense justice, equality, and protect others and thus depicting the guns as more than just practical tools (ibid.).

The gun rights group National Rifle Association has also contributed its fair share to the birth of gun culture in the United States. Their former CEO and vice president Wayne LaPierre, who has been observed to have the tendency of highlighting the cultural features of gun ownership (Joslyn, 2020, 17) talked about his views on defining ‘gun culture’:

What is the “gun culture”? The answer depends on your point of view. To millions of Americans, especially those who own firearms, the term refers to America’s traditional bedrock values of self-reliance, self-defense, and self-determination. To others, most of whom dislike firearms and do not own them, the term is a pejorative. Participants think these outsiders use the term to distinguish themselves as the culturally elite, ruling the national media as moral superiors to the nation’s gun owners. (Melzer 2009, 29)

LaPierre’s statement puts the right to own firearms as one of the key components used to maintain the American values, while also pointing the in- and out-group division between gun rights and gun control groups. Generally, the gun rights advocates tend argue the problem

with gun violence does not lie with gun themselves, or that “guns are not evil per se, but are instead just an instrument that can be used with bad or good intentions; in any case, the responsibility falls on the person, not on the gun” (Corti 2022, 15). Furthermore, they assert that the problem pertains to illegal guns, not to legal guns, and that the existence of illegal guns necessitates legal guns (ibid.). In short, the fault lies in those who use guns in a wrongful manner, not in the guns themselves. In stark contrast, gun control advocates believe that people lack the necessary discipline and training to handle high pressure situations and that they tend to overestimate the threat posed to them (Corti 2022, 16).

As the country with perhaps the largest military presence in the world, the vast number of firearms in circulation is also related to the U.S military-industrial complex, a concept often used to refer to the power and influence on a country’s politics that firearm companies and other military-related industry may garner, “whether sought or unsought (Fallows 2002, 46). What makes this concept problematic is that the combined power of the military and defence industry may influence a country’s political decision-making. When it comes to legal protection, firearm and ammunition businesses are protected by the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act that “requires the courts to dismiss certain cases” against these businesses, which essentially prevents them from being sued for any potential damage their product may cause (Higgins, Lowy and Rising 2020, 83).

In terms of political attitude, the conservative Republican Party has tied itself with gun culture, such as having guns for recreational purposes, and affiliated itself with gun advocacy groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), while the Democratic Party has garnered a reputation for opposing gun culture in general (Losee et al. 2021, 97). This divide between the two parties started in the early 1990s when the Republican party started to oppose many gun control bills while the Democratic party advocated for more restrictions on guns (Joslyn 2020, 48) which affected their supporters’ outlook on gun policies as well. In addition to their overt support for gun rights, Republican political rhetoric shares many of the values and ideals also associated with gun culture such as individualism, freedom, and self-sufficiency (ibid.). Democrats and their supporters, on the other hand, tend to view guns as threats to the stability of the society and view gun restrictions as “sensible, not an obstacle to personal freedom” (Joslyn 2020, 49) and “believe that limits improve safety and beget greater social solidarity” (ibid.). Gun ownership can therefore be a strong indicator of one’s political behaviour and preferences, although its use as a black-and-white way of labelling gun owners and non-gun owners can be questionable, as owning a gun does not necessarily translate into

advocating for more gun rights and vice versa. Also, the fact that firearms are so widespread across the United States means that there is no single reason for owning one and they may range from self-defence to hunting purposes (Jacobs 2002, 40).

2.1.3 Donald Trump and Joe Biden's stance on gun regulation

As the perhaps most publicised political figures in the United States, both ex-president Donald Trump and then-president Joe Biden share very different views about the causes of gun violence that correspond to the differences Republicans and Democrats share about gun control in general.

During his time in the presidential office, starting from 2017 and ending in 2021, Donald Trump did advocate for more legislative control over firearms, such as advocating for background checks in 2018 and for 'red-flag laws' in 2019, but he eventually backpedalled on both issues due to backlash and pressure from the NRA (Rivera et al., 2024). Incidentally, during his first of presidency, the United States experienced the deadliest mass shooting in its history, the Las Vegas Shooting of 2017 that claimed around 60 lives and left over 400 injured, according to a report by BBC News (Epstein 2024). After his first presidential term, he has advocated for fewer gun restrictions and has even vowed to undo Biden's actions on guns should he be elected president and told the audience at an NRA convention that "no one will lay a finger on [their] firearms" (Rivera et al. 2024).

Compared to Trump, Joe Biden has consistently advocated for more legislative action to curb the increase in gun violence which follows the general Democrat policy and attitude on gun regulation, even before his own presidency. For instance, in 1994 he helped the passing of the previous federal law related to gun control prior the Bipartisan Safer Communities of 2022, the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, during his time as a Senator in the U.S Congress (Weber 2021). During his own presidential administration, he has planned for many other gun control initiatives, which include mandatory background checks, the ban of manufacturing and selling assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, as well as 'gun buy-back program' which would give the government more control over the aforementioned assault weapons and high-capacity magazines by giving their owners two options of either selling the weapons to the government, or registering them accordingly, as required by the National Firearms Act (ibid.). Of course, perhaps the biggest action the Biden took against is gun violence is the enactment of the *Bipartisan Safer Communities Act* of 2022.

2.1.4 Uvalde and Buffalo shootings of 2022

On May 14th, 2022, in Buffalo, New York, the gunman identified as an 18-year-old white male drove to a Tops Friendly Market on Buffalo's East Side, armed with a several firearms and wearing body armour, camouflage combat uniform, and a ballistic tactical helmet (James 2022, 9). According to official report conducted in 2022 by the New York State Attorney General Letitia James, the gunman had chosen the Tops Market due to and arrived to the location with an intent to "kill as many blacks as possible" which was pointed out in the gunman's own writings (James 2022, 9). Prior to the shooting, the gunman had also spent considerable time on online platforms, such as Reddit, Discord as well as Twitch where he livestreamed the attack. As a result of the shooting, ten people lost their lives and three people were injured.

The Buffalo shooter's manifesto, released on Discord shortly before the shooting occurred, detailed the motivations for the shooting, which included conspiratorial and racist concepts related to white supremacy, such as "White Genocide", the "Great Replacement" theory and accelerationism. To describe them briefly, the concepts of "White Genocide" and "the Great Replacement" refer to "the supposed decline of the white race, its replacement by other demographic groups" and the perceived attempt "to lower white birthrates in order to replace white majorities in perceived white homelands with other races" (James 2022, 15).

Accelerationism, on the other hand, describes the idea "that acts of violence, especially racially motivated murder, will hasten racial war" (James 2022, 16) which is based on a belief that there is an impending race war between whites and other races. The shooter's stated goal was to spread panic among the general populace, inspire copycat incidents and invoke revenge acts from the affected groups (*ibid.*).

Just ten days later after the Buffalo incident, the Robb elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, was similarly attacked by a lone gunman. A former student of Robb elementary school, who was armed with an AR-15 style assault rifle, was identified as the perpetrator and in the wake of the shooting, 19 students and two teachers lost their lives while at least 17 others were physically injured (U.S Department of Justice 2024, xii). Similarly to the Buffalo shooter, the Uvalde gunman was also active social media platforms, which included Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, as well as Yubo, a French livestreaming platform, and he was also an avid video game player (Burrows et al. 2022, 32). The shooter exhibited threatening behaviour online, such as sending explicit messages to other users, threatening them, in addition

watching sometimes sharing violent videos on his accounts (ibid.). Moreover, he had made threats to a high school in New York which resulted “a mental health evaluation that put him in a hospital for a day and a half”, as stated by a PBS News report (Associated Press 2022).

Unlike the Buffalo shooter, however, the Uvalde gunman’s main motivation for the shooting seems to have centred around seeking fame and notoriety instead of being driven by any specific political agendas (Burrows et al. 2022, 38) and he had no mental health history, but the overall motive is still uncertain. One aspect that was focused on and criticized quite intensively in the news and media coverage of the Uvalde incident was the police response: instead treating the shooting as an “active shooter scenario” that involves law enforcement officials actively trying to stop the shooter and saving the victims, the shooting was treated as a “barricaded subject scenario”, which was assumed to have given the gunman more time to wreak havoc inside the school before being shot by the authorities (Burrows et al., 2022 7–8).

The large amount of attention both incidents received, combined with their occurrence within a rather short time from each other, may have contributed to garnering support for the legislation in the U.S Congress. Also, the social media aspect of both shootings also received an abundant amount of attention and discussion of how it affects the youth population.

2.1.5 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022

A federal legislative decision titled Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) was enacted under president Joe Biden and vice president Kamala Harris’ administration. While gun legislation differs in each state to some extent, the BCSA is a significant piece of legislation due to the fact the previous federal law regarding gun control was enacted 28 years prior to it. It became effective on 25th of June, 2022 after gathering support from the majority Republicans in the Congress (Corti 2022, 26). The previous federal legislation related to firearms, the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act of 1994, more popularly referred to as the ‘Federal Assault Weapons Ban’, was created in order to prohibit the sale and possession of certain military-style semiautomatic firearms:

Assault weapons include semiautomatic firearms that fire a single round of ammunition with each pull of the trigger [...] have large ammunition clips that can hold up to 30 rounds or more [...] are compact; have barrels less than 20 inches long; weigh from 6 to 10 pounds; are made for military use; and have pistol grips. (Utter 2016, 22).

The 'Federal Assault Weapons Ban' itself faced some controversy over how an assault weapon is defined and categorized. In general, keeping track of changes gun legislation may sometimes prove to be an arduous task as their names do not tend to give a very comprehensive picture about its actual content. Additionally, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish what legislation is considered to apply on state- or federal-level.

The BSCA has three key components which describe the issues which the law was made to specifically address: community and domestic violence, school and mass shootings and mental health support (White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention 2024, 3). This includes changes to gun legislation and additional funding for violence prevention and intervention programmes, school safety and mental health work.

Even though it is not mentioned or stated too explicitly, the mental health component of the BSCA was most likely brought on by the discussion surrounding the Buffalo and Uvalde gunmen as both were reported to having spent much time online which is speculated to have had a major role in radicalizing them to commit such atrocities, even though only the Buffalo gunman had history regarding mental health issues. In general, mental health problems' connection towards gun violence has been discussed quite extensively over the years. It is often associated with the motives for each shooting and news media tend to use it to offer simplified explanations "that assume the perpetrator is either 'mad or bad'" as they make news easier to produce and digest (Knoll and Annas 2016, 83).

When it comes to the gun regulation-related content of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, it "created an enhanced background check process for gun buyers under 21 years of age" and "provided funding for mental health services, including school-based mental health programs, and for school safety measures" (Merry 2023, 427). Furthermore, it "created a funding pot for states to implement 'red flag' laws, which allow authorities to confiscate firearms from individuals who may be a danger to themselves or others" (ibid.). The law also addressed a previous legal issue, the so-called "boyfriend loophole" by "prohibiting dating partners convicted of domestic violence from purchasing or possessing firearms or ammunition" (White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention 2024, 3). Moreover, gun trafficking and straw purchasing were indicated by BSCA as central sources to how criminals acquire their guns (White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention 2024, 5). The first term refers to the "diversion of firearms from legal markets to illegal markets" and the latter to "the method by which a person who cannot pass a background check or who otherwise wants to conceal they

are acquiring firearms uses another person who can pass a background check to purchase firearms” (ibid). Incidentally, BSCA was implemented around the same time as another law regarding gun safety was revoked. Just days before, on June 23, 2022, the US Supreme Court ruled that the New York state law that required a permit for concealed carry of firearms was unconstitutional (Corti 2022, 26). In short, it indicated that the state law was in violation of the Second Amendment, thus removing the requirement for a permit.

However, Melissa. K. Merry argues that there has not been a significant alteration in the gun policy of the U.S despite the implementation of the BSCA. Among other issues, they assess that the main reasons for these changes are the result disproportionate focus on mass shootings (school shootings in particular) when they occur, the fact that the provisions related to gun control of the BSCA were not “sweeping or controversial” (Merry 2023, 429), which allowed it to garner the support of Republicans in the Congress. Admittedly, it is difficult to predict how large of an impact the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act will have on the prevention of mass shootings and gun violence in general.

2.2 Theoretical background and key concepts

This subsection will cover the most important theoretical aspects of this thesis, beginning from the broader framework of Critical Discourse Analysis and then moving onto the specific concepts of discursive strategies and *topoi*.

2.2.1 Discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis

In general, the notion of *discourse* has many different meanings and interpretations. In its widest sense, it is used to pertain to “all the phenomena of symbolic interaction and communication between people, usually through spoken or written language or visual representation”, and *texts*, such as the ones studied in this thesis, are products of discourse and are used to describe linguistic records of a communicative events (Bloor and Bloor 2007, 6–7), which may include written records, recordings of spoken interactions or even incorporation of visual materials. When studying and analysing different kinds of texts, the timeframe, situation, and place during which the linguistic events have taken place also play an important role. This concept of *context* is another key concept related to discourse studies and it is further divided into two headings: *context of culture* and *context of situation*. The former refers to shared knowledge, which is comprised of “traditions, the institutions, the discourse communities, the historical context and the knowledge base of the participants”,

whereas the latter revolves around more immediate factors affecting the linguistic event, such as social setting or environment, as well as the participants' identities (Bloor and Bloor 2007, 27). In this study both aspects of contexts are considered important, as both speeches carry important elements regarding their *context of situation* (e.g. speakers' status and position within society etc.) as well as their *context of culture* (e.g. identifying with certain political parties etc.).

In addition to context, another essential aspect of studying discourse is *framing*, which affects how the surrounding world is perceived. Conceptually, frames emphasize some pieces of information, whatever they may be, which increases their salience and thus "making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences" (Entman 1993, 53). Essentially, framing is used to talk about a cognitive model that links separate entities together or mental structures that are triggered by words and help shape the way world is seen and what kinds of feelings, thoughts and messages are associated with certain topics (Bloor and Bloor 2007, 11–12). In political contexts specifically, frames emphasize some aspects of reality while given less focus on other aspects, which in turn "might lead audiences to have different reactions" (Entman 1993, 55). Those controlling the framing of political issues are often members of political elite and the frames they present "can determine just what 'public opinion is'", even though determining what is actually a true representation of public's sentiment is difficult due to it requiring "agreement among contending elites and citizens on which frame was most accurate, fair, complete, and so forth" (Entman 1993, 57). The importance of framing to CDA stems from the fact the frames vary between cultures and they change how authorities, social groups and identities are seen (Bloor and Bloor 2007, 11–12), which, in turn may influence how positively or negatively they are treated. In this study, the way both speakers frame their respective topics, arguments as well other parties are of particular interest.

As a form of critical social analysis, CDA views language as a matter of social practice and asserts that the context of language use plays a vital role (Wodak and Meyer, 2001, 1–2). Furthermore, CDA addresses the relationship between language and power. It focuses on the relationships between structural forms of control, discrimination, dominance and power, and how they are manifested in language, especially in institutional, media and political discourses (ibid.). While the critique CDA provides is not enough on its own to cause societal change, "it can contribute to political action for change by increasing understanding of the existing reality and its problems and possibilities" (Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018, 13).

Moreover, it not only acknowledges the power of discourse but also the power that operates behind discourse and therefore the purpose is to critique the ideology behind the manipulation that is present in the discourse (Flowerdew and Richardson 2018, 14). In broader terms, CDA's main objectives are to analyse how power relationships are expressed through language use in different contexts, expose unjust or otherwise unfair practices thus help provide explanations about real-world issues present in the discourse.

Although the direct impact of different political institutions and figures on shaping discourses and decision-making is difficult to measure accurately, it should nonetheless be analysed and studied as “dominant structures stabilize conventions and naturalize them,” meaning that “the effects of power and ideology in the production of meaning are obscured and acquire stable and natural forms: they are taken as ‘given’”(Wodak and Meyer, 2001, 3). In other words, if problematic elements in discourses are left unexamined and no action is taken to address these issues, they may become ‘common sense’ and imbued within unconscious attitudes, making them “more difficult to question” or “to challenge openly in the social arena” (Bloor and Bloor 2007, 10) and thus helping them legitimize their power in the society. This process of legitimizing other issues and delegitimizing others by either referring to authority, morality, rationality or narratives (van Leeuwen 2007, 92) could lead into into prolonged injustice and unfair power-structures within the society over time, whose after-effects may yield even worse outcomes.

2.2.2 Discursive strategies and *topoi*

Discursive strategies and *topoi*, as conceptualized in the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl, provide a structured method for analysing political rhetoric. While DHA is often applied to intertextual and historical discourse analysis, this study does not employ the full approach. Instead, it draws on discursive strategies and *topoi* as analytical tools to examine two political speeches that encapsulate broader ideological debates on gun control. This focused approach allows for a detailed linguistic analysis while maintaining a connection to CDA.

Discursive strategies refer to “more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan[s] of practices [...] adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aim” (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 73). They typically involve positioning the speaker and others in either a positive or negative light through systematic language use. Wodak and Meyer (2001) indicate that there are five discursive strategies, *nomination*, *predication*, *argumentation*,

perspectivization, and *intensification/mitigation*, which highlight different ways in which various events, ideologies and social actors are represented.

First, the *nomination* strategy's purpose is to discursively construct actions, events, objects, phenomena, processes, social actors, etc. More broadly speaking, this strategy refers to their naming and to how they are linguistically referred to in a specific discourse (Flowerdew 2018, 52). This can be significant, since different words used to refer to the same topic may differ in terms of their connotation, or the emotions associated with them, and any biases can affect these choices. For example, the word *freedom fighter* bears a positive connotation, while the word *terrorist* bears negative connotation (Bloor and Bloor, 2007, 129). Lexical choices made by authors or speakers can be a major factor in manipulating opinions (ibid.), which makes them worth examining and analysing.

Closely associated with nomination strategies, the second strategy of *predication* focuses more on describing the social actors, events etc. by attributing certain types of positive/negative qualities or characteristics they may have. The most common approach to predication is to attribute favourable qualities to the topics the speaker or writer views favourably while also attributing negative qualities to those they are criticising.

The third strategy, *argumentation*, seeks to persuade the audience by justifying and questioning certain truth claims and normative assumptions. This strategy often utilizes fallacies (faulty reasoning) and *topoi* (conclusion rules). However, this study will focus on the latter, as *topoi* are more clearly defined in the DHA framework and provide a structured way to analyse argumentative patterns. The specific *topoi* examined in the analysis will be introduced later in this subsection.

Unlike the previous strategies which focus on certain elements of the text, the *perspectivization* strategy can affect the entire tone of the text, as it seeks to explain the perspective or viewpoint from which the nomination, attribution, and argumentation stem from, which involves the speaker/writer positioning their own viewpoint and expressing involvement or further from the discourse topic. In practice, it may sometimes overlap with the nomination strategy as both are concerned. The main difference, however, is that nomination strategy is concerned about how the speaker/writer names, refer and positions others in the text, meanwhile *perspectivization* is more about their own perspective, which in turn affects the way the other elements are nominated and predicated.

The final strategy of *intensification/mitigation* intensifies or conversely mitigates the illocutionary force, or the speaker's/writer's intention, of the text's utterances. Practically, this may be done in the form diminutives or augmentative word choices, that augment the meaning constructed by other words, such as superlatives or hyperboles. Mitigations, on the other hand, can similarly be used diminish meaning constructed by other words, like for example lessen the impact of critique. In general, the mitigation/intensification strategies serve to compliment the other discursive strategies.

As a part of the discursive strategy of argumentation, *topoi* are used to structure the specific arguments used in discussion. They are 'conclusion rules' that are used to "justify the transition from the argument(s) to the conclusion" (Meyer and Wodak 2016, 35). The actual theoretical origins of *topoi* are rooted in argumentation theory and ancient Greece in the work of Aristotle, according to whom "[a] *topos* is a general argumentative form or pattern, and concrete arguments are instantiations of this general form" (Žagar 2010, 17: italics added). To put it bluntly, *topoi* are mechanisms that justify why a certain conclusion is drawn from the argument. While they are not always stated in an explicit fashion, in practice "they can be made explicit as conditional or causal paraphrases, such as 'if x, then y' or 'y, because x'" (KhosraviNik 2015, 64). In practice, *topoi* represent how the author of the text or the speaker argues for or against their chosen issue or topic. *Topoi* are not meant to perform the action but to persuade the listener(s) about the necessity or desirability of these actions.

The following *topoi* are identified in the DHA framework developed by Reisigl and Wodak (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 74–77). While all are presented here for theoretical completeness, only those that were explicitly used in the analysed speeches will be examined in detail in the Analysis section. This study utilized the 2001 edition of *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* for establishing the *topoi*, as later editions do not provide a fixed list, nor discuss them in as much detail. The study adheres to Reisigl-Wodak framework's list to maintain consistency, comparability and to avoid arbitrariness. For the purposes of this study, the original 15 were adapted into 14 by treating the *topoi* of *usefulness* and *uselessness* as two sides of the same *topos*:

Table 1. *Topoi* and causes for action (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 74–77).

Topos	Cause for action
1. Usefulness/uselessness	Action presents an advantage/ disadvantage so it should be taken/avoided

Topos	Cause for action
2. Definition/name interpretation	a thing or a person designated as belonging to certain group, faction etc., therefore should carry the qualities, traits and attributes contained in the concept they are identified with
3. Danger/threat	Action presents a danger or a threat so it OR if inaction would lead to a significant threat or danger, then action should be taken to prevent it
4. Humanitarianism	Action complies or clashes with human rights so it should be performed or avoided
5. Justice	Persons, actions, or situations are equal in specific respects, so they should be treated equally
6. Responsibility	a state or group responsible for the emergence of specific problems must act in order to find solutions to these problems
7. Burdening/weighting	a person, institution or a country who is a burden to should act to reduce these burdens
8. Finances	a specific situation/action costs too much money or causes a loss of revenue, therefore actions that lessen or help avoid them should be performed
9. Reality	Because present reality is what it is, a specific action/decision should or should not be performed
10. Numbers	Numbers (e.g. statistics) prove a specific topos to be true, therefore an action should or should not be performed.
11. Law and right	A law or another codified norm requires or forbids a specific political or administrative action
12. History	Because history shows that specific actions have specific consequences, an action should or should not be performed in a situation comparable with the historical example
13. Culture	because the culture of a specific group of people is as it is, specific problems arise in specific situations.
14. Abuse	If rights or offered help is abused, the action against the abuse should be taken

To summarize both concepts, the *discursive strategies* and *topoi* are used to explain the motivations behind certain kinds of texts. On one hand, the *discursive strategies* could be thought of as the more covert yet all-encompassing strategies that underline the usage of words and structures with certain connotations etc. in the text which, in turn, shape how a certain issue talked about and therefore perceived by the audience. On the other hand, *topoi* are specifically related to the argumentation for the topic at hand and they justify why certain

conclusion are ‘correct’ and justifiable. A practical example of the use of both discursive strategies in government-related contexts is blame avoidance, where these strategies and ‘conclusion rules’ are used to avoid receiving blame as it can damage on one’s “personal or organisational reputation and result in the loss of power” among other negative consequences (Hansson 2015, 298). Additionally, they may be used to “obstruct or prevent public debates over certain policy issues, alter political agendas and alliances, legitimate some actors and disempower/delegitimise others” (ibid.). The main distinction between these two concepts is that discursive strategies shape perceptions of social actors and events etc., while *topoi* justify arguments and answer why a particular action is necessary or dangerous.

2.3 Previous studies

The use of discursive strategies in institution/government-related contexts has been studied before. Sten Hansson (2015) examined discursive strategies as a blame-avoidance method, although he did not utilize the same strategies formulated by Reisigl and Wodak (2001). The US gun control discourse has been a topic of academic study for quite some time prior to this thesis. While most of the studies analyse the gun regulation discussion from a sociological perspective, there are also existing linguistic studies that focus on the language used in gun control discussions. For example, Lydia Wilkes, Nate Kreuter and Ryan Skinnell (2022) have assessed gun rhetoric and Christopher Duerringer has analysed gun right tropes (Duerringer and Justus 2016) and strategic maneuvering rhetoric pertaining to current gun-control (Duerringer 2023). It is also worthwhile to acknowledge Devon Ziminski’s (2024) comparative analysis of the 1993 Brady Act and the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act that pertains to how gun violence was outlined and defined in both acts. Similarly, Melissa K. Merry’s (2023) recent study focuses on gun policies and their relation to mass shootings in the US. Discursive strategy use in gun control-related discussion has also been studied prior to this thesis by, for example, Stella Tarrant (2018) whose study focuses on the Heller Supreme Court case as both a legal proceeding and a narrative and talks about the tolerance of guns in the United States. She did not, however, utilize discursive strategies of Reisigl and Wodak as analytical tools.

3 Materials and methods

This section will go into further detail about the research data and the practical approach of the thesis.

the gunmen any more notoriety than what they already have garnered with their actions.

3.1 Research data

The decision to focus on the two latest US presidents (as of writing), Donald Trump and Joe Biden, was based on the influence the President of the United States has on gun regulation. Gun control and gun rights groups, such as Everytown for Gun Safety and National Rifle Association, and think tanks Heritage Foundation and Center for American Progress have been reported to have extensive influence on Trump and Biden administrations. They were therefore considered as potential data sources for analysis but they were ultimately left out due to limitations of scope. The audiovisual recordings of both speeches were roughly similar in length, with Trump's speech clocking in at 14 minutes and 27 seconds and Biden's speech being slightly longer at 17 minutes and 21 seconds.

For both speeches, it is important to note that Trump's speech neglects to mention the Buffalo incident. Instead, it focuses on Uvalde almost exclusively. As for Biden's speech, he conducted a speech on 24th of May 2022, the very day Uvalde shooting took place. However, the speech of June 2nd was chosen for this study instead as it gives a more comprehensive look into his view on gun violence and regulation. Although the comparison of speeches is not ideal, because Trump focuses more on Uvalde incident which occurred only three days prior to his speech and Biden's speech addresses gun control in a more general manner, both nevertheless also address the topic of gun regulation in their speeches. They are still comparable in terms of the topic of this thesis.

While the linguistic content of the speeches is the focus of analysis, the role of audience and other extralinguistic factors will also be addressed when necessary. It is also worth acknowledging that the comparison is made more difficult by how Trump's speech took place in front of a live audience, whereas Biden's speech did not. However, they are still worth contrasting with one another in order to see how their opposite ideologies are showcased in their use of discursive strategies and *topoi*. As both speech videos are available to the public on

Youtube and as both Donald Trump and Joe Biden are well-known public figures, there should be no major issues concerning the ethical or moral integrity of this study.

Premade transcriptions (New York Times 2022; Rev.com 2022) for both speeches (Biden 2022; Trump 2022) were also used to aid the textual analysis of discursive strategies for the sake of time management. Both transcriptions were available on the internet, with Trump transcription being free to access while Biden transcription required a New York Times account to access. Both were then copy-pasted onto a Microsoft Word document for the analysis, which was done by highlighting specific words, phrases and sentences. The links to the speech transcriptions used are included as Appendices section.

Though the names of both Buffalo and Uvalde incidents' perpetrators have been publicly available for quite some time now, and can be found out rather easily, a decision to omit their names from this study was made, and instead, they will be referred to as "Buffalo gunman" and "Uvalde gunman" when necessary. Their names or other information regarding their person are not a point of interest of this study and are not essential for understanding this topic. The main reasons for this choice are the very tragic nature of these mass shootings and willingness to not give

3.2 Methods

The analysis itself focused on studying the word choices, structures and rhetorical devices in order point out which discursive strategies were present in the speeches. The use of argumentation strategy for softer/stricter gun control or other gun control-related issue was also examined in reference to *topoi* use. In practice, the analysis was done by compiling the texts in a Microsoft Word document, in which parts of the text were highlighted in different colours in order distinguish specific occurrences of each strategy and *topoi*. However, the data examples in the analysis are not highlighted in colour in order to remain printer friendly.

The strategies were analysed in the following order: nomination and predication, argumentation and *topoi*, perspectivization and intensification/mitigation. Nomination and predication as well as argumentation and *topoi* were combined due to them often occurring in tandem with each other. Additionally, possible motivations and reasons for certain strategies behind them were also discussed. While the main emphasis was on the speeches and their use of the discursive strategies, any extralinguistic factors such as audience interaction, speaker's gestures were acknowledged when deemed necessary.

With discursive strategies, it is important to remember that many of them can occur in a single paragraph or even in the same sentence, with some strategies complimenting one another, like nomination and predication. While the main approach of the analysis is on analysing each approach one by one in the texts, there may be instances where the use of other strategies is indicated. Because they can pile on top of each other like this, some specific segments from the speeches may be repeated in multiple strategy sections — for instance, a passage analysed in the nomination/predication section may also appear in the perspectivization or mitigation/intensification sections.

With regard to *topos*, while Reisigl and Wodak provide specific descriptions for each *topos* in their framework which are often examined in racist or otherwise discriminatory contexts, this study follows Flowerdew's (2016, 52–53) view that discourse-analytical categories should be adapted based on context. For instance, the *topos of danger/threat* is not limited to arguing against action by implying that doing such would be dangerous but can also be used to justify action as a necessary response to an imminent danger. The descriptions of the *topoi* in the Reisigl-Wodak framework will serve as guidelines for identifying the core argumentative structures in the discourse analysed. However, due to the complex and multilayered nature of the research data, some arguments may not strictly adhere to the precise definitions outlined by Reisigl and Wodak. Therefore, the application of *topoi* will be based on their general rhetorical function and argumentative purpose, allowing for some leeway in how these *topoi* are categorized.

These changes to the discursive strategy and *topoi* analysis were deemed necessary to suit the qualitative and smaller scope of this study compared to many other studies employing aspects of DHA. However, despite more flexible interpretations, the definitions provided by Reisigl-Wodak framework remain as the backbone of analysis to ensure comparability and consistency in the Discussion section.

4 Discursive strategy analysis

This section will focus on the first two research questions:

1. In what ways were *discursive strategies* used by Donald Trump and Joe Biden in their respective speeches?
2. What *topoi* did they use to argue for or against gun control-related issues (e.g. Second Amendment rights, school safety etc.) and how?

The analysis of both speeches follows a mostly chronological order, with each discursive strategy examined in their dedicated subsections. Consequently, the same passages may appear in multiple sections, emphasizing different aspects, depending on its relevance. In some examples, bolding is used to highlight particular words or phrases that are relevant to a specific strategy, especially in longer extracts. In argumentation and topos section, recurring *topoi* have been grouped to highlight each speaker's rhetorical patterns more effectively, although most of the analysis retains a chronological approach. Timecodes for specific instances in the videos are provided throughout the analysis.

4.1 Donald Trump

In this subsection, the manner in how each of the discursive strategies appear in Donald Trump's speech is analysed with data examples. The speech itself took place at a NRA convention in Houston, Texas on 27th of May, 2022.

4.1.1 Nomination & Predication

Trump constructs a clear moral division between different actors in the gun control debate, referring to victims, perpetrators, and political opponents in distinct ways. The analysis focuses on how he names and describes these figures, shaping the overall framing of his speech.

Trump begins by referencing the Uvalde victims, using terms like “innocent children,” “beautiful victims,” “brave teachers,” and “each precious young soul”. These terms attribute moral qualities to the victims, elevating their status and framing them as pure, virtuous, and deserving of empathy. His description of the victims as an “incomprehensible loss, literally not comprehensible” (Trump 2022, 3:04-3:14) further adds to the characterization of their

lives as valuable and irreplaceable. This use of predication creates a strong emotional connection between the audience and the victims, portraying them not merely as tragic figures but as symbols of innocence and virtue who were taken from the world too soon. His emotional language not only underscores the tragedy and violence of the event in Uvalde but also establishes a sad, mournful tone that appeals to the audience's emotions and morality.

In stark contrast to the victims, Trump refers to the Uvalde gunman as an “out-of-control lunatic” and a “monster,” with these nominations and predications creating an image of an evil person who could not be reasoned with. By establishing the shooter as irrational and attributing their actions as irredeemably evil, Trump makes them an ideal counterforce to the morally righteous victims. This stark contrast in the characterization of the perpetrator and the victims serves to heighten the emotional impact of the speech, creating a Manichean framework of ‘good versus evil’ through word choices alone. This theme is then summarized with Trump’s statement pitting them in Heaven and Hell, stating that “those [Uvalde gunman] slaughtered are now with God in Heaven, he will be eternally damned to burn in the fires of Hell” (Trump 2022, 3:29), reinforcing a strict dichotomy of right and wrong between the victims and the perpetrator and helping to create a moral binary.

A moment later, he refers to mass shooters in general as “disturbed or a demented person[s]” (Trump 2022, 4:30-4:34). This nomination/predication may implicitly suggest a presumed connection between mental health problems and mass shootings. However, it is unclear whether this is intentional on Trump’s behalf or merely an example of rhetoric that seeks to distance the shooters from any relatability, as he then starts to shift the discussion more toward politics:

- 1) Sadly, before the sun had even set on the horrible day of tragedy, we witnessed a now familiar parade of cynical politicians seeking to exploit the tears of sobbing families to increase their own power and take away our constitutional rights. Every time a disturbed or a demented person commits such a hideous crime there’s always a grotesque effort by some in our society to use the suffering of others to advance their own extreme political agenda. (Trump 2022, 4:11-4:46)

The negative predication of the politicians calling for more gun control as uncaring opportunists emphasizes their perceived exploitation of the Uvalde tragedy. On the other hand, the sympathetic attribution of families invokes feelings of emotional vulnerability and innocence. Both predications help create a moral binary, framing gun control advocates as the morally evil party. Furthermore, the collective pronouns “we” and “our” used by Trump

throughout the speech include the NRA audience into the in-group he constructs while the gun control advocates are constructed as an outgroup. The division between the in-group — those who stand with Trump and the victims, and the out-group — the opportunistic politicians supporting gun control — establishes a moral binary between them. The juxtaposition of “cynical politicians” with “sobbing families” produces a cold, unfeeling image of the advocates, which may be aimed at delegitimizing those calling for stricter gun laws in the aftermath of Uvalde. A similar nomination strategy occurs when Trump refers to the gun control advocates’ blame-shifting:

- 2) Even more repulsive is their rush to shift blame away from the villains who commit acts of mass violence and to place that blame onto the shoulders of millions of peaceful law-abiding citizens who belong to organizations such as our wonderful NRA. (Trump 2022, 4:49-5:08).

Trump predicates the NRA favourably as “peaceful law-abiding citizens,” attributing positive moral qualities to them. Meanwhile, the gun control advocates are depicted as engaging in the act of shifting blame, which attributes their actions negatively. This strategic assignment of qualities positions the NRA in a favourable light, while constructing gun control advocates in a less favourable manner. This grouping delegitimizes the advocates for gun control while positioning Trump’s supporters as those who seek to protect the rights of ordinary citizens from the politicized efforts of those attempting to undermine them.

The speech also references the Columbine High School shooting of 1999, one of the first widely publicized and perhaps the most well-known school shootings. This reference underscores the long history of school shootings, which Trump refers to as a “contagion,” characterizing the perpetrators as “deeply evil, violent, and mentally disturbed young men” (Trump 2022 5:49-6:03). By focusing heavily on the individuals committing these crimes and describing school shootings as a longstanding and problematic phenomenon, Trump positions gun violence as stemming from individuals and societal issues rather than from firearms themselves. His focus on the perpetrators shifts the blame away from recent gun control proposals, thus creating narrative that gun violence is caused by the actions of 'evil' individuals rather than systemic issues tied to gun access.

Negative associations extend to mental health as well, which Trump brings up multiple times, often accompanied by emotionally charged word choices. For example, his use of the phrase “violent and mentally deranged” when referring to individuals with mental illness paints a rather extreme picture of them, as it implies that having any level of mental struggles may

pose a tendency for violence. The use of the adjective “deranged” especially stresses that his intent may be to refer exclusively to those with the most severe illnesses posing a risk for violent behaviour:

- 3) We need to drastically change our approach to mental health. There are always so many warning signs, almost all of these disfigured minds share the same profile. (Trump 2022, 6:12-6:25)

The statement positions those with mental illnesses into a singular group and predicates as dangerous individuals. Their illness is not talked about as issue that needs to be solved but rather as individual feature which is underlined by the word ‘disfigured’ which suggest that there is something wrong them. This predication sets his later argument about placing mental patients in institutions.

At this point in the speech, Trump explicitly mentions Joe Biden and other Democrats, whom he attributes with irresponsibility and irrationality due to them spending “122 billion in so-called COVID relief funds to K through 12 schools, even while they were keeping many of our schools totally shut down” (Trump 2022, 10:25-10:40). He names this as a reason for “severely worsening the mental health challenge of many youth” (ibid.), implicitly positioning Biden and Democrats as a part of the school shooting problem. Trump’s statement constructs an image of politicians using valuable resources for the wrong purposes, effectively depicting them as responsible for the recent shootings. Combined with what was said about mental health, Trump implicitly suggests that Democrats are at least partly responsible for the increase in mass shootings.

Furthermore, Trump prominently invokes left-wing politics and associated concepts. Early on, he implies that gun control policies demanded in the aftermath of mass shootings are “pushed by the left” against the will of others, implying some sort of resistance. Later, Trump continues this characterization directly addressing Democrats and left-wing politics:

- 4) Whatever our differences may be on other issues, what on earth is stopping Democrats from immediately passing measures to ramp up school security? How many more tragedies will it take until they agree to set aside their far-left political agenda and do what is really needed and what actually works? This is not about virtue signalling and signing, this is about blaming your enemies, no, we don’t want to do that. (Trump 2022, 11:57-12:32)

Here, Trump references *virtue signalling*—a pejorative term referring to actions intended to express one’s views for approval or recognition, often associated with superficial

demonstrations of good character or social conscience (*OED*, s.v. ‘virtue signalling,’ n)—to characterize Democrats' actions as insincere and ineffective. By doing this, Trump ridicules their response to gun violence by suggesting that they prioritize symbolic gestures over meaningful solutions. On top of that, the apparent misspelling/mispronunciation of "virtue signalling" as "virtue cycling/signing" serves to trivialize Democratic actions, portraying them as ineffectual and disconnected from real issues and in the process, position Trump himself as a sceptic towards the effectiveness of their actions. Interestingly however, the very first sentence carries a somewhat ironic tone, considering that Trump talks about unity in the face of a tragedy in his speech, while heavily criticizing the Democrats for not doing enough at the same time.

To conclude, Trump’s nomination and predication strategies primarily serve to discredit gun control advocates and his political opponents. By using emotionally charged language, he qualitatively frames the opposition as ineffective or even opportunistic, contrasting them with the innocence and righteousness of the victims and his supporters. By constructing a strong moral binary between innocent victims and evil perpetrators, Trump’s nomination and predication strategies set the stage for his argumentation.

4.1.2 Argumentation & *topoi*

What is most notable about Trump’ argumentation is his tendency to employ many *topoi* at the same, though there is a clear distinction between ones functioning as they main conclusion rule and ones that support the main *topoi*. His main goals being to oppose gun control, unwise government spending and instead direct those funds to improving school security

In the segment where Trump mentions “a now familiar parade of cynical politicians seeking to exploit the tears of sobbing families to increase their own power and take away our constitutional rights” (2022, 4:11-4:29) invokes the *topos danger/threat*. His negative predication of politicians as exploitative sets up the argument and presents their policies as a threat the constitutional rights of the American people. Specifically, the conclusion is that because these policies and their advocates present a threat to the rights granted by the U.S Constitution, these policies should not be implemented. *Danger/threat topos* is invoked in his mental health discussion as well:

- 5) We need to drastically change our approach to mental health. There are always so many warning signs, almost all of these disfigured minds share the same profile. When people see something, whether on social media or in school, they need to

say something [...] And clearly we need to make it far easier to confine the violent and mentally deranged into mental institutions. (Trump 2022, 6:12-7:13)

Set up by the negative predication of the mentally ill, Trump's argument is that because the mentally ill always present a danger, confining them into institutions should be made easier. In a way, he does not advocate for helping but to instead push their threat away by institutionalizing these individuals.

When he argues against gun control policies, the main *topos* Trump invokes is the *topos of uselessness* by implying that "the various gun control policies being pushed by the left would have done nothing to prevent the horror that took place, absolutely nothing" (2022, 5:38-5:48). Trump negatively predicates gun control policies as completely ineffective, framing them as incapable of preventing mass shootings and setting up his argumentation. This framing supports his use of the *topos of uselessness*, where he argues that policies failing to prevent violence should not be enacted.

Same *topos* is invoked once again when Trump talks about government spending money on foreign ventures instead school security:

- 6) If the United States has \$40 billion to send to Ukraine, we should be able to do whatever it takes to keep our children safe at home. Thank you. That's true. That's true. We spent trillions in Iraq, trillions in Afghanistan, we got nothing. Before we nation build the rest of the world we should be building safe schools for our own children in our own nation, right. (Trump 2022, 9:42-10:18)

Trump invokes the *topos of uselessness* by arguing that past U.S. foreign spending, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, yielded no benefits which in turn implies that current funding for Ukraine is equally wasteful. He uses this argument to justify reallocating these funds toward school security, reinforcing the idea that ineffective policies should not be pursued. While primarily structured around the *topos of uselessness*, this argument also draws on the *topos of justice* by comparing Ukrainian aid and U.S. children's safety as equals, and the *topos of history* by using past wars as evidence of financial mismanagement.

In another argument related to misdirected funds, Trump invokes a slightly different *topos*:

- 7) Last year alone, Biden and congressional Democrats sent 122 billion in so-called COVID relief funds to K through 12 schools, even while they were keeping many of our schools totally shut down, no doubt, severely worsening the mental health challenge of many youth [...] **Congress should vote immediately to take back every penny of unused COVID relief money, take it back from the states and**

use that money to quickly establish impenetrable security at every school, all across our land. (Trump 2022, 10:25-11:10: bold added)

Because he demands the Congress to take back and redistribute the COVID funds they authorized into school security matters, Trump invokes the *topos of finances* by suggesting that because the COVID funds given to schools was wasted due the schools being closed, they are therefore considered financial losses and should be taken back for redistribution into school security.

Though not a very common occurrence in the speech in general, one instance of *history topos* is quite significant in terms of Trump's argumentation:

- 8) As many have noted inner city schools rarely have these kinds of mass shootings, I didn't know that until just recently. Think of that, they rarely have this problem despite being located in very tough neighborhoods, in many cases where there's tremendous levels of high crime and violence. They're much more dangerous outside the school than inside. The reason is that for decades, inner city schools have had much stronger security measures in place in the school itself, including metal detectors, and yes, armed guards. They had guns, armed guards". (Trump 2022, 11:18-11:52)

Because Trump suggests that the history of inner city having fewer shooting incidents despite often being located in crime-heavy neighbourhoods is a reason enough to consider stronger security measures for other schools as well. Also, he underlines the surprising nature of this fact by explicitly stating that he was unaware of it as well, thus adding a small amount of perspectivization to his argument.

On school security-related note, Trump again utilizes the *topos of finances* when argues for letting school personnel carry concealed firearms stating that "it would be so much better and **so much more effective even from a cost standpoint**" (Trump 2022, 12:37-13:23: bolding added). The bolded phrase invoking the *finances topos* functions more as a supporting *topos* rather than as the main argument to the main *topos* of usefulness, which argues that allowing the personnel concealed carry would be an advantageous decision in terms of improving school safety. To add further credibility to his argument for allowing concealed carry, Trump also employs the *topos of reality* when talks about gun-free zones:

- 9) Because there is no sign more inviting to a mass killer than a sign that declares a gun free zone, most dangerous place. I know it sounds good, and it really does, doesn't it sound wonderful? But it's not. And statistically, it's a total disaster. Gun free zone, they look at that sign and they say, "That's where I'm going." (Trump 2022, 13:24-13:46)

Trump specifically argues that while, the present reality and even statistics (e.g. *topos of numbers*) show that gun-free zones are not wise and present a danger those inside them should a shooter attack there. This statement could also be an argument against further gun laws due to Trump mentioning the fact that gun laws, though it is first and foremost an argument for allowing concealed carry. Of course, his negligence to provide any statistical numbers to support his claim dulls the impact of his claim somewhat.

4.1.3 Perspectivization

Beyond describing others, Trump carefully positions himself in the debate. His alignment with certain groups, distancing from others, and self-characterization all contribute to his rhetorical strategy, in addition to some extralinguistic factors.

As a first perspectivization-related method, Trump pulls out a paper at the 0:51 mark and reads out loud each victim's name and surname, with reading being also accompanied by the sound of a church bell. The result is a funeral-like event in which Trump serves as the priest honouring those who have died, with the convention turning to a church for a moment and truly emphasizing the moral purity of the victims. As for Trump himself, this strategy allows him to establish a moral authority over his opponents later in the speech. He also gets closer with the audience with use of collective pronouns "we" and "our" throughout his speech, like in the end of the Uvalde victim memorial part of the speech, which Trump concludes with the following statement:

- 10) As we mourn for so many beautiful victims, I know that everyone here joins me in praying for the families who are suddenly missing the brightest light in their lives. We see their agony, we ask God to ease their suffering and to heal their pain and together we grieve side by side as one great American family. Now is the time to find common ground. (Trump 2022, 3:43-4:11)

With this statement, Trump's perspective changes into that of a figure asking people to find common ground during times of crisis, especially with the phrase "one great American family". With his following statement about the politicians exploiting shootings to advance their own political agenda (2022, 4:11-4:46) Trump positions himself as a man standing for the victims whose suffering has been exploited, further emphasizing his moral righteousness and contrast to the other politicians using tragedy for their own gain.

As the speech takes place in a National Rifle Association convention, the audience is almost unequivocally on Trump's side. The framing of Democrats and gun control advocates as people exploiting the mass shooting tragedies and Trump himself aligning himself with the victims are the other key elements in establishing the moral binary of 'good and evil' built by the nomination and predication strategies. However, it may be considered somewhat ironic, if not even slightly hypocritical that while Trump accuses his opponents of exploiting the recent events for political power, he himself utilizes the Uvalde incident to speak against the gun control while also claiming to stand for its victims.

In terms of solutions to the shooting incidents, Trump's proposals help him assert himself as a pragmatic leader offering concrete solutions in lieu of just policies offered by the Democrats:

- 11) What we need now is a top to bottom security overhaul at schools all across our country. Every building should have a single point of entry. There should be strong exterior fencing, metal detectors, and the use of new technology to make sure that no unauthorized individual can ever enter the school with a weapon. (Trump 2022, 8:01-8:31)

The use of definitive statements and the offering of concrete solutions to the school security problems cast Trump in an authoritative role of a leader who seems to understand the gravity of the issues discussed and also attribute him as an action-oriented person willing to take decisive steps towards resolving the problem. When contrasted with Democrats' ineffective policies and their apparent inability to solve this issue, this perspectivization strategy positions Trump as the 'correct' alternative.

As final key perspectivization strategy, Trump also shifts discussion towards broader political decisions by contrasting the domestic security concerns with foreign spending:

- 12) This is not a matter of money, this is a matter of will. If the United States has \$40 billion to send to Ukraine, we should be able to do whatever it takes to keep our children safe at home. Thank you. That's true. That's true. We spent trillions in Iraq, trillions in Afghanistan, we got nothing. **Before we nation build the rest of the world we should be building safe schools for our own children in our own nation, right?"** (Trump 2022 9:40-10:18: bolding added)

Trump positions implicitly himself as advocate for American concerns first and foremost, which reinforces his alignment with the interests of his audience. By additionally drawing on the *topoi* of, *uselessness*, *justice*, and *history*, he constructs a broader argument that the government should prioritize American children. This framing also contributes to his

perspectivization strategy where he presents himself as a defender of U.S. interests against misplaced priorities. In addition to positioning Trump himself, bolded statement also insinuates that the current leadership of the United States prioritizes foreign spending over domestic and national security.

4.1.4 Mitigation/Intensification

With mitigation and intensification, Trump strengthens his arguments by amplifying or downplaying key issues laid on the foundation of his nomination, predication, and argumentation strategies.

The very beginning of the speech, for instance, includes subtle forms of intensification strategies, most notably in the form of adjectives bearing strong emotional connotations. While many of them appear to be similar to predication strategies, the main difference is these intensifying elements serve to amplify the qualities the predication strategies attribute to the topic in question. For instance, Trump amplifies the tragic nature of Uvalde by referring to it with emotionally loaded words:

- 13) This week citizens across this state and across this nation are filled with grief in the wake of the **heinous massacre** of Robb Elementary School in Uvalde. You know all about that and what a **horrible, horrible thing** it was to see it, to watch it, to hear about it. The **terrible murder** of 19 innocent children and two adult teachers, with many **badly injured**, was a **savage and barbaric atrocity** that shocks the conscience of every single American, **so horrible**. (Trump 2022, 0:01-0:36: bolding added)

As the Uvalde incident itself is already attributed as a tragedy, these specific examples act as supporting strategies that emphasize the tragic nature rather than attribute it and as such, they heighten the emotional impact of the speech with the audience. Similar intensification is also used when referring to the Uvalde gunman:

- 14) Each precious young soul that was taken is an **incomprehensible loss, literally not comprehensible**, stolen from us by a malice that no words can describe, sickness. The monster who committed this crime is **pure evil, pure cruelty, pure hatred, absolute pure hatred**. And while **those he slaughtered are now with God in heaven, he will be eternally damned to burn in the fires of hell**" (Trump 2022, 3:04-3:37: bolding added)

In addition to the emotionally-resonating word choices, Trump's repetition of certain phrases, like "pure" and "hatred" also acts as an intensifying strategy. The religious references present

in the reinforce the moral binary of the victims and the Uvalde gunman built by the nomination and predication strategies, which in turn compliment the funeral-like atmosphere created the by the perspectivization strategy of reading the victims' names.

In addition to increasing the emotional appeal of the speech, intensification is also used to strengthen his criticism towards his opponents. The segment where Trump transitions into criticising the political opponents for exploiting the Uvalde incident for their own purposes (2022, 3:44-6:03) features a couple of instances. For example, the phrase “a now familiar parade of cynical politicians” used to criticize the gun control advocates intensifies the criticism Trump directs at them. More specifically, the word “parade” itself is metaphorical, suggesting that their actions are performative rather than genuine. The addition of “now familiar” further amplifies the notion that this is a recurring and predictable pattern. This is accompanied by terms like “grotesque effort” and “extreme political agenda”, which Trump uses to describe the efforts of gun control advocacy. The next sentence features another intensification that expands upon the previous ones:

- 15) **Even more repulsive** is their rush to shift blame away from the villains who commit acts of mass violence and to place that blame onto the shoulders of millions of peaceful law-abiding citizens who belong to organizations such as our wonderful NRA. (Trump 2022 4:47-5:08: bolding added)

The bolded phrase strengthens the criticism of the previous sentence by not only labelling the initial actions of these politicians as negative but escalating their behaviour to an even more extreme level. The comparative structure "even more" suggests a worsening moral offense, implying that their attempt to shift blame is beyond mere political opportunism, as something especially detestable. He even extends this to then-president Biden, indicating that Biden should be ashamed for his statements:

- 16) When Joe Biden blamed the gun lobby, he was talking about Americans like you. And along with countless other Democrats this week, he was **shamefully suggesting** that Republicans are somehow okay with letting school shootings happen, they're not okay with it. (Trump 2022, 5:09-5:27: bolding added)

These strategies heighten the emotional response from the audience and serve to polarize the discourse further by depicting these politicians as progressively more reprehensible. All of this supports the Trump's goals of demonizing his opponents, downplaying their policies and building a 'good versus evil' framework.

Moving on, the intensifications also serve the purpose of reinforcing his arguments. One of the closing statements of his speech contains the well-known statement about “the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun”, originally credited to the former NRA vice president Wayne LaPierre. While summarizing everything he has said in his speech, Trump legitimizes his stance, perhaps fallaciously, by putting a well-known statement at the end of his speech. As expected, NRA crowd gives considerable applause, and the inclusion of the statement is most likely a deliberate choice from Trump, meant to maximize the support of the NRA audience who are at least somewhat familiar with the statement. Interestingly however, Trump immediately backpedals by emphatically asking and replying to the audience “have you ever heard that? No, you’ve never heard that” (2022, 14:06-14:08). This may be intended as a mitigation strategy that is meant to pre-emptively soften the possible critique he could receive for it.

As a matter of fact, the mitigation strategies are less prevalent in the speech, and most often used to downplay particular issues. Most notable of this occurs when Trump mentions how the gun policies “being pushed by the left would have done **nothing** to prevent the horror that took place, **absolutely nothing**” (2022, 5:39-5:48: bolding added). The definite term “absolutely” and repeated use of “nothing” diminish the futility of the gun policies, underscoring that they failed completely in preventing what happened in Uvalde. This in turn makes his arguments of concrete action more credible and persuasive.

As an alternative to downplaying his opponents, Trump also employs a mitigation strategy that functions very differently from the rest:

- 17) **While we don’t yet know enough about this week’s killing**, we know there are many things we must do. We need to drastically change our approach to mental health. There are always so many warning signs, almost all of these disfigured minds share the same profile. (Trump 2022, 6:03-6:25: bolding added)

The bolded phrase is an interesting example of mitigation that implicitly functions as a way to deflect some of the impending criticism some of his statements may receive. To be more specific, the phrase allows him the possibility of saying things that may later prove to be erroneous or prove otherwise controversial after more information about the incident is released. Should he be criticised for using incorrect information by his detractors, he can post-justify his statements by referring to the bolded statement.

4.2 Joe Biden

This subsection analyses how the discursive strategies are used in president Joe Biden's speech that took place in the White House and was most likely a filmed in a controlled environment for a nationwide broadcast.

4.2.1 Nomination & Predication

Biden's speech constructs specific representations of key figures in the gun control debate. The beginning stages of Biden's speech establish a sympathetic tone. He does this by beginning with a memorial of the victims of the then-recent Buffalo and Uvalde shootings, identifying them through their roles or relationships. For Uvalde, he refers to the victims as 'third and fourth graders and two teachers,' while for Buffalo, he highlights familial connections with terms such as "a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, a sibling". The familial tone of the Buffalo segment builds on the characterization of the Uvalde victims as 'innocent' and extends to "the hundreds of family members who were broken, and whose lives will never be the same" (Biden 2022, 1:30-1:35). The use of adjective 'broken' especially emphasizes the disruptive effect of both the Buffalo and Uvalde shootings on the nation and on the lives of those affected.

In addition to their victims, the very locations of the shootings (e.g. grocery stores, schools, 'everyday places') are also brought up, which he describes to have become "killing fields, battlefields," (Biden 2022, 1:04-1:08) thus attributing features of violence and war-like atrocities to the places the events took place. To add to these, he also mentions the placenames of past shooting incidents and talks about the nature of the U.S gun violence:

18) After Columbine, after Sandy Hook, after Charleston, after Orlando, after Las Vegas, after Parkland, nothing has been done. This time, that can't be true. This time, we must actually do something. The issue we face is one of conscience and common sense" (Biden 2022, 1:46-2:07)

Biden is essentially defining the problem of gun violence in moral and rational terms. More specifically, "conscience" evokes a moral obligation, while "common sense" frames it as a matter of logic rather than political ideology. This is a form of predication because he ascribes specific qualities of moral and rational dimensions to the issue. Additionally, it also subtly and implicitly delegitimizes opposing views, suggesting that those who do not support action on gun control are either lacking conscience or ignoring common sense.

The mass shooters, on the other hand, are not named nor described individually and Biden's general rhetoric does not demonize them as individuals very much. However, Biden does allude to their young age and their presumably easy access to firearms, like when he talks about the Sandy Hook school shooter having grown in a "house full of guns" and having too easy access to them (2022, 7:09-7:16) or how the Uvalde shooter was able to purchase two assault rifles at the age of 18 after previously having their sister refuse to do so (2022, 8:37-8:56). They are often framed as young, unstable, or in crisis, like Biden's reference of red flag laws that could have prevented past shootings in Fort Hood, Texas and Parkland, Florida (2022, 8:15-8:37). By focusing less on the shooters and their features, the reason for mass shooting is framed around systemic failures rather than solely on the individuals themselves.

As a contrast, guns themselves are the objects to blame for the frequent mass shootings in Biden's speech. When talking about the role of guns, he gives them some element of agency through his statements:

- 19) According to new data just released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, guns are the No. 1 killer of children in the United States of America. The No. 1 killer. More than car accidents, more than cancer. Over the last two decades, more school-age children have died from guns than on-duty police officers and active-duty military combined. Think about that. More kids than on-duty cops killed by guns. More kids than soldiers killed by guns. For God's sake. (Biden 2022, 3:29-4:07)

This extract is a particularly a good example of Biden's nomination and predication strategies giving guns agency and attributing them with destructive qualities, making them dangerous and harmful objects. Instead of focusing on the shooters as the primary agents of violence, he shifts the focus to the guns themselves, framing them as the active perpetrators of harm. By predicating guns as the 'No. 1 killer of children', Biden shifts the agency of violence away from the individuals who commit shootings and towards the weapons themselves, making the guns seem like the primary agents of death. To add to this agency, he specifically names models like AK-47s and AR-15s:

- 20) Nine categories of semiautomatic weapons were included in that ban, like AK-47s and AR-15s. And in the 10 years it was law, mass shootings went down. (Biden 2022, 5:26-5:38)

By doing this, Biden predicates these weapons as uniquely dangerous and legitimizes their threat in the context of the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban, which legitimizes the threat

these kinds of weapons pose, compared to merely referring to them generally as ‘assault weapons’.

He describes proposed solutions for gun violence (e.g. banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, expanding background checks, raising the minimum age for weapon purchases, strengthening “red flag” and safe storage laws and repeal the gun manufacturers’ liability protection) as “rational, common-sense measures”. By attributing them as such, Biden makes these proposals come off as sensible solutions and as results of the rational thought put into them which is generally viewed as preferable to more hastily put together or emotionally-driven solutions, though he does not speculate about their actual effectiveness.

As Biden brings up the Second Amendment rights and gun ownership, a focus on systemic failures and mistakes continues. For instance, Biden’s statements about how “Second Amendment, like all other rights, is not absolute” (2022, 2:36-2:40) and rights granted by it are not unlimited” call into question its unconditional nature, and reframe its status as a right that must have some sort of limits despite its constitutionality. Gun owners themselves are not depicted in an overtly negative manner by Biden, although he does make an implicit distinction between “responsible gun owners” and “gun owners”:

21) For so many of you at home, I want to be very clear. This is not about taking away anyone’s guns. It’s not about vilifying gun owners. In fact, we believe we should be treating responsible gun owners as an example of how every gun owner should behave. (Biden 2022, 2:08-2:27)

The detached predication of ‘responsible’ separates and makes gun owners considered responsible as the ideal, portraying them as an example for other gun owners to aspire to. The positive predication subtly positions irresponsible gun owners as the problem, without directly vilifying them. While it is possible that he merely wants to emphasize responsibility with firearms, splitting gun owners into two categories this way does convey an implicit message about how Biden views the majority of gun owners in general, whether intentional or not.

However, the gun industry itself is not left without a mention either. Biden gives special attention to the liability immunity, which prevents them from being sued should their products be used. His statement of gun manufacturing being “the only industry in this country that has that kind of immunity” (Biden 2022, 9:44-9:47) emphasizes their exceptional role and protection and also carries an implicit question about why the gun industry is given such protection. While there is no explicit mention made, this may be an implicit allusion to the

military industrial complex by Biden and how its unchecked power contributes to the ever-increasing shooting incidents.

When moving on to the phenomenon of mental health crisis, Biden mentions it as a major contributing factor to gun violence, though not as the sole reason. Instead, Biden chooses to highlight the severity of the mental struggles and the preventive measures needed by narrating that "even before the pandemic, young people were already hurting [and] there's a serious youth mental health crisis in this country" (Biden 2022, 10:52-11:00). The role of U.S youth and how they are especially affected by mental illnesses is given special attention. Biden predicates the mental health of youth as a 'crisis,' underscoring the urgency of addressing the emotional and psychological toll of gun violence, even before the pandemic worsened the situation. Later, he advocates for more mental services to be made available, which reflect his stance of mental health playing a considerable part in frequent gun violence incidents:

- 22) We must provide more school counselors; more school nurses; more mental health services for students and for teachers. More people volunteering as mentors to help young people succeed. More privacy protection and resources to keep kids safe from the harms of social media. (Biden 2022, 11:10-11:25)

In addition to improving mental health services, Biden also nominates and frames social media as a threat to the youth's mental health struggles. This is mostly likely a reference to the fact that both Buffalo and Uvalde gunmen demonstrated threatening behaviour on social media platforms, as mentioned in the Background section. By advocating for more mental health services, Biden predicates a systemic approach to preventing gun violence, emphasizing the importance of early intervention and support. When combined with his lack of mentioning anything specific about the shooters, this strategy diminishes role and agency of the shooters and instead constructs a framework that stresses the role of systemic failures and inadequate support systems as the main reasons for the shootings in the first place.

When Biden brings up the members of the Republican party, he talks about them in a very critical manner. This is most apparent in the segment where he talks about needing a majority support in the Senate in order to get the preventive measures prepared by the Congress into effect:

- 23) But, as we know, in order to get anything done in the Senate, we need a minimum of 10 Republican senators. I support the bipartisan efforts that include a small group of Democrats and Republican senators trying to find a way. But my God.

The fact that the majority of the Senate Republicans don't want any of these proposals even to be debated or come up for a vote. (Biden 2022, 12:34-13:00)

This extract is a continuation for Biden's 'rationality versus irrationality' framework. Here, the Republican majority is framed as the irrational actor in the gun violence issue, unwilling to budge from their views and stances despite the urgency of the situation at hand. By portraying Senate Republicans as unwilling to engage in dialogue or compromise, Biden predicates them as obstructionists in the face of crisis facing the nation, casting them as irrational and obstructive to necessary reform. At the same time though, he does not mention any specific senators, which aligns with his strategy of not focusing on individuals.

In general, Biden's nomination and predication strategies frame the gun violence issue as 'rationality versus irrationality' - type of situation. The main goal is to relate to the audience that the failures of the systems responsible for monitoring and enforcing gun control are mainly to blame for the occurrence of mass shootings in the larger picture. Despite openly questioning and criticising these parties, like the gun industry and the Republican senators, Biden's word choices used to name and describe them are not particularly strong or derogatory. By not resulting to such choices, he keeps his tone appropriate and official which feeds into his framework of common sense and rationality.

4.2.2 Argumentation & *topoi*

Biden's argumentative goals being to argue for stricter gun control measures which he states to be vital for preventing future mass shootings and to improve the accessibility of mental health services, which he also deems equally important to preventing future incidents. Towards this end, he employs a variety of *topoi* to persuade those listening to support these goals, with some functioning in supporting roles to more dominant ones.

The first *topos* he invokes is the *topos of danger/threat*. This particular *topos* is invoked in various parts of the speech, with the first instance occurring in his account about "everyday places that have become killing fields, battlefields". By doing this, Biden creates a sense of crisis and urgency about the situation by suggesting that places usually deemed safe are no longer such, thus laying the groundwork for his arguments to help solve the gun violence problem. Other examples of *danger/threat topos* include his statement about how the guns are the number one leading cause of death for children and how more kids than on-duty cops and soldiers. These statements clearly convey a message to the listeners that the current events

pose an urgent threat and therefore, it should be handled with as quickly and efficiently as possible. Same kind of urgency narrative could also be argued to be present when Biden talks about the “serious youth mental health crisis in this country” (2022, 10:56-11:00). While he does not linger on the topic too extensively, the warning about the mental health crisis could also be invoking the *topos of danger/threat* as it implies a threat to the U.S youth and in the long term, a threat to the coming U.S generations. The final instance of *danger/threat topos* occurs near the ending stages of his speech when he warns the public about other mass shootings:

24) Since Uvalde, just over a week ago, there have been 20 other mass shootings in America, each with four or more people killed or injured, including yesterday, at a hospital in Tulsa, Okla. A shooter deliberately targeted a surgeon using an assault weapon he bought just a few hours before his rampage that left a surgeon, another doctor, a receptionist and a patient dead, and many more injured. That doesn't count the carnage we see every single day that doesn't make the headlines. (Biden 2022, 13:06-13:44)

This particular instance of *danger/threat topos* is somewhat different from the preceding one as Biden suggests that while then-recent Buffalo and Uvalde shootings have garnered the most attention, a worrying amount of other gun violence occurs with alarming frequency, with some of it going unnoticed by the general public. Ultimately the strategy behind this may be to convey a message that more dangerous incidents occur than people realize, which feeds into Biden's general 'crisis' narrative. The main overall purpose of Biden's utilization of the *topos of danger/threat* appears to be persuade the listeners about extreme and severe danger gun violence poses to domestic safety and therefore stress the dire need for stricter legislative efforts to lessen its impact.

While not a frequent occurrence in the speech, Biden does invoke the *topos of numbers*, albeit without directly mentioning concrete numbers. This occurs when brings up the data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to which guns are the number one killer of children in the U.S (2022, 3:30-3:39). While no hard data mentioned, this factual statement serves perhaps to add to the narrative constructed by the *danger/threat topos*,

In addition to the framing built by nomination and predication, Biden emphasizes the individual responsibility in his arguments regarding storing guns:

25) I also believe we should have safe storage laws, and personal liability for not locking up your gun. The shooter in Sandy Hook came from a home full of guns. They were too easy to access [...] If you own a weapon, you have a responsibility

to secure it. Every responsible gun owner agrees. To make sure no one else can have access to it. To lock it up. To have trigger locks. And if you don't, and something bad happens, you should be held responsible.” (Biden 2022, 7:02-7:45)

By using the Sandy Hook shooting to illustrate his point, he invokes the *topos of responsibility*. Specifically, his conclusion is that because guns in the shootings have been too easy to access, the ones responsible for keeping them haphazardly stored should be held accountable. A similar conclusion is drawn later when Biden argues for revoking the gun industry's liability immunity. The *topos of responsibility*, with his mere suggestion that the whole immunity should be repealed speaking to the fact that they are exasperating the gun violence problems because they are “the only industry in this country that has that kind of immunity” (Biden 2022, 9:44-9:47). His conclusion is that because gun industry is indirectly responsible due their guns being used in the shootings, they are at least partly involved in the matter and should also be held accountable. Both arguments build on the nomination framing of systemic failure and guns themselves being central to the ever-increasing amount of gun violence.

Another less frequent yet significant *topos* is the *topos of reality* which Biden invokes in his description about the reality of the present-day United States:

26) Imagine what it's like for children who experience this kind of trauma every day in school, on the streets, in communities all across America. Imagine what it's like for so many parents to hug their children goodbye in the morning, not sure whether they'll come back home. Unfortunately, too many people don't have to imagine that at all. (Biden 2022, 10:30-10:50)

While initially seeming like a continuation of the narrative constructed by the *danger/threat topos*, the present tense of the statement emphasizes that Biden is talking the current situation (e.g. reality). The way he also points out that many do not have experience the situations he describes is also a strong indicator that he is very much talking about current reality. Like in the instances of the *danger/threat topos*, the statement invoking the *topos of reality* aims to relate to the listeners that because reality is as it is (e.g. the frequent mass shootings create trauma and create feelings of insecurity), the stricter gun laws are a necessity.

Moving back to other more common *topoi*, one of the more significant arguments Biden makes in his speech involves the mention of the previous federal-level firearm law which he brings up to presumably reinforce his arguments for stricter gun laws. Specifically, he brings up the effects Federal Assault Weapons ban of 1994 on the overall number of mass shootings

Biden invokes the *topos of history* as he advocates for stricter gun control by using comparable historical situation as example to reinforce his argument:

- 27) It all means this: We should reinstate the assault weapons ban on high-capacity magazines that we passed in 1994 with bipartisan support in Congress and the support of law enforcement. Nine categories of semiautomatic weapons were included in that ban, like AK-47s and AR-15s. And in the 10 years it was law, mass shootings went down. But after Republicans let the law expire in 2004, and those weapons were allowed to be sold again, mass shootings tripled. (Biden 2022, 5:14-5:48)

In addition to the *topos of history*, the argument also presents a causal relationship between mass shootings and firearm legislation: if no gun control policies exist or existing ones are not strict enough, the end result will be more tragedies. Other instances of *history topos* occur when he uses past incidents to argue for safe storage and red flag laws by stating that the Sandy Hook and Fort Hood shootings could have been prevented with such laws, with Biden outright declaring that “red flag laws could have stopped both these shooters” (2022, 8:34-8:38). Another major instance of *history topos* could be argued to occur when Biden’s uses the knowledge from the Uvalde incident to provide weight for his arguments, despite the it having occurred only a few days prior to his speech. The young age of the shooter is used as an argument to persuade the listeners about the necessity of raising the minimum age for assault weapon purchase:

- 28) In Uvalde, the shooter was 17 when he asked his sister to buy him an assault weapon, knowing he’d be denied because he was too young to purchase one himself. She refused. But as soon as he turned 18, he purchased two assault weapons for himself [...] If we can’t ban assault weapons, as we should, we must at least raise the age to be able to purchase one to 21. (Biden 2022, 8:39-9:14)

The way Biden utilizes the *topos of history* revolves around providing the listeners with actual evidence about why his arguments should be taken into consideration. In hindsight, it is difficult to determine whether or not Biden’s proposes would have had the effect of preventing or outright stopping those particular incidents he claims but nevertheless, his motivations for using them is rather clear.

4.2.3 Perspectivization

Much of Biden's perspectivization involves him bringing himself closer to the issues at hand, whether it be mourning the victims or endorsing his and his family's history in gun politics. Biden starts his speech by narrating his and his wife's visit to the Arlington National Cemetery in the state of Virginia, which houses the graves of soldiers who served in the United States military. For context, the Memorial Day is an American holiday that takes place annually on the last Monday of May and is dedicated to the remembrance of the deceased men and women of military:

29) On Memorial Day this past Monday, Jill and I visited Arlington National Cemetery. As we enter those hallowed grounds, we saw rows and rows of crosses among the rows of headstones with other emblems of belief honoring those who paid the ultimate price in battlefields around the world. The day before we visited Uvalde, Uvalde, Texas. In front of Robb Elementary School we stood before 21 crosses for 19 third and fourth graders and two teachers, on each cross a name and nearby a photo of each victim that Jill and I reached out to touch. (Biden 2022, 0:01-0:46)

By utilizing this strategy at the very beginning of his speech, Biden is aiming to come off as emphatic to the American people and especially for those who have lost loved ones in mass shootings by explicitly bringing up his own involvement. It also carries an implicit message; while Biden's status as the President of the United States almost demands to show commemorate fallen soldiers, he also takes time to take part in mourning the tragedies of the general population and thus, makes appear more sympathetic. Additionally, by first recounting the Memorial Day-visit and then moving onto the story of visiting Uvalde, Biden frames the Uvalde victims in a position similar to soldiers who have died in service for their country. With victims of Buffalo incident, a similar tone continues but with a shift to a family perspective:

30) We stood in such a place just 12 days before, across from a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, memorializing 10 fellow Americans — a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, gone forever. At both places, we spent hours with hundreds of family members who were broken, and whose lives will never be the same. (Biden 2022, 1:11-1:35)

This plays well into Biden's strategy of expressing his own family's involvement like he did in the very beginning of his speech and appearing as empathetic to those suffering in the

aftermath of both shooting. Related to this ‘family perspective’, it also occurs when Biden discusses the red flag laws:

31) Nineteen states and the District of Columbia have red flag laws. The Delaware law is named after my son, Attorney General Beau Biden. (Biden 2022, 8:10-8:15)

Continuing a similar trend, Biden brings himself closer to the issues he discusses by mentioning his family’s involvement in the gun control procedure, this time involving his own children. At the same time though, this mention about seems like a ‘throw-away line’ as he does not mention or add anything else about his son’s involvement in their eponymous law, which is rather different from the extensive recounts of his and wife’s involvement. When talking about his own personal involvement that does not involve his family, Biden uses definitive statement “I just told you what I’d do” (2022, 11:34-11:36), thus appearing as leader that has a clear vision about what has to be done. On the other hand, the line “I’ve been in this fight for a long time. I know how hard it is, but I’ll never give up” (Biden 2022, 13:45-13:51) brings up his experience with gun legislation, suggesting that despite knowing how tough the fight for stricter gun control is and will be, he will not stand idly by. This is further reinforced by his argumentation regarding the effectiveness of the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban, which also plays into his self-representation as a determined leader with experience about the subject matter. His speech also contains a small story regarding the AR-15 assault rifle platform which also plays into how he has talked about gun in the speech in general. How he came across this account from the inventor of the AR-15 is left unclear, however:

32) A few years ago, the family of the inventor of the AR-15 said he would have been horrified to know his design was being used to slaughter children and other innocent lives instead of being used as a military weapon on the battlefields, as it was designed. That’s what it was designed for. (Biden 2022, 5:51-6:10)

This story may not involve Biden himself, but it nevertheless reinforces his staunch anti-gun, viewing them as objects that should be used for defending righteous causes, and not for attacking innocent in mass shootings. However, his statement can be come across as somewhat ironic because of United States’ alleged involvement in war crimes and other questionable military ventures over the years.

To mirror the beginning of his speech, Biden ends his speech with similar recounting of his and his wife’s involvement, recounting a meeting with a murdered teacher’s sister and children, attending a Catholic mass afterwards and then meeting a grandmother whose

granddaughter died in Uvalde, and who personally handed them a letter asking Biden to “make the changes that are necessary to prevent this happening again”, among other things (2022, 14:40-16:05). As he then shortly concludes his speech, Biden seeks to end on a sympathetic note and coming off as a strong leader that is on the victim’s side first and foremost, and shall take the measures necessary for preventing similar tragedies from occurring again.

4.2.4 Mitigation/Intensification

With the use of intensification and mitigation, emotional weight of Biden’s statements shifts throughout his speech, as he amplifies urgency of the situation or softens certain points. The intensification strategies mostly focus on heightening the emotional resonance his nomination and predication strategies build, while mitigation strategies are used to temper the expectations for his proposed policies.

A notable element of the speech is Biden’s repetition of the children’s victimhood in the mass shootings, which he does throughout his speech. This repetition appeals to the commonly held idea that children should be protected from harm and thus, functions as an intensification strategy-related element that strengthens the speech’s emotional impact. A particular example regarding the psychological trauma caused by the Uvalde incident especially underlines the emotional appeal of his speech:

33) Imagine being that **little** girl, that **brave little** girl in Uvalde, who smeared blood off her murdered friend’s body onto her own face, to lie still among the corpses in her classroom and **pretend she was dead in order to stay alive**. (Biden 2022, 10:04-10:23: bolding added)

This account of a survivor’s experience strongly appeals to the audience’s sympathy. The combination of the adjectives “little” and “brave” functions as an intensification strategy by contrasting the girl’s courage with her vulnerability, which complements the nomination and predication strategies in establishing sympathy for the victims. The last bolded phrase juxtaposes the concepts of life and death, and relates how the little girl was forced to act dead to not actually die.

When it comes to the gun industry, Biden calls out their “special protections”, specifically mentioning their protection from being sued for liability should their products cause “death and destruction” (Biden 2022, 9:35-9:43). To illustrate his point, he mirrors gun industry with

the tobacco industry by asking to imagine “if the tobacco industry had been immune from being sued, where we’d be today.” (Biden 2022, 9:47-9:52). With this comparison to tobacco, a substance widely known to be harmful to one’s health, Biden intensifies the predication of gun industry as an irresponsible actor and further frames their liability immunity. as an alarming issue by suggesting that their products’ negative effects on peoples’ wellbeing or the right to live, on are comparable to that of tobacco industry’s. As he does not bring up particular points of criticism about the ‘big tobacco’, this point mostly serves to strengthen the point made about liability immunity of gun industries by associating them with another ‘negative’ industry.

As Biden moves onto talking about the actual legislative process of getting his proposed measures, he seems optimistic about the Congress where many of the proposals presented in the speech have proceeded to the planning stage. However, his somewhat pessimistic statement about the Republican-majority Senate tones down some of that optimism:

34) But, as we know, in order to get anything done in the Senate, we need a minimum of 10 Republican senators. I support the bipartisan efforts that include a small group of Democrats and Republican senators trying to find a way. But my God. The fact that the majority of the Senate Republicans don’t want any of these proposals even to be debated or come up for a vote, **I find unconscionable**. We can’t fail the American people **again**. (Biden 2022, 12:34-13:05: bolding added)

The bolded phrase amplifies the rational approach his speech takes which is apparent from his word choice of ‘unconscionable’ as he involves himself in a perspectivization-like manner and makes it clear how much he fails to understand the logic behind the action of Senate Republicans. In addition, the bolded word ‘again’ is used to emphasize this fact, and it also discreetly implies that these Republicans are failing the nation once again, which ties back to Biden’s argument mentioning the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban.

When it comes to mitigation strategies, Biden seeks to either soften his statements or lessen some of the expectations about his proposed anti-gun violence measures. As an example of the former, one sentence contained in is particularly interesting:

35) For so many of you at home, I want to be very clear. **This is not about taking away anyone’s guns. It’s not about vilifying gun owners**. In fact, we believe we should be treating responsible gun owners as an example of how every gun owner should behave.” (Biden 2022, 2:09-2:27: bolding added)

The bolded sentences are mostly likely intended to soften the impact of his upcoming criticism of gun ownership by explicitly messaging his intentions of not taking people's legal property, not demonizing gun owners that are not responsible for the shootings he brings up. It takes out some of the edge off from the criticism, even though his implicit division of gun owners and 'responsible' gun owners still. When it comes to mitigating the expectations of the results his policies will have, there two major instances with the first preceding his gun control policies' introduction and second one coming after the mention of his mental health and school policies:

36) I know that we can't prevent every tragedy, but here's what I believe we have to do. (Biden 2022, 4:18-4:23)

37) This unity agenda won't fully heal the wounded souls, but it will help. It matters. (Biden 2022, 11:25-11:33)

The possible motivation behind these mitigations is to pre-emptively turn down any criticism from his detractors and opponents that Biden being too optimistic or misleading about the actual real-life impact his policies. What is also shared between the two statements is how Biden's following words after the coordinator 'but' return the somewhat pessimistic tone set by the mitigating words back into more optimistic one.

5 Discussion

This section will use the findings made in the Analysis section to talk about the third research question of this thesis:

3. How do the differences in their discursive strategy and *topoi* use reflect conservative and liberal ideologies, and what are the broader implications for the gun control debate?

Both Trump and Biden shaped the public perception of gun control in very different ways in their speeches. For example, the framework they constructed with their discursive strategy use was very different from each other. Trump's use of hyperbolic, emotionally charged rhetoric (e.g., "monsters," "tyranny," "exploitation") in addition to the extralinguistic factors (e.g. bell toll) made his speech emotionally stronger in comparison to Biden, who utilized measured yet emotional appeals which relied on victims' stories, expressing his and his family's involvement in the situation. Both speakers also added a moral dimension to gun control discussion, with Trump emphasizing a moral binary where the evil perpetrators and exploitative politicians were contrasted with innocent victims and law-abiding citizens, while Biden emphasized legislative action as a moral responsibility on the behalf on the victims. On that note, Biden's moral responsibility framing resembles the "*warrant of the dead*" rhetoric often used to argue for gun control (Rood 2017, 48). In this kind rhetoric, "the living are called on to act and the dead are invoked as justification for that action (ibid.), thus functioning in a *topos*-like manner. The emotional black-and-white rhetoric of Trump made him come off as more passionate and involved when compared to Biden, whose less passionate and rational rhetoric was more official in tone despite him wielding more practical influence on gun control than Trump due to his position as the active president.

Both Trump and Biden sought to appear to appear as strong and determined leaders with solutions to the gun violence. The ones proposed by Trump were overall more pragmatic and action-oriented while also opposing stricter legislation, taking a more reactive and defensive stance against gun control. For instance, his strategies constructed framework where the gun control advocates were presented as a threat to the Second Amendment rights. Moreover, his proposed solutions of arming the school personnel and increasing emphasized defence from an outsider's attack. In contrast, Biden's proposed solutions were more proactive and relied

on indirect, preventive measures by legislative means instead, like for example repealing the liability of gun manufacturers.

As for how the framing constructed by Trump and Biden reflected the conservative and liberal ideologies, their argumentative goals were the clearest indicator of their ideological standing in terms of gun control. To dive further into specific elements, Trump's staunch resistance towards stricter gun laws reflects the conservative belief of guns as "the individual's form of protection in a hostile world" (Lakoff 2002, 199) and how they are not key problem regarding mass shootings. Furthermore, his method of shifting the attention away from firearms themselves and onto individuals by highlighting the mental illness aspect of the Uvalde gunman and other shooters, for instance, corresponds to the Republican tendency to blame to individual features, like their mental health, in cases of mass shootings (Yousaf 2017, 2772). His negative categorization and delegitimization of gun control advocates, on the other hand, correlates with Lakoff's (2002) conservative moral categories regarding "anti-ideal citizens" where gun control advocates are specifically named "since they would take the guns away from those who need them to protect themselves and their families both from criminals and from possible government tyranny" (171–172). One final conservatively minded aspect of his speech was evident from his endorsement for school personnel's concealed carry, which aligns with conservative perception of guns as means to reduce risks and control the situation, which befits "conservative ideologies emphasizing personal control" (Shepherd and Kay 2017). This was further exemplified with Trump's "good guy with a gun"-comment which from a conservative viewpoint, "can bring an orderly end to what would otherwise be a deadly and chaotic situation" (Shepherd and Kay 2017, 18).

Similarly, Biden's method of emphasizing the role of guns over individual shooters echoed the liberal support for gun control as guns contribute to a cycle of violence and how their very presence evokes scenarios in which guns are used (Lakoff 2002, 199). Also, his general support of measures restricting gun ownership corresponds to the Democrats' view on these restrictions as sensible due to the destabilizing and society-threatening nature of firearms (Joslyn 2020, 49). To U.S liberals, guns represent chaos and unpredictability, which makes them "see gun control as a preferred solution to the perceived unpredictability of gun violence, perhaps due to [their] relative comfort with government control" (Shepherd and Kay 2017,18). The liberal beliefs of strict gun control and guns as instruments of chaos were rather evident in Biden's speech, such as when he proposed implementing a ban on assault weapons

and high-capacity magazines and basing his argument on 1994 Assault Weapons Ban's success in tempering mass shootings.

One final common factor for both speeches was that they somewhat oversimplified the very complex nature of gun control in different ways, which in turn showcased the ideological divide between Republicans and Democrats. It underlines tendency of legislative solutions to gun violence falling into two camps: pro-gun control legislation that limits access to guns, such as increasing the number of background checks and prohibiting military-style long guns, and pro-gun rights legislation that makes gun more available to people, such as permitting concealed carry and allowing teachers to carry weapons in schools (Losee et al. 2021, 89).

By focusing on the shooters and their mental health as the main cause of gun violence, Trump's speech downplays the issue of guns being too easy to access and overemphasizes mental health as the cause of mass shootings, despite research asserting that few perpetrators of mass shootings have been found to have medical histories pertaining to serious mental illnesses (Knoll and Annas 2016, 91). Therefore, Trump's proposed tactic of locking up the mentally ill in order to prevent future shootings may not actually solve the gun violence problem and instead result in more negative perception of those with mental illnesses.

Conversely, Biden's speech does not address challenges in enforcement and implementation of gun laws and focuses much on advocating for their implementation by stressing how important their implementation is and how presumably effective they are. By doing this, Biden somewhat overstates the effectiveness of legislation but at the same time, neglected to address the difficulties of enforcing these laws. As mentioned in the background section, the immense number of firearms in circulation combined with authorities' limited access to gun sales information makes enforcing difficult so stricter legislation may not also be the answer to the gun violence problem.

Donald Trump and Joe Biden have very different approaches to how they talk about their chosen topics. The passionate, emotionally resonant rhetoric of Trump and the rationally-oriented and collected rhetoric of Biden is a contrast akin to that of fire and ice. The study of their discursive strategies and *topoi* use showcases the deep polarization present in modern-day politics of the United States. While such a phenomenon is nothing new by now and it appears to deepen day by day in the United States, the topic of gun control itself certainly is a political subject which can have terrifying consequences if left unattended. However, discussion surrounding is almost as volatile as the gun violence problem itself.

6 Conclusion

Even though many political issues can have severe consequences, the fact that gun control includes weapons designed to kill makes it stand out from other issues. At the same time, the deep cultural significance of guns is something that only those who have grown around them can truly understand, even though it may appear as incomprehensible, outlandish or even barbaric at times for those spectating from the outside.

Presidential figures like Donald Trump and Joe Biden are the most prominent and visible part of politics, yet they only give a surface-level view into gun control. As an acknowledgement about the limitations of this study, the qualitative approach is influenced by subjective assessments which means that some aspects may still be left out despite author's best efforts. Also, the limited dataset composed of two public speeches do not portray the gun control and discussion surrounding it in the most comprehensive manner. Therefore, more linguistic study on how gun control discourse is affected by ideological, societal, and cultural norms on a larger scale is needed in order to capture full extent of gun control discourse.

Future research could be conducted on how the government-affiliated institutions, such as conservatively- and liberally-oriented think tanks or alternatively, gun control/gun rights groups like National Rifle Association and Everytown for Gun Safety, shape the discourse through their publications and overall messaging. This could include the study of discursive strategies on a larger scale, perhaps employing the discourse-historical approach in its full extent to get best possible perspective on how the gun control discourse has evolved over a longer period time, such during the time-gap between the two most recent federal-level gun policies, the 1994 and the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. Alternatively, a smaller-scale study akin to this one could be conducted to examine how other influential gun rights or gun control activist groups employ discursive strategies in their political messaging.

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8 Appendices

Appendix 1: List of abbreviations and tables

List of abbreviations

CDA = Critical Discourse Analysis

DHA = Discourse-historical Approach

BSCA = Bipartisan Safer Communities Act

NRA = National Rifle Association

US = United States

List of tables

1: List of topoi adapted from Discourse-historical Approach by Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak (Meyer and Wodak, 2001, 74–77)

Appendix 2: Finnish summary

1 Johdanto

Vaikka Yhdysvaltain aselainsäädäntöön liittyvät seikat ovat ennen kaikkea sisäpoliittinen asia, siellä tapahtuvat joukkoampumiset ja muut aseilla tehdyt rikokset saavat usein myös runsaasti kansainvälistä huomiota. Siinä missä monissa Euroopan maissa aseita pidetään ensisijaisesti metsästys- ja itsepuolustusvälineinä, Yhdysvalloissa ne näyttäytyvät myös symbolisesti vapauden, turvallisuuden ja itsenäisyyden arvojen ilmentyminä. Vuosi 2022 valittiin tutkielman keskiöksi, koska tuona vuonna Yhdysvaltojen aselakisäädännössä tapahtui merkittävä muutos, kun ensimmäinen liittovaltiotason aselakialoite lähes 30 vuoteen, eli Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, astui voimaan kesäkuussa. Aiemmin toukokuussa New Yorkin osavaltion Buffalossa sekä Teksasin osavaltion Uvaldessa tapahtuneiden kahden joukkoammuskelun ja niistä syntyneen keskustelun on mainittu vaikuttaneen merkittävästi aselakialoitteen syntyyn ja läpimenoon republikaanienemmistöisessä Yhdysvaltain kongressissa. Silloiset ex-presidentti Donald Trump ja presidentti Joe Bidenin olivat

kumpikin vaikuttaneet merkittävästi asevalvontaan liittyviin asioihin, jonka vuoksi kaksi heidän vuonna 2022 pitämää puhetta valittiin tutkimusmateriaaleiksi.

Tutkimuskysymyksinä olivat:

1. Millä tavoin Donald Trump ja Joe Biden käyttivät diskursiivisia strategioita puheissaan?
2. Millaisia *topoksia* he käyttivät argumentoidakseen asehallintaan liittyvien asioiden puolesta (e.g. perustuslain toisen lisäyksen suomat oikeudet, kouluturvallisuus) ja millä tavoin?
3. Kuinka diskursiivisten strategioiden ja *toposten* käytön eroavaisuudet heijastavat konservatiivisia sekä liberaaleja ideologioita ja mitä laajempia vaikutuksia niillä on aselakikeskusteluun?

Tutkielman päätarkoituksena ei ole antaa kaikkea kattavaa kuvausta Yhdysvaltojen asepolitiikasta tai selittää mikä olisi oikea tapa ratkaista siihen liittyvät ongelmat, vaan kuvata millaisia strategioita Donald Trumpin ja Joe Bidenin kaltaiset merkittävät poliittiset vaikuttajat käyttävät lausunnoissaan, sekä edistää Yhdysvaltain aselakidiskurssista tehtävää kielellistä tutkimusta.

2 Tausta ja teoriakehys

Yhdysvaltojen aselakeihin liittyvässä poliittisessä keskustelussa on monia sosiopoliittisia sekä kulttuurisia tekijöitä vaikuttavat sen luonteeseen niin suorasti kuin epäsuorastikin, myös nykypäivänä. Keskustelun perustana toimii Yhdysvaltain perustuslain toinen lisäys, jonka mukaan hyvin säännelty miliisi on tarpeellinen osavaltion turvallisuuden kannalta eikä ihmisten oikeuteen kantaa aseita tulla kajoamaan. Lisäyksen vanhanaikainen kieliasu ja siitä johtuva monitulkintaisuus ovat aiheuttaneet eriäviä tulkintoja, joita ovat esimerkiksi yksilötulkinta, kollektiivitulkinta sekä kansalaisyhteiskuntatulkinta. Yksilötulkinnan mukaan oikeus kantaa aseita on yksilöoikeus, jota perustellaan sillä, että yksilöiden odotetaan toimivan miliisissä kantaen omia aseitaan. Kollektiivitulkinta puolestaan painottaa, että lisäyksen tarkoituksena auttaa osavaltioiden miliisien ylläpitoa ja välttää antamasta liittovaltiolle yksinoikeutta aseisiin eikä luoda koko väestön kattavaa yleistä ja harkitsematonta aseenkanto-oikeutta. Kahden edellä mainitun eräänlaisena välimuotona

toimiva kansalaisyhteiskunta puolestaan tulkitsee lisäystä siten, että jokaisella kansalaisella on oikeus kantaa asetta yleisen turvallisuuden nimissä.

Perustuslain toisen lisäyksen oikeanlainen tulkinta on aiheuttanut ongelmia myös korkeimmassa, josta merkittävimminä tapaus esimerkkeinä toimivat vuoden 1939 *United States vs. Miller* ja vuoden 2008 *District of Columbia vs. Heller*, joista ensimmäisen mukaan lisäys oli kollektiivinen oikeus, kun taas jälkimmäisen tapauksen mukaan aseenkanto-oikeus on ennen kaikkea yksilöoikeus. Perinteisesti Yhdysvaltain konservatiiviset liikkeet, joista näkyvimpänä toimii republikaanipuolue, ovat olleet löyhempien aselakien puolella, kun taas liberaalit liikkeet, kuten demokraattipuolue, ovat olleet tiukempien aselakien puolella. Aselakikeskustelussa on läsnä myös ajatus valtion tyranniasta, jonka mukaan kansalaisilla tulee olla oikeus omistaa ja kantaa aseita, jotta he voivat tarvittaessa puolustautua mielivaltaiselta valtiojohtolta.

Asehallintaan liittyvä keskustelu on ollut kautta aikain eräs Yhdysvaltain suurimmista poliittisista puheenaiheista. Republikaanien mielestä perustuslain toisen lisäyksen suomat oikeudet ovat oikeuksia, joita ei tulisi rajoittaa, kun taas demokraatit suosivat tiukempaa aselainsäädäntöä. Joukkoampumisten juurisyiden suhteen puolueet ovat myös hyvin kahtiajakautuneita: Republikaanit usein esittävät ampujan yksilöllisiä piirteitä, kuten mielenterveysongelmia, ampumisten juurisyiksi, kun taas demokraattien mielestä liian löysä lainsäädäntö on merkittävin syy joukkoampumisten syntyyn.

Liittovaltion aselaki velvoittaa ostajat käymään taustojen kartoituksen, jolla pyritään saamaan selville mahdollisia aseiden myynnin estäviä tekijöitä. Aseiden yksityistä myyntiä eivät kuitenkaan vastaavat taustojen tarkistamaan liittyvät velvoitteet koske. Aseiden suuren määrän ja aseomistajien vastahakoisuuden vuoksi niiden kokonaisvaltainen kieltäminen, kuten esimerkiksi monissa muissa kehittyneissä maissa on tehty, olisi käytännössä mahdotonta. Tämän lisäksi aselakien tehokasta valvontaa vaikeuttavat myös valvonnasta vastaavien viranomaisten heikko vaikutusvalta ja aseiden myyntiin liittyvän tiedon puute.

Aselakikeskustelun ohella puhutaan myös asekulttuurista, jolla tarkemmin viitataan aseiden merkittävään kulttuuriseen asemaan, joka alkoi korostua Yhdysvaltojen sisällissodan jälkeisen aseiden tehotuotannon takia. Asekulttuuri ja ajatus liittovaltion vastuusta aseidenhallinnassa alkoivat muodostua 1920-luvun lukuisten jengisotien myötä. Tätä kulttuurista ja symbolista asemaa ovat myös edesauttaneet esimerkiksi lännenelokuvat ja muu populaarikulttuuri, joiden sankarit käyttävät aseita oikeuden, tasa-arvon ja suojelemisen nimissä. Asevastustajien ja

asemyönteisten ryhmien välillä vallitsee selvä jakolinja, jossa konservatiivinen republikaanipuolue puolustaa laajaa ase- ja kanto-oikeutta, kun taas demokraattipuolue kannattaa tiukempia rajoituksia näihin oikeuksiin. Lisäksi asevalvontaan liittyvää keskustelua monimutkaistaa Yhdysvaltain sotateollinen kompleksi, johon kuuluu puolustusteollisuuden ja poliittisen päätöksenteon välisiä kytköksiä.

Ex-presidentti Donald Trump ja presidentti Joe Biden edustavat asepolitiikassa vastakkaisia linjoja. Trumpin suhtautuminen asevalvontaan on vaihdellut: vaikka hän omalla presidenttikautenaan ajoittain kannatti rajoituksia, hän vetäytyi niistä National Rifle Associationin (NRA) painostuksesta. Ensimmäisen presidenttikautensa jälkeen hän on profiloitunut vahvana ase-oikeuksien puolestapuhujana. Joe Biden on puolestaan poliittisen uransa aikana kannattanut asevalvontaa pitkään ja ajanut presidenttikaudellaan laajoja reformeja, mukaan lukien taustatarkastusten tiukennukset ja rynnäkköaseiden kieltämistä.

Vuonna 2022 tapahtuneet Buffalon ja Uvalden joukkoampumiset toimivat tutkimuksen taustalla keskeisinä kontekstuaalisina tapahtumina. Buffalon hyökkäyksen motiivit perustuivat rasistiseen ideologiaan ja internetissä tapahtuneeseen radikalisaatioon, kun taas Uvalden ampujan motiiveiksi on epäilty maineen ja kuuluisuuden hakemista. Molempien tapausten yhteydessä nousi esiin keskustelua mielenterveyden, sosiaalisen median ja poliittisten toimien suhteesta aseväkivaltaa, jonka on uskottu vaikuttaneen ampumisten jälkeen säädetyn Bipartisan Safer Communities Act-lakipaketin sisältöön.

Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) oli ensimmäinen liittovaltiotason asevalvontalaki lähes kolmeen vuosikymmeneen. BSCA:ta edeltänyt liittovaltiotason lakialoite oli vuoden 1994 Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act, joka tunnetaan myös nimellä Federal Assault Weapons Ban, joka kielsi rynnäkköaseiden ja suurikapasiteettisten lippaiden myynnin ja sisälsi muun muassa taustatarkastusten laajennuksia alle 21-vuotiaille, tukea kouluturvallisuuteen ja mielenterveyspalveluihin sekä rahoitusmekanismeja osavaltioiden "red flag"-laeille, joilla pyritään ennaltaehkäisevästi puuttumaan mahdollisiin aseväkivaltatapauksiin. Lisäksi BSCA sisälsi lakeja, jotka estävät lähisuhdeväkivallasta tuomittuja henkilöitä ostamasta aseita.

Tutkimuksen teoreettisena viitekehyksenä toimi kriittinen diskurssianalyysi (Critical Discourse Analysis, CDA), jonka tarkoituksena on tarkastella kielen ja vallan suhteita yhteiskunnallisissa konteksteissa. Kriittinen diskurssianalyysi otettiin tutkielman keskeisimmäksi lähestymistavaksi, koska sen tarjoaman painotus valta-asemien ja

ideologioiden tutkimiseen tulkittiin soveltuvan hyvin kahden merkittävän puheiden eri rakenneosien syvällisempään analyysiin. Kriittiselle diskurssianalyysille keskeisiä käsitteitä ovat konteksti, kehystys (framing) sekä valtarakenteiden ja ideologioiden kielellinen ilmentyminen. Täydentävinä analyttisinä työkaluina käytettävät diskursiiviset strategiat ja topokset täydennettiin Martin Reisiglin ja Ruth Wodakin diskurssihistoriallisesta lähestymistavasta (discourse-historical approach, DHA), joka itsessään on jatkumoa kriittisestä diskurssianalyysistä.

Reisiglin ja Wodakin diskurssihistoriallinen lähestymistapa pitää sisällään kaikkiaan viisi erilaista diskursiivista strategiaa: nimitys (nomination), predikaatio (predication), argumentaatio (argumentation), perspektivisaatio (perspectivization) sekä voimistaminen/lieventäminen (intensification/mitigation). Nimitysstrategialla tarkoitetaan sitä, miten kirjoittaja tai puhuja nimeää tai viittaa puhuttaviin asioihin. Merkittävään tästä tekee se, että kahdella eri sanalla, jotka viittaavat samaan asiaan voivat olla tunnemerkitykseltään hyvin erilaisia, kuten esimerkiksi sotilaaseen viittaaminen terroristina tai vapaustaistelijana, ja tämä voi vaikuttaa tai muokata sitä, miten lukija tai kuulija ajattelee tai asennoituu tietyn asian suhteen. Toinen eli predikaatiostrategia puolestaan tarkoittaa puhuttavien asioiden kuvailemista sekä millaisia ominaisuuksia niihin liitetään. Nämä ominaisuudet voivat olla joko positiivisia tai negatiivisia, ja voivat siten vaikuttaa miten puhuja tai kirjoittaja muokkaa. Kolmas strategia eli argumentaatio keskittyy ennen kaikkea kuulijan tai lukijan suostuttelemiseen jonkin asian puolesta. Neljäntenä strategiana toimiva perspektivisaatio puolestaan viittaa niihin ilmaisuihin, joita puhuja tai kirjoittaja käyttää ilmaistaakseen osallisuutensa tiettyyn asiaan tai päinvastoin etäännyttääkseen itsensä jostakin asiasta. Viimeisenä toimiva strategia eli voimistaminen/lieventäminen toimivat eräänlaisena tukistrategioina muille diskursiivisille strategioille. Toisena analyttisenä työkaluna toimivat Reisiglin ja Wodakin teoreettisen viitekehyksen 14 *toposta*, jotka liittyvät argumentaatioon. Tarkemmin sanottuna topokset ovat eräänlaisia 'päätelmäsääntöjä', joilla kuulijalle perustellaan, miksi argumentin mukainen toiminta on oikein. *Topoksia* ei ole itsessään tarkoitettu suorittamaan mitään toimintaa, vaan pikemmin suostuttelemaan kuulija toiminnan oikeellisuudesta tai tarpeellisuudesta.

Yhdysvaltojen liittyvää diskurssia on aiemmin tutkittu erityisesti sosiologisesta näkökulmasta, mutta myös kielitieteellisiä ja retorisia tutkimuksia on julkaistu. Diskursiivisten strategioiden käyttöä on tutkittu muun muassa hallinnollisen vastuun välttämiseen liittyvissä tapauksissa.

Kuitenkin nimenomaan Reisiglin ja Wodakin diskursiivisia strategioita hyödyntäviä tutkimuksia Yhdysvaltain asepolitiikasta on vain vähän.

3 Aineisto ja menetelmät

Tutkimusmateriaaleina käytettiin kahta Youtubesta otettua tallennetta Donald Trumpin ja Joe Bidenin puheista. Erilaisia ase oikeus- ja -valvontaryhmiä sekä Trumpin presidenttikausiin vaikuttaneita ajatushautomoita harkittiin myös tutkimusmateriaalin lähteiksi, mutta ne jätettiin pois tutkimuksen rajoitetun laajuuden vuoksi. Trumpin National Rifle Associationin kokouksessa pitämä puheen päivämäärä oli 27. toukokuuta 2022, kun taas Biden piti puheen 2. kesäkuuta 2022 Valkoisessa Talossa. Merkittävin ero puheiden välillä oli, että Trump piti puheensa yleisön edessä, kun taas Bidenilla ei ollut yleisöä vaan puhe oli kuvattu hallituissa olosuhteissa. Tallenteiden analyysin tukena käytettiin lisäksi puheista tehtyjä kirjallisia transkriptioita New York Timesin sekä Rev.comin nettisivuilta. Analyysi tehtiin Microsoftin Word-tiedostoon, jonne transkriptiot liitettiin ja eri diskursiiviset strategiat sekä *topokset* merkattiin ja korostettiin eri väreillä. Reisiglin ja Wodakin diskurssihistoriallista lähestymistapaa jouduttiin mukauttamaan tutkielman tarkoitusperiin siten, koska diskurssihistoriallista lähestymistapaa käytetään yleensä suurempien datamäärien analysoimiseen pidemmällä aikavälillä. Mukauttaminen tehtiin niin, että vain diskursiiviset strategiat ja *topokset* otettiin puheiden analyysin työkaluiksi ja niiden tarkoissa määritelmässä joustettiin hieman.

4. Analyysi ja keskustelu

Analyysissa kävi ilmi, että vastakkaisista ideologioistaan huolimatta Trumpin ja Biden diskursiivisten strategioiden käytössä oli jonkin verran yhteneväisyyksiä. Eroavaisuuksien suhteen merkittävin yksittäinen seikka oli, että Trumpin ja Bidenin nimitys- ja predikaatiostrategioiden käytön suhteen Trump käytti huomattavasti tunnepitoisempia nimityksiä asioista ja näin ollen loi vaikutelman itsestään vaikutelman. Biden taas päinvastaisesti käytti hyvin hillittyjä ilmaisuja, ja loi näin itsestään virallisemmän, joskin vähemmän intohimoisen vaikutelman. Keskeisimmät samankaltaisuudet Bidenin ja Trumpin diskursiivisten strategioiden sekä *toposten* käytössä olivat esimerkiksi, että kumpikin käytti ja eriävistä ratkaisuehdotuksista huolimatta kumpikin pyrki perspektivisaatiostrategioillaan luomaan itsestään kuvan vahvana johtajana, jolla on tarjota tehokkaita ratkaisuja

aseväkivaltaongelmaan. Argumentaation suhteen kummankin puheessa oli havaittavissa samojen *toposten* käyttöä, usein hieman eroavilla tavoilla.

Lisäksi kumpikin puhe heijasti vahvasti republikaanien ja demokraattien perinteisiä näkemyksiä aselainsäädäntöön liittyen, joista selkeimpinä esimerkkeinä toimivat Trumpin vahva aselakivastainen kanta ja Bidenin tiukempia aselakeja puoltavat kannanotot. Toinen yhdistävä tekijä oli, että sekä Trump että Biden ylyksinkertaistivat aselakikeskustelua, kukin omalla tavallaan: Trumpin vahva painotus mielenterveysongelmien roolin suhteen ei toisaalta huomionnut ollenkaan aseiden laajan saatavuuden luomia ongelmia ja toisaalta leimaa mielenterveysongelmista kärsiviä. Bidenin tiukempia aselakeja puoltava puhe ei puolestaan huomionnut aselakien valvontaan liittyviä haasteita. Tutkimuksen tuloksista voidaan päätellä, että asevalvontaan liittyvät poliittiset puheenvuorot heijastavat vahvasti Yhdysvalloissa jo jonkin aikaa ollutta poliittista polarisaatiota ja kahtiajakautuneisuutta.

5. Lopuksi

Tutkielman rajoitetusta otannasta johtuen täysin kattavan kuvan saaminen Yhdysvaltain asevalvonnannasta ei ollut mahdollista saada, jonka vuoksi lisää kielellistä tutkimusta liittyen sosiologisten ja ideologisten tekijöiden vaikutuksesta Yhdysvaltain asevalvontadiskurssiin tarvitaan tulevaisuudessa. Tuleviksi diskursiivisten strategioiden tutkimuskohteiksi ehdotetaan Yhdysvaltain erilaisia ajatushautomaita, kuten Heritage Foundation ja Center for American Progress, sekä aseoikeus ja -valvontaryhmiä, kuten National Rifle Association ja Everytown for Gun Safety, jotta asevalvontadiskurssista saataisiin entistä kattavampi ja tarkempi yleiskuva.