

Nationalist Rhetoric in State of the State Addresses -
Text Analyses of California and Texas

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Introduction

When introducing myself in classes and at work, when we share who we are and where we're from I always lead with being from Washington state. I often identify myself very closely with the state and city I was born in, and when talking with folks from other states how we present ourselves and interpret each other is, to some degree, through the lens of not our shared identity as people in the United States, but our distinct identities as being from different cities and states within the country. National identity is constructed by states, leaders, and other important figures and institutions, so the same must be true of individual states as well. States, however, are not entirely independent but instead part of a broader national infrastructure and hierarchy. So, states on the one hand construct their own unique identity to distinguish themselves from other states, but also must function within the national identity framework of the United States as a whole. To investigate this, a comparative case study is in order, but before getting to that comparison there must be a common understanding of what exactly nationalism and national identity are and how they come to be.

Theoretical Basis

Nationalism isn't a political orientation as it is often framed in recent mainstream political contexts. It is instead a neutral tool that can be used by folks of any political orientation to construct a shared identity to socially and politically unite around. National identity requires, among other things, solidified borders both on a map and in a more theoretical space between those who live inside versus outside those borders. If there was no difference between "insiders" and "outsiders," the border would be essentially meaningless. Nationalism also relies on constructing a shared history between those it considers insiders, and this history must go back earlier than the actual establishment of the current borders. There has to be some sort of timeless

state of being, a sense that the community now has also existed previously in some form and people around now are carrying on the legacy of this nebulous past. Most often, these sorts of identities and constructs are discussed in the context of nation-states, but that is not the only space where this sort of identity formation can occur. It can also be hard to consider in more concrete terms without any sort of examples of the literal actions and documents that construct these identities. Luckily, presidential State of the Union and state-level executive State of the State addresses can illustrate the construction in general and on these different scales.

As a practical illustration of nationalist identity construction, an easy pull on the national level is the State of the Union delivered every year by the president. In the state-level context, every governor across the country also delivers their own State of the State (or Commonwealth) address at least every other year. These speeches work to lay out the goals the governor has for the state over the coming year, serving as a time to draw together people throughout the state by discussing their shared problems, hopes, and identity as citizens of that state. It can be a perfect encapsulation of how national identity is formed in political rhetoric, creating a shared identity between people who will likely never even see each other. Instead of drawing on the history of the entire country, however, these states draw on their own histories, creating interesting overlaps and unique elements of state versus national identity and how each state sees itself both independently from and in relation to other states in the union. Although they do draw on unique historical moments and figures for their state, all of these moments still point out a fundamental contradiction of nationalism as a concept that is also obvious in the similarities between the states - nationalism is based on pointing out a fundamental difference between “us” and “them,” but the way these governors use history still points to the comedically overlapping traits they claim as exclusively “ours.” If both states and the US as a whole all claim that specific historical

moments are evidence of their unique creativity, energy, or determination, then there really is no difference between any of them.

Methodology

State and Speech Selection

State of the State addresses follow similar structures and goals regardless of the state in question, they happen on a regular schedule, and they are likely one of the most watched/read/covered speeches a governor makes each year. They are incredibly important for setting the tone for the legislative session, and help a governor either introduce themselves at the start of their term or tout their victories from the previous year(s). This creates a regular, highly structured speech centered on political unity and the idea of progress, setting the stage for regular examples of nation- and state-based identity formation in a nationalist framework.

Initially this was going to be a look at State of the State addresses across five regions between 1980 and 2023, but while many states do have transcripts of State of the State addresses archived either with the state directly or with a university, most of them have not been digitized at all. While there are transcripts accessible online going back to around 2000 for most of these states, the narrower window in time that this presents poses a problem in itself. Nationalist and political rhetoric doesn't often change so rapidly, so the narrower time would likely present fewer changes than a wider window. Ultimately, I am favoring the longer timeline with a narrower region, which will allow for deeper analysis of the common language used, how history has been called upon in different ways, and similarities and differences across states that have seen vast changes in the last 40 or so years in their political and demographic landscapes.

Based on both historical and political significance of the states and the digital availability of the addresses in the first place, I honed in on California and Texas as the points of comparison.

As of the July 2022 census data publication, the population of California is 39,029,342 and that of Texas is 30,029,572, and in the 2022 election they had 55 and 38 electoral votes respectively. In the 43 year period this paper covers, California had a Republican governor for 24 years and a Democratic governor for the other 19 years.¹ Texas had a Republican governor for 35 years, and a Democrat as governor for the remaining 8 years in that same 43 year period.²

	California	Texas
Population	39,029,342	30,029,572
Electoral votes	55	38
2020 presidential election results	Biden (D) 63.5% Trump (R) 34.3%	Biden (D) 46.5% Trump (R) 52.1%
2022 governor election results	Newsom (D) 59% Dahle (R) 41%	O'Rourke (D) 44% Abbott (R) 55%
Governor's parties, 1980-2023	Democrat – 19 years Republican – 24 years	Democrat – 8 years Republican – 35 years

Both states were formally introduced to the union in the mid-1800s (only five years apart from each other, in 1845 and 1850), and both had been Spanish-held territories before being brought into the United States through a combination of purchases and warfare against Mexico and Mexican citizens living in those regions. Both states have also been major forces in several economic fields, like agriculture, energy, engineering, and technology, and those last two fields in particular have become especially important in the US economy in the period—1980 to 2023—this paper investigates. Leaders in each of these states in the past several decades, even just the last few years, have been big players in national politics, and in the past few years there

¹ “Former Governors - California,” National Governors Association (National Governors Association), accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.nga.org/former-governors/california/>.

² “Former Governors - Texas,” National Governors Association (National Governors Association), accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.nga.org/former-governors/texas/>.

has also been increasingly explicit and aggressive competition between the two states, with governors Gavin Newsom (CA) and Gregg Abbott (TX) repeatedly calling each other and each other's states out for criticism by name. Given the political importance of these states on a national level and overlap in their state histories, Texas and California are relevant both individually and in a comparative context.

Speech Sourcing and Voyant Tools

Both states have State of the State addresses archived and available online going back several decades. California has this speech every year, as it requires in their State Constitution, and the transcripts of these speeches are available through the California State Library on their Governor's Gallery website.³ In Texas, the State of the State Address is delivered every two years, and they have all been archived and made available online as either scanned pages or text documents with the Legislative Reference Library of Texas.⁴ For distance reading, I compiled these addresses and uploaded them as individual and combined corpuses to Voyant Tools. Before creating these corpuses on Voyant, I copied over the transcript of just the speech content to a document organized by year and separated visually when a new governor entered office. This was done to remove things like headers on California's Governor's Gallery website and to formal, procedural writing that is ever present on formal Legislative Session documents that are in Texas' Legislative Reference Library. This would lower the likelihood of these often repeated procedural, unimportant, and/or unrelated parts of the text skewing results or throwing off my search for close reading.

After working through the data in the combined corpus as presented without filtering anything, I selected a set of thirteen terms to search for (along with any variants of them, such as

³ <https://governors.library.ca.gov/34-Jbrown.html>

⁴ <https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/governors/searchProc.cfm>

plurals) that were relatively common across both documents. The table below shows what those terms were and the total number of times each word and any variants showed up. Using these

Term	Appearances with variants	Term	Appearances with variants
nation	324	America	187
future	304	states	163
better	240	crime	134
world	222	past	126
local	217	community	113
protect	212	border	109
challenge	201		

results, I used the “Context” tool on Voyant to search through the documents to find relevant passages that use terms like these, which I figured (mostly correctly, I think) would serve as good signifiers of language and passages that somehow define national and state character or identity. The passages that I selected in this weeding out process with the “Context” tool are the ones I went with for close reading, as it pointed me in the direction of specific places where identity-related language was being used. In this search, I also found specific historical moments and figures that were repeatedly named in either Texas or California speeches, so in the corpuses made up of a single state’s speeches I also searched for those terms (i.e. Sam Houston for Texas and Gold Rush for California) to ensure I caught those for close reading as well.

Content of the Paper

First is a section on the findings of the combined corpus, showing the relative frequencies of the terms listed previously and analysis of how these terms are used in select passages to position their states relative to other states, outside countries, and the US. This is where some of

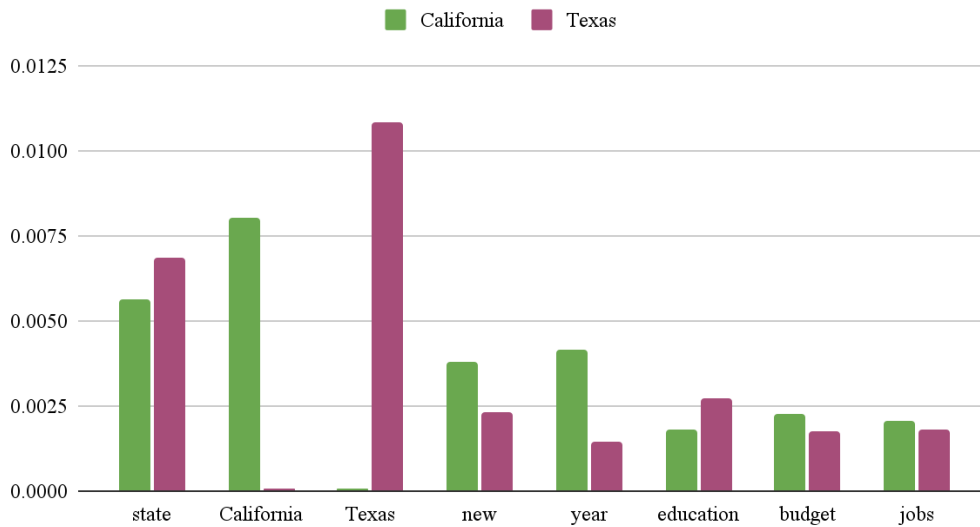
the contradictions of nationalist rhetoric first appear, with each state using the same tactics to position themselves as leaders/winners in the same contexts. The governors also have to contend with their position as inherently part of a shared American identity and structure of power. The following section shows how California and Texas State of the State addresses uniquely call on their own histories as states to establish an identity that is somewhat separate from the broader United States national identity. Most importantly, it illustrates the constructed, vague, and often overlapping elements of supposedly unique elements of Californian and Texan identity. These traits that are framed as central to their states' identities often overlap with each other, and are vague enough that they also overlap with broader national identity, simply attributed to the state instead. The conclusion draws together these themes and places them in the context of today's hyper-visible and competitive politics on the part of governors, who now have a higher profile than ever before as public figures while being less and less likely to use that as a stepping stone to pursue the presidency from.

Comparison Corpus and Similarities Between Texas and California

At first when pulling up the Voyant Tools combined corpus,⁵ words and phrases that first appear as most common across the two sets combined are rather predictable, with the five most common words being “California,” “Texas,” “state,” “year,” and “new.” Other common words are expected categories, like “education,” “jobs,” and “budget.” Although there was some difference between the frequency of those terms across the two sets of speeches, the frequency rates of those eight terms were somewhat comparable (see the figure below), other than the name

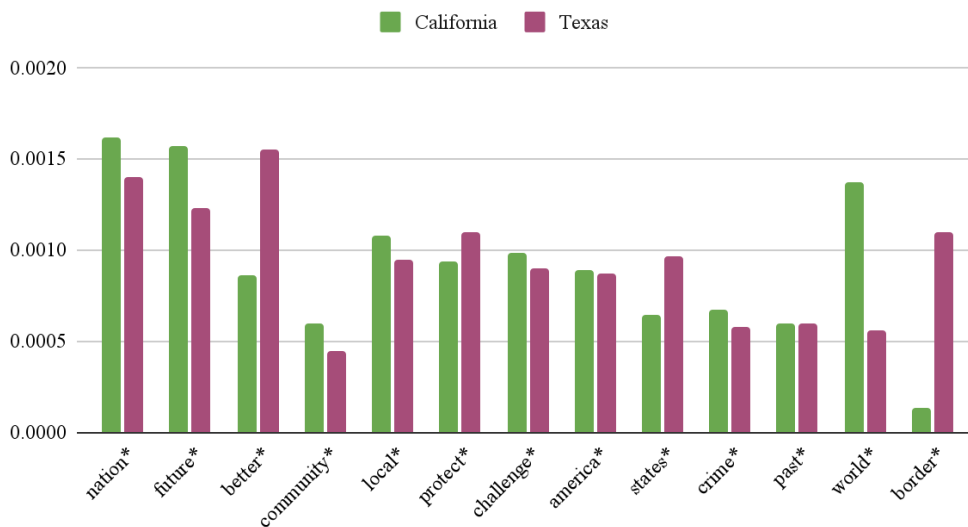
⁵ Stéfán Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, *Voyant Tools*, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://voyant-tools.org/?panels=corpusterm%2Creader%2Cdocumentterms%2Cphrases%2Ccontexts&corpus=4f34cbea3317204b60bd82fc1551b0cb>.

Relative Frequency of terms in corpus



of the other state of course. While this initial search came up with results that were rather straightforward, searching the 13 terms that were listed in the introduction yielded much more interesting results. Below is a bar graph with those thirteen terms between the two corpora, which already draws attention to differences between California and Texas speeches before even getting to the close reading.

Relative Frequency of terms in corpus



Specifically, the massive difference between the frequency of “border” and “world” between the two states is quite remarkable. This draws attention to different political focuses between the two states in this period, and although that political difference is interesting in some ways, the close reading shows that it is largely centered on policy rather than state identity. It is worth exploring in the future, but in the focus on state and national identity there are other terms and passages more worth exploring. This is also true of local and community, which seemed like very promising terms but often came up in more specific policy discussions, particularly in education, policing, and healthcare. While some terms did not pan out very well for close reading, a few other commonalities emerged between the documents following other search terms.

Leaders, Challengers of the Nation

One of the most common threads between the two sets of speeches is framing the state as a leader of the United States more broadly, in two different contexts. Either the state is so far ahead of others in a specific field that they are leading other states/the US as a whole down the right path, or the state is pursuing a policy that directly challenges policies and practices of the federal government, acting as challengers leading the charge against a wayward state bureaucracy. Although both states do this quite often, Texas in particular has pursued the challenger end of this continuum. This trend emerges both in the context of specific policy fields, or in broader, more idealistic and theoretical spaces. Although this has especially emerged as a trend in the last 20 years—particularly in the context of technological innovation and industry—there are still some examples from the earlier end of my timeline, especially in California. In 1986, the governor proclaimed: “Fellow Californians, we share the honor of living in the best state in the greatest nation in the only world we know. Together, we have brought

America's frontier back to California – and we brought California back to the future.”⁶ This quote clearly creates a hierarchy that favors state over national identity, with California not only bringing itself “back to the future,” but leading America “back to the frontier” of innovation and discovery in doing so. This then emphasizes both the independent functioning of California on its own and the role it plays as a leader in the United States as a whole.

In 2007, Arnold Schwarzenegger went even further, framing California as an independent leader that also happens to be a part of the United States, stating, “I believe that together not only can we lead California into the future...we can show the nation and the world how to get there. We can do this because we have the economic strength, the population, the technological force of a nation-state. We are the modern equivalent of the ancient city states of Athens and Sparta. California has the ideas of Athens and the power of Sparta.”⁷ Leading with just California, disconnected from the United States in any way, asserts its independent development and existence, he even literally refers to California as essentially its own “nation-state.” The only role that the United States plays in this statement is to be led, alongside other nations, by California, not be involved in any sort of exchange like the previous passage. And, by stating California has the “ideas of Athens and the power of Sparta” he is giving Californians a more fundamental, transcendent identity and past that is not limited by the literal history of the state or even the country overall.

This rhetorical trick is not unique to California, but can also be found in Texas speeches. In 2013, Rick Perry stated that “The people running some other states are actually pretty smart, and they see what we’ve been doing. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, you all should

⁶ George Deukmejian, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 9, 1986), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_35-Deukmejian04.html

⁷ Arnold Schwarzenegger, “State of the State Address,” (speech Sacramento, CA, January 9, 2007), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_38-schwarzenegger4.html

be flattered,” and listed the different states and governors who had pursued education, tax, and welfare policies that Texas had already put in place.⁸ Interestingly, this example doesn’t even include discussion of leading the nation as a whole, but only other states that, at the time, had similarly conservative governors in office. This also asserts an identity and existence independent from the United States, simply by leaving it as an entity out of the story entirely, more concerned with working with and alongside other states as equally independent entities.

Texas has also leaned more into the rebel or challenger narrative, still emphasizing their role as a leader, but this time a leader of an opposition to the federal government. In 2011, Rick Perry stated that, “we affirm the principle of state sovereignty and proclaim without reservation that Texans can run Texas better than bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. Where Washington encroaches upon the rights of states, this state will push back with resolve and the full force of the law.”⁹ In this case, Perry is still emphasizing Texas’ role as a leader within the country, notably by saying that while DC is encroaching on “states,” Texas is the sole “state” that is pushing back against the federal government. This, then, makes Texas appear as a leader of a movement towards sovereignty, the one state that will inspire others to do the same. The specific use of “encroaches” and calling out Washington DC as a location also emphasizes the borders and space that separate Texans and DC bureaucrats from each other, as if there is no overlap between them whatsoever because they’re clearly so distant.

Competition at Home

Similarly to how governors position the state as leaders in the nation and the world, Texas and California governors throughout the period in question often discussed their state as being in

⁸ Rick Perry, “State of the State,” in House Journal of the Regular Session of the Eighty-Third Legislature, (speech, Austin, TX, January 29, 2013), Legislative Reference Library of Texas, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/Rick%20Perry/2013/SOS_Perry_2013.pdf

⁹ Rick Perry, “State of the State,” in House Journal of the Regular Session of the Eighty-Second Legislature, (speech, Austin, TX, February 8, 2011), Legislative Reference Library of Texas, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/Rick%20Perry/2011/SOS_Perry_2011.pdf

direct, serious competition with other states in the US. In 1998, California's governor Pete Wilson stated that California and its economy were under threat because "neighboring states continue to lower their taxes... to lure away our jobs. Last year, every state touching California's border passed a tax cut."¹⁰ Emphasizing the border between the states he was discussing emphasizes their foreignness in this context. They are not primarily fellow people or even fellow Americans who just as equally deserve to benefit from increasing employment levels, but are instead non-Californians who pose a clear outside threat, trying to "lure away" jobs from the state. This frames the potential shift in employment patterns not as a natural outgrowth of various economic factors that are in the control of a lot of different people and institutions, but instead a deliberate effort from outsiders to try and take something important from California and Californians.

Texas governors similarly have a history of framing other states as competitors in incredibly direct and threatening competition, often in the context of the economy. In 2015, Gregg Abbott stated that Texas was "at the pinnacle of America's economy," and had been the leader in US job creation rates "for so many years, it's hard to keep count."¹¹ In other passages, Texas is framed as a leader who is showing the way, but this quote is more like a victory lap. By referring to the state as the "pinnacle" of job creation, and emphasizing how long Texas has led all other states in that context, Abbott is not talking about showing the way for others to follow so they can catch up to Texas. Instead, he's talking about being at the top of the table, challenging other states to compete for the number one spot. In this address, Abbott didn't only refer to the wins Texas has gotten in the last few years, but also uses explicit competition with

¹⁰ Pete Wilson, "State of the State Address," (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 7, 1998), The Governor's Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_36-Wilson06.html

¹¹ Gregg Abbott, "State of the State," in House Journal of the Regular Session of the Eighty-Fourth Legislature, (speech, Austin, TX, February 17, 2015), Legislative Reference Library of Texas, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/Greg%20Abbott/2015/SOS_Abbott_2015.pdf

other states to point out where he sees failures worth addressing within his own state: “Many of us have ridiculed states like California and Illinois as bastions of failed big government. You’ll be surprised to learn that Texas has more full-time state employees per capita than California and Illinois. That’s shocking, and it must be changed. That’s why my budget requires most state agencies to reduce their general revenue spending by three percent.”¹² In this case, he’s still asserting Texas’ general superiority to these other states in a direct competition, but is instead using this position to motivate improvement on the part of Texas. Texas is still better than the states they have often “ridiculed,” or but they need to prove their superiority in this one field that they’ve fallen behind in. Although these states continually assert their differences from and superiority over each other and, at times, the US as a whole, there is also no way for them to claim an identity completely independent from the nation they’re a part of.

We’re Still American Though...

Although Texas and California governors often emphasize the ways their states exist and thrive separate from or as leaders of the United States, they must still situate themselves as fundamentally American. Their inherent American-ness can’t be entirely excised from their state identity because of the realities of institutional/governmental hierarchies of the country. Instead of trying to ignore or downplay the role that American identity must play in state identity, State of the State addresses repeatedly emphasize the connections between the two levels of nationalist identity. In 1993, Pete Wilson stated that the “solemn promise” that California as a state had to keep was part of “an especially American obligation,”¹³ drawing a clear throughline of California working to keep promises made in the broader American system and identity. In 2011, Rick Perry stated it was Texas’ job to “continue to call attention to the essential truth of the 10th

¹² Ibid

¹³ Pete Wilson, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 6, 1993), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_36-Wilson03.html

Amendment,”¹⁴ asserting that central to the role that Texas plays is to follow through faithfully on the ideology of the single most defining document for the United States as a country. Both of these examples show that, although governors in both states have spent decades using their State of the State addresses to emphasize a level of separation from the rest of the United States—as a complete nation and in relation to other specific states—they can’t do so completely. Part of being a state in the country as a whole is identifying with the fundamental ideologies and elements of national identity that create the nation conceptually in the first place. Because this connection cannot be severed, they must find another way to integrate the broader national identity into their own state-based constructs and have them work together. This means that each state simultaneously asserts their own separation from the US, but also how they are fundamentally the most American they can be.

This also applies to asserting the connection between the state and the country in historical examples, not just rhetorical flair. While there are some examples of this throughout, none are more clear than Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2008, stating that California must follow the example set by FDR in addressing the Great Depression through the WPA, which not only provided jobs at the time, but also built roads, bridges, and buildings that are still relied upon today. He goes on to say that California can’t be afraid to pursue a similarly “daring,” “bold,” and “visionary” path towards addressing the Great Recession.¹⁵ In doing so, he not only uses FDR as a figure to inspire action, but asserts that, if a similar path is followed by California, they will be contributing to a similar legacy that will help Californians for decades or more to come. States cannot simply separate themselves from the federal government and the national identity

¹⁴ Rick Perry, 2011.

¹⁵ Arnold Schwarzenegger, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 8, 2008), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_38-schwarzenegger5.html

that, by the nature of the power hierarchy in question, takes precedence above state identity, but they do still attempt to emphasize traits as uniquely associated with them over any other states.

But We're Still Special

The issue with states saying certain traits are uniquely “theirs” is that nationalist rhetoric has to be rather expansive and vague, and there are only so many different traits that assert positive identity, history, and progress. As a result, states aggressively claim that the same share of often incredibly vague traits somehow belong only to their own citizens. In 2022, Gavin Newsom stated that the “California Way means rejecting old binaries and finding new solutions to big problems,”¹⁶ which is all well and good on its own, except in 2003 Rick Perry claimed that “Texans never embrace the status quo,”¹⁷ and are always looking to the future. There are virtually no differences between these two claims, except that one was made by a governor of California about Californians, and the other was made by a Texas governor about Texans. Similarly, California’s Arnold Schwarzenegger asked the legislature to “help [him] apply the natural innovation and imagination of our people - to government, to education, to transportation, to the improvement of our society.”¹⁸ In 1989, Texas’ Bill Clements stated: “Let us have the courage, vision, honesty, and dedication to make the necessary decisions, the tough choices, to solve complex problems and set Texas on a steady course towards a brighter and more prosperous future. Our greatest resource is our people.”¹⁹ Both of these passages claim that the people of their state are the key to unlocking a positive future because of their “innovation and

¹⁶ Gavin Newsom, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, March 8, 2022), Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2022/03/08/governor-newsom-delivers-state-of-the-state-address-3-8-22/>

¹⁷ Rick Perry, “State of the State,” in Journal of the House of Representatives of the Regular Session of the Seventy-Eighth Legislature, (speech, Austin, TX, February 1, 2003), Legislative Reference Library of Texas, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/Rick%20Perry/2003/SOS_Perry_2003.pdf

¹⁸ Arnold Schwarzenegger, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 5, 2005), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_38-schwarzenegger2.html

¹⁹ Bill Clements, “State of the State,” in House Journal of the Regular Session of the Seventy-First Legislature, (speech, Austin, TX, January 31, 1989), Legislative Reference Library of Texas, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/William%20P%20Clements/1989/SOS_Clements_1989.pdf

imagination” or their “courage, vision, honesty, and dedication,” which are apparently incredibly different sets of traits. Again, the language is incredibly similar and makes the same exact point, just claiming that the same set of traits that will lead to the same bright future are either unique to Californians or Texans.

While there are more examples of this particular trend, there is one passage that specifically indicates how vague these claims are when really interrogated, divorced (to some degree) from their context of a rousing, unifying speech. In 2006, Arnold Schwarzenegger stated that:

We must remember that this is the state that represents a dream. If you talk about the Illinois dream or the Delaware dream or the Kentucky dream, no one would know what you meant or what you're talking about. But our dream—the California dream—ah, that means something. People understand it. It is the means to a better life, where anything is possible – no matter where you came from, no matter who you are. This is what people understand. This is what draws them here. This is why I came here.²⁰

This passage is the ultimate example of how attempts at constructing unique state identities in a nationalist framework is a fundamentally contradictory and losing battle when interrogated. Schwarzenegger swears that there is a fundamental difference between what the California Dream is compared to dreams in other states, but he never explains that difference. Somehow, listeners and readers are meant to accept that only California has the conditions where “anything is possible” and people can pursue “a better life” simply because he says so. What is the Kentucky dream? The Delaware dream? The Illinois dream? It couldn’t matter less, it simply isn’t the incredibly vague idea that life can get better and anything is possible.

²⁰ Arnold Schwarzenegger, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 5, 2006), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_38-schwarzenegger3.html

Historical Specificity

There are a ton of similarities in the content of the State of the State addresses as only partially explained above. The one major (surface-level) difference is that the states use different historical moments to explain the continuity of their unique nature as a state. This is necessary in the construction of distinct national-style identities. One of the keys to creating a national identity is to call on an often simplified (or invented) history of the people, calling back to major events and figures of the past as examples of positive or heroic actions and beliefs that are worth replicating. This creates a feeling of timeless continuity for those who are inside the state, creating an obligation among the public to carry on that legacy with their own collective political and social actions. Between the two sets of speeches, the main difference that emerged was a difference in the specific histories that the governors called upon as this source of inspiration. Although these histories are different, they often end up leading to the same conclusions regardless.

California History

In looking at just the California speech corpus,²¹ there are some trends that can be found when looking for specific references to history and historic events. Three historical moments in particular were cited as informative to California character over the decades: the Gold Rush, World War II, and the Cold War. This particular chart²² shows the relative frequency that these specific moments and some more general related words (like “war” and “gold”) appear in various sections of the speeches, showing that there are specific periods where these events were

²¹ Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, *Voyant Tools*, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://voyant-tools.org/?panels=corpusterm%2Creader%2Ctrends%2Csummary%2Ccontexts&corpus=fbf9484f35ef04796d3dc6474d5747eb>.

²² Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, "Trends", *Voyant Tools*, accessed April 6, 2023, https://voyant-tools.org/?view=Trends&query=history*&query=gold*&query=legacy*&query=frontier*&query=%22cold%20war%22&query=%22world%20war%20ii%22&query=war&query=wars&mode=document&corpus=fbf9484f35ef04796d3dc6474d5747eb.

called upon more often than others. Regardless of what the specific event being cited is, however, they are often used in similar ways within a broader argument. In 1998, Pete Wilson used the Gold Rush as a starting point to make a broader argument about the opportunities California provides and the people those chances draw in: “Three Saturdays from now marks 150 years since the first discovery of gold in the South Fork of the American River – the beginning of the Great California Gold Rush. From that day to this, California has drawn risk-takers and pioneers. Men and women of all races and persuasions have struck their own gold in California./And have they struck it big!”²³ In 1993, he also made a similar point, using various inventions and periods in California history to assert that Californians are naturally courageous and innovative: “We're the people who made the first movies, the first home computers, designed the Space Shuttle and gave America the tools for victory in the Cold War. We face hard times now, but we can change that. We can make our own future.”²⁴ Both of these passages use specific historical moments in California, simplify them immensely, and create a broad and vague narrative of economic and technological progress partnered with a continuity of the human/Californian spirit that maintains that progress.

The most obvious and far-reaching example of this is from Jerry Brown in 1982, who gives lip service to all the broadest strokes of California history to emphasize a continual strength of spirit and push towards progress:

When the Gold Rush ended, vigorous agriculture took its place. Then railroads, automobiles, oil and gas, the motion picture industry, airplane factories, freeways, suburbs, aerospace, the space shuttle, electronics and microprocessors, Pacific Basin trade and finally biotechnology. Each new source of wealth and imagination gave way to

²³ Pete Wilson, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 7, 1998), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_36-Wilson03.html

²⁴ Pete Wilson, 1993.

even more bold and prosperous endeavors. There have been set-backs—wars, depressions, scandals, raging controversies—but the people who inhabit this State have relentlessly created the most abundant society in the history of the world.²⁵

This passage hits all the points, starting in the mid-1800s with the Gold Rush and catching up to the developments made by the time he delivered the speech, creating a sense of a somehow timeless history. By specifically calling attention to “each new source of wealth and imagination” and the current state as “the most abundant society in the history of the world,” Brown drives home the narrative of continual progress motivated by a uniquely Californian knack for innovation. And finally, by only mentioning the setbacks of “wars, depressions, scandals, [and] raging controversies,” he vastly oversimplifies the historical narrative to serve his political goal of creating and motivating a cohesive “people,” not to present an accurate history for history’s sake. A similar trend—using unique historical moments and figures to create boilerplate narratives and identities that only have the veneer of uniqueness—can be found in the Texas speeches.

Texas History

The corpus of only Texas speeches²⁶ was also helpful in looking for specific historical moments and when they were cited, although this did of course require some different search terms that were more specific to Texas history, like Houston (in reference to Sam Houston).²⁷ In the case of Texas, the most common specific references were to Sam Houston and Texas’ short

²⁵ Jerry Brown, “State of the State Address,” (speech, Sacramento, CA, January 7, 1982), The Governor’s Gallery, https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_34-JBrown7.html

²⁶ Stéfán Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, *Voyant Tools*, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://voyant-tools.org/?panels=cirrus%2Creader%2Ctrends%2Csummary%2Ccontexts&corpus=d0bdcd28093e6c8725a267bf65d0c01e>.

²⁷ Stéfán Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, "Trends", *Voyant Tools*, accessed April 6, 2023, https://voyant-tools.org/?view=Trends&query=houston*&query=history*&query=legacy*&query=frontier*&query=%22world%20war%20ii%22&query=war&query=wars&mode=document&corpus=d0bdcd28093e6c8725a267bf65d0c01e.

time as a republic independent from both Mexico and the United States. On multiple occasions, governors cited quotes from Sam Houston as part of their remarks. In 1991, Ann Richards started off discussing the state of Texas when Houston was in office, stating that:

In 1841, when Sam Houston took the oath of office for his second term as president of the Republic, the frontier was still a dangerous place, only three or four towns had a population of more than a thousand, and Texans were in the midst of a gnawing recession. In his inaugural address, Houston faced the unhappy duty of informing congress that the cupboard was bare; there was not one dollar in the treasury. Listen to what he told them: "Patriotism, industry, and enterprise," he said, "are now our only resources." One hundred fifty years later, this "nation" we call Texas has become so powerful, so complex, so sophisticated that even the great Houston would have had trouble imagining our success.²⁸

By starting off referring to Texas in 1841 as the Republic and ending it by still referring to Texas as a "nation," Richards draws a spiritual continuation where a literal one doesn't exist, asserting that Texas still functions in many ways as an independent entity that is only incidentally part of the US now. By ending it with a statement of how surprised Houston would be, she furthers the continuity on a more person-to-person level, claiming that a state hero would be proud of the work that Texans are doing 150 years later, creating an immediacy to his importance and emphasizing the sort of timeless nature of history in a nationalist context.

Similarly, if more briefly, in 1989 Bill Clements also cited Sam Houston as a source for inspiring citizens to take on the challenges they were facing with confidence, stating that, "with every new generation there are new challenges, and the ones we face today are as critical to our

²⁸ Ann Richards, "State of the State," in House Journal of the Regular Session of the Seventy-Second Legislature, (speech, Austin, TX, February 6, 1991), Legislative Reference Library of Texas, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/Ann%20W%20Richards/1991/SOS_Richards_1991.pdf

future as those faced by our forefathers. Texans are ready, as always, to meet these challenges. In the words of Sam Houston, ‘We are equal to our destiny.’”²⁹ Again, this shortens history by bringing the relevant forefathers—Houston in particular—right up to the present day as a person whose thoughts somehow matter in a fundamental way to how people choose to act now. Texans are meant to care about what he would theoretically think and do, and make their own choices to carry on his legacy both for their own sake and to hopefully be remembered in a similar fashion.

In 2017, Gregg Abbott specifically called upon the history of the Texas flag: “It’s of no small significance that we unite today under the San Jacinto battle flag. One of the most decisive battles of the world, it changed the course of history and brought liberty to Texas. It’s our privilege, our duty, to preserve that cause of liberty. Courageous heroes died so Texas could be free. Let’s use this session to build a Texas worthy of their sacrifice. Let’s keep Texas the most exceptional state in America.”³⁰ Similar to the discussion of Sam Houston, by drawing a connection directly between the San Jacinto battle flag and current day Texas and skipping over a vast amount of history in-between, Abbott creates a sense of timeless history that is somehow immediate and hyper-relevant to today, even though the conditions of the two periods are so clearly different. This passage also emphasizes the liberty and independence of Texas and the influence of that independent nature on the entire world since that battle, not Texas’ position as a state in the union. Citing the deaths of “courageous heroes” in battle also creates an obligation to carry on the legacy of past Texans not by choice, but because it’s their duty as Texans.

²⁹ Bill Clements, 1989.

³⁰ Gregg Abbott, “State of the State,” in House Journal of the Regular Session of the Eighty-Fourth Legislature, (speech, Austin, TX, January 31, 2017), Legislative Reference Library of Texas, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/Greg%20Abbott/2017/SOS_Abbott_2017.pdf

Different Histories, Same Ending

Although the historical moments and figures that are cited by Californian and Texan governors are different from each other and focus on elements of state-specific history, they all function in nationalist identity construction in a similar way. They shorten time and simplify events, creating straightforward stories of progress and heroism that seem both immediate and somehow divorced from time. These stories also create an obligation among the current citizenry to live up to the high standards set by the figures and people in these past moments. By simplifying their hardship and glorifying their actions, it isn't just a choice for citizens to pursue a certain path that is supposed to further the progress of the past, but they are obligated to. If they choose not to, they are failing themselves, their state, and their history all at the same time. So, although California may emphasize the Gold Rush and Cold War while Texas emphasizes Sam Houston and their period as an independent Republic, the actual use of these different historical moments all serves the same purpose: to create a common sense of supposedly unique identity that leads to a common political and social purpose among citizens who are obligated to uphold the legacy of that history and identity.

Conclusion

Nationalism is a modern political invention that asserts a selfhood based on exclusivity and is inherently contradictory, creating a sense of community between people who will never actually meet each other. While there are, of course, contradictions within these identities at the nation-state level, sub-nationalisms on the state level are even more contradictory as they need to function within the legal and intellectual frameworks of the nation they're part of. However much governors want to frame themselves and their states as unique leaders of the country and the world, they exist in the middle of a hierarchy of state power, so the state-level identity must

also fall under an American identity. In this study of Texas and California, this comes through in a couple main ways. First, both states refer to themselves as leaders of the country, in policy and in character. Although Texas is often framed as a leader in direct opposition to and competition with the federal government while California is often framed more harmoniously as a leader within the US, the ultimate endpoint that they both reach is that their economies, schools, and people are the best in the country. So good, in fact, that other states wish they could replicate it. This position of leadership is due to their “unique” Californian or Texan traits, but these traits almost entirely overlapped between the two states, with both claiming things like “creativity,” “innovation,” and “dedication” to belong exclusively to citizens of their own state. While they cite different historical moments as the origin of these traits, the traits are the same and the historical moments are presented as essentially identical to each other.

Pointing out these sorts of contradictions and traits of nationalist identity construction is not new by any stretch, but considering the national profiles that governors Gavin Newsom and Gregg Abbott have developed in recent years along with the direct rhetorical and policy jobs both governors have targeted the other with make these contradictions even more important to keep in mind. Historically, the position of governor would be a stepping stone for politicians to hold a lower-level executive office with the eventual goal of running for president. In the last few decades, however, this has become less and less common of a path to the White House. Modern governors have been able to gain national profiles without even approaching a role in the federal government, president or otherwise, as governors like Newsom and Abbott have well proven. This shifts the language that these governors use, not necessarily toeing the line between state- and national-level appeal, and seemingly coincides with more aggressive callouts and targeted policies that bypass the federal government altogether, such as Abbott bussing

undocumented immigrants to California specifically to undermine the state and the Democratic officials who run it. This sort of oppositional action is not justifiable if a state and the people running it view that state as on a horizontal plane with other states akin to a brotherhood. Instead, it can only be justified if nationalist rhetorical strategies have been used to create a direct “us” and “them” competition between the two states in which one must “beat” the other to prove their superiority. That nationalist rhetoric crumbles under slight scrutiny shows that this competition to “beat” other states isn’t natural, but a political construction meant to inspire loyalty towards systems and positions of power over other fellow people by creating false distinctions and contentions between everyday folks who happen to live in different states.

This presents one of several future paths I’d like to take from this project. First, expanding the timeline of this project to include as many State of the State addresses since Texas and California gained statehood would allow for an interesting view on how nationalist rhetorical strategies developed since nations were still a rather new thing in the mid-1800s. Something else that could be explored is what historical reference points were used to speak to the state’s character in different era, as the speeches in this paper often referenced events and figures that happened very early in their state’s history. When did things like Sam Houston or the Gold Rush become important, character-defining historical reference points? Another avenue worth exploring would be topic modeling, to see how words and topics shift in use and importance over time and pull out connections and trends that I may miss in more self-guided text analysis as with Voyant. Lastly, despite the issues with sourcing archived State of the State addresses I already faced, all of these methods would be incredibly useful to apply to a broader set of states and allow for the regional analysis that I had initially hoped to do this time around. Topic modeling would be especially useful in the expanded project, as it would simply be able to dig

through and pull together passages and topics faster and with more accuracy than I would be able to do myself, as the corpuses when expanded to my original plan (5 regions, 4 states in each region) would be at least a pain if not basically impossible to get through on my own.

More and more governors are becoming household names, and they are more and more often trying to directly impact each other politically while bypassing the federal government to do so. As states more directly and aggressively see each other as “others,” it’s important to dig into and tear apart these divisions that are based not on facts, but on the interests of people and structures of power hoping to mobilize people to their own ends. This is a construction, and one that is inherently harmful and divisive by its very nature. If folks want to truly pursue progress and peace, we must collectively be able to understand the inherent fakeness of constructed state-identity and see each other as fellow people first, not Californians or Texans or Washingtonians.

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