

The Politicization of Knowledge Claims: The “Laffer Curve” in the U.S. Congress

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Abstract Political debates over knowledge claims often become emotionally charged, with two sides not only disputing what is true but seeing those on the other side as deluded or worse. By looking at use of the term “Laffer curve” in the U.S. Congress from 1977 to 2010, we draw attention to two ways such debates over knowledge claims can evolve. The Laffer curve is a simple schematic representation of the relationship between tax rates and government revenue that was influential in U.S. tax policy in the late 1970s. Early on, Republicans and Democrats faced off over the Laffer curve as a cognitive symbol to be debated with argument, evidence, and reference to experts. Over time, Republicans continued to treat the Laffer curve as a cognitive symbol, but for Democrats it became a polluted expressive symbol that could be dismissed without debate. Democrats also articulated the Laffer curve as part of an ironic narrative about the failure of the Reagan administration, which ended the possibility of serious deliberation. We suggest that the dynamics seen here may also be present around other politicized knowledge claims, such as the claim that human activity is causing climate change.

Keywords Politics · Knowledge · Science · Symbols · Culture · Taxes

Knowledge claims are made and debated all the time in policy discourse. In the process, they often become emotionally charged, with one side embracing the truth of a particular claim, while the other not only rejects it, but treats those accepting it as misguided, deluded, or simply stupid. This is seen regularly in public debates over claims about the natural world, around issues ranging from anthropogenic global warming to whether mercury in vaccines causes autism.

These politicized debates are not limited to natural scientific claims, however. Policy-makers also make claims about how the social world works that may be seriously debated or

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similarly polarizing. This paper uses one such case—U.S. congressional discussion of the Laffer curve—to highlight two ways that use of a knowledge claim can change. In the case of the Laffer curve, while legislators did not necessarily assume the concept was true when they first began to discuss it, members of both political parties did treat it as worthy of serious debate. But over time it took on an increasing level of expressive content for Democrats, and came to be used in clearly divergent ways by Democrats and Republicans. We suggest that the dynamics seen here, while identified inductively from a single case, may be useful in generating broader theories about how knowledge claims become politicized.

The Laffer curve is a simple schematic representation of the relationship between tax rates and government revenues that was influential in U.S. tax policy in the late 1970s. It points out that if there are no taxes, there are no revenues. As tax rates increase from 0 %, revenues also increase. But as tax rates continue to increase, incentives to work and invest decrease. Theoretically, if tax rates were to reach 100 %, there would be no incentive to work or invest, and revenues would return to zero. So there is some tax rate beyond which further increases actually lead to a *decrease* in revenue (Fig. 1).

The claim that the U.S. was on the “wrong” side of the Laffer curve was a centerpiece of late-1970s Republican arguments in favor of tax cuts. Over the course of the 35 years since the Laffer curve was first mentioned in Congress, however, the way it was used in political discourse changed substantially. In particular, its use among Democrats and Republicans diverged significantly.

We explore these changes by looking at the 425 instances the term “Laffer curve” was mentioned in the *Congressional Record* from when it was first referred to in 1977 up through 2010. Early on, the Laffer curve was treated with respect by both Republicans and Democrats. While Republicans always favored the Laffer curve argument and Democrats always opposed it, both sides saw it as a claim to be taken seriously and debated with argument, evidence, and reference to experts. Borrowing Talcott Parsons’ distinction between cognitive and expressive symbols, we suggest that both parties used the Laffer curve as a cognitive symbol during this period (Parsons and Shils 1951, 167–169).

Over time, however, the two sides came to treat the concept quite differently. Republicans continued to use the Laffer curve as a cognitive symbol, discussing it in depth and bringing in evidence to support their claims. For Democrats, however, the Laffer curve started to

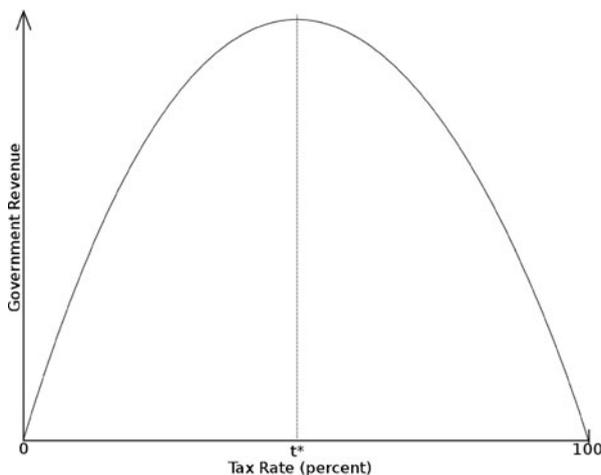


Fig. 1 The laffer curve

become a polluted expressive symbol (Parsons and Shils 1951, 169–170) after 1980. They continued to mention it at rates similar to Republicans, but stopped discussing it at length or bringing in evidence to prove its inapplicability to the U.S. context. Instead, they mentioned it briefly and treated it dismissively, as a ridiculous idea. Eventually, this expressive content became dominant, with Democrats calling the concept a joke, making puns on the term “Laffer,” and using it as an epithet to highlight all that they saw as bad about Republicans’ economic policies; for example, by calling a proposal “Laffer curve, trickle-down voodoo economics.”

Starting around 1987, Democrats began to incorporate the Laffer curve into an ironic narrative about the failure of supply-side economics and the Reagan administration. In this narrative, Reagan (and/or supply-siders) came into office brandishing the Laffer curve and arguing that revenues could be raised by cutting taxes. In this narrative, Reagan and the supply-siders succeeded in cutting taxes, but rather than working as the Laffer curve argument predicted, those tax cuts led to massive deficits. By the time Democrats began introducing this narrative, they had already been using the Laffer curve as an expressive symbol for the larger ignorance or irresponsibility of the Reagan administration for several years. After 1990, when Democrats mentioned the Laffer curve it was nearly always as part of this narrative. Republicans, however, continued to talk about it very similarly to the way they had in the late 1970s: as a legitimate argument to be made with logic and supported with data.

Through close examination of a historically important case, we identify a pattern that may also be visible in the use of other politically significant knowledge claims. Though there is widespread acknowledgement that science has become increasingly politicized in the United States (Gauchat 2012; McCright and Dunlap 2011), there has been less attention to the *process* through which knowledge claims become politicized. Attention to moments when a particular cognitive symbol gains or loses expressive content is warranted, since we have reached the point at which even claims that are broadly accepted in the scientific community have become associated with a political position and thus removed from the realm of serious deliberation.

In particular, we point to two ways in which this case study may contribute to a larger theory of the dynamics of knowledge politicization. First, we draw new attention to the important distinction between cognitive and expressive symbols, to the possibility that a symbol can shift from being used predominantly as a cognitive to an expressive symbol, and to the fact that such a shift may take place among one political group, but not another. One apparent outcome of such a shift is that once a concept has become primarily an expressive symbol, deliberative debate around the concept is no longer possible.

Second, the case also suggests attention to the process through which expressive symbols can become embedded in larger narratives. Only when the Laffer curve had become an expressive symbol for Democrats did it become incorporated into a narrative about the failure of the Reagan administration. But once this narrative emerged, both Republicans and Democrats who mentioned the Laffer curve were forced to address the fact that many were portraying it as a cause of the national debt.

Both of these dynamics—the shift from cognitive to expressive symbol, and subsequent incorporation into polluting narratives about one’s opponents—seem likely to occur around other politically charged knowledge claims beyond the Laffer curve. While we do not try to generalize from a single case, in the conclusion we discuss more fully how our observations may apply to other cases and address questions this case raises about the process through which knowledge claims become politicized more generally.

The Cognitive and Expressive Symbolism of an Economic Claim

To understand the evolution of the use of the Laffer curve in Congress, we draw on observations from cultural sociology, which places meaning at the center of sociological explanation, even explanation of claims about the economic world (Alexander 2011). In Durkheimian terms, the Laffer curve is a collective representation: a symbol reflecting the empirical world, but created by society, and bearing the meanings that society has placed upon it (Durkheim 1912/1995; Durkheim and Mauss 1903/1963). Durkheim emphasizes that “collective representations are more stable than individual ones; for while the individual is sensitive to even slight changes in his internal or external environment, only quite weighty events can succeed in changing the mental equilibrium of society” (Durkheim 1912/1995, 435–436).

But while such symbols do have greater durability than individual sensations, the Laffer curve demonstrates that their meaning can nevertheless change considerably over time. In this case, most of the shift occurred within one political party, the Democrats, and involved moving from treating the Laffer curve as a reasoned argument, something to be evaluated intellectually, to using it as a polluted symbol for the political opposition.

While Durkheim himself does not provide tools for thinking about how collective representations evolve, Talcott Parsons made a distinction that has occasionally been borrowed within cultural sociology (e.g. Smith and Riley 2009, 29) and that is helpful in discriminating between two kinds of uses of the Laffer curve.¹ In his theory of the cultural system, Parsons divides symbol systems into three types: cognitive, expressive, and normative. We set aside normative for present purposes, but find Parsons’ differentiation between cognitive and expressive symbols useful here. Parsons and Shils characterize cognitive symbols as “beliefs or ideas,” and expressive symbols as those “in which the cathectic [i.e., emotional] function has primacy” (1951, 162–163).

Following this, we refer to the Laffer curve as a cognitive symbol when most actors interpret it as a theoretical construct. When this is the case, political actors debate the curve, using arguments and evidence and citing experts to bolster their position. We identify the Laffer curve as an expressive symbol when it is used, mainly by Democrats, to convey noncognitive meanings. This can involve attaching feelings to the curve, such as disdain, or using it as a polluted sign for a group of political opponents, rather than discussing its validity as a theory or its applicability to U.S. fiscal policy.

Parsons and Shils emphasize that the distinction between cognitive and expressive symbols “is an *analytical* classification. In concrete cultural phenomena, many combinations and nuances are possible” (1951, 167; emphasis in original). Parsons also notes elsewhere that a symbol “*always* has both ‘cognitive’ and ‘expressive’ meanings. The distinction... is a difference of relative *primacy of significance* of the two orders of meaning, not of separately distinct ‘kinds’” (1953, 32; emphasis in original). While Parsons, like Durkheim, focuses on a symbol’s content at a single moment, we use the distinction between cognitive and expressive symbols as a starting point for examining the process through which the meaning of a symbol changes over time, in this case shifting from being predominantly cognitive to (for members of one political party) predominantly expressive.

In doing so, we extend recent work in cultural sociology on the symbolic power of economic objects or indicators. Wherry (2004), for example, argues that the GNP per capita indicator has totemic power for development economists, and that the team promoting a new indicator, the Human Development Index, had to strategize accordingly, making the index

¹ We thank editor David Smilde for suggesting Parsons’ terminology for describing this shift.

more statistically sophisticated than necessary in order to present it as a legitimate alternative. Tognato (2008) emphasizes the Deutsche Mark's similar totemic quality for Germans, and discusses how this constrained central bank decisions. De Santos (2009) calls the country risk indicator a "fact-totem" for Argentinians trying to make sense of an unfolding financial crisis. Like these other economic symbols, the Laffer curve came to play a role in affirming group identity for Democrats, not in this case as a totem, but as a sort of symbolic foil—a symbol for the opposition. What we add to the studies just mentioned, which explore how the symbolic content of economic objects has social and political effects, is an examination of the process through which such symbolic content is acquired, and how it can diverge across groups.

Our second empirical observation about the Laffer curve, beyond its shift from cognitive to expressive symbol for Democrats, is that it subsequently became attached to a polluted narrative about supply-siders and the Reagan administration, and that by the 1990s almost all Democratic uses of the term were in the context of this narrative. Several recent studies have addressed the role of narratives in adjudicating knowledge claims (Abolafia 2010; Suttles 2010), emphasizing that even scientific concepts are "collective representations in need of interpretation" (Smith 2012, 748) and that narrative struggles play a role "in filtering raw natural science into something socially, rather than just scientifically, meaningful" (746).

But these studies all focus on narratives that are more cognitive than expressive. Abolafia (2010), for example, discusses how members of the Federal Open Reserve Committee work together in meetings to develop a story that allows them to make sense of recent economic events. The process may not be entirely rational, but it is dominated by thought, not emotion. Similarly, Smith (2012) documents the shifts between romantic and apocalyptic genres in discussions of climate change. However, both of these genres are part of reasoned debate over the perceived effects of global warming: Would it be manageable or devastating? The debates Smith describes do not use the concept of global warming to tell an expressively charged story about the idiocy of the political opposition.²

De Santos (2009) and Tognato (2008), while not looking at narratives attached to knowledge claims per se, do show how narratives around economic concepts can help to reinforce group identity. De Santos's article on the country risk indicator explains how, for Argentinians, having the highest country risk in the world became part of a story of national failure. For Argentinians, the risk indicator showed that Argentina was not "a European nation in Latin America," but was similar to countries they perceived as undesirable, like Kenya, Nigeria, and Burundi (de Santos 2009, 478–479). Similarly, Tognato's work shows how the Deutsche Mark became a national symbol for Germans and was articulated with a key national identity, that of *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle), after World War II. This identity, in contrast to the identity based in shame for the Holocaust, allowed the German people to feel proud of their country's postwar economic leadership (Tognato 2008, 101).

Like the country risk indicator and the Deutsche Mark, the Laffer curve was also eventually articulated into a narrative that helped to reinforce a particular identity: that of Democrats as responsible and wise, in contrast to the wrongheaded Republicans, whose stubborn commitment to the Laffer curve led (in the Democrats' narrative) to massive deficits. The Laffer curve narrative differs from those described by de Santos and Tognato, however, in that the narrative was built around a symbol that was also a knowledge claim. The expressive content of the symbol was reinforced, however, by being incorporated into a narrative about the stupidity of the opposition, making it even less likely that the two sides

² Of course global warming *can* be used as part of such narratives, and has been; however the expressive aspect of the debate is not the focus of Smith's study.

might return to rationally debating the applicability of Laffer curve to U.S. fiscal policy. Thus we build upon this second recent strand of work by showing how the incorporation of knowledge claims into narratives can reinforce their shift from cognitive to expressive symbol, not just serve as a way of making undisputed facts socially meaningful.

Methods

We demonstrate these points by tracking how the term “Laffer curve” was used by members of the U.S. Congress between 1977, when it was first introduced, and 2010. We identified every time the phrase “Laffer curve” appeared in the *Congressional Record* during this period through searches in the HeinOnline database. The *Congressional Record* contains a near-verbatim record of floor proceedings of the U.S. House and Senate, as well as additional material inserted at the request of legislators, sometimes their own further remarks, but often reprints of newspaper or magazine articles or speeches. We then collected each statement by a legislator that included the phrase “Laffer curve” at least once. Our unit of analysis (what we call “statements”) included all material before and after the phrase that was spoken or inserted by the same legislator, and ended when we reached text spoken or inserted by someone else. These statements range in length from a few sentences to more than a dozen pages, with the modal statement about one three-column page in length. In total, this included 215 statements that used the phrase “Laffer curve” 425 different times.

The *Record* contains three sections: a House section, a Senate section, and an Extensions of Remarks section. The Extensions of Remarks contains additional material inserted by representatives; senators also insert additional material but it is typically included in the Senate section and can be harder to identify as inserted material. When not otherwise specified, our analysis refers both to spoken text and inserted text. In coding, however, we did distinguish between statements that mentioned the Laffer curve as part of the floor proceedings and those included in the Extensions of Remarks. We also distinguished between times when the term “Laffer curve” appears to represent the actual words of a legislator (whether spoken or inserted) and times when it appears only as part of a text reprinted by a legislator’s request (whether in the Extensions or not). During the entire period, the Laffer curve was mentioned by 112 different legislators.

We used an iterative process of reading and discussing small samples of data to develop coding categories. Each author began by reading some number of statements, typically about ten, and looking for patterns in the way the phrase “Laffer curve” was used. We subsequently discussed our observations and whether they suggested coding categories. In following rounds, we attempted to code new samples of data in the tentative categories while continuing to look for additional patterns. As we settled on a handful of codes, our emphasis shifted away from looking for new patterns and toward defining the codes more precisely to achieve greater reliability. We conducted seven rounds of coding development before proceeding to code the data fully. Each author coded roughly half the data, and final coding categories are listed in Table 1. Finally, beyond the systematic coding, we also took notes on how the term was used in each statement and on anything that seemed particularly interesting or significant about each use.

The terms “cognitive” and “expressive” were not part of our original coding scheme, nor did we initially code for the presence of a narrative about the failure of supply-siders and/or the Reagan administration. In the former case, drawing a clear, reproducible line for coding purposes between cognitive and expressive use of the term was not possible. As Parsons pointed out, the extent to which a symbol is cognitive or expressive is one of degree.

Table 1 Coding categories used for statements containing the phrase ‘Laffer Curve’

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- 1) Date of the statement
 - 2) Starting page of the statement
 - 3) Statement made in House or Senate
 - 4) Part of “Extensions of Remarks”?
 - 5) Who said the phrase (or inserted material containing it)?
 - 6) Legislator’s party affiliation
 - 7) Legislator’s state
 - 8) Whether in that turn the term was a) the actual words of a legislator, b) part of an inserted text (usually an article), or c) both
 - 9) If inserted, a) the name of the article, b) its author, c) the source (e.g. *Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, speech to a professional group), and d) date if indicated
 - 10) Whether reference a) assumed audience familiarity with the term, b) explained it briefly, or c) explained it at some length
 - 11) Whether mentioner a) approved of the concept and/or its policy implications, b) approved of the concept but not the proposed policies attached to it, c) conceded the concept’s general validity but did not approve of it and/or its policy implications, d) disapproved of the concept and/or its policy implications, or e) was neutral/unclear with respect to approval^a
 - 12) Whether discussion of Laffer curve took up a) a sentence or less of the turn, b) more than a sentence but no more than a paragraph, c) more than a paragraph
 - 13) The number of times phrase was mentioned in that turn
 - 14) Whether term was used primarily as a referent to a particular political philosophy or era (e.g. supply-side economics, the Reagan years)
 - 15) Whether reference made a pun on the word “Laffer” (or “curve”)
 - 16) Whether the term was used as part of a narrative in which Reagan, the Reagan administration, or supply-siders used the Laffer curve to justify tax cuts that led to deficits, debt, or other negative economic consequences
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^a We refer to mentions that fall into categories a) and b) of line 11 as “positive.” “Negative” mentions are those that fall into categories c) and d). Mentions that fell into category e) we call “neutral”

Several of our initial coding categories, however, tended to indicate cognitive or expressive content. For example, longer discussions of the Laffer curve tended to be cognitive, while briefer mentions of a sentence or less tended to be expressive. Cognitive uses frequently provided evidence in support of their position as well, by citing studies, introducing historical examples, or referring to expert authority. Indicators of expressive content included using emotionally charged adjectives to describe the Laffer curve (“much-ridiculed,” “much maligned,” “crazy,” “cocktail napkin economics”); using it in puns (which were always associated with disdain); and using the concept itself as a way to cast some person or group in a negative light (e.g. accusing Republicans of using “Laffer curve, trickle-down voodoo economics”). While we are confident the shift we describe is real, we do not try to quantify it.

We were, however, able to recode the data to identify use of the ironic narrative about the failure of supply-siders and/or the Reagan administration. In our initial coding, we identified uses of the Laffer curve as a “political referent,” meaning that the term was used primarily as shorthand for a particular political philosophy or era, generally supply-side economics and the early Reagan years. Such uses only began in mid-1980, picked up as time went on, and were much more common among Democrats than Republicans.

Over time we realized that many of the uses coded as “political referent” used the Laffer curve as part of a single narrative. Ultimately we coded as “ironic narrative” the subset of statements that told a story that introduced a protagonist (either supply-siders, Reagan, or the Reagan administration); that mentioned the Laffer curve as a factor in the decision to cut taxes; and that referred to or implied a negative outcome that resulted from that decision (usually deficits, but sometimes other negative economic consequences). Three borderline statements in terms of fitting this narrative were made prior to 1987, and each was made by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY).³ Other legislators did not start using the narrative till 1987, but from that point all statements either clearly used the narrative or clearly did not.

Our central focus is on how the use of the Laffer curve changed over time. We divided statements into six distinct intervals based both on political events and our subjective sense of when use was shifting. The paper focuses primarily on the second, fourth, and fifth intervals. Later, we refer to these as Periods 1, 2, and 3, but here we briefly describe each interval.

The first interval begins with the initial mention of the phrase, in October 1977. Proponents of the Laffer curve argument were introducing their idea at this time, and all 49 mentions of the Laffer curve during this period were positive. This interval ends with the first negative reference to the Laffer curve, in June 1978. The second interval, later referred to as Period 1, started in June 1978 with this first negative reference, and ended in October with the passage of the Revenue Act of 1978, which closed a period of active tax debate. Discussion of the Laffer curve was most frequent by far in this period, with 128 mentions in 3 1/2 months. The third interval started after passage of the Revenue Act, and saw a relative lull in use of the term; we do not focus on this interval in the paper. The beginning of the fourth interval, later referred to as Period 2, was marked by a political event that launched another more active period of tax debate. It began in June 1980, when presidential candidate Ronald Reagan and the Republican congressional leadership announced their support for a large across-the-board income tax cut, and ended in December 1981, with the close of the congressional session in which Reagan’s major tax legislation, the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA), was passed into law. We considered ending this interval with the passage of ERTA, rather than the close of the session four months later, but our subjective impression was that uses of the Laffer curve in August to December 1981 were more similar to those in the fourth interval than those in the fifth, so we placed them in this group. Sixty-seven mentions of the Laffer curve were made in the fourth interval. The fifth interval, later referred to as Period 3, was not a single episode of active debate, but rather an extended period of time (March 1982 to March 1995) during which the Laffer curve was only mentioned occasionally (less than once per month, on average) but did continue to come up regularly. This period included 115 of the total uses, but over 13 years. Finally, there was a clear drop-off after a small burst of mentions in early 1995, and the sixth interval, from the end of this burst through 2010, rarely saw the term Laffer curve used, though 2009 and 2010 saw a modest uptick in references. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the main characteristics of these intervals.

In the sections that follow, we discuss how use of the “Laffer curve” term changed in Periods 1, 2, and 3, putting those changing uses into the context of contemporary tax policy debates. We present this evidence in three sections, each of which addresses one of these three time periods. Each section begins with a brief discussion of the political context in which the Laffer curve was being mentioned, then describes how the Laffer curve was used, first in terms of its cognitive or expressive content, and then in terms of the visibility (or lack

³ Each of these borderline cases is quoted later in the paper.

Table 2 Use of the term “Laffer Curve” in Congress during Periods 1, 2 and 3

Dates	Description of period	Length of time	Party	No. of turns	No. of mentions	Mean mentions/month	Percent of turns positive	Percent of turns neutral	Percent of turns negative	Percent of discussions > 1 paragraph	Percent including puns	Percent using as political referent
Period 1												
Jun. 22, 1978–Oct. 10, 1978	Most active period of debate; both parties use as cognitive symbol	3 1/2 months.	R	20	71	20	95 %	0 %	5 %	60 %	0 %	0 %
			D	16	57	16	6 %	0 %	94 %	94 %	12 % (including apology)	0 %
			Total	36	128	37	56 % ***	0 %	44 % ***	75 % *	6 %	0 %
Period 2												
Jun. 3, 1980–Dec. 9, 1981	Concept starting to lose legitimacy; mix of cognitive and expressive use	18 months.	R	20	27	1.5	50 %	45 %	5 %	30 %	0 %	20 %
			D	27	40	2.2	11 %	26 %	63 %	37 %	0 %	11 %
			Total	47	67	3.7	28 % **	34 %	38 % ***	34 %	0 %	15 %
Period 3												
Mar. 17, 1982–Mar. 23, 1995	Long period of occasional use; expressive symbol for Ds; ironic narrative emerges	13 years	R	37	60	0.38	78 %	14 %	8 %	43 %	0 %	8 %
			D	44	55	0.35	5 %	11 %	84 %	5 %	30 %	57 %
			Total	81	115	0.74	38 % ***	12 %	49 % ***	22 % ***	16 % ***	35 % ***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; two-tailed p values calculated using Fisher’s exact test, where H_0 is that Rs and Ds behave the same

Table 3 Use of the term “Laffer Curve” in Congress during other intervals, 1977–2010

Dates	Description of period	Length of time	Party	No. of turns	No. of mentions	Mean mentions/month	Percent of turns positive	Percent of turns neutral	Percent of turns negative	Percent of discussions >1 paragraph	Percent including puns	Percent using as political referent
Oct. 27, 1977– Jun. 14, 1978	Period of introduction; term described and explained by proponents	3 1/2 months.	R	9	49	6.5	100 %	0 %	0 %	78 %	0 %	0 %
			D	0	0	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
			Total	9**	49***	6.5**	100 %	0 %	0 %	78 %	0 %	0 %
Apr. 9, 1979– May 13, 1980	Relative lull in debate	18 months.	R	13	21	1.6	54 %	46 %	0 %	31 %	0 %	0 %
			D	3	9	0.69	67 %	0 %	33 %	33 %	0 %	0 %
			Total	16*	30*	2.3	56 %	38 %	6 %	31 %	0 %	0 %
Aug. 1, 1996– Dec. 8, 2010	Very infrequent use	13 years	R	13	21	0.12	85 %	15 %	0 %	69 %	0 %	0 %
			D	13	15	0.09	7 %	0 %	93 %	31 %	31 %	77 %
			Total	26	36	0.21	46 %***	8 %	46 %***	50 %	15 %	38 %

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; two-tailed p values calculated using Fisher's exact test, where H_0 is that Rs and Ds behave the same

thereof) of an ironic narrative about the failure of supply-siders and/or the Reagan administration.

Period 1, June to October 1978: The Emergence of the Laffer Curve as a Politically Significant Concept

The argument that tax cuts can increase government revenues has a long history, but in its Laffer curve form it experienced a political resurgence in the 1970s. As proponents of the Laffer curve liked to point out, the general idea went back at least to Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldūn, in the fourteenth century (*Congressional Record* [hereafter *CR*] 1978, 33215, 33923]. In the United States, similar arguments had been made by Republican Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon in the 1920s (Mellon 1924), as well as by Democrats in the 1960s, as a justification for the Kennedy-Johnson tax cuts (Berman and Pagnucco 2010).

The idea was given fresh form in the mid-1970s. Arthur Laffer was an academic economist who had also worked at the Office of Management and Budget during the Nixon administration. In a story that is perhaps apocryphal, in 1974 Laffer had dinner with Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and *Wall Street Journal* associate editor Jude Wanniski. At the dinner, during a discussion about President Gerald Ford's proposed tax increases, he jotted down the Laffer curve on a paper napkin to explain why tax increases would be a bad idea (Laffer 2004).

Laffer's curve had a great deal of resonance with Wanniski in particular. Wanniski, who controlled the *Journal's* editorial page, had a very large platform, and began using it to promote Laffer and his arguments. In the next few years, Wanniski and Laffer would become influential promoters of supply-side economics. They argued that the U.S. economy needed policies that would encourage people to supply more goods and services, not greater consumer demand, as the Keynesian prescription would have it. In particular, they thought that large tax cuts were needed. The Laffer curve was exhibit A in explaining to lawmakers and the public why this was the case and how such tax cuts could be afforded (Anderson 1990; Blumenthal 1986).

In Congress, the supply-side banner was first picked up by Jack Kemp (R-NY), the former Buffalo Bills quarterback who was elected to the House of Representatives in 1970. By about 1976, Kemp, who was close to both Laffer and Wanniski, was pulling together a group of allies around the tax cut program, including David Stockman (then a freshman representative but later Reagan's director of the Office of Management and Budget) and Congressional staffers Paul Craig Roberts, Norman Ture, and Bruce Bartlett (Anderson 1990; Blumenthal 1986; Stockman 1986).

In April 1977, Kemp first introduced a bill, later cosponsored with Senator William Roth (R-DE), to cut income tax rates by 30 % across the board (H.R. 6201). At the time, his ideas were seen as fairly radical, and the bill was perceived as extremely unlikely to pass (Stockman 1986). The phrase "Laffer curve" itself first appeared in the *Congressional Record* in October 1977. In the context of a discussion on tariffs, Kemp inserted a relevant *Wall Street Journal* editorial written by Wanniski, and, in introducing the piece, mentioned Wanniski's new book, *The Way the World Works*. According to Kemp, Wanniski's book "explain[ed] the 'Laffer curve'" and was "as great a contribution to the solution of our economic malaise as John Maynard Keynes' general theory was in causing the problem" (*CR* 1977, 35876–35877).

Over the next fourteen months, the Laffer curve was mentioned in another eight statements, three of which were made by Kemp. All referred to it positively, all came from Republicans, and all either included or mentioned articles on the need for tax cuts from the

Wall Street Journal, *Fortune* magazine, *Public Interest*, *Time* magazine, or the *L.A. Times*. But the idea had not yet gained enough visibility to prompt Democrats to respond.

The first half of 1978, however, marked a turning point in the national conversation about taxes. In California, Proposition 13, which would reduce the average property tax rate by more than half, was being debated; it passed on June 6 (Martin 2008). In Washington, a proposal to slash the top capital gains tax rate from 49 % to 25 %, seen in the spring as politically very unlikely, became “the hottest tax measure on Capitol Hill” (Johnson 1980; Pine 1978). In this context of “tax revolt,” legislators started to take the Kemp-Roth proposal more seriously. During the summer of 1978, political ground was shifting rapidly, and no one was sure any longer what was possible. In the end, while the capital gains tax cut would pass in October, Kemp-Roth would have to wait three more years. But it was in this climate, in which large across-the-board tax cuts were suddenly a serious option, that the first active debate over the Laffer curve occurred.

Period 1 begins with the first critical mention of the Laffer curve. Representative Charles Vanik (D-OH) introduced a *National Review* article addressing what Vanik called “the politically popular but completely unproven Kemp-Roth tax cut bill” (CR 1978, 18597). The *National Review* piece began by criticizing that proposal, explaining the “so-called Laffer curve” and then noting that while “as common sense, there’s nothing wrong with this notion [that at some point] taxes become suffocating...Roth-Kemp supporters almost certainly have overestimated the immediate benefits of their proposal and seriously underestimated its inflationary potential” (CR 1978, 18598). This introduced the most active period of discussion of the Laffer curve, which lasted less than 4 months but saw 128 uses of the term, with a rough balance between positive (56 %) and negative (44 %) statements.

We make three main observations about how the Laffer curve was used in Period 1. First, while there was a strong partisan difference in terms of approval of the Laffer curve argument, the Laffer curve was clearly treated as a cognitive symbol by members of both parties. Its cognitive character is evident in the lengthy discussions of its validity, those discussions’ focus on evidence, argument, and experts, and the way that Democrats as well as Republicans approached it as a legitimate theory. Second, limited expressive content was associated with the symbol. Discussions were relatively emotionally neutral, and those opposing the concept did not speak of it with disdain. The respect for its legitimacy was particularly evident when one legislator punned on the term “Laffer,” then came back later to apologize for doing so. Third, the Laffer curve was not used as part of a narrative about the failure of supply-siders or the Reagan administration, for the obvious reason that the supply-siders had not yet accomplished anything and Reagan had not come into office. Most of the discussion was relatively reasoned, describing other times and places in which tax cuts had led to revenue increases or mentioning evidence that tax cuts would, or would not, increase revenues, and no clear narratives were visible.

A Legitimate Cognitive Symbol

The Laffer curve was not an idea that mainstream economists, even conservative ones, took very seriously. As renowned Chicago School economist George Stigler pointed out at the time, “The Laffer curve is more or less a tautology” (Zucker 1978). It served as a bridge between more nuanced arguments about the negative economic impact of taxes, like those of Harvard economist and chair of Reagan’s Council of Economic Advisers Martin Feldstein, and the world of politics, which demanded simple, easy-to-communicate justifications for policy decisions. On the floor of Congress, though, the Laffer curve was treated as a respectable theory to be considered. When the term was referred to, it was typically not just

in passing, but in the context of detailed discussions of its argument, complete with evidence supporting or disputing the contention that if the United States cut taxes as Kemp-Roth proposed, revenues would increase.

One indicator of the seriousness of discussion is the length at which each statement directly addressed the Laffer curve. Across all periods, mentions that were mocking or dismissive tended to be brief; mentions that made serious arguments tended to be longer. While some speakers did refer to the Laffer curve in passing, 75 % of statements in Period 1 spent more than a paragraph explicitly discussing it. This proportion would drop dramatically, to 34 % and 22 %, in Periods 2 and 3.⁴

These discussions often spent time explicitly laying out the logic behind the Laffer curve. For example, on June 22, 1978, Kemp explained the Laffer curve this way:

Mr. Speaker, there are always two tax rates that yield the same revenues: 100 % and 0 %. When the tax rate is 100 %, all production ceases in the money economy (as distinct from the barter, subterranean economy), for people will not work if all the fruits of their labors are confiscated by the Government. The revenues are thus zero. On the other hand, if the tax rate is zero, people keep 100 % of what they produce and Government receives zero. Our focus this afternoon, as well as the focus of the Kemp-Roth bill, is in between these extremes. There is a point at which revenues and production are maximized. This is the point at which the electorate desires to be taxed. Above that point is the prohibitive range where rates are unnecessarily high and can be reduced with gains in both output and revenue. This is what this amendment seeks to do (*CR* 1978, 18589).

Kemp continued for several pages more, walking through the incentive effects of tax cuts on production, examples of this happening in U.S. history, and the findings of econometric models.

Democrats, on the other hand, presented detailed rebuttals of their own, as when Representative Charles Vanik (D-OH) argued that

Even using Congressman Kemp's own econometric studies, the deficit caused by such a tax cut would almost double the current deficit. Inflation rates obviously would rise above the current near-10 % figure....It cannot be compared to the Kennedy tax cuts in the 1960s. That period was more affected by our Nation's movement into the Vietnam War than by any other phenomenon. Almost half of the increase in Government revenues resulted from four social security tax increases in this same period. The Library of Congress study cautiously points out that the favorable aspects of the econometric studies of the Roth-Kemp tax cut bill would be accompanied by substantially higher inflation, higher interest rates, and a larger Federal deficit (*CR* 1978, 23999).

Another reflection of the Laffer curve's status as a cognitive symbol is the frequency with which experts were cited in support of each side's position. Supporters of the Laffer curve relied especially on a study by Chase Econometrics, which they saw as particularly strong evidence because it was based on "a Keynesian formula," not supply-side assumptions, and its author, Michael Evans, was "a leading Keynesian, demand-oriented model builder" (*CR* 1978, 18590, 21035; see also 23748–23750, 26683–26688, 33923–33944). Kemp in particular strewed his statements with references to economists. In one noteworthy speech he

⁴ p (two-tailed) < 0.001 (Fisher's exact test) for the difference between Period 1 and Period 2. The difference between Period 2 and Period 3 is not statistically significant.

mentioned 14 by name (including “Armen Alchian of UCLA, Karl Brunner of Rochester, James Buchanan of VPI, Arthur Laffer of USC, Paul Evans of Stanford, Allan Meltzer of Carnegie-Mellon, Robert Mundell of Columbia, Beryl Sprinkel of the Harris Bank—all believe the Keynesian approach totally neglects incentives”), then added a newspaper article citing five more (*CR* 1978, 21035–21038). Nor did supporters cite only contemporary economists. They also introduced the arguments of Adam Smith and Ibn Khaldūn, as well as the commonsense wisdom of Americans who were flight superintendents, electrical engineers, or housewives (*CR* 1978, 21035, 31033, 33125, 33923).

Opponents, on the other hand, relied particularly heavily on the arguments of Walter Heller, the University of Minnesota economist who, as chair of President Kennedy’s Council of Economic Advisers, engineered the Kennedy-Johnson tax cuts (*CR* 1978, 19305–19308, 20583–20585, 20722–20723, 20860–20861, 24809). Beyond Heller, Democrats also liked to mention unexpected supporters of their position, citing conservative economists like Milton Friedman and Martin Feldstein, as well as the American Enterprise Institute’s William Fellner and Rudolph Penner (*CR* 1978, 26446, 25507, 20585, 20588–20589, 20722, 20860).

During this period of serious debate, the Laffer curve did not have a great deal of expressive content. It was treated respectfully even by those who disagreed with its premises, and expressions of disdain were rare. Legislators sometimes stated their dissent forcefully, as when Representative J. J. Pickle (D-TX) called it a “dangerous mirage” (*CR* 1978, 20113). Other times they conceded its basic truth, as when Representative James Jones (D-OK) said that it “makes some sense. At some point, yes, you tax too much; you decrease revenue; you decrease productivity” (*CR* 1978, 25507). But regardless of their approach, they took the concept seriously.

Even the single time a legislator mocked the Laffer curve on the floor of Congress in this period reinforced this general tone of gravity. Pickle at one point made a pun out of “Laffer,” saying that “anyone who takes a close look at the realities of taxes, the budget and the economy will get a hearty belly laugh out of this proposed budget-balancing tax cut...I think it would be more appropriate to call his Laffer Curve the Guffaw Curve” (*CR* 1978, 19466). Two weeks later, Pickle actually apologized, saying that “Since my remark about the ‘Guffaw curve’...a few people have suggested I might be making fun of an allegedly serious economic proposal. So, I want to make it clear that I have nothing personal against Prof. Arthur Laffer. In fact, his basic thesis may be true” (*CR* 1978, 20961). This contrasts sharply with the situation after 1981, when the name Laffer would be punned upon with regularity and the curve treated by many as a joke. In Period 1, though, treating the Laffer curve as an object of mockery was not acceptable.

Finally, as the quotations above suggest, discussions of the Laffer curve were relatively neutral, focusing on arguments and evidence, and did not incorporate the curve into larger political narratives. The narrative that would later emerge about how Reagan and/or the supply-siders came to power wielding the Laffer curve, only to find that their tax cuts left the nation deeply in debt, was not yet visible, nor were any other stories about the Laffer curve clearly in evidence.

Period 2, June 1980 to December 1981: The Second Coming of Kemp-Roth

Period 1 came to a close with the passage of the Revenue Act of 1978—which did include a large cut in the capital gains tax, but not the income tax—on October 10 (Congressional Quarterly [hereafter CQ] 1981). This defused Congressional tax debate for a while, and

mentions of the Laffer curve were much less frequent in late 1978, 1979, and early 1980. Negative statements largely disappeared during this time, and once again it was mostly promoters who brought up the curve. The only clear difference between this late 1978 to early 1980 interval and the interval before June 1978 was that there were now some neutral references as well as positive ones, as when Laffer was described in debate over some other question as “progenitor of the famous Laffer curve” (CR 1980, 7640).

It was not until the campaign for the 1980 presidential election heated up that both tax cuts and the Laffer curve returned to political visibility. Republican Ronald Reagan had endorsed Kemp-Roth from the beginning of his presidential candidacy (Cannon 1979), but runaway inflation had made many, including Republicans, leery of large tax cuts despite the tax revolt. In April, even George H. W. Bush, Reagan’s main competitor, called Reagan’s tax cut proposal “voodoo economic policy” (Shogan 1980).

But by June 1980, when Period 2 began, the debate was once again changing. The tight monetary policy being pursued by Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker was starting to rein in inflation, though at the cost of throwing the economy into recession. As unemployment began to climb and the onset of recession became evident, the appeal of supply-side tax cuts increased while some fears about their inflationary potential were quelled (Strout and Richard 1980). As Representative Donald J. Pease (D-OH) noted on June 25, “As we get closer and closer to November, more people have begun blowing the dust off the old Kemp-Roth tax cut bill or similar colossal-sized, across-the-board Federal income tax cuts” (CR 1980, 16851). That same day, presumptive presidential nominee Ronald Reagan stood with congressional Republicans on the Capitol steps, where they announced their unified support for a modified version of Kemp-Roth (CQ 1982).

June 1980 thus began an eighteen-month revival in use and discussion of the Laffer curve in Congress. Mentions were far less frequent than they had been in the summer of 1978, but increased from their late 1978 through early 1980 rate. Notably, the valence of Laffer curve mentions also changed at this time. Up to this point, 62 % of all Laffer curve mentions had been positive in tone. In Period 2, however, only 28 % of statements were clearly positive, with the rest split nearly evenly between negative and neutral (or unclear) mentions.⁵

Active discussion of fiscal policy continued during the summer and fall of 1980, as Congress considered a series of short-term tax cuts designed to be stimulative (CQ 1982, Dewar 1980). But major tax legislation was postponed till after the election.

The November 1980 election marked a turning point in the use of the Laffer curve in Congress. Reagan was elected president, and Democrats lost control of the Senate, meaning that for the first time in 26 years Democrats did not hold majorities in both houses of Congress. The part of Period 2 that fell before the election saw a four-to-one ratio of Republican to Democratic mentions, suggesting that despite the “voodoo economics” label, Republicans still saw the Laffer curve as being useful to refer to. But the post-election part of Period 2 saw a one-to-three ratio of Republican to Democratic mentions—almost the reverse—implying that Democrats perceived it as more politically valuable to bring up the Laffer curve than Republicans did.⁶

When Reagan was elected, he reaffirmed his commitment to the core of Kemp-Roth, and his own tax proposal, announced in February 1981, was closely based on it (Atkinson 1980, CQ 1982). Discussion of Reagan’s bill, the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA), gradually intensified until the legislation passed both houses of Congress in late July and was signed

⁵ p (two-tailed) <0.001 (Fisher’s exact test) for positive/nonpositive statements before and during Period 2.

⁶ p (two-tailed) <0.001 (Fisher’s exact test) for Republican/Democrat statements during the pre-election and post-election parts of Period 2.

into law on August 13 (CQ 1985b). Tax debate (and Laffer curve mentions) continued through the rest of the Congressional session, however, as Democrats unsuccessfully tried to modify various provisions of ERTA (CQ 1985a). Period 2 ends with the close of this session, after which use of the Laffer curve dropped off sharply.

We make two main observations about how legislators used the term “Laffer curve” in Period 2. First, it was being used by members of both parties less as a cognitive symbol and more as an expressive symbol than it had been in Period 1. Both Democrats and Republicans gave indications that the Laffer curve argument was losing legitimacy, but they did so in different ways. Democrats increasingly treated it with disdain, though it was not usually mocked, and puns were rare. Republicans, on the other hand, expressed this in two ways. The half of them who used the term approvingly in this period sometimes acknowledged that the argument was rejected by many even as they invoked it. But among the other half it was common to use the Laffer curve to represent an extreme viewpoint, against which they could position themselves as moderate.

Second, for the most part political narratives were still not visible in Period 2. However, there were three instances in which one senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, prefigured the “Reagan used the Laffer curve to justify tax cuts and it led us into debt” narrative that would eventually come to dominate Democrats’ use of the term—though not for another decade.

Loss of Legitimacy and the Shift from Cognitive to Expressive Symbol

The fact that fewer Republicans and more Democrats mentioned the Laffer curve after the election itself suggests that the argument was losing effectiveness, if not legitimacy. But the ways Republicans talked about the Laffer curve reinforce this impression that the concept was gaining expressive content.

There were still approving mentions, as when Representative Edward Weber (R-OH) said, “Mr. Speaker, for the past 2 weeks I have been wearing a lapel pin that says, ‘Swerve with the Curve—Tax Cuts Now.’ On the pin there is a curved red line that represents the Laffer curve, named after economist Arthur Laffer. Mr. Laffer relies on an ancient principle—the more you tax something, the less you will get of it. The more we tax income, the less income we get” (CR 1981, 16077–16078). Some of the inserted mentions even used the evidence-based strategy of presenting examples of times and places the Laffer curve had worked, as Republicans commonly had in 1978. Kemp, for example, included a *Wall Street Journal* editorial describing Massachusetts’ tax-cut-driven economic success: “as [Democratic] Governor [Edward J.] King surveys his state’s economic health and his higher-than-projected tax receipts, he is a long way from repudiating the ‘Laffer Curve.’ The Carter-Mondale ticket can denounce it as ‘make-believe,’ but the governor, an early Carter supporter, is unmoved. ‘Well, it’s working for me,’ he says” (CR 1980, 26949). But even here the decline in legitimacy is clear, with the reference to “make-believe.”

And more common among Republicans were mentions that not only acknowledged that many saw the Laffer curve as extreme, but also used that fact to position themselves as moderate. Representative Stewart McKinney (R-CT), for example, emphasized, “[O]f course, any substantial reduction in taxes will require fiscal restraint. That cannot be denied. There is no magic formula (the Laffer curve notwithstanding) that allows us to reduce taxes, increase defense spending, and balance the budget” (CR 1980, 29038). Similarly, Representative S. William Green (R-NY) said that “few but the most ardent believers in the Laffer curve think that the stimulative effects of an across-the-board tax cut will be instantaneous” (CR 1981, 1215).

Even early proponents of the Laffer curve found themselves backpedaling, explaining that it was not the sole justification for tax cuts. Representative John H. Roussetol (R-CA), for example, inserted a *Washington Star* editorial written by Bruce Bartlett:

Of course, many different arguments were used to support and buttress the tax-cut program, one of them being the idea that a tax cut could—theoretically—pay for itself by expanding the tax base; i.e., the Laffer Curve. Unfortunately, rather than being an illustration of what was theoretically possible, the Laffer Curve got turned into the sole justification for Kemp-Roth, and the idea became implanted in the public mind that those of us supporting Kemp-Roth were somehow unconcerned about federal spending because the tax cut would pay for itself overnight. This was never the case (*CR* 1981, 5328).

Jude Wanniski (*CR* 1980, 14875) and Paul Craig Roberts (*CR* 1980, 22200) were quoted making similar arguments qualifying the Laffer-curve case for tax cuts.

Democrats, whose use of the “Laffer curve” term picked up after Reagan’s election, did still treat it as an intellectual concept, and they did take it fairly seriously. Only rarely (11 % of the time) did they use it as what we call a political referent; that is, as shorthand for a particular political group or era (e.g., “Republicans came into office waving the Laffer curve”). By comparison, 57 % of Democratic mentions in Period 3 would use the Laffer curve as a political referent.⁷ But Democrats were, however, increasingly disdainful of the argument.

Their spoken mentions, in particular, showed a new level of negativity toward it. Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC), for example, said with regard to Kemp-Roth budget projections, “You want to credit yourselves for a \$5 billion reflow of funds under the Laffer curve or whatever that thing is. They did not even bring him around the last two months” (*CR* 1980, 30158). Representative Robert Edgar (D-PA), in a statement opposing Reagan’s proposed budget, said, “What happens to the economy in the midst of all this? The Laffer curve suggests that tax cuts will somehow increase tax revenues. It is an idea crazy enough to get the attention of the media and politicians. But commonsense says otherwise. Increased spending and decreased revenues simply mean higher deficits” (*CR* 1981, 8928). And Senator J. James Exon (D-NE), in one of the post-ERTA attempts to amend the tax legislation, said, “We are all hopeful the President’s program will work, but simply blind wishing will not make it so. I believe that the Laffer curve and all this supply side economics running wild is Alice in Wonderland economics” (*CR* 1981, 22319). Democrats stopped bringing in evidence to support their points almost entirely; instead, they treated the concept as already disproven.

Despite this general disdain for the concept’s validity, however, its expressive content was still not nearly as strong as it would become in Period 3. Rarely was the idea mocked—Edgar’s characterization of it as “crazy” was about as strong as the language got—and only one negative pun was used, when Representative Henry S. Reuss (D-WI) wrote, “The Laffer Curve, it has been said, has the shape, and the substance, of a wishbone” (*CR* 1981, 1336).

Prefiguring an Ironic Narrative about the Reagan Administration

In Period 3, an ironic narrative about the Laffer curve would become common among Democrats. In this story, Reagan and the supply-siders came to power with faith in the Laffer curve and cut taxes promising that revenues would increase, but instead created massive

⁷ p (two-tailed) = 0.0001 (Fisher’s exact test).

deficits that hurt the country. While this narrative is not very visible during Period 2, its very beginnings were articulated several times by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. For example, in late 1981 he used it to explain the financial markets' "panic" over deficit projections. The Reagan administration, he argued, created this situation through distrust of government institutions and belief in the Laffer curve: "The '[L]affer curve' was new. It was a fundamental rejection of the notion of restraint, of limit as the necessary environment of government. The proposition took as its most popular form the proposal that taxes could be cut by one third at no cost to revenues" (CR 1981, 20811). Again in December Moynihan used the Laffer curve to explain how the nation found itself in its present position of budget "crisis":

[T]his one was brought on by the majority's political commitments to an untenable, indefensible and now abandoned economics. What was the proposition? It was essentially a policy at war with itself. On the one hand, the administration embraced the nostrum of the Laffer curve, cocktail napkin economics that offered the classic free lunch that politicians somehow cannot resist... Simultaneously, the Federal Reserve pursued a tightly restrictive monetary policy, bringing the Nation the highest interest rates in history. These policies were at war with themselves, and inevitably when you are at war with yourself, all the casualties are your own (CR 1981, 30106).

The emerging narrative is not as clear here as it would become in the late 1980s. But this is the first hint of what would eventually become Democrats' dominant way of using the Laffer curve: as a way to tell a story about the past failure of their political opposition.

Period 3, March 1982 to March 1995: After ERTA

Period 2 ends with the close of the 1981 Congressional session. Period 3, which begins with the next mention of the Laffer curve in March 1982, covers a much longer duration: 13 years. We characterize this era as a single period because during it, the Laffer curve is mentioned in the *Congressional Record* only occasionally, but regularly: a little less than once per month, on average, for a total of 115 mentions. These are not clustered heavily around specific political episodes, and after Period 3 ends, in March 1995, mentions once again drop off sharply.

The rest of early 1980s fiscal policy was dominated by discussion of what to do about the large deficits that ERTA created. Reagan signed several small tax increases into law: on income, as well as gasoline, in 1982; for social security in 1983; and in miscellaneous minor areas in 1984 (CQ 1985b). The unprecedented budget deficits also led to intense debate over how to manage them. In 1985 Reagan signed the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget Act, which was supposed to enact automatic budget cuts if deficit reduction targets were not met. The Supreme Court, however, declared Gramm-Rudman unconstitutional, and legislators found ways to get around a revised version of the law, making it toothless (CQ 2008). The other major tax legislation of the Reagan era was the bipartisan Tax Reform Act of 1986, which closed loopholes and reduced tax expenditures in order to lower marginal rates overall. While intended to be revenue-neutral, it too turned out to cost money (CQ 1989).

During the rest of the Reagan administration—that is, from 1982 through 1988—statements about the Laffer curve were not, in general, clustered around specific tax debates as they had been in Periods 1 and 2. There were occasional small groups of Republican mentions as one set of tax data or another became available and was brought in as providing evidence for the Laffer curve. More of the references during these years were actually tied to

budget debates than to tax debates, since the constraints caused by the growing deficit provided opportunities for Democrats in particular to bring up the Laffer curve.

Beyond the Reagan years, Period 3 also included the George H. W. Bush presidential administration as well as half of Bill Clinton's first term. The most significant tax event of the Bush years was the 1990 passage of a tax increase as part of a deficit-reduction bill (CQ 1993b). This broke Bush's campaign pledge of "no new taxes," and cost him significant political capital. Clinton came into office in January 1993, and his early years saw two fiscal debates that did prompt a handful of Laffer curve mentions. The first was around Clinton's initial budget reconciliation bill, which he presented in February 1993 and signed into law in August. It included the largest nominal tax increase in U.S. history, targeted at upper-income groups. The other was over a Republican budget reconciliation bill introduced after that party, in a massive upset, won both houses of Congress in the 1994 midterm elections. The bill would have included large tax cuts, but while it passed the House and Senate, Clinton vetoed it, and the veto held (CQ 1997). After March 1995, references to the Laffer curve nearly disappeared, with zero to three mentions made each year from 1996 to 2008.⁸

Period 3 saw a sharp divergence in how members of the two political parties used the term "Laffer curve." In Period 1, both Democrats and Republicans approached it as a cognitive symbol, discussing it at length and bringing in arguments, evidence, and experts to make their case about why it did or did not apply to U.S. fiscal policy. In Period 2, while the Laffer curve still retained significant cognitive content, it was increasingly spoken of in an expressive way by both Democrats and Republicans. The former group often treated it with disdain, and the latter either acknowledged Democrats' dismissal while defending the argument, or portrayed it as a somewhat extreme position.

But in Period 3, the cognitive symbolism of the Laffer curve became decidedly secondary for Democrats, and its expressive symbolism dominant. Now, they brought it up not because they wanted to discuss its validity, but as an epithet—a ridiculous idea, and, often, a polluted symbol for supply-siders and the Reagan administration.

At the same time, among Republicans use of the Laffer curve actually shifted back in a *more* cognitive direction. Republicans continued to acknowledge that the Laffer curve had become a polluted symbol. But those who mentioned it in Period 3 were much more likely to discuss it using arguments and evidence, as they had in Period 1. Consistent with this, 43 % of Republicans who mentioned the Laffer curve in Period 3 discussed it for more than a paragraph, while only 5 % of Democrats did.⁹ References to it as an extreme position disappeared among Republicans, and during this period it was once again mentioned with roughly equal frequency by Republicans and Democrats.

In addition to Democrats' shift toward using the Laffer curve primarily as an expressive symbol, during the latter half of Period 3 it also became clearly articulated into an ironic narrative about the failure of the Reagan administration. Initially, it was only Senator Moynihan who used this narrative. But, starting in 1987 other Democrats also began to adopt it, and after 1990, when Democrats brought up the Laffer curve it was almost always to tell this story of Republican failure. For Democrats, the Laffer curve had become not only an expressive symbol, but also a way to reaffirm the rightness of their beliefs and the failure of their political opponents.

⁸ Interestingly, however, there has recently been a slight uptick, with five mentions in 2009 and ten in 2010.

⁹ p (two-tailed) <0.00001 (Fisher's exact test) for the Republican/Democrat difference in Period 3.

Cognitive or Expressive Symbol? A Partisan Divergence

In Period 3, Republicans used the Laffer curve mostly as a cognitive symbol, in ways that were more similar to Period 1 than Period 2. The proportion of positive uses shot back up, from only 50 % in Period 2 to 78 % in Period 3. (Period 1, by comparison, was 95 % positive among Republicans.) And few Republicans (8 %) used the Laffer curve as a political referent, that is, as shorthand for a particular group or era.

Instead, they returned to lengthy, serious argument. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), for example, provided a historical example to make the case for the Laffer curve:

It was said in 1932 that we must balance the budget in order to end Government “crowding out” of the credit markets so as to lower interest rates in order to spur recovery. But when taxes were raised the economy stagnated and revenues declined. Some people would say that the much maligned Laffer curve effect had taken place—that tax increases had so reduced incentives that the economy stagnated and the budget could not be balanced, because revenue declined. (CR 1982, 22442)

Helms continued, for several paragraphs, to explain why the U.S. needed “Reaganomics,” rather than “Hoovernomics.”

Similarly, Senator Bob Packwood (R-OR), in a 1989 conversation about tax reform, said,

Here is where this country is indebted to Art Laffer and the Laffer curve, because his theory is correct. Here is where Professor Laffer says: There is a point, an elliptical curve, where there is an optimal level of taxation that produces the greatest amount of revenue for the Government. That is how he explains it. It is quite simple. At a zero rate of taxation, the Government does not realize very much money; namely, zero. (CR 1989, 28677)

Packwood went on to talk through exactly what the Laffer curve implied for U.S. tax rates for several hundred more words. Almost all Republican mentions during this period brought in some kind of evidence to support the Laffer curve, ranging from the allegedly positive budget impact of tax cuts in California, to examples of the revenue-increasing effects of tax cuts in other times and places, to the increase in tax revenues from upper-income groups that followed ERTA, to the revenue decline seen among high-income groups after the Bush tax increase.¹⁰

Unlike in Period 2, with one exception, Republicans did not use the Laffer curve to position themselves as moderate in Period 3. Instead, it was only the true believers who now brought up the Laffer curve. But while they themselves treated it primarily as a cognitive symbol, they did, however, still frequently acknowledge its polluted, expressive nature, calling it “widely misunderstood,” “much maligned,” “much-ridiculed,” and “infamous” (see, e.g., CR 1982, 8688, 22442; 1983, 8490; 1993, 15502, 15503, 19112).

This expressive content was even clearer in Democrats’ use of the Laffer curve. As mentioned above, only 5 % of their discussions were longer than a paragraph—a decline from 37 % in Period 2 and 94 % in Period 1.¹¹ They were not wasting time debating its validity. And when the term was actually used in a cognitive way, as a concept rather than as

¹⁰ For examples of these uses, see CR 1982, 5422–5423, 8687–8688, 22441–22442; 1983, 15984–15985; 1984, 16029–16042; 1985, 6097–6098; 1986, 8150–8151; 1988, 20031–20041; 1990, 16808–16810, 26081, 29873–29874; 1991, 20600–20601; 1993, 15502, 15503–15505, 15681, 19112, 19122.

¹¹ p (two-tailed) < 0.001 (Fisher’s exact test) for the Period 2/Period 3 difference and < 0.0001 for the Period 1/Period 3 difference.

shorthand for a political group, it almost always had emotional content attached as well—usually ridicule. Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND), for example, stated, “Let me say I think the Laffer curve at both zero and 100 % option [sic] is probably accurate, but a joke most of the places in between” (*CR* 1987, 33228).

More often, however, the Laffer curve was used less as a concept and more as shorthand for a particular group—though still with disdain attached. Senator Donald Riegle (D-MI) called the Laffer curve part of a “budget shell game”: “It has gone under the guise of Reaganomics. It has gone under the guise of supply-side economics, the Laffer curve—the notion that was sketched on the back of an envelope” (*CR* 1991, 23502). And Representative Ben Jones (D-GA) said, “While Americans and Georgians are seeing the American dream in many cases become a nightmare, they [Republicans] are talking about a supply-side growth package, Laffer curve, trickle-down voodoo economics” (*CR* 1991, 24842).

This ridicule was particularly evident in the use of puns, which occurred in a full 30 % of Democratic statements during Period 3. All of these were at least mildly derisory. Speakers frequently punned on the word “Laffer,” saying, “Don’t believe in the nonsense of the Laffer curve, at which you should laugh, as an overwhelming number of economists do” (*CR* 1985, 28452), “The Laffer curve was a laugh in that we ended up choking on debt in this country” (*CR* 1992, 14778), and “It was a ‘laugher,’ all right, the way it worked” (*CR* 1995, 3707). Occasionally they even punned on “curve,” as in the statement that “Presidential wise men tell us from time to time that a return to health is just around the Laffer curve, but the curve turns out to be endless” (*CR* 1982, 13379). For Democrats, the Laffer curve was no longer a theory, but a joke.

The Laffer Curve and the Ironic Narrative of the Reagan Administration

The Laffer curve was also increasingly used by Democrats as part of an ironic narrative during this period. In this narrative, the Laffer-curve-obsessed Reagan administration had cut taxes expecting to raise revenues, but instead created massive deficits. In the earlier part of this period, Moynihan was still the only one telling these stories, as when, in 1984, he claimed, “These vast increases in the Federal deficit and debt are due, simply stated, to the failed economic theories advanced and followed by the administration, to Laffer curve economics that promised to balance the budget by cutting taxes and increasing spending” (*CR* 1984, 8547; Moynihan also used this narrative in 1985, 1986, 1992, and 1995).

But after 1987, others began to adopt this narrative as well, starting with Senator Lawton Chiles (D-FL), who told such a story as part of a conversation about the budget:

We are willing to say that the great policy that started in 1981 ain’t working—ain’t working. The Laffer curve, supply-side economics, that we are going to be able to tax cut ourselves into prosperity, has reached the same fate as the old Democratic philosophy that you could spend yourself into prosperity: It did not work. The Laffer curve, supply side, did not work either. (*CR* 1987, 17262)

And in 1990, Representative Richard Durbin, in the context of another budget debate, laid out the narrative quite clearly:

Most will recall that when President Reagan came to office about 10 years ago, he brought with him a new school of economics that was guided by a theory known as the Laffer curve, not the usual spelling. This curve maintained that if enough taxes were cut, the American economy would grow, and in growing, create jobs and opportunity for everyone. It was vintage trickle-down theory that if enough tax cuts were given to

the wealthiest people in this country, those in the lower income categories would certainly benefit. Many people questioned this. They questioned the wisdom of it. They questioned whether it would work. Ten years have passed, and we can now look at the verdict that has been turned in as a result of our adherence to the Laffer curve and the Reagan philosophy, this trickle-down theory. (CR 1990, 25515)

Durbin went on to explain at some length how the verdict had been negative, ending, “of course, the old saying is—and I do not know who started it—the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Under the Laffer curve and the Reagan tax policy that unfortunately was true” (CR 1990, 25515).

Similarly, Representative David Bonior (D-MI) explained how the deficit “came directly out of those huge defense increases and Laffer-curve cuts that [Reagan] thought were the great achievement of his administration. Do you remember those days? Remember when he tried to tell Americans we would grow our way out of the deficit?” (CR 1992, 12954). And Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) recalled, “I arrived here in 1981 in the minority. President Reagan pointed to something called the Laffer curve and told all of us we could balance the budget, while at the same time cutting taxes and increasing spending. It was an Alice-in-Wonderland view of economics where up was down and down was up, and tax cuts always increase revenue” (CR 1995, 3159). By the 1990s, this had become by far the dominant way Democrats talked about the Laffer curve, with 22 of the 24 Democratic statements in this part of Period 3 using this ironic narrative.

Discussion and Conclusions

The way that legislators used the phrase “Laffer curve” changed substantially over the 17 years the term was in at least occasional use. The term was always highly partisan, with Republicans approving of it and Democrats thinking it was wrong or inapplicable. Over the entire period, Democratic uses were positive only 9 % of the time, and there was no interval in which more than 8 % of Republicans clearly used it negatively.

Yet over time, the way the two parties talked about the Laffer curve diverged beyond a simple disagreement about its applicability. For both Republicans and Democrats, it started out as primarily a cognitive symbol: a theory to be debated using reason, evidence, and reference to experts. Republicans made a moderate shift toward expressive use of the Laffer curve in Period 2, when some began acknowledging that it represented an extreme position, and positioning themselves, by contrast, as less extreme. But in Period 3, from 1982 to 1995, Republicans who mentioned the Laffer curve returned to using it predominantly as a cognitive symbol, with longer, evidence-and-argument-based discussions and less expressive content, much as they had in the summer of 1978.

For Democrats, however, use of the Laffer curve took a very different trajectory. While it started as a cognitive symbol, in Period 2 it increasingly picked up expressive content and was often treated with disdain as a theory that had clearly been disproven. Yet for the most part Democrats were still treating it *as* a concept, even if an incorrect one, during this period.

In Period 3, though, while Republicans were shifting back toward a more cognitive use of the Laffer curve, Democrats nearly stopped using it as an intellectual concept at all, referring to it instead as a polluted symbol for a particular political group—supply-siders and the Reagan administration. And after 1987 Democrats increasingly used the Laffer curve as part of an ironic political narrative about the failure of the Reagan administration: Reagan came to power preaching the Laffer curve, but his tax cuts resulted in massive deficits instead of

the promised revenue increases. By the 1990s, Democratic almost always used the Laffer curve as an expressive symbol articulated into this political narrative.

Why Does Use of the Laffer Curve Change?

While the main contribution of this paper is to empirically document how the political use of an economic concept evolved over time, we do want to consider, however speculatively, possible causes of the change. The nature of our data prevents us from making any strong claims about why use of the Laffer curve shifted at the particular moments, and in the particular ways, that it did. But we can identify several potential reasons such a change might have taken place.

One plausible explanation for Democrats' shift away from using the Laffer curve in a measured, cognitive way is that it paralleled a larger polarization of American political discourse. There is strong evidence that the voting patterns of U.S. legislators became more polarized by party after 1976, with polarization increasing at a roughly constant rate from then to the present (McCarty et al. 2006). There is also a fair amount of qualitative evidence suggesting that civility on the House and Senate floor started to decline around the same time (Sinclair 2006; Uslander 1993), although not all quantitative indicators of civility show the same pattern (Jamieson et al. 1999).

Sinclair (2006) argues that a decline in civility began after the congressional reforms of the 1970s, was accelerated by the styles of specific legislative leaders like Jim Wright (D-TX) and Newt Gingrich (R-GA), and was worsened by a changing media environment. Others have proposed that the diminishing amount of time spent by legislators in Washington, the effects of large new cohorts of legislators in the 1970s, Democrats' loss of control of the Senate in 1980, and changes in broader American culture may also have contributed (Uslander 1993). Regardless of the causes of this polarization, the timing of the changes we observe does line up closely with these changes. Legislators may have shifted away from serious, deliberative debate more generally, not just with regard to the Laffer curve. However, evaluating this possibility would require additional cases, or other types of data.

Even if broader political polarization drove the changes, though, several questions still remain about why the Laffer curve was used in particular ways at particular moments. First, it might seem surprising that the Democrats ever took the Laffer curve seriously, even in the late 1970s. Why did they respond by arguing against it, rather than dismissing it out of hand? Several factors might have contributed to its initial legitimacy: its association with an academic economist, the fact that Democrats had made similar arguments for the Kennedy-Johnson tax cuts during the previous decade, and the perception of broad voter demand for tax relief are three possibilities.

In Period 2, though, the content of the symbol changed for both parties. Here our guess is that the rise of Reagan affected the politics of its use. In the late 70s, the Laffer curve was associated most closely with Jack Kemp. But it later became linked to Reagan, in part through Bush's April 1980 attack on Reagan's "voodoo economic policy." Bush's vocal dismissal of supply-side economics legitimated opposition from other Republicans, and may have created an opening for Democrats, too, to begin using the Laffer curve more negatively. The political implications of the Laffer curve likely changed again after the November election, as Republicans leaders of Congress became more interested in winning the votes of moderate legislators than appealing to their base, and thus less prone to using the Laffer curve as an argument.

After Period 2, Republicans returned to a style of use quite similar to that seen in Period 1. This may be because only the Republicans most committed to the Laffer curve continued

to mention it as it became less important in political debate. For Democrats, though, the Laffer curve became more polluted during Period 3, and was integrated into a political narrative after 1987. Though one might expect that this delegitimation was simply a reaction to massive increases in the deficit after 1982, the timing does not support this. Much of the Laffer curve's legitimacy was already lost among Democrats by the time ERTA passed, and the narrative of failure did not crystallize until the late 1980s, long after ERTA's budget impact became clear. It seems plausible that the political narrative may have solidified during a time of collective stock-taking as the Reagan years came to a close: Democrats looked back and explained to themselves what had happened, and included a role for the Laffer curve.

The Politicization of Knowledge Claims

While the initial promulgation of the Laffer curve did shape tax policy, we do not think the change in use that we describe here necessarily had any political effects. Kemp-Roth did not pass in 1978 when Democrats took the Laffer curve seriously, and a version of it did pass after the Laffer curve had been delegitimated in 1981. Nor did its delegitimation prevent later tax cuts—even those tied to similar revenue claims, like George W. Bush's in 2001. The only effect that seems clear is that once the Laffer curve became an expressive symbol for one party, the possibility of real bipartisan debate over its validity or applicability ended.

The value of looking at this discursive trend is not that it explains the evolution of tax policy. It is as a step toward building a theory of how knowledge claims become politicized. While the evolution of the Laffer curve may be explained partly by larger trends toward polarization, we suspect it may also highlight a pattern through which the politicization of knowledge claims can occur more generally. A cognitive symbol is introduced and taken seriously, then undergoes delegitimation by one party. It becomes increasingly polluted and expressive, loses its cognitive content as it becomes associated with all that is bad about the political opposition, and eventually becomes part of a narrative about the failures of one's opponents.

It is likely that some variation on this pattern can be found in other contexts in which science is politicized. It seems quite similar, for example, to how the debate over global warming has evolved over the last 20 years. Smith (2012) characterizes this debate in terms of changes in narrative genre, which we agree are important. But a cursory look at environmental debates in the *Congressional Record* suggests that “global warming” also shifted from serving as a cognitive symbol to an expressive one for Republicans, much as the Laffer curve did for Democrats. In congressional debate over revision of the Clean Air Act in 1990, one can find Republicans arguing quite seriously about whether certain measures are needed to address global warming. By the early 2000s, though, when Republicans mention global warming, it is typically as a polluted expressive symbol, not a cognitive symbol that is up for real debate.¹² This happened even though the evolution of the global warming debate took place a decade later than that of the Laffer curve. If our observations about global warming discourse are accurate, they suggest that the dynamics we document cannot be attributed entirely to a one-time shift in Congressional polarization.

The pattern we observe here suggests several sets of questions one might ask about the politicization of knowledge claims more generally. First, does this process work differently depending on the nature of the knowledge claim itself? The Laffer curve debate is distinctive in some ways from debates over global warming, for example. Academic experts on both the left and the right saw the Laffer curve as a conceptual truism, but as very unlikely to apply to

¹² See CQ 1993a, 2002, 2006 for entries into the Congressional debates where global warming was discussed in the early 1990s, late 1990s, and early 2000s.

the U.S. context, and this was true throughout the time period studied here. A strong program approach to the sociology of knowledge would retain a commitment to analyzing the reception of true and false claims similarly (Bloor 1991). But in the context of politics it is hard to imagine that a claim's acceptance by experts, or lack thereof, has no effects on its reception, even if those effects are not straightforward.

The Laffer curve is also located in an unusual sweet spot between simplicity and technicality. It has the outward trappings of economics, with its graphical representation, its focus on incentives, and its counterintuitive, yet logical, claim. But it is simple enough for the layperson to grasp easily, and translates nicely into a causal policy story (Stone 1989) with obvious implications: If we are on the downward-sloping side of the Laffer curve, then we should cut taxes in order to raise revenues. As Campbell (1998) has pointed out, simple explanations have a political advantage. Thus level of expert acceptance and level of technicality or complexity may both be mediating factors affecting the politicization of knowledge claims.

Second, are there particular social or political conditions under which knowledge claims are likely to become expressive or attached to polluting narratives? It took several years for the Laffer curve to gain significant expressive content, and a durable narrative was not attached to the concept till a decade after its introduction. This timeframe may be normal or unusual, or it may be historically specific: it seems possible that the pace of the shift to expressive symbol might have accelerated as Congress itself became more polarized, and as the media cycle accelerated. Elements of this process may also be particular to a two-party political system. More generally, while we look at the shift from cognitive to expressive symbol in congressional politics, knowledge claims can become expressively charged in other contexts as well, including the civil sphere (Epstein 1996) and the scientific one (Collins 1992, chapter 4), even in the absence of a clear change in evidence.¹³ Another direction for future work would involve looking for the presence or absence this pattern under different scope conditions.

Third, is the shift from cognitive to expressive symbol reversible, or is it generally permanent once it occurs? After 1995, Republicans more or less abandoned the phrase "Laffer curve," perhaps because the term had become too polluted, though they did not abandon the argument that tax cuts could raise revenues. If a particular claim takes on such expressive content, will it eventually be given up on, perhaps replaced by another way of saying the same thing (as "creationism" has become "intelligent design"), or can expressively charged claims eventually reenter the realm of substantive, reasoned debate? Based on the global warming case, it does not seem that a preponderance of scientific evidence alone is enough to remove the expressive charge attached to a knowledge claim. Indeed, if Nyhan and Reifler's (2010) claims are accurate, attempts to correct factual inaccuracies can actually backfire and *increase* commitment to the inaccuracy among members of the corrected group.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what effects does the shift from cognitive to expressive symbol, or the emergence of a narrative that uses the symbol to pollute the opposition, have on political outcomes? Such a shift seems likely to constrain discourse in certain ways, at the very least limiting serious deliberation. Yet if the alternative is for opposing parties to repeatedly make the case for their position using evidence and reason rather than emotion, but to cling to that position regardless of whose evidence and arguments are stronger, is that really preferable to a more emotion-driven debate? An exploration of how the discursive changes we document here affect further discourse and political outcomes is a critical next step, perhaps to be accomplished using comparative strategies.

Further research will be required to determine whether and to what extent the patterns we see here are more broadly visible, under what conditions they play out in similar ways, and with

¹³ We thank a reviewer for drawing our attention to this point and suggesting the Collins example.

what ultimate effect. But the examples we provide suggest what the larger importance of understanding such dynamics might be. It may not matter if politicians take the Laffer curve seriously or mock it. We hope, however, that the Laffer curve can tell us something about the process through which other kinds of knowledge claims become politically charged and polluted, and how the possibility of real deliberation can be shut down. At a time when science itself is increasingly subject to politicization, such lessons are worth learning.

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