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Silent Majorities: The Brief History of a Curious Term, 1920-1980

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SILENT MAJORITIES: THE BRIEF HISTORY OF A CURIOUS TERM, 1920-1980

by
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of the term “the silent majority” from 1920-1980, tracing the term from its roots in the prohibition and moral movements of the 1920s and 1930s, to its resurfacing in the 1950s in connection to race and integration, to finally Nixon’s popularization of the term. The sources in which the term was used as such were located through Google Books, the University of Mississippi’s One Search tool, and the Chronicling America database. The Google Ngram Viewer was also utilized in creating a graph that tracked the usage of “the silent majority” in digitized literature through the twentieth century.

Upon analyzing these sources, it became apparent that “the silent majority” was used by conservative American citizens and politicians to describe voters they considered to be the anti-radicals, the anti-minority, and the virtuous majoritarian sect of the voting population in America. The conclusion of this paper considers the implications of such a definition on modern American politics – as the term resurfaced and many voters began to identify as members of 2016 candidate Donald Trump’s “silent majority” constituency – and suggests that “the silent majority” of the 2016 election might actually have been composed of liberals, who won the popular vote, rather than the conservatives who claimed membership to the group.

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

On August 21, 2015 Presidential candidate Donald J. Trump tweeted, “We are going to have a wild time in Alabama tonight! Finally, the silent majority is back!”¹ On October 29, 2016, at a campaign rally in Phoenix, Arizona, candidate Trump again used the phrase, declaring, “It’s a term that I haven’t heard for years. But I really think it applies now more than maybe ever before, and that’s the term the silent majority. You don’t hear it anymore.”² On November 7, 2016, the official YouTube account associated with promoting his Presidential candidacy – known as Donald J. Trump for President – published a 0:46 video titled “We are the Silent Majority.”³

Presidential candidate Donald Trump’s use of the term “the silent majority” to describe his supporters echoed President Richard Nixon, who first used the term in his “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam” on November 3, 1969:

And so tonight – to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans – I ask for your support. I pledged in my campaign for the presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed.⁴

Two presidential figures, situated over half a century apart, each capitalized on a term with roots stretching back to the nineteenth century. But *who* is “the silent majority” and

1. Trump, Donald J. @realDonaldTrump. Aug. 21, 2015.

2. Trump, Donald J. Oct. 29, 2016. Campaign Rally. Phoenix, AZ. C-Span.

3. Trump, Donald J. “We are the Silent Majority”. Donald J. Trump for President. Nov. 7, 2016. YouTube.

4. Nixon, Richard. “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam.” Nov. 3, 1969. University of Virginia, Millers Center National Archives: Presidential Speeches.

what does it mean to be a member of it? More importantly, how has this term changed in meaning over time? How has it conveyed continuity?

To address these lines of inquiry, I examined a range of primary sources from 1920-1980 to discern who defines “the silent majority” and who has defined themselves as part of “the silent majority.” To be sure, “the silent majority” remains both a difficult and nebulous concept to research, challenging clear or consistent definitions over time. That is because “the silent majority” – as a concept and constituency – had to evolve to reflect the realities of American public life it supposedly captured.

This thesis examines the term “the silent majority” and its usage in culture and politics from the early twentieth century to the present. A key component of my research was tracking the phrase via GoogleBooks Ngram Viewer.⁵ This tool allows a user to enter a word or phrase and see its popularity over time. After entering the phrase “the silent majority,” I was able to select a specific timeframe – which I chose to be the twentieth century – for the device to create a graph that illustrates the term’s ebbs and flows in use within digitized literature.

5. Lin, Yuri A., Michel, Aiden, Orwant, Brockman, Petrov. “Proceedings of the 50th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics.” *Syntactic Annotations for the Google Books Ngram Corpus*. 2012. Volume 2: Demo Papers. Google.

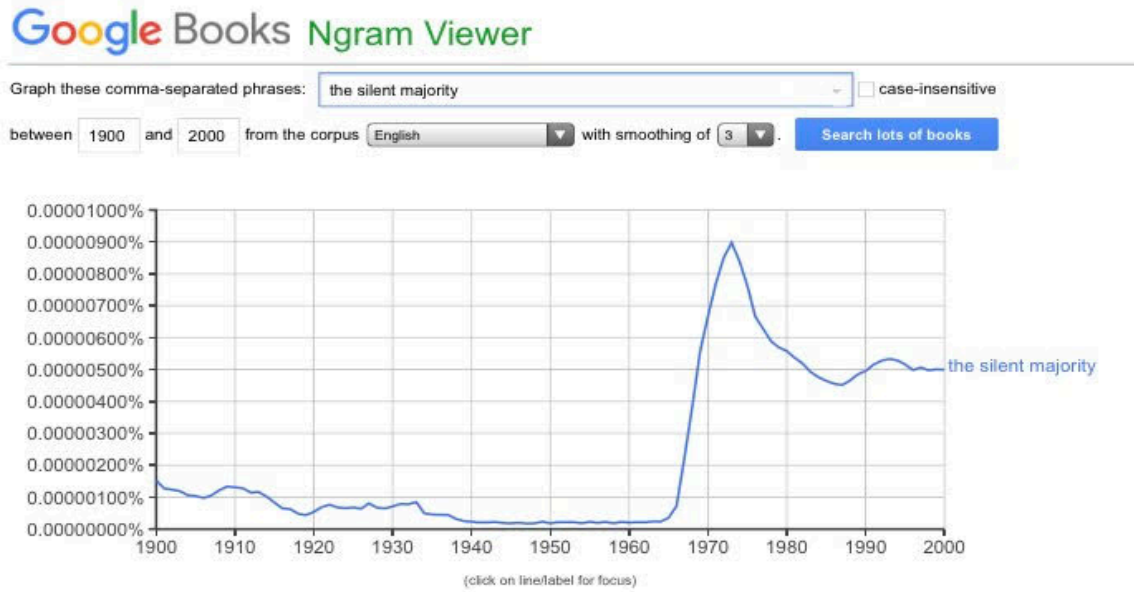


Figure 1.1⁶

Figure 1.1 illustrates the fluctuation in usage of the phrase, and it gave me perfunctory parameters for my research. After setting parameters, I examined primary sources from speeches, newspapers, books, poetry works, online posts, and tweets that used the phrase. To locate such sources, I used Google Books, Chronicling America, and the University of Mississippi’s One Search tool to locate digitized primary sources online that ranged from 1920-1980.

It should be noted that I dismissed the nineteenth century from my research in the beginning because, as James Greenough and George Kittredge stated, “the silent majority” was not used as a political term but rather as reference to the dead.⁷ In one of its first usages, M.C. King’s poem “The Silent Majority” illustrated the deaths of a company of sailors at sea:

He saw his doom before him, but filled with contemplation,

6. Ibid.

7. Greenough, James Bradstreet, Kittredge. *Words and their ways in English speech*. 1920. The Macmillan Company. London, ENG. Google Books. pg. 302.

He thought of nothing, to the last, but ‘Irren’s Vindication.’

O, for private Zimmerman, most timid of the lot,

Who sniffed the breeze of ruin, took sick, and died upon the spot.⁸

Another such use transpired in a *Report of the Board of Trustees* at the University of Illinois in 1885.⁹ In addition, similar use of the phrase as an association of the dead occurred in 1890 at the Senate of New York meeting by J.M. Whitman, who spoke about, “long after you and I have passed over to the silent majority.”¹⁰ Because “the silent majority” did not occur as a political term during the late nineteenth century – or if it did, it was not popular and carried little of the weight it later would – I chose to focus my thesis on the usage of the term in the context of modern twentieth century politics.

In the twentieth century, “the silent majority” did not fall out of use as a term for the dead immediately at the turn of the century. For instance, in 1914, a dramatic story printed in *The Day Book* newspaper read, “By the time you read these lines I shall have joined the great, silent majority.”¹¹ In addition, six years later in 1920, a comedic story in *The Mt. Sterling Advocate* featured the following dialogue between two characters:

“Since you saw my friend, he has joined the great silent majority.”

“Ah, is he dead?”

8. Herringshaw, Thomas William. *Local and National Poets of America*. 1890. American Publishers’ Association. Chicago, IL. Google Books. pg. 928.

9. *Report of the Board of Trustees*, Issue 12. 1885. University of Illinois. Chicago, IL. Google Books. pg. 84.

10. Whitman, J.M. *Argument of J.M. Whitman, one of Counsel for Michael F. Collins, sitting member*. 1890. Senate of the State of New York. New York, NY. Google Books. pg. 1042.

11. *The Day Book*. Sept. 16, 1914. Chicago, IL. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

“No; married.”¹²

The term became political shortly after World War I, specifically in the hands of advertising guru Bruce Barton. In 1919, Barton wrote in *Collier's* magazine, an endorsement of Vice-Presidential candidate Calvin Coolidge, “It sometimes seems as if this great *silent majority* has no spokesmen,” Barton wrote, himself a Republican, “but Coolidge belongs with that crowd: he lives like them, he works like them, and understands.”¹³ Barton’s effort to popularize Coolidge by characterizing him as an everyman marks the first political usage of the term, and thus marks the starting point of my research. This thesis is divided into three chapters – each covering a twenty-year period over 1920-1940, 1940-1960, and 1960-1980 – that ultimately seek to explain why and how the term “the silent majority” came to represent a supposedly unrepresented majoritarian segment of the population.

Barton’s characterization of Coolidge as an everyman that represented a great unspoken sect, or rather “the silent majority,” of the population was only reinforced over time. “The silent majority,” were the anti-radical, the anti-minority, and the virtuous majoritarian sect of the voting population in America. This presentation and its accuracy will both be examined, as will the social and political underpinnings of the phrase - its racial associations, its usage to attack the most vulnerable, and its political commodification. Barton coined the phrase, but politicians and citizens alike claimed to

12. *The Mt. Sterling Advocate*. Feb. 12, 1920. Mt. Sterling, KY. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

13. Barton, Bruce. “Concerning Calvin Coolidge,” *Collier's Magazine*. Springfield, OH. Nov. 1919. Appearing In: Buckley, Kerry W. *A President for the “Great Silent Majority”*: *Bruce Barton's Construction of Calvin Coolidge*. Dec. 2003. The New England Quarterly. MIT Press. Boston, MA. JSTOR. pg. 28.

be members or representatives of “the silent majority,” and then presented themselves as a group robbed of their political voice. As Trump’s recent use of the term shows, its appeal remains evident – as well as its ability to draw lines of definition and division that, in reality, stretch back over a century to the era in which “the silent majority,” first appeared.

PART ONE: 1920-1940

From 1920-1940, the term “the silent majority” evolved from a phrase describing the dead to a term full of political meaning. Bruce Barton’s use in 1919 was not the first. A few small, local newspapers gave the term traction before Barton did. Other newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s followed, with two distinct, opposing definitions emerging – that of “the silent majority” as a majoritarian voting sect to be reckoned with, and that of the group as an un-represented part of the population. The term then fell out of usage from 1930-1940, most likely due to the advent of the Great Depression and, later, World War II.¹⁴

Though Bruce Barton was the first to use “the silent majority” in a national magazine, local newspapers previously deployed the term. On June 24, 1919, the *Harrisburg Telegraph* ran an article on suffragette workers in Pennsylvania, which quoted Eliza D. Armstrong. She claimed, “I represent the silent majority of women who oppose suffrage for the sex.”¹⁵ The next use of the phrase concerned the vote for the League of Nations. Three months later, an article in the *News Scimitar* read: “The great mass of American people, the silent, thinking, all-powerful majority, who neither shout for the league of nations, nor against those who neither storm against the reservations, nor make violent protest in favor of their adoption, have but one desire, and that is to have the thing over.”¹⁶ The final use of the phrase before Barton took place in Great Falls, Montana, when the *Great Falls Daily Tribune* quoted B.J. Boorman as saying,

14. Ibid.

15. *Harrisburg Telegraph*. June 24, 1919. Harrisburg, PA. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

16. *News Scimitar*. Sept. 16, 1919. Memphis, TN. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

The great majority of people are not saying anything [in politics]. This great apparently neutral class is not neutral but it has no spokesman, no agitator or agent who will gain by the exploitation of its views. It is the duty, therefore, of civic organizations to serve, among other ways in representing this silent majority of the populace.¹⁷

In Armstrong and Boorman's characterization, "the silent majority" was a large group of people underrepresented in American life, and largely ambivalent about American internationalism. The opinion of "the silent, thinking, all-powerful majority" was both deliberate and meaningful, grounded in a posture of standing for or against something, whether women's suffrage or the League of Nations.¹⁸

Each writer, in some fashion, claimed that their voice was that of a "silent majority." However, it was Bruce Barton, the son of a Congregational minister and co-founder of the international advertising agency BBDO, who first used the term to describe a national political figure. In 1919, Barton took on the task of promoting Calvin Coolidge's campaign alongside Republican Presidential candidate Warren G. Harding.¹⁹ After meeting with Coolidge in October, Barton wrote an article about the candidate that appeared in the November 1919 *Collier's* magazine issue, for which Barton was an editor.²⁰ In the article, Barton used "the silent majority" to describe an imagined group to which Coolidge belonged, as he was one who "lived like them...worked like them, and

17. *Great Falls Daily Tribune*. Oct. 18, 1919. Great Falls, MT. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

18. *News Scimitar*. Sept. 16, 1919.

19. Buckley, Kerry W. *A President for the "Great Silent Majority": Bruce Barton's Construction of Calvin Coolidge*. Dec. 2003. *The New England Quarterly*. JSTOR. pg. 602.

20. *Ibid.*, pg. 598.

understood.”²¹ Besides serving as the first appearance of the term in a national magazine, Barton’s linkage of Coolidge to “the silent majority” established a trend that would continue for decades. Coolidge, in Barton’s characterization, was just as important and attractive as the rest of the members of “the silent majority.” Barton’s article portrayed Vice-Presidential candidate Coolidge as a representative for “the silent majority,” focusing on his moderate mindset and racial qualifications. For Barton, Coolidge’s appeal among his constituents showed, “The great majority of Americans are neither radicals nor reactionaries. They are middle-of-the-road folks who own their homes and work hard, and would like to have the government get back to its old habits of meddling with their lives as little as possible.”²² In highlighting Coolidge as a racially pure American, Buckley observed of Barton: “The portrait [Barton] painted of Coolidge in that first article was doubly significant. Here was a man of unimpeachable ethnic and racial credentials, the apotheosis of white Protestant culture.”²³ “There is no doubt,” Barton had written, “about [Coolidge’s] Yankee heritage.”²⁴ With this emphasis on “Yankee heritage,” Barton linked Coolidge’s political identity to his race and anti-radicalism.

Between 1920-1940, the term “the silent majority” appeared twenty-two times in print. Nineteen appearances were in circulating newspapers or magazines. One was in an academic thesis from Columbia University, one was in the speech of a preacher at the pulpit, and one was in the printed minutes of the annual convention of the Missouri Bankers Association. Notably, thirteen references occurred before 1930, all of which

21. Barton, Bruce. “Concerning Calvin Coolidge,” *Collier’s Magazine*. Nov. 1919.

22. Ibid.

23 Buckley, Kerry W. *A President for the “Great Silent Majority*. pg. 601.

24. Ibid.

were in newspapers. After 1930, only nine sources used the term, with it falling out of favor shortly before 1940.²⁵ As the moral issues of the 1920s – prohibition and women’s suffrage, to name a few – became less relevant, in the face of the Great Depression and World War II, the use of the term decreased drastically, and would not increase until new issues threatened the white middle class in the late 1950s, specifically desegregation.

Before 1930, the phrase “the silent majority” appeared in thirteen articles in eleven different newspapers. The term occurred in three separate issues of *The Washington Herald*.²⁶ Its deployment differed slightly from Barton’s take on the term. A May 7, 1920 article, “The Silent, Inscrutable Majority,” read: “One grim fact faces ambitious candidates for the Presidency and overwhelming party managers. A majority of the voters are not attending the primaries.”²⁷ Additional articles in *The Washington Herald* followed the precedence set by the May 7 edition, using “the silent, inscrutable majority” to describe voters who did not participate in primary elections, and “remain to be heard from,” thereby accounting for “unrecorded and uncommitted millions.”²⁸ *The Literary Digest* used the same phrasing a few weeks later in an advertisement run in several newspapers across the nation, including *The Bismarck Tribune*, *Grand Fork Herald*, *Great Falls Daily Tribune*, *Arizona Republican*, *The Guthrie Daily Leader*, and *The Bridgeport Times and Evening Farmer*. The digest stated, “That ‘silent, inscrutable majority’, as the Washington Herald calls it, which does not express itself either at party

25. Lin, Yuri A. “Proceedings of the 50th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics.” 2012.

26. *The Washington Herald*. May 7, 1920. May 8, 1920. June 9, 1920. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

27. *The Washington Herald*. May 7, 1920. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

28. *The Washington Herald*. May 8, 1920. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

primaries or party conventions, undoubtedly has revealed something of the state of its mind in the columns of figures classified in THE LITERARY DIGEST for May 22nd.²⁹ Though eight other sources before 1930 did not follow *The Washington Herald's* exact phrasing of “the silent, inscrutable majority,” they did use the phrase in a similar context.

In the latter half of 1920, an election year, two newspapers used the phrase “the silent majority.” On September 29, 1920 *The Columbus Dispatch* wrote:

There have been chaos and anarchy in this world before. Every country has experienced it at some time or another, but always it is defeated in the end – by the awakened consciousness of “noblesse oblige,” so deeply rooted in the great heart of the world, in the silent majorities who act slowly, but ultimately always act definitely and emphatically.³⁰

On October 19, 1920, the *New-York Tribune* printed an article on “The Silent Majority.”³¹ This article argued that the Democratic party was experiencing an “exodus [that] exists everywhere, among working men, business men, professional men, first voters, and among new voters that have been created by the Nineteenth Amendment,” as voters turned to the Republican party.³² Such usages highlighted a morality politics that, three decades later, would continue to define the term.

In 1921, *The South Bend News-Times*, *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, and *The Seattle Star* all used the term “the silent majority” to describe an underrepresented voting

29. *The Literary Digest*. May 22, 1920. New York, NY. Appearing In: *The Bismarck Tribune*. May 22, 1920. Bismarck, ND. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

30. *The Columbus Dispatch*. Sept. 29, 1920. Columbus, MS. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

31. *New-York Tribune*. Oct. 19, 1920. New York, NY. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

32. *Ibid*.

population. In *The South Bend News-Times*, a workingman wrote a letter against daylight savings time, reading, “Our councilmen must be wise, and remember that the majority are silent – do not write to editors or go to council meetings, but they are discontented and feel that they are being imposed on by others.”³³ In *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, the author argued that, “The minority makes all the noise, while the members of the majority, unorganized and silent, are not represented before the lawmakers.”³⁴ In *The Seattle Star*, an anti-prohibitionist wrote, “It may express only my opinion on certain points, but I am sure it voices the views of thousands, of that silent majority perhaps, the patient American people, who bear all impositions and iniquities to a degree.”³⁵ None of these authors were newspaper columnists, but were citizens. Each used the term to describe themselves and people who supposedly agreed with them. By 1921, literate American citizens were using the term “the silent majority” to describe themselves and those that agreed with them. They defined themselves by their frustration, their disfranchisement, and their “silence” – presenting themselves as almost noble for their suffering and restraint in face of “the loud minority.”

Prohibition sparked the use of “the silent majority” in other press. The *Omaha Daily Bee*, recorded Albert W. Jefferis, newly-elected U.S. Senator, saying: “I shall have both ears open to hear what the ‘drys’ and the ‘wets,’ as well as that great silent majority,

33. *The South Bend News-Times*. March 8, 1921. South Bend, IN. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

34. *The Wheeling Intelligencer*. May 12, 1921. Wheeling, WV. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

35. *The Seattle Star*. May 16, 1921. Seattle, WA. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

the temperate people of the state and nation, have to say.”³⁶ The *Evening Star* did not classify “the silent majority” as differing from the ‘wets’ and ‘drys’ on the issue of Prohibition. Similarly, Senator Frelinghuysen of New Jersey stated, “While the wets are the more noisy and in evidence, the silent thought of a majority of the voters favors the dry practice.”³⁷ The *West Virginian* followed suit in classifying “the silent majority” as standing behind prohibition, referencing it as “that silent and formidable majority that backs the enforcement of the Volstead law.”³⁸ By 1928, the group’s stance on prohibition still affirmed, “The election campaign may possibly show what the silent majority of the 120,000,000 Americans are thinking about the liquor problem.”³⁹

After 1930, “the silent majority” appeared six times, with three mentions linking it to conservative issues. Editions of the *Evening Star*, in 1931 and 1939 for example, used the term with moral connotations. The former, written by Bruce Barton, read:

I may be wrong, but my idea about the other countries is that they are all having serious difficulties, just as we are, but in every one of them there is a solid backbone of people just like you and me – hardworking, sensible men and women who have their homes and families, who do not want to see the social order overthrown, and who are doing their individual best to solve their own problems. Ultimately, I believe, this silent majority will win.⁴⁰

36. *Omaha Daily Bee*. March 14, 1922. Omaha, NE. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

37. *Evening Star*. Oct. 17, 1922. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

38. *The West Virginian*. Oct. 19, 1922. Fairmont, WV. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

41. *The Spectator*. Volume 141. 1928. London, ENG. Google Books.

40. *Evening Star*. Jan. 18, 1931. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

The latter, in a similar vein of praising the people of America as a moral majority, stated, “The silent majority of godly humans does not often find expression in the news.”⁴¹ *The Municipality*, a magazine from Wisconsin, avoided temperance issues when using the term in 1936, choosing instead to define “the silent majority” as a class of voters that are not obviously active in politics and thus hard to read.⁴² “The silent majority places its trust in its chosen representatives to act in good faith,” A.E. Pritchard, Executive Director of League of Kansas Municipalities wrote, “to interpret the opinions, desires and final judgment of the silent majority is the most difficult task confronting a leader.”⁴³

In 1933, two other newspaper articles used the term “the silent majority,” though they did not focus on conservative issues. On April 4, 1933, *The New York Times* wrote of temperance: “The interested minority which wants political advantage and special benefits from the beer bill is the tail. The silent majority which wants a beer bill free from politics and conceived fairly and impersonally is the dog. The question is, Shall the tail wag the dog?”⁴⁴ Also of significance was an article titled “Ignoring Mr. Shaw,” run in the same year by the same newspaper, which read, “As a favor to the great silent majority of the United States and as a well deserved lesson to Bernard Shaw, why does not the press of the country calmly ignore his existence?”⁴⁵ Bernard Shaw, the subject of this article, was an Irish playwright and critic who did not have much good to

41. *Evening Star*. Oct. 21, 1939. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

42. Pritchard, A.E. *The Municipality*. 1936. League of Wisconsin Municipalities. Madison, WI. Google Books.

43. *Ibid*.

44. *The New York Times*. April 4, 1933. New York, NY. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

45. *The New York Times*. March 26, 1933. New York, NY. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

say or portray about America.⁴⁶ The author of “Ignoring Mr. Shaw,” was surely referencing this, and acknowledging that “the silent majority” stood against Shaw and should ignore him – and so should the media, suggesting that “the silent majority” was against criticisms of America.

In 1938, *The New York Times* cast “the silent majority” as having defeated three proposals on judiciary reapportionment at the poll by turning in 2,500,000 blank and void ballots.⁴⁷ The author of the article claimed that by casting blank and void ballots, “the silent majority” defeated the amendments and illustrated their political power, since “The blank-and-void had an absolute majority of more than 300,000.”⁴⁸ The *Times* credited the defeat of the proposals with the power of “the silent majority,” recognizing them as a significant voting bloc. Thus, three of the six newspapers that used “the silent majority” in the 1930s illustrated various aspects of the term, from prohibition to protesting anti-American criticisms to the power of “the silent majority.”

A graduate thesis from Columbia University, a sermon from the pulpit, and the printed minutes of the annual convention of the Missouri Bankers Association also presented their take on “the silent majority” in the 1930s. In 1932, Earle Leslie Hunter, finished a graduate thesis at Columbia University titled, “A Sociological Analysis of Certain Types of Patriotism: A Study of Certain Patriotic Attitudes, Particularly as These

46. Henderson, Archibald. *George Bernard Shaw, His Life and Works: A Critical Biography*. 1918. Chapel Hill, NC. University of North Carolina. pg. XV.

47. *The New York Times*. Dec. 11, 1939. New York, NY. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

48. Ibid.

Appear in Peace-time Controversies in the United States.”⁴⁹ A psychological analysis of patriotism, it asserted, “The silent majority does not suffer from delusions of a high call to make America safe and honor the sacrifice to a dream of international brotherly love.”⁵⁰ Hunter used the term several times throughout the dissertation, but each use centered on a claim that “the silent majority” of Americans desired security through the presence of a large standing army or navy.⁵¹ A sermon by Bishop Ernest M. Stires of Long Island in 1935 differed in its usage of “the silent majority.” As Stires claimed, “The silent majority must lift the nation from confusion,” referencing the removal of politics from the pulpit.⁵² Stires’s use of a term as a reference to removing politics from the church was both unique and significant. Indeed, as the printed minutes of the annual convention of the Missouri Bankers Association illustrated, others associated the term with a pro-banking stance, not necessarily religious politics. As Buxton and Skinner noted: “The fact [is] that there are at least thirty-five million people in this country who are not in the unemployed ranks but who are working. This is the great silent majority, if you please, and it is in that field of the silent majority where I think our work as bankers lies.”⁵³

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the term “the silent majority” was mainly used to classify unspoken voters and underrepresented voters. In the three editions of

49. Hunter, Earl L. “A Sociological Analysis of Certain Types of Patriotism: A Study of Certain Patriotic Attitudes, Particularly as These Appear in Peace-time Controversies in the United States.” 1932. Columbia University. New York, NY. Google Books.

50. *Ibid.*, pg. 184.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *The New York Times*. March 16, 1935. New York, NY. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

53. Bruxton, Skinner. “Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the Missouri Bankers Association.” 1936. Missouri Bankers Association. Jefferson City, MO. Google Books. pg. 111.

The Washington Herald, the issue of *The Literary Digest*, and the edition *New-York Tribune* of 1920 already examined, the newspapers used the phrase to describe unspoken voters. Other examples of this usage also include the October 17, 1922 edition of the *Evening Star* and volume 141 of *The Spectator*. Each publication portrayed “the silent majority” as a group of unspoken voters who, while perhaps not staging protests or showing up to the primaries, made their vote known on Election Day. While there is no one issue that the writers agreed that “the silent majority” backed – some argued that they were for prohibition, others that they were against it, others that they were for or against certain presidential candidates – a consensus existed that “the silent majority” opposed an often-mentioned “loud minority.” However, despite the “noise” of the minority, the authors cast the silent majority as the ones with actual political power.

In 1921, three newspapers – the *South-Bend News-Times*, *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, and *The Seattle Star* – used “the silent majority” to describe an underrepresented majority of voters, rather than a group with majority voting power. Like Barton, these authors cast “the silent majority” as a mass of common people not represented in politics despite their ability to vote. As a result, “the silent majority” fell on many sides of the prohibition issue, of various moral issues, and as a characterization of both “wets” and “drys.” After 1933 – when federal prohibition ended – the term fell out of usage. To be sure, correlation does not equal causation, but falling popularity of the term likely was likely connected to a broader decline in debate over alcohol as a hot-button issue.

Racial undertones remained pertinent to the use of “the silent majority” after the 1930s. As a “majority”, “the silent majority” occluded and excluded other minorities,

especially people of color.⁵⁴ Barton's usage set the precedent for utilizing "the silent majority" to capture the interest of American citizens concerning race. By asserting that Coolidge represented "the silent majority," then assuring the same readers – who can be assumed to be members of "the silent majority," at least by Barton's definition – of Coolidge's racial credentials, Barton illustrated that "the silent majority" had a vested interest in race. Furthermore, given the paradox of "the silent majority" being either politically dominant or underrepresented, people of color were summarily outside the scope of the term. Between Barton's overt racism and the connotations of the term itself, "the silent majority" had a racial undercurrent from 1920-1940, which carried over into later decades.

54. Buckley, Kerry W. *A President for the "Great Silent Majority"*. pg. 601.

PART TWO: 1940-1960

After 1920-1940, the use of the term “the silent majority” decreased. Fifteen sources used the term “the silent majority” between the years 1940-1960, compared to the twenty-two sources from 1920-1940.⁵⁵ Seven sources were newspapers, four were books, two were letters, and two were published hearing minutes. Only four sources were written in the 1940s, while eleven appeared in the 1950s.

Three newspapers published the term “the silent majority” in 1942, 1943, and 1946. They were *The Key West Citizen*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, respectively. Their usage of the term had little in common, besides suggesting that “the silent majority” had little to say on their own part, and that others often spoke for them. For example, *The Key West Citizen* stated:

Now that the merits and demerits of Key West have been pretty thoroughly cussed and discussed and, as far as *The Citizen* is concerned, the debate declared closed, we take occasion to pay our respects to a great and silent majority; the men and women who are in Key West because it is their duty to be here.⁵⁶

Here, “a great and silent majority” represented the men and women stationed in Key West during World War II, particularly those doing their duty silently.⁵⁷ In a similar fashion, *The Washington Post* wrote, “The President is the man who speaks for the great but ordinarily silent majority, and only when he is leading that majority is the ordinary

55. Ibid.

56. *The Key West Citizen*. Dec. 4, 1942. Key West, FL. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

57. Ibid.

congressman able to point to the real majority and say no to the pressure groups.”⁵⁸ In this case, “the silent majority” does not speak on their own behalf either but is represented by Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom the article criticizes for being out of the country for 60 days during the war, and thus unavailable to speak for “the silent majority.”⁵⁹ The last of the sources, from February 7, 1946, also identifies the need for a speaker on behalf of “the silent majority,” as the author wrote: “Mr. Nelson declared that the vast silent majority of property owners had no effective organization to emphasize their rights.”⁶⁰ *The New York Times* thus claimed that “the vast silent majority” of property owners had no voice. While this seems to avoid political usage of the term, in actuality, Nelson is referring to the Atlanta housing crisis, a racially laden issue in the era.⁶¹

The next source, a book published in 1947, on the other hand, is unique in presentation of “the silent majority.” In 1947, Clarence Budington Kelland published the book *Murder For a Million*, which included the following scene about a hardscrabble detective and his lieutenant sidekick investigating a murder in a residential area:

“‘For now,’ said Clovis. ‘I got to go and ask different people if they know who this dear departed is.’

‘Ask who?’

58. Walter, Lippmann. *The Washington Post*. Dec. 21, 1942. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

59. Ibid.

60. *The New York Times*. Feb. 7, 1946. New York, NY. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*

61. Sugrue, Thomas J. *The origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. 1997. University of Princeton. Princeton, NJ.

‘The silent majority,’ said Clovis. ‘Somebody knows him. If I ask enough folks I’ll hit the right one.’

Clovis sighed. He looked about him in the dawn. ‘People,’ he said, ‘don’t like being bothered and upset. If I was going to vote for a place in the United States most likely to not want to be bothered or upset it would be The Block.’”⁶²

Kellard’s used “the silent majority” to define the people who live on “The Block,” which he described earlier as a place that “represents all that is best and finest in American life.”⁶³ This usage of the term –in a novel – illustrated “the silent majority” in a multitude of ways previously portrayed: as not desiring to speak, as being part of the “best and finest” in American life, as wanting to maintain the status quo and “not be bothered or upset.”⁶⁴

Other writers capitalized upon common themes when utilizing the term, including Dr. Robert S. Sherman and Alice Sturgis, both of whom used the term in 1953 when describing unknown voters. Sherman used the term to describe the will of alumni at the University of California. He wrote to them, “It is hoped that you will forward your ideas or suggestions to us so that we may better represent the wishes of the ‘silent majority.’”⁶⁵ In this instance, “the silent majority” again appeared as a group of unknown, silent people who need a representative – which Sherman offered to be.⁶⁶ In a similar manner, Alice Sturgis wrote in a book about parliamentary procedure that

62. Kelland, Clarence B. *Murder for a Million*. 1947. Harper & Brothers. New York, NY. Google Books.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Sherman, Robert S. “President Sherman’s Message.” *Alumni Faculty Association, School of Medicine, University of California Bulletin*. 1953. University of California. San Francisco, CA. Google Books.

66. Ibid.

claimed, “The silent majority serves its own important purposes. Its members are usually in a better position to judge arguments and make decisions than the vocal few; they exercise their highly effective type of eloquence when they vote. In so doing, they emphatically and effectively speak their minds on the proposal at hand.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, Sturgis suggested that there can be members of “the silent majority” within a political body, when previously the term has been only been used for citizens that do not hold political office.⁶⁸ Senators, presidents, and other political figures had claimed to represent “the silent majority” but had never been members themselves. This was indicative of the changing deployments of “the silent majority,” which were heightened in then-Senator John F. Kennedy’s book *Profiles in Courage*.

Published in 1955, Kennedy cast “the silent majority” as possibly “representing the actual sentiments of the silent majority of their constituents in opposition to the screams of a vocal minority.”⁶⁹ Kennedy suggested that most of the men in his book, while courageous, probably were self-serving in some manner or another.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, wrote Kennedy, some of them were probably actually representing “the silent majority” instead of the “vocal minority.”⁷¹ Kennedy’s use of the phrase as such was notable for three reasons: he would soon become President, he used the term in opposition to the “vocal minority” as others had before, and he suggested that elected officials were supposed to serve “the silent majority.”

67. Sturgis, Alice. *Learning Parliamentary Procedure*. 1953. McGraw-Hill. New York, NY. Google Books.

68. Ibid.

69. Kennedy, John F. *Profiles in Courage*. 1955. Harper & Row Publishers. New York, NY. pg. 261.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

Racial associations regarding “the silent majority” re-appeared in four newspapers between 1956-1958. The first, in *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, was used to describe a sect of people in Tennessee who did not want to defeat desegregation themselves, but would allow others to do so.⁷² Under a subheading titled “The Silent Majority,” the author wrote:

Principal Brittain had this to say of the silent majority:

‘A lot of people thought that, if the rabble-rousers could defeat desegregation, well fine, as long as they didn’t have to take part themselves.’

But the silent majority did speak out on Dec. 4 when segregation and the White Citizens Councils were the only issue. The Council-backed candidates lost, 3- and 4-to-1, in the town election.⁷³

In August 1957, the same newspaper recorded Rep. A.A. Fowler Jr. of Georgia using the term to describe his desire that “the great silent majorities in other areas of the country would elect representatives to Congress who will represent all rather than a few small vociferous minorities.”⁷⁴ The “vociferous minorities” were those opposed to the racial segregation of housing in big cities, which has already been noted as an issue of the era.⁷⁵ Fowler proposed a plan to buy housing in the North to lease to African Americans, to “show the residents of good white neighborhoods in the North that the very thing the South opposes – racial integration – could happen to them.”⁷⁶

72. *The Washington Post and Times Herald*. Dec. 16, 1956. Washington, D.C. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

73. Ibid.

74. *The Washington Post and Times Herald*. Aug. 25, 1957. Washington, D.C. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

Later in October of 1957 *The New York Times* published a “Statement of Objectives and Rededication to Principles” that twenty-four men of Little Rock had submitted to the *Arkansas Gazette*.⁷⁷ The *Gazette*, the *Times* noted, had claimed that the letter, which encouraged “daily prayer” and discouraged and “detested and condemned any violence,” was “giving voice to the views of the vast, silent majority.”⁷⁸ In 1958, the term was used similarly in *The Washington Post and Times Herald* to refer to a group of parents who – in light of the state of Virginia automatically closing any school that participated in desegregation – were “growing disillusioned with massive resistance.”⁷⁹ In response, the parents organized to “preserve-the-public-schools” and stop the closures, believing that their group “expressed the views of the silent majority.”⁸⁰

In 1958, two sources – a thesis from an undergraduate history major and the minutes of a subcommittee for the House of Representatives – used the term “the silent majority,” specifically to describe a portion of voters who held the majority vote. In the thesis, the use was by the voters themselves who, according to Lois Wand, sent Senator James E. Murray flowers with a note signed “The Silent Majority.”⁸¹ This is an interesting use of the term because it would have occurred around 1888, as the signatories were sending flowers to lobby for Ella Knowles Haskell to be admitted as the first female lawyer in Montana.⁸² It is unlike other uses of the term in the period, which often used

77. *The New York Times*. Oct. 3, 1957. New York, NY. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

78. Ibid.

79. *The Washington Post and Times Herald*. Sept. 13, 1958. Washington, D.C. University of Mississippi Archives. One Search.

80. Ibid.

81. Wand, Lois. “Ella Knowles Haskell First Woman Lawyer of Montana.” 1958. Carroll College. Helena, MT. Google Books.

82. Ibid.

“the silent majority” as an allusion to the dead; instead, it was claimed by the voters themselves as they referred to themselves as “The Silent Majority.” The second use of the term in 1958 was in the minutes of a meeting of a subcommittee for the House of Representatives, and read: “where as, there is that silent, and we would like to feel the silent majority of the people, who just simply don’t get aroused to coming before the Committee and expressing their opinions.”⁸³ Yet again, the meaning of the term shifted to mean a set of voters identified by political leaders as unheard or not easily perceivable.

In 1958, Dr. Alfred Sears wrote in his analysis of the popularity of Thomas Worthington, the “Father of Ohio Statehood,” that “Whatever may have been the patriotic fervor stirred up by the War Hawk party, the silent majority of Ohio people were opposed to the war.”⁸⁴ Worthington remained popular with the Ohio people, according to Sears, because “the silent majority” shared his pacifism. Sears’s use was also notable because he recognized that “the silent majority” existed in the past, and he applied the term retroactively to a group of people who can only be discerned as existing after the fact, when their votes clearly had effects. A year later, the American Association for State Highway and Transport Officials used the term in a similar manner, applying it to people of the 1950s. As the proceedings read, “This is where our public relations get an acid test. Some way must be developed to bring out the opinion of the silent majority in these

83. “Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations.” 1958. House of Representatives. Washington, D.C. Google Books.

84. Sears, Alfred Byron. *Thomas Worthington, Father of Ohio Statehood*. 1958. Ohio State University Press. Columbus, Ohio. Google Books. pg. 260.

matters. We hear often enough from the vocal minorities.”⁸⁵ This group wanted to hear the opinion of “the silent majority,” but did not know how to do so.

Politicians seemed members of “the silent majority” as much as citizens did, thereby making the term an umbrella term by 1960. Under the umbrella, there existed a variety of definitions for “the silent majority.” It could encompass the majority of voters. And, it could encompass the politicians themselves.

There also remained another, complicated fact regarding “the silent majority.” As politicians from Coolidge to Kennedy claimed that they or others represented “the silent majority,” others illustrated that “the silent majority” remained difficult to locate and understand. A contrast thus existed between those who claimed “the silent majority” was distinct and represented and those who maintained that “the silent majority” needed to speak up and make their voices heard. This paradox mirrored the previous one presented in the last chapter – that “the silent majority” was both politically dominant and underrepresented.

Another key presentation of “the silent majority” came to be that of voters who seemed politically “middle of the road.”⁸⁶ This rhetoric, of “the silent majority” as moderate views and orderly politics, complemented another common association of the term: that “the silent majority” did not like to be bothered with all of the details of politics. The presentation of “the silent majority” as moderates erased certain facets of their political stances, especially the “newness,” flexibility, and racial posture of their beliefs.

85. “Annual Meeting: Proceedings, Committee Meeting Papers.” 1959. American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. Washington, D.C. Google Books.

86. *The Washington Post and Times Herald*. Sept. 13, 1958.

As in the past, the sources between 1940-1960 all refer to a type of “vocal minority” that opposes “the silent majority.” While the latter is often portrayed as quiet, mild-mannered, and moderate, the former is often illustrated as radical, noisy, and pushing niche issues that only benefit themselves. When given the context that “the silent majority” opposed or were moderate on issues like racism, however, it can be intuited that the vocal minority were not selfish radicals, but rather those in favor of desegregation, women’s rights, and social justice.

SECTION THREE: 1960-1980

Between 1960-1980, the use of the term “the silent majority” exploded (see Figure 1.1).⁸⁷ The term appeared over 7,000 times in newspapers, books, and other media sources. As analyzing so many sources would be an impossible undertaking, this paper will focus on a much more manageable task: the use of the term by Richard Nixon and the 11 sources available through Google Books.

Richard Nixon popularized “the silent majority” via his speech on November 3, 1969. Nixon, at least in his own vision of himself, embodied “the silent majority.” As Rick Perlstein wrote, Nixon grew up in a tension between shame and pride of his blue-collar family:

Nixon would ever transit between feelings of shame toward his dirty-necked, lusty spitfire of a father, between apologizing for him and boasting about him, between desperately reaching for success to honor him, and desperately reaching for success to repudiate him...he was a serial collector of resentments. He raged for what he could not have or control.⁸⁸

This resentment against those who had what he did not shaped Nixon for the rest of his life. One way in which Nixon struck out against them, perhaps as a precursor to his claim to being a member of and representing “the silent majority,” was by forming the Orthogonians while at Whittier College.⁸⁹ Nixon’s group juxtaposed the established social group, the Franklins, who were upper-crust, high-profile students. The

87. Lin, Yuri A. “Proceedings of the 50th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics.” 2012.

88. Perlstein, Rick. *Nixonland*. 2008. Simon & Schuster, Inc. New York, NY. pg. 21.

89. *Ibid.*, pg. 22.

Orthogonians, on the other hand, “was for the strivers, those not to the manor born.”⁹⁰ He established the group by preying on the insecurities of Whittier’s athletes, as “on every sports teams there are only a couple of stars, and if you want to win the loyalty of the team for yourself, the surest, if least glamorous, strategy is to concentrate on the nonspectacular – silent – majority.”⁹¹ Thus, Nixon built his popularity in college by appealing to those who felt overshadowed, an effective strategy that won him an election to student body President, beating out a Franklin for the position.⁹² The budding politician learned from a young age how to appeal to an unpolished, middle-of-the-road majority. This political approach primed him for using “the silent majority” to describe himself and his supporters. The only question left was: when would Nixon have the best chance to lay claim to the term?

While it is possible that he heard or read the term before 1969, what can be proven is the fact that his 1968 acceptance speech contained elements that would later be attributed to “the silent majority.” During his acceptance speech, he claimed, “the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans – the nonshouters; the non-demonstrators. They are not racist or sick...They give drive to the spirit of America...This is the real voice of America.”⁹³ His vice president and running mate, Spiro Agnew, also said six months before Nixon’s November 3, 1969 speech. “It is time for America’s silent majority,” said Agnew, “to stand up for its rights, and let us remember the American majority includes every minority. America's silent majority is

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid., 23.

93. Nixon, Richard. “Law and Order.” 1968. Republican National Committee. C-Span. National Cable Satellite Corporation.

bewildered by irrational protest.”⁹⁴ Pat Buchanan – one of Nixon’s speechwriters – also apparently exposed the president to the term, later remembering, “We used ‘forgotten Americans’ and ‘quiet Americans’ and other phrases. And in one memo I mentioned twice the phrase ‘silent majority,’ and it was double-underlined by Richard Nixon, and it would pop up in 1969 in that great speech that basically made his presidency.”⁹⁵

Buchanan also noted that, although he used the phrase in a memo to Nixon, the president wrote the November 3, 1969 speech himself. Thus, the term was both an organic and a conscious choice. Indeed, regardless of how Nixon was introduced to the term, whether by a previous source, by Agnew, or by Buchanan, his use of it was intentional.

Ultimately, Nixon’s use of the term to define his base of political support accelerated its popularity while dividing Americans between those included in “the silent majority” and those not.

Nixon’s use of “the silent majority” primarily concerned the war in Vietnam, encouraging the public to support the continuation of troops in Vietnam and claiming that doing so was the only way to bring a peaceful end to the war.⁹⁶ Over the radio and television, he addressed his listeners as “the great silent majority of Americans,” attempting to employ the term to describe those who supported him and a continued war. He used the term the same way he had the Orthogonians: to give those unpolished, middle-of-the-road supporters of his a name. Afterwards, both his popularity and that of the term skyrocketed, Nixon’s approval rating increased an over thirty points, to 81%, in

94. Safire, William. *Safire’s Political Dictionary*. 2008. Oxford University Press USA. New York, NY. pg. 660.

95. Buchanan, Pat. *The World Over Live*. Oct. 2, 2014.

96 . Nixon, Richard. “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam.” Nov. 3, 1969.

two months.⁹⁷ According to Perlstein, the way Nixon had spoken to the public, including his use of the term “the silent majority,” had “inspired the protective love of millions of white middle-class Americans in their daily battles with existential humiliation at the hands of the media, the liberals, the know-it-alls, the slovenly loud, the *them*.”⁹⁸ Middle-class Americans were Nixon’s new Orthogonians. As Perlstein wrote, “Nixon described the ‘silent center’ as ‘the millions of people in the middle of the American political spectrum who do not demonstrate, who do not picket or protest loudly.’ *They* were loud. *You* were quiet. *They* proclaimed their virtue. *You* simply lived virtuously.”⁹⁹ Thus, Nixon not only sought to claim leadership and representation of “the silent majority,” but also to define the group as middle-class Americans who lived quietly and virtuously. Nixon’s use of “the silent majority” identified a specific group of voters as “real” Americans, charged the term further with an “us and them” rhetoric, and applied already common associations of moralism and conservatism to the group. Other sources from the 1960-1980 reinforced Nixon’s use of “the silent majority” while others questioned it.

Nixon’s use of the term popularized it, and various sources began to use “the silent majority” to describe supporters of Nixon and a continued war. Notably, it was also often alongside divisive rhetoric – comparable to the language Nixon used throughout his presidency, beginning in his 1968 acceptance speech, to contrast the “real voice of American” and those who opposed it. Two sources that employed this usage of “the silent majority” were *The New York Forester* and *Contractors and Engineers*. Both, despite being published five years apart in 1964 and 1969, used the term to describe a

97. Perlstein, Rick. *Nixonland*. 2008. Simon & Schuster, Inc. New York, NY. pg. 444.

98. *Ibid.*, pg. 743.

99. *Ibid.*, pg. 211.

quiet majority that opposed “loud” minority groups. The first read, “While your Committee has received many communications from the vociferous minority, there has been little received from the silent majority group.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the second stated, “More than 40,000 Americans have given their lives in this undeclared decade-long war. It fostered bitter conflict at home, first between the hawks and the doves, later termed the silent majority and the peaceniks or moratoriumists.”¹⁰¹ This rhetoric of a moderate, quiet majority who opposed a loud, radical minority was an extension of similar language from 1920-1940 and 1940-1960, though by 1960-1980 members of the “loud minority” had evolved. Rather than being composed of those either against prohibition or integration, the “loud minority” were those who did not agree with Nixon or a continued war in Vietnam. Such usage of “the silent majority” in contrast to a “vociferous minority” supported Nixon’s division between the moderates and radicals. The last source especially accomplished this, as it also recognized “the silent majority” as those who supported the war in Vietnam.

Two other sources, both from 1970, also used the term in a Nixonian manner. The first, found in the minutes of “Tax Recommendations of the President: Hearings Before the Ninety-First Congress,” was used in a letter written to the committee by R.W. Shade, who identified themselves as a member of “the silent majority.” “As a member of the silent majority,” Shade wrote, “I wish the Administration would stop tinkering with the various tax laws and raise more money by eliminating the unnecessary government

100. *New York Forester*. Volume 21-25. 1964. Society of American Foresters. New York, NY. Google Books.

101. *Contractors and Engineers Magazine*. Volumes 66-57. 1969. Consulting Engineer. New York, NY. Google Books.

jobs.”¹⁰² After claiming to be a part of the group that Nixon represented, Shade suggested that the government should stop taxing the American citizens so much and focus on removing drains on their own resources – a patently conservative complaint. Shade did so with a touch of moralism, which is more than can be said for Alfred W. Horton, who published a book titled *The Silent Majority* in the same year. In his book, Horton defined the term in a conservative manner, writing, “The members of ‘the silent majority’ remain to be depended upon to make the right decisions, and to see to it that the right kind of men are elected to represent them in the halls of state,” and that “It’s going to take the revitalization of ‘the silent majority,’ the local independent individuals with their initiative and love for their country and fellow man to put us back on an even keel and keep us there.”¹⁰³ Horton described “the silent majority” as moral individuals keeping the nation on track, and suggested their conservatism more subtly in their “love for state and fellow man.”

Neither Shade nor Horton, however, were as obvious in their association of “the silent majority” with moralism as Thurzal Q. Terry in his book, also titled *The Silent Majority*, published in the same year. For Terry, “the vocal minority” was composed of people who protested for peace and the end of the Vietnam War. “This unwashed rabble,” he wrote, “while screaming for their own right of free speech, succeed in denying the same privilege to the silent majority.”¹⁰⁴ Terry disdained the “vocal

102. Shade, R.W. in “Tax Recommendations of the President: Hearings Before the Ninety-First Congress.” 1970. House of Representatives. U.S. Government Printing Office. Washington, D.C. Google Books. pg. 286.

103. Horton, Alfred W. *The Silent Majority*. 1970. Vantage Press. Burlington, VT. Google Books. pg. 8.

104. Terry, Thurzal Q. *The Silent Majority*. 1970. Exposition Press. New York, NY. Google Books. pg. 13.

minority,” the “unwashed rabble” of America. Nixon showed similar contempt for the minority in his acceptance speech, when he noted that “the great majority of Americans” were not “racist or sick.” Terry’s use of the term reinforced the division Nixon instated between “the silent majority” in support of the war and “the loud minority” in opposition to it. Furthermore, Terry’s characterization of “the loud minority,” was not only critical but also incendiary as he claimed that the “unwashed rabble” violated “the silent majority’s” most basic right of free speech. This aggressive rhetoric directed towards “the loud minority” was not out of line with how Nixon and others portrayed the oppositional minority, though it was perhaps the most directly confrontational. Most others who employed the term preferred to focus on the will of “the silent majority,” and only noted the existence and continued voice of “the loud minority.”

In 1973 and 1974, in the “Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates,” W.T. Nightingale used “the silent majority” to describe the opinions of a large majority of American voters. Rather than being robbed of their voice, as Terry presented them, the group merely labored in silence. According to Nightingale, “It is not until these people are hit right in the pocketbook that they do rise up and make their real feelings known.”¹⁰⁵ They were not robbed of their voice, Nightingale posited, but rather were quiet until they chose to speak – and when they did speak, it was as “a most responsible group of citizens that have become quite alienated from involvement in governmental processes.”¹⁰⁶ Huber echoed similar sentiments about “the silent majority,” titling his speech “The Sadness of the Silent Majority.” In Huber’s case, the group was “saddened”

105. Nightingale, W.T. “Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates.” Volume 120. 1974. U.S. Government Printing Office. Washington, D.C. Google Books. pg. 22375.

106. Ibid.

by the state of education.¹⁰⁷ This was another political tactic commonly used by Nixon, defining his followers by what they stood against rather than what they stood for.¹⁰⁸

The use of “the silent majority” was usually linked to Nixon in this era, as the term used almost synonymously with his presidency and constituency. When Nixon fell from grace due to Watergate, however, “the silent majority” came under reconsideration as a term. In three sources from 1973, 1978, and 1979, the term “the silent majority” came under fire. As John C. Hendee wrote in a suggestion to the National Forest Service:

In our complex, pluralistic society, citizens are likely to remain passive on well over 90 percent of their opportunities for public involvement. To the extent the ‘silent majority’ has ideas about issues, they are probably just as diverse as those that are expressed. It is a mistake to think there is one opinion held by the entire ‘silent majority.’¹⁰⁹

Hendee further wrote, “The silent majority will probably remain silent. No words should be put into its mouth.”¹¹⁰ A 1978 edition of *The Crisis*, a magazine published by the NAACP, held the same reservations about those claiming to speak for “the silent majority.” “Suddenly, the ‘silent majority,’” the magazine wrote, “has become the ‘moderate majority.’” As former President Nixon oppressed dissent by speaking for a ‘silent majority’ about ‘peace with honor’ in Vietnam and ‘law and order’ in America, so the Mayor’s committee would blunt criticism of systemic racism by speaking for a

107. Huber, Robert J. “The Silent Majority Should Be Heard.” in “Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates.” Volume 119. 1973. U.S. Government Printing Office. Washington, D.C. Google Books. pg. 16918.

108. Perlstein, Rick. *Nixonland*. 2008. pg. 22.

109. Hendee, John C. “Public Involvement and the Forest Service: Experience, Effectiveness and Suggested Direction.” 1973. Forest Service. Government Printing Office. Washington, D.C. Google Books pg. 77.

110. Ibid.

‘moderate majority.’”¹¹¹ *The Crisis* understood the racist underpinnings of “the silent majority,” casting “the silent majority” as a term used to by politicians to “oppress dissent” of systemic racism by black minorities. However, the most salient point made against “the silent majority” might be found in J.R. Ditton’s *Contrologogy: Beyond the New Criminology*. In the 1979 book, Ditton stated that “the silent majority” played the same role as that of the “dark figure” in criminology – apparently menacing and all-powerful, but not actually existing. He quoted an article by Hugo Young, a reporter from *The New York Times*, to drive the point home:

For silence is what gives the silent majority its special attraction to a politician – silence is the source of its unassailable authenticity. It proposes no arguments which might be exposed, no tangible expressions...which might be vulnerable to dispute. He who speaks for the silent majority offers something much more attractive than mere argument, namely initiation into secrets which he alone has divined...the silent majority is not, as is supposed, the embodiment of some more perfect democratic will. It is, on the contrary, profoundly undemocratic...*It has been invented for a single purpose: to clothe with spurious respectability minority prejudices which lack the support of rational argument.*¹¹²

After the fall of Nixon in 1974, suspicion toward the term “the silent majority” grew. And though correlation is not causation, it can be hypothesized that perhaps Nixon’s

111. *The Crisis*. Nov. 1978. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Baltimore, MD. Google Books. pg. 303.

112. Young, Hugo. *Sunday Times*. 1972. London, ENG. Appearing In: Ditton, J.R. *Contrologogy: Beyond the New Criminology*. 1979. Springer Publishing. New York, NY. Google Books. pg. 40.

plummet in popularity had something to do with the phrase he popularized coming under fire.

In 1980, however, Jerry Falwell made a speech titled “Organizing the Moral Majority,” in which he laid out the political agenda for the burgeoning Religious Right movement over the next decade. Towards the end, Falwell made a call for “the silent majority” to join “the moral majority,” perhaps sensing that without Nixon the group lacked a leader and political clout. “I am convinced,” Falwell said, “that God is calling millions of Americans in the so-often silent majority to join in the moral majority to crusade to turn America around in our lifetime.”¹¹³ Falwell at least believed that “the silent majority” were real insofar as Americans respond to the term, and was clearly hoping that those who consider themselves among “the silent majority” would join “the moral majority.” While it is unclear whether “the silent majority” even existed at this point as a cohesive unit, it is clear that Americans had used and responded to the term for decades.

From Coolidge to Nixon, many politicians presented themselves as either representatives of “the silent majority” or members of “the silent majority.” This was never explicitly called into question until the 1970s, when three sources – and likely more – claimed, with a newfound cynicism that stemmed from Watergate and the Vietnam War, that “the silent majority” was merely a term politicians used to add to their constituency’s validity. The term “the silent majority” was associated with prohibition and conservatism in 1920-1940 and 1940-1960, a trend that continued in 1960-1980. To

113. Falwell, Jerry. “Organizing the Moral Majority.” 1980. Appearing In: *Listen, America!, The Conservative Blueprint for America’s Moral Rebirth*. 1981. Bantam Books. New York, NY. Google Books. pg. 129.

Nixon and other believers in “the silent majority,” the group was at the root both moral and conservative – which is perhaps why Falwell used the term in his 1980 book.

Falwell’s “moral majority” became a political force of the Religious Right in the 1980s, and was both moral and conservative by title. Perhaps, with the end of Nixon’s era in politics, “the silent majority” became part of “the moral majority” under Falwell, repurposing their already-present conservatism for a new cause. The only question would be whether “the moral majority” would allow “the silent majority” to keep their anti-minority and racial rhetoric.

Whether “the silent majority” ultimately joined “the moral majority” or not, the fact remains that for a time “the silent majority” fell out of usage. Newspapers, citizens, and politicians seemed unwilling to use the term in any association besides that of Nixon. Now a historical term associated with Nixon, the pre-Nixon usage of the term faded. However, during the run up to the of the 2016 presidential election, Republican candidate Donald Trump reintroduced the term, applying it to his constituency.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary deployment of “the silent majority” began with presidential candidate Donald Trump’s campaign, when he said at a rally in 2015, “The silent majority is back, and we’re going to take our country back.”¹¹⁴ The candidate, his campaign, and constituency subsequently used the term to describe anyone voting for Trump, as signs reading “The silent majority stands with Trump,” decorated rallies, campaign ads, and bumper stickers. “The silent majority” had resurfaced with vigor, and decidedly in favor of candidate Donald Trump.

After the election, newspapers and other media sources credited Trump’s election to “the silent majority,” as one NBC News article titled “Rural America and a Silent Majority Powered Trump to a Win,” read, “there were thousands of silent, secret Trump supporters who misled pollsters and others who were missed or discounted... a new wave of voters were emerging. The silent voters slipped by, unnoticed until election day.”¹¹⁵ This “silent majority” of Trump’s mirrored that of *The Washington Herald’s* in 1920, when the newspaper cast the group as voters that “remain to be heard from.”¹¹⁶ Trump’s “silent majority” had not been accounted for, according to Whitaker, which is why his election did not reflect the predictions of the polls or pundits. However, “the silent majority” of 2016 was not only familiar in its tendency to only show its true voting power during elections – it also echoed the racial and political issues of 1950-1980.

If “the silent majority” is assumed to be synonymous with or even a portion of President Trump’s constituency, then they are concerned with racial and moral issues,

114. Trump, Donald J. October 29, 2016. Campaign Rally. Phoenix, AZ. C-Span.

115. Whitaker, Marie. Nov. 9, 2016. NBC News. Google.

116. *The Washington Herald*. May 8, 1920. Washington, D.C.

and vote along those lines. Throughout his campaign, Trump pushed such issues; he claimed the need for America to build a wall, to deport immigrants, and to defund Planned Parenthood. This rhetoric – of racial and moral issues being presented as proudly anti-establishment – parroted Nixon’s style, as Terence McArdle wrote for *The Washington Post*, “Trump invoked the phrase ‘silent majority’ during his presidential run and has seized on another Nixon favorite: ‘law and order.’”¹¹⁷ Thus, not only did Trump seize on Nixon’s term “the silent majority,” but he also cast members of it alongside the same issues and rhetoric. Thus, Trump’s “silent majority” is not much of a progression of the phrase as it is a resurfacing of it.

From 1980-2015, “the silent majority” vanished, as scholars and media sources chose to limit their use of the phrase to describing Nixon’s constituency in the 1960s, rather than employing it to define any modern voting blocs. However, while the term had little political capital for over thirty years, voters of the group did not disappear alongside use of the term. Rather, it might be postulated that many voters retained their moralistic and racial beliefs and gave their votes to Falwell’s “moral majority” and, later, the Religious Right. Regardless of the accuracy of this and where “the silent majority” actually went, the term remained unused, and perhaps unmobilized, until Trump’s campaign – when the candidate repurposed Nixon’s usage of the term and rallied “the silent majority” together in key states.

Trump won the election, claiming the power of his “silent majority,” but lost the popular vote by 2.87 million to Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton.¹¹⁸ His “silent

117. McArdle, Terence. *The Washington Post*. Nov. 5, 2018. Washington, DC. Google.

118. Krieg, Gregory. “It’s Official: Clinton swamps Trump in popular vote.” Dec. 22, 2016. CNN Politics. Atlanta, GA. Google.

majority” was inarguably not the majority, despite his, his party’s, and the media’s claims. Rather, Trump’s “noisy minority” dominated the Electoral College and press, stifling the voice of the real majority within American politics – a tactic Nixon’s and other “silent majorities” claimed that minorities did to them. Therefore, it could be argued that Clinton’s Democrats were the real “silent majority” in the 2016 election, and were repressed by Trump’s “noisy minority.” Such a characterization could be potent political capital for framing the Democratic campaigns of 2020.

However, regardless of such conjecture, one thing remains true: the unpredicted outcome of the 2016 election solidified and validated usage of “the silent majority,” bringing the constituency – and the term used to describe them – to power and popularity once more in American politics.

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