

From the Capitol to the Heartland: Analyzing Congressional Rhetoric and the “Flyover Country” Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution and strategic use of the term “flyover country” in US congressional rhetoric from 1995 to 2024. Initially a benign geographic descriptor, “flyover country” has transformed into a potent symbol of cultural and political identity, particularly among Republican members of Congress. Through a comprehensive analysis of congressional speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence, this research identifies an increase in the use of flyover rhetoric, especially during the Trump era. The study reveals that “flyover” is employed to evoke a sense of victimhood and marginalization among rural constituents, highlighting perceived economic and cultural disenfranchisement by coastal elites. The findings underscore the adaptability of political language and its role in shaping and reflecting socio-political divides in the United States. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of congressional rhetoric and the cultural and political undercurrents that influence US-American identity and discourse.

KEYWORDS

Flyover fictions, US Congress, US-American politics

Introduction

The term “flyover” originated in the 1970s, initially referring to Midwest America in a playful, self-deprecating manner, and eventually describing the vast expanse of the United States between the coasts. For some, “flyover country” evokes images of

rolling plains and quaint small towns, retaining its Midwestern origins. However, over the last few decades, many politicians, particularly Republicans, have increasingly used the term as a powerful symbol of US-American identity and as a trope reflecting deep-seated anxieties about globalization, economic inequality, and cultural fragmentation (Klecker and Pöhlmann).

Originally a geographic term, “flyover” has evolved into a cultural and political symbol, reflecting deeper cultural and political divides in the United States (Harkins 113). The term “flyover country” has been regularly employed in political rhetoric, especially by Republicans, to describe regions of the US they represent (primarily rural and in the Midwest) and which they perceive to be overlooked by so-called “coastal elites.” With the rise of Donald Trump and “MAGA Republicans,” the politicization of “flyover” has intensified, transforming it into a tool for populist discourse, which often involves appealing to the concerns and values of “ordinary people,” especially those who feel neglected by the political establishment. In recent years, the shift towards a victim narrative, where constituents in flyover country are portrayed as being oppressed by coastal elites, has become a popular strategy for Republicans as anti-elite rhetoric has become a staple of Republican politics. The increased use of the flyover trope has coincided with the Republican Party’s growing support among rural US-American voters and the use of populist rhetoric. As noted by Klecker and Pöhlmann, pitting “real America” against what is perceived as “fake America” for political gain is not a new strategy and was employed years before the term “flyover” took hold in US politics.

While previous research on the use of flyover rhetoric has been limited to only a sample of essays, speeches, and commentary identified by previous scholars, this research puts forth a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the use of “flyover” within the United States Congress over the last 29 years (1995–2024). Specifically, all congressional speeches, committee hearings, and available constituent correspondence, which contain the term “flyover,” are included in this analysis.

Examining this data, which includes all references to flyover in the Congressional Record, allows us to better understand if and how flyover rhetoric has changed over time and which members of Congress are most likely to employ it. Specifically, I examine whether the use of the term “flyover” has increased in the past decades. Also, is “flyover” more likely to be used by Republicans than Democrats? Is the term limited to rural and/or Midwestern members of Congress? Finally, how is the term employed in congressional rhetoric, and to what extent is the anti-elite and victim rhetoric of the Trump era reflected in flyover statements?

Congressional Rhetoric

Before analyzing congressional rhetoric, it is crucial to understand whether the words of members of Congress, including their committee testimony and constituent correspondence, genuinely matter to members or their constituents. Research strongly supports the significance of words, particularly those of our political leaders. Kenneth Burke highlighted the power of terminologies, arguing that language shapes our reality and guides behavior (187). Language creates both unity and division. Essentially, humans interact with the world based on their understanding, which is molded by the words they hear and use (187). More relevant to my analysis of flyover rhetoric, Benedict Anderson suggests that notions of community are “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Due to distance and the limited view of individuals, words and imagination play a central role in constructing our communities, ourselves, and the political other (Anderson; Asen; Castoriadis).

Political rhetoric can supplement existing evidence or even persuade in its absence (Coker). Jenny Rice argues that many contemporary political debates rely on limited evidence, and individuals are often manipulated by rhetoric to support their ideas (6). For instance, politicians frequently use different metaphors to discuss the economy (Barnes and Hicks), crime (Thibodeau and Boroditsky), and healthcare (Schlesinger and Lau), with metaphors often being “essential to their persuasiveness” (Charteris-Black 2).

Ultimately, politicians can persuade voters to endorse particular candidates and policy options by using language strategically. Language that elicits emotional responses and personal connections is critical to electoral and policy success (e.g., Gross; Redlawsk; Slatcher et al.). These and other studies demonstrate that words (political rhetoric) matter to political success, often in non-obvious ways.

Floor Speeches and Correspondence

When examining the speeches of members of Congress on the chamber floor and in committee, it becomes clear that their words carry significant weight – or at least, members act as if they do. Members see committee hearings and floor speeches as key opportunities to send political messages to their constituents and interest groups, even though these moments are designed to gather and share policy-relevant information (Krehbiel). By taking stands on policy issues and shaping perceptions of themselves, their constituencies, and their party, members skillfully use these platforms to their advantage (DeGregorio; Huitt; Park). While only a very small minority of constituents actually watch or hear members’ committee and floor speeches,

highlights are regularly replayed on local news stations and emphasized by members of Congress in their direct communications with constituents and during campaigns.

Congressional correspondence is another vital tool for members of Congress to communicate with their constituents. The sheer volume of mail sent by members of Congress highlights its importance. In 2016, US House representatives collectively spent \$18.5 million on mail to their constituents, averaging \$43,500 each. Interestingly, research shows that House members in competitive electoral districts sent 2.5 times more mail to constituents than those in non-competitive districts (McMinn). Although the literature offers mixed findings on whether increased constituent mail boosts a member's electoral security (Cover; Cover and Brumberg; Fenno; Parker; Parker and Parker), Parker and Goodman found that members who invest more in constituent communication are seen as significantly more representative and often reap electoral benefits (495).

Data and Analysis

This research investigates whether the use of the term “flyover” by members of Congress has increased over time. To understand this trend, I examined the Congressional Record from 1995 to 2024, identifying all congressional speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence (Cormack) that referenced “flyover” between January 1, 1995, and June 1, 2024. The analysis begins in 1995 (104th Congress) since this was the first Congress since 1931 led by a Republican majority in the US House. 1995 was also the first year of Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich's leadership, which was marked by a significant increase in polarization in Congress and the number of Republican members representing southern and rural congressional districts.

Initially, 339 references were found but most referenced US military planes flying over campaigns, government functions, and sporting events. Surprisingly, over the past 29 years, there have only been 66 references to “flyover” in the context of “flyover country” or “flyover state” in the Congressional Record. As a point of comparison, the term “heartland,” which is similar in context to “flyover,” was referenced over 1,500 times by members of Congress in their speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence during the same period (Congressional Record and Cormack). However, the use of “flyover country” has increased in recent years, from an average of just once per year between 1995 and 2015 to an average of four times per year since 2015 (Figure 1). As Cornelia Klecker suggests, the Trump era has significantly boosted the use of “flyover” rhetoric, aligning with Trump's and the Republican Party's increased focus on rural voters and their populist messaging.

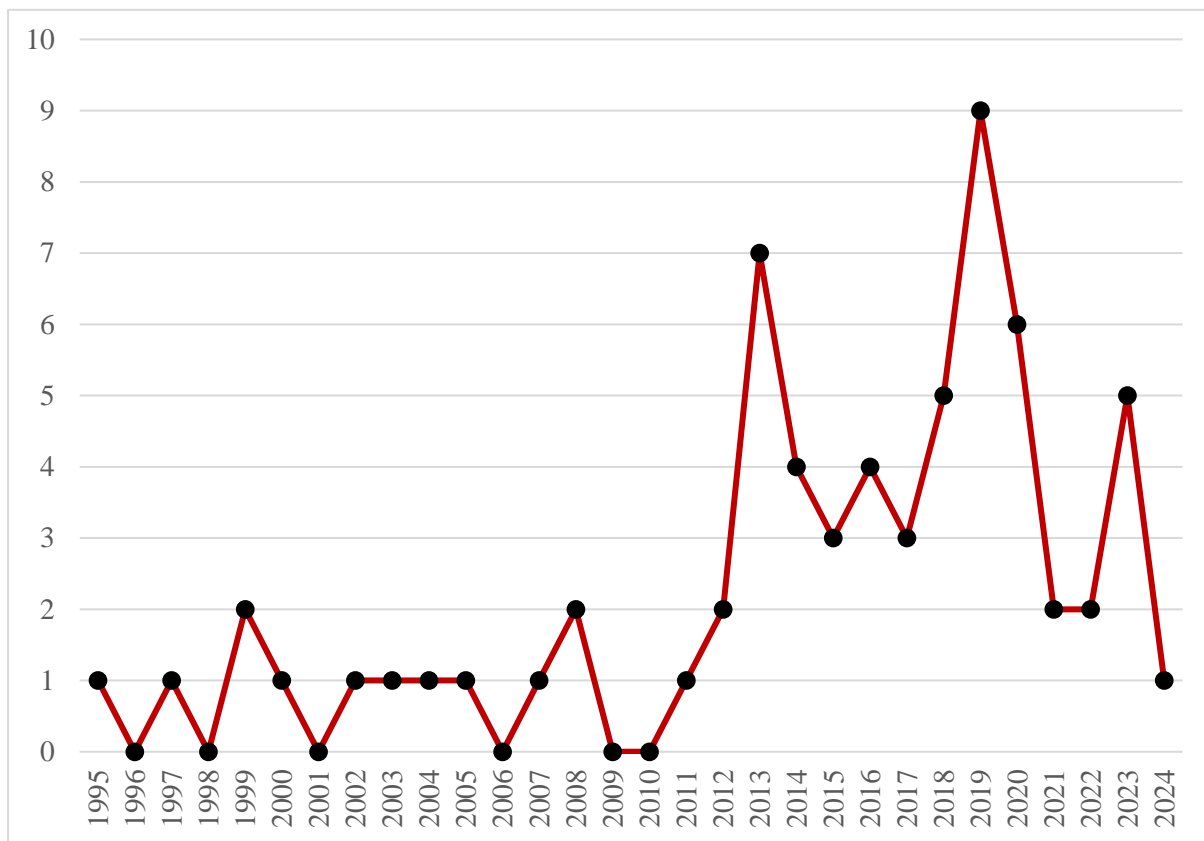


Figure 1: Congressional flyover references by year

Recent trends in congressional rhetoric reveal that the increase in references to “flyover country” is predominantly led by Republicans. Over the past 29 years, the congressional record shows 66 mentions of this term, with only six attributed to Democrats, specifically Representatives Marcy Kaptur (Ohio), Gwen Moore (Wisconsin), Cheri Bustos (Illinois), Emmanuel Cleaver (Missouri), and Senator Sherrod Brown (Ohio).¹ This data underscores a clear partisan divide, with Republicans significantly more likely to employ flyover rhetoric.

“Flyover country” is often linked to rural communities, which Republican members of Congress predominantly represent. This correlation suggests the demographics of their constituents, rather than partisanship, may explain why Republicans use flyover rhetoric more frequently. To investigate this further, we analyzed a random sample of “heartland” references in Congress over the past five years (Congressional Record, 2019–2024). Our findings indicate, while Republicans are also more likely to use the term “heartland” compared to Democrats, the difference is substantially less pronounced. Specifically, 60% of “heartland” references were made by Republicans, while

¹ Representative Cheri Bustos (Illinois) mentioned “flyover” country twice, while all other Democratic members of Congress made only a single reference to it.

Democrats made 40%. This “heartland” distribution reflects the actual difference in rural populations represented by the two parties in Congress (US Census), suggesting the higher use of “flyover” rhetoric by Republicans is driven more by partisanship than by constituent demographics. If “flyover” was simply used as a synonym for rural communities, as “heartland” seems to be for Democrats and Republicans in Congress, then the use of flyover rhetoric by Republican members of Congress as compared to Democrats would be closer to the 60/40 heartland split rather than the 91/9 split found in the data.

To quantify the extent of “flyover” language usage by members of Congress from rural communities, we compared the average rural population of their constituencies. In 2020, the average rural population for all US House Districts was 19.3% and 20.0% for all US states (US Census). However, for US House members who referenced “flyover,” the average rural population was significantly higher at 33.9%. Similarly, US senators who used “flyover” represented states with an average rural population of 32.0%. This analysis clearly indicates that members of Congress who reference “flyover” are from more rural states and districts (Figure 2).

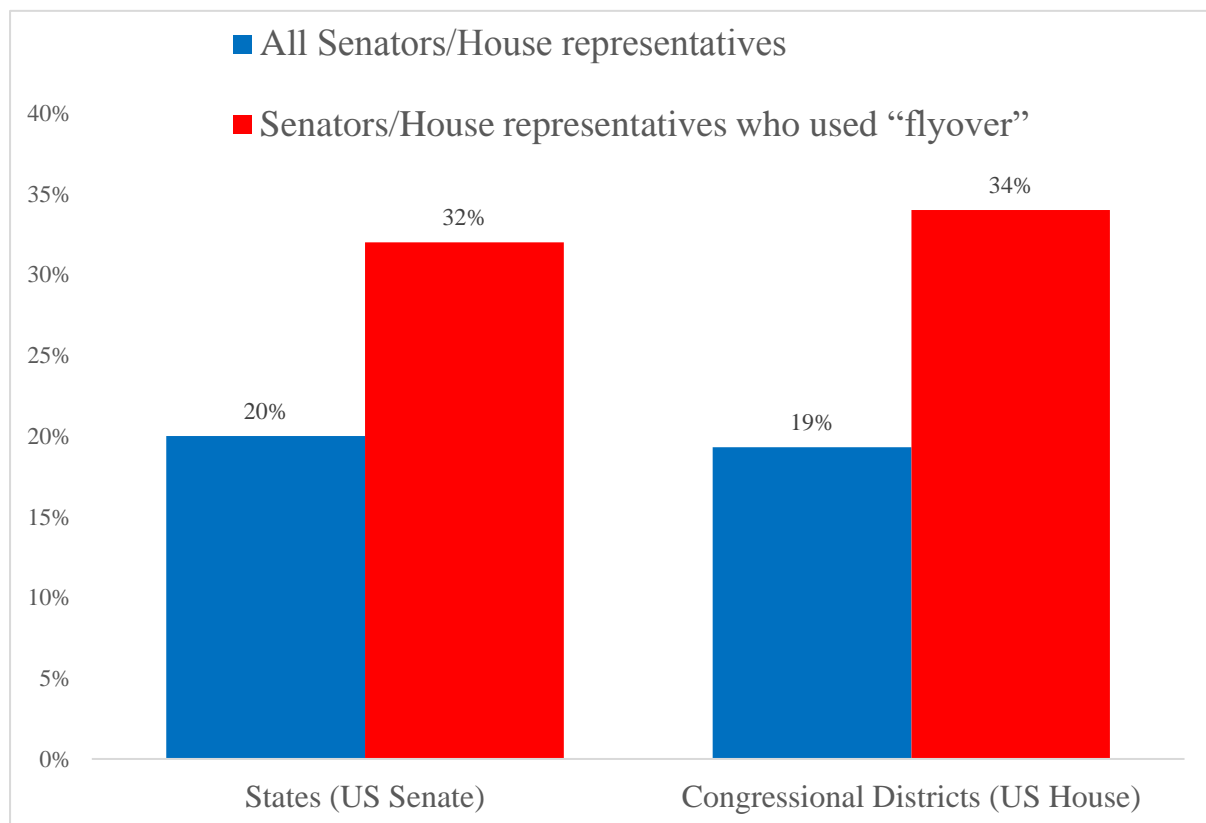


Figure 2: Percentage of rural population of states/districts represented by all senators/House representatives and senators/House representatives who used “flyover”

While the above analysis confirms that members of Congress who reference “flyover country” predominantly represent rural districts, the term originally referred only to

the Midwest. This analysis shows that members of Congress who reference “flyover” predominantly represent rural districts, which, of course, also exist in states on the coasts (such as Maine, Oregon, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and even New York).

To what extent do the members of Congress using the “flyover” reference represent “middle America” (i.e., all states without a coast)? Figure 3 illustrates the states and congressional districts represented by members of Congress who employed fly-over rhetoric. Generally, those who used “flyover country” do represent “middle America.” Notably, Missouri and Ohio have the highest frequency of references, with Missouri having eight and Ohio six. The few flyover references not from “middle America,” such as North Carolina’s 7th, Pennsylvania’s 12th, and Louisiana’s 3rd congressional districts, were from members of Congress representing very rural districts.

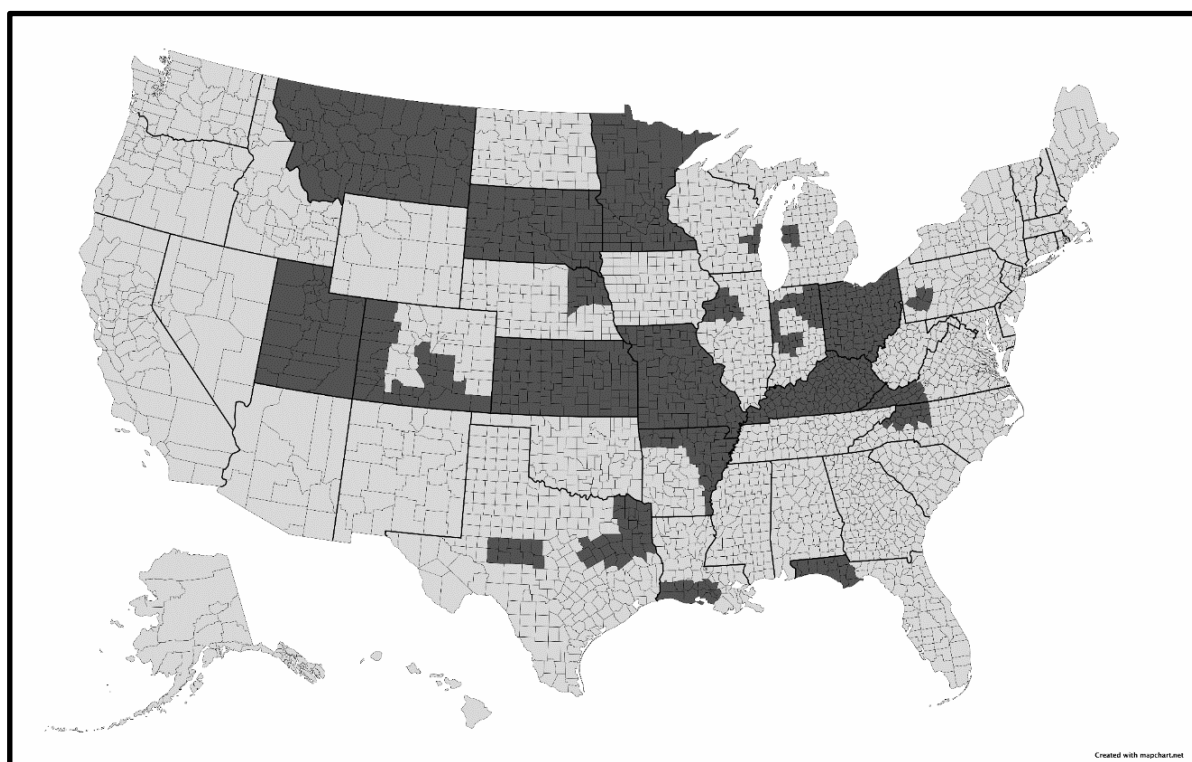


Figure 3: States and congressional districts represented by congressional members using “flyover”

Flyover Content Analysis

I now turn to a detailed content analysis of *how* members of Congress have employed the term “flyover.” Previous research (Klecker; Harkins) suggests politicians have generally used this term to symbolize US-American identity, referencing the rural and Midwestern regions perceived to be overlooked by coastal elites. Furthermore, these studies argue that the Trump era has intensified the politicization of “flyover,” transforming it into a tool for populist discourse.

Before delving into the content analysis, it is essential to note that “flyover country” was the most common variant in the Congressional Record representing 71% of the references. However, “flyover state” was also frequently mentioned (17%), along with other variations such as space, territory, zone, and America representing a combined 12% of flyover references.

My analysis of the 66 references to “flyover” in the Congressional Record from 1995 to 2024 aligns well with previous scholarly findings. The analysis identified two major themes. The first theme, representing more than 45% of the references, depicted “flyover” as a forgotten and/or ignored region of the nation. The second most common theme described it as exceptional, important to America, and embodying the nation’s ideals. Additionally, the analysis revealed three sub-themes that resonate with the victimhood narratives identified by previous scholars (Klecker and Pöhlmann). These sub-themes were categorized as follows: (a) underappreciated/misunderstood (13.6%), (b) ridiculed/viewed as inferior (13.6%), and (c) cheated/provided fewer resources (12.1%). These findings are illustrated in Figure 4.

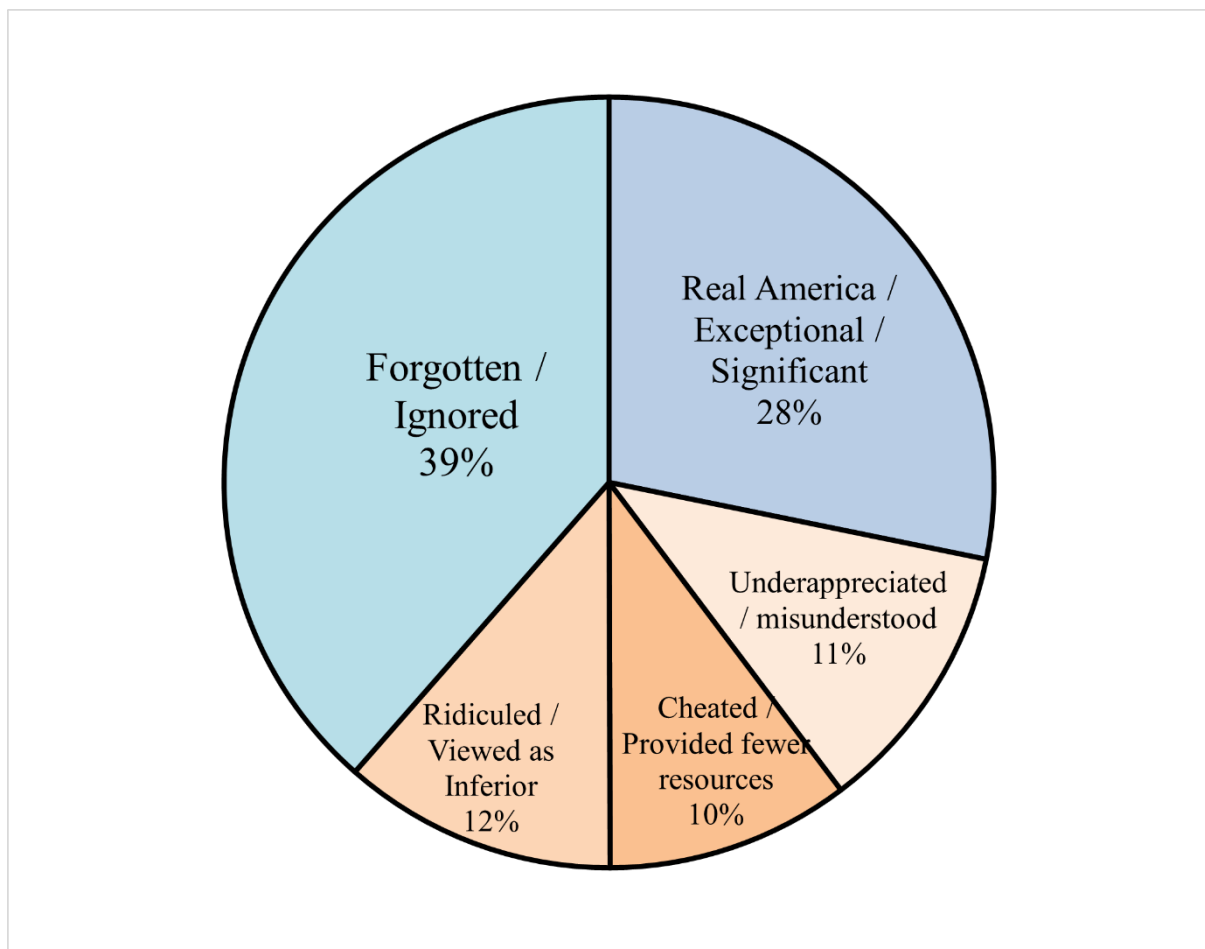


Figure 4: Themes of flyover references

Forgotten and/or Ignored

The most common use of the flyover term by members of Congress is to describe their communities and constituents as being forgotten or ignored by Washington, DC, and coastal cities. Members of Congress use the term to emphasize the need for greater attention and resources for their rural constituents. In the following statement, Congressman Louis Gohmert (Texas) uses flyover rhetoric as a rallying cry to advocate for additional healthcare funding to address the unique challenges faced by flyover communities:

If people haven't gotten out from around this town and gone out and talked to doctors across the country, including doctors in what some would deem "flyover country," you find out the doctors say, if and when those cuts occur, we cannot stay in business; we'll have to close our doors. (Gohmert [H797](#))

"Flyover country" is also used by Republican members of Congress to describe their districts, which are literally flown over by planes traveling between major urban centers, symbolizing how policymakers, businesses, and the media often ignore these areas. For instance, US Representative James Lankford (Oklahoma) uses flyover in the congressional committee statement below to highlight how most individuals simply fly over his district and how it may surprise them that some planes land there and find smart people.

I come from a place that many in this town call flyover country. It may surprise you that planes actually land in flyover country. And when you get off the plane, do you know what you find? You find smart people. People who balance their budgets, serve their neighbors and love their kids. They are not helpless. (Lankford [H2069](#))

Ultimately, these members of Congress use the term "flyover" to convey a sense of neglect and marginalization experienced by the country's rural and less populated regions. They often express frustration with the perception that policymakers in Washington, DC, overlook rural states and districts and regularly ignore them in favor of more populated urban centers.

Real America / Exceptional / Significant

The term "flyover" is also frequently employed by members of Congress to underscore various themes related to the United States, particularly the significance and exceptional nature of "flyover country," despite its perception as less significant. Members often depict their constituents and their "flyover" communities as places where common sense prevails, standing in stark contrast to the political and bureaucratic complexities of Washington, DC. A typical example of the flyover rhetoric is found in the following statement by Representative Chip Roy (Texas):

Mr. Speaker, in this [sic] two weeks following Independence Day, you do a lot of thinking if you are, as I assume my friend was, part of an Independence Day parade. There are a lot of patriotic Americans out there, particularly in flyover country, who love their country and want to defend their country, and they just want their life back. That is it. They want that American Dream back. (Roy [H3692](#))

Another excellent example by Republican senator Pat Roberts (Kansas) uses a sports victory to symbolize the resilience and determination of people from “flyover country,” reinforcing their cultural identity and resiliency:

Our celebration today is about the Royals, the joy of the game of baseball, but it is also about our identity as a city and a region. We were told that a small market team from flyover country would not be able to beat the New York Mets. We won because we kept the line moving – just like the Royals fans do in Kansas and Missouri every day – through a couple of decades of post-season drought, proving our team, our fans, our kind of game is the best in baseball. I know I speak for the fans all over our State and the hundreds of thousands of fans that gathered to enjoy and celebrate a victory for our team and, yes, for our region, too – and I think for our country. (Roberts [S7755](#))

Ultimately, these members of Congress use “flyover” rhetoric to depict the communities they represent as embodying “real America,” i.e., the true American spirit, with hardworking, self-reliant, and deeply patriotic people.

Flyover Country as Victim: Underappreciated, Ridiculed, and Cheated

The final theme emerging from the content analysis of Congressional “flyover” statements is the portrayal of victimhood, accounting for 33% of the discourse. This theme is divided into three subthemes: (a) underappreciation/misunderstanding, (b) ridicule or viewed as inferior, and (c) cheated or an inequitable distribution of resources. Flyover rhetoric identified within this theme emphasizes the lack of appreciation, misunderstanding, and ridicule experienced by regions often labeled as “flyover country/states.” Ultimately, the analysis reveals that congressional members articulate that these central areas are not only geographically but also culturally and economically sidelined.

Underappreciated

The underappreciated/misunderstood subtheme reflects the sentiment that “flyover country” is not fully recognized for its contributions to the nation. Members of Congress argue that these states are often overlooked or undervalued by the rest of the country, particularly by coastal elites and urban centers. A recurring idea in these references is that these regions’ cultural, economic, and social contributions are not adequately acknowledged.

Despite being labeled as “flyover,” these areas are crucial for the nation’s agriculture, manufacturing, and overall economy. Not only are flyover states viewed as

crucial to the success of the United States, but they are also often referenced as the “real” America, as opposed to the elites on the coasts. For example, Republican senator Kit Bond of Missouri highlighted this during a committee hearing on farm security and rural investment:

The big city papers can take our food supply for granted, but those of us who live in flyover country – the real America between the two coasts – cannot, and neither can the consumers in this country and elsewhere, who are unwittingly the biggest beneficiaries of the hard labor and sacrifice of those who struggle on the farm. (Bond S3980)

Ridiculed

The ridicule/inferiority subtheme highlights the notion that “flyover country” is often subjected to ridicule or viewed as less sophisticated compared to coastal and urban regions. Politicians leveraging this rhetoric argue that the constituents and communities in these areas are unfairly stereotyped and marginalized. This includes references to elite or bureaucratic opinions and public discourse that depict these regions negatively. Republican congressman Jim Jordan (Ohio) provides a striking example of this rhetoric:

They can't stand it, and they are never going to stop. And it is not just because they don't like the President. They don't like us. They don't like the 63 million people who voted for this President, all of us in flyover country, all of us common folk in Ohio, Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Texas. (qtd. in United States, House of Representatives 19)

Overall, this narrative underscores the perceived cultural and intellectual divide between “flyover country” and more urbanized coastal areas, emphasizing the need for greater recognition and respect for these often-overlooked regions.

Cheated

The subtheme of being “cheated” or provided fewer resources highlights the systemic disadvantages faced by “flyover country” in terms of resource allocation. Members of Congress argue these regions receive disproportionately less federal funding, fewer economic opportunities, and inadequate infrastructure support in comparison to urbanized or coastal areas. This perceived inequity is said to contribute to significant economic and social disparities. Republican representative Doug Lamborn (Colorado) exemplifies this sentiment in his critique of the INVEST in America Act, a major infrastructure bill championed by the Democrats:

The Democrats' so-called INVEST in America Act is nothing more than the Green New Deal disguised as an infrastructure bill. Instead of working in a bipartisan fashion, Democrats crafted this partisan legislation, which will never become law, solely to cater to special interest climate extremists. This bill also further widens the disparity between

rural and urban infrastructure by once again abandoning “flyover country,” with seven times more funding going to infrastructure in urban cities. (Lamborn)

Collectively, these themes construct an image of “flyover country” as regions that are not only geographically but also politically and culturally marginalized. By highlighting these victimhood narratives, members of Congress aim to draw attention to the perceived injustices faced by their constituents and advocate for greater recognition and support.

Conclusion

Unlike previous studies that have focused on a limited sample of essays, speeches, and commentary, this research provides a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the use of flyover rhetoric in the US Congress over nearly three decades. By examining all congressional speeches, committee hearings, and constituent correspondence referencing “flyover,” the study offers a systematic analysis of how this term has been employed in the Congressional Record by members of Congress since 1995.

The analysis of congressional rhetoric surrounding the term “flyover” reveals a profound and evolving narrative that underscores the deep-seated cultural and political divides in the United States. This study not only highlights the increasing use of flyover rhetoric primarily by Republican members of Congress but also exposes the strategic deployment of this term to evoke a sense of victimhood and marginalization among rural constituents. The findings suggest that “flyover” has become more than just a geographic descriptor; it is a potent symbol of identity politics, wielded to galvanize support and foster a collective sense of grievance against perceived coastal elitism (and/or Democrats).

Particularly striking is the shift in flyover rhetoric usage over the past three decades. Initially a benign term, it has morphed into a tool for populist discourse, especially during the Trump era. The data shows a marked increase in references to “flyover” post-2015, reflecting the Republican Party’s intensified focus on rural voters and their populist messaging. This transformation underscores the adaptability of political language and its capacity to shape and reflect the socio-political landscape.

Moreover, the content analysis reveals that flyover rhetoric is not merely about geographic neglect but also cultural and economic disenfranchisement. Members of Congress use this term to highlight the perceived injustices faced by their constituents, portraying them as underappreciated, ridiculed, and cheated by the urban-centric policies of coastal elites (and/or Democrats). This narrative of victimhood is a powerful mobilizing force, strengthening the divide between “real America” and coastal elites or the other America.

In conclusion, the flyover rhetoric mirrors the broader cultural and political tensions in the United States. It reflects a growing sense of alienation and resentment among rural Americans, which politicians have adeptly harnessed for electoral gain. As the political landscape continues to evolve, such rhetoric will likely remain a critical tool in the arsenal of those seeking to champion the cause of the overlooked and the marginalized. This study sheds light on the dynamics of congressional rhetoric and calls for a deeper understanding of the cultural and political undercurrents that shape US-American identity and discourse.

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