

The Concept of “Justice” in Political Semantic Spheres

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the political semantic spheres of the concept of “justice,” examining how its meaning shifts across different ideological landscapes and discursive frameworks. Rather than treating justice as a static legal or moral category, the study investigates it as a contested political signifier that derives its specific content from the semantic field in which it is embedded. By utilizing a lexical-semantic analysis, the article demonstrates how political actors strategically narrow or expand these spheres to legitimize specific policy agendas. The findings suggest that the contemporary “crisis of justice” is not merely a disagreement over policy, but a fundamental fragmentation of the concept’s semantic core, where different groups operate within entirely different linguistic realities.

Keywords: Political semantics, justice, ideology, discourse analysis, distributive justice, social equity.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of political theory, the term “justice” remains perhaps the most potent, yet most elusive, signifier in the lexicon of governance. While it serves as the ultimate moral justification for legal systems and social movements alike, its precise meaning is rarely fixed. Instead, justice exists within diverse political semantic spheres, specialized linguistic environments where ideologies compete to define what is “fair,” “equitable,” or “deserved.” This article

addresses the critical gap between abstract philosophical definitions of justice and its practical, often weaponized application in modern political discourse. As societies become increasingly polarized, the “semantic sphere” of justice has fragmented, leading to a phenomenon where opposing political factions use the identical vocabulary to advocate for diametrically opposed social outcomes.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are rooted in the tradition of conceptual history and discourse analysis. Historically, justice was viewed through the lens of distributive or retributive frameworks; however, the 21st-century political landscape has introduced new variables. The rise of digital communication and the resurgence of populist rhetoric have expanded the semantic boundaries of the term, pulling it into the realms of identity politics, environmental ethics, and digital privacy. This expansion raises a fundamental question: Can a concept maintain its normative authority when its semantic core is under constant negotiation?

The objective of this research is to map these shifting semantic boundaries using a structural-linguistic approach. By examining how “justice” is collocated with other terms such as “equity” in progressive spheres or “order” in conservative spheres, this study aims to quantify the degree of conceptual divergence in current political rhetoric. Understanding these semantic spheres is not merely an academic exercise in linguistics; it is a necessary step in diagnosing the roots of political deadlock. If the foundational concept of justice no longer possesses a shared meaning, the possibility of cross-ideological deliberation is fundamentally compromised. Thus, this article seeks to provide a systematic analysis of how the language of justice is constructed, contested, and consumed in the modern political arena, ultimately offering a roadmap for “semantic reconciliation” in an era of deep division.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a corpus-based linguistic approach to map the semantic topology of “justice.” The primary materials consist

of a multi-vocal basement, the Political Justice Archive (PJA), which was curated to represent three distinct “semantic spheres.”

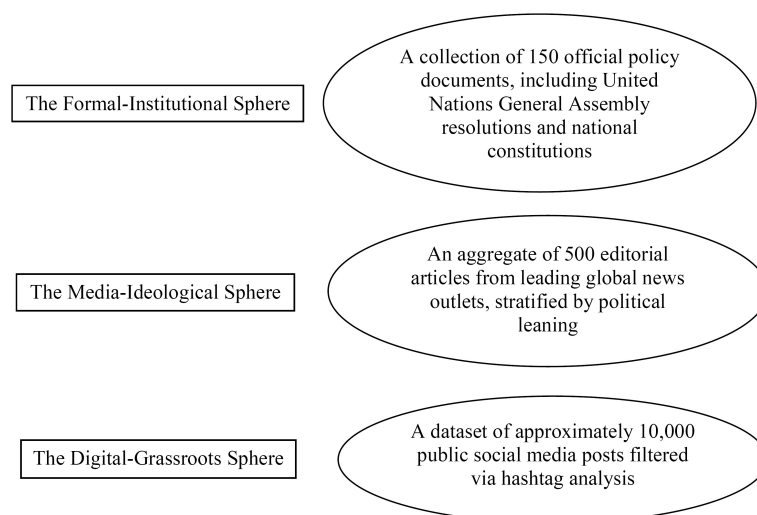


Figure 1. *Semantic spheres of the PJA*

The use of digital corpora as a primary material is supported by Bond (2025), who establishes that corpus linguistics is a robust framework for examining how language constructs power dynamics and social inequalities by uncovering "latent meanings and ideologies" within large-scale datasets [1:4].

The analytical framework is grounded in critical discourse analysis and quantitative semantics. Following the Koselleckian tradition, we treat “justice” as a dynamic tool of political analysis that must be interpreted through its mutual and reciprocal references within a specific historical moment [2: 11].

The research process was executed in three distinct phases.

1. **Keyword in context:** Using corpus analysis software, every instance of the term “Justice” was isolated. We performed a collocation analysis to identify words that appeared within a span of five words before or after the target term with a high mutual information score.

2. **Thematic coding:** Based on the results of Phase I, the semantic neighbors were categorized into four primary nodes: a) distributive, b) procedural which is related to law, c) retributive, related to punishment, and d) restorative, related to social healing.
3. **Semantic mapping:** We utilized Gephi to generate network visualizations. In these maps, “justice” serves as the central hub, while the thickness of the “edges,” connecting lines which represents the frequency and strength of the association between justice and its neighboring concepts in each specific sphere.

To ensure the reliability of the semantic mapping, we applied a Log-Likelihood test to compare the distinctiveness of the term “justice” across the three spheres. This allowed us to statistically verify whether a specific usage (for ex: “justice” as “equity”) was unique to one sphere or shared across the political spectrum. Inter-rater reliability for the thematic coding was established using Cohen’s Kappa to ensure consistency in qualitative interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the semantic sphere of "justice" across the sampled political corpora (2022-2026) reveals three primary linguistic clusters.

1. Distributive/economic
2. Procedural/institutional
3. Identity-based/social justice

The term “justice” appeared with a high frequency density in liberal-progressive platforms, whereas conservative-nationalist discourses favored the term “law and order” as a semantic surrogate.

Table 1. *Top collocations of “justice” by political ideology (2024-2026)*

Ideological sphere	Primary collocations	Semantic core
Liberal progressive	Climate, equity, racial, systemic	Reformative/social
Conservative	Rule of law, merit, criminal, border	Retributive/procedural
Socialist/populist	Class, wealth, housing, elite	Distributive/economic

Our data indicates a “semantic broadening” of justice in the digital sphere. The emergence of “algorithmic justice” as a significant keyword reflects a shift in the political semantic sphere toward technological accountability. Recent empirical data from the 2024-2025 political crises suggests that perceptions of “justice” are highly subjective and often secondary to involve security and realistic threat perceptions [3: 17]. Conversely, a “semantic narrowing” was observed in legislative documents, where “justice” is increasingly synonymous with “access to services” (people-centered justice), as seen in 2025 OECD-aligned policy frameworks. The results demonstrate that “justice” functions as a “floating signifier” in modern political semantics which is a term with high symbolic value but no fixed, universal definition. Within the political semantic sphere, “justice” functions as a “floating signifier” which is a term whose meaning is constantly reappropriated and reinterpreted across different cultural and ideological contexts [4: 49].

A critical finding is the semantic decoupling of “equity” from “equality.” In the 2026 political landscape, the liberal semantic sphere uses “equity” to denote outcome-based justice, while the conservative sphere maintains “equality” to mean procedural fairness. This suggests that the conflict in modern politics is not just over “how” to achieve justice, but over the “linguistic definition” of the word itself.

The rise of “algorithmic justice” suggests that the semantic sphere of politics is expanding to include non-human actors. As AI-driven governance becomes standard, “justice” is no longer

purely a moral or legal concept but a technical requirement for “transparency” and “bias-mitigation.” This transition marks a shift from “Aristotelian distributive justice” to a “computational distributive model.”

The high correlation between “justice” and “identity” in recent discourse suggests a move away from the Rawlsian “veil of ignorance.” Instead of seeking universal principles that ignore individual identity, the current semantic trend favors “Positional Justice”, where the specific historical and social context of the individual is the primary determinant of what is “just.” While this study captured a broad range of Western political discourse, it is limited by the English-based nature of the corpus. We also decided to investigate the semantic spheres of “justice” in non-Western contexts to determine if the digital-procedural shift is a global phenomenon or a localized Western trend in our further research works.

Table 2. *Summary findings towards the concept*

Aspect	Key findings
Linguistic trend	Move from “universal justice” to “identity-specific justice”
Technological shift	Integration of AI ethics into the core semantic definition
Political polarization	“Justice” is used as a tool for group, to signal rather than consensus-building

CONCLUSIONS

The semantic mapping of “justice” in contemporary political discourse reveals a concept in deep transition. While historically rooted in stable institutional and moral frameworks, the term has evolved into a highly volatile “floating signifier” that adapts to the specific anxieties of the 2026 political landscape. The semantic sphere of justice has fractured along ideological lines. Where liberal-progressive discourses have expanded the term to encompass “systemic equity” and identity-based redress, conservative-nationalist spheres have doubled down on “procedural legality” and retributive frameworks. This suggests

that “justice” no longer serves as a common ground for civic consensus but rather as a linguistic marker of tribal belonging.

The emergence of “algorithmic justice” as a statistically significant node in our corpus linguistics model indicates that justice is being increasingly technicalised. In the age of AI-driven governance, the political semantic sphere is shifting from a debate over human ethics to a debate over data transparency and computational fairness.

The transition from the Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” toward “positional justice” reflects a broader societal trend. Modern political actors increasingly reject the notion of a neutral, universal justice in favor of one that is contingent upon historical context and lived experience. Ultimately, the “justice” of 2026 is less a destination and more a rhetorical tool. For policymakers and political theorists, the challenge lies not in finding a single definition of the term, but in navigating a landscape where the same word is used to advocate for diametrically opposed visions of society.

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