Spring 2023

Political Rhetoric: A Personal and Scientific Exploration

Joshua McNeal

Joshua McNeal

Advised by Todd Donovan

Honors Capstone

06/03/2023

<u>Political Rhetoric: A Personal and Scientific Exploration</u>

   In joining the honors program at Western my freshman year, I did not have a perfect plan for how I wanted my life to go or what it would involve. However, I did have a strong conviction that if one is going to attempt to solve any of the large systemic problems and injustices facing the world then they must have two things: the skillset to be useful and the optimism to believe that a better future is possible. My degree and my time in the honors college the past four years have helped me grow in both areas. Thanks to the honors program I was exposed to topics that I would have never explored before like the history of ancient Persia, the poets of the romantic period, and modern-day bioethics. In exploring all these topics and more in an interdisciplinary way my education was not only rich, but also deeply interconnected. As a Political Science major the realizations I had because of my honors education naturally carried over to my major classes – which was an extensive education in its own right – and led me to pursue this capstone project about a subject which I now know to be vitally important personally, socially, and politically: rhetoric.

This paper deals with political rhetoric as a function of my major and my interests, but the underlying mechanisms that make rhetoric work as explored by various political scientists and communications researchers carry over to any other form of speech. And in the case of rhetoric, framing mechanisms only work because we know that they affect the way that we as humans

think and believe, because they touch and can shape our values. Values, which are deeply connected to our emotions and are at the core of how we all experience life. Whether you study great art, or great civilizations of the past, or contemporary public problems you will find ideas that inspire people and make them feel something at the core. With this understanding of how people work, and the broader understanding that any sort of revolution for the better (political, social, environmental, etc.) will necessitate large scale public support and action, rhetoric strikes me as the most important thing to understand and learn to use well. If you can speak in such a way that others feel and align their beliefs with you, then you can move them to act despite resistance; that is effective rhetoric and it is the only way that the problems in our society will be solved.

Political rhetoric is a topic that is as potentially expansive in the literature as it is vague in having an exact definition. A large part of the confusion around political rhetoric has to do with how popular conceptions about what is and is not rhetoric compare to existing scholarly definitions. In the popular understanding, political rhetoric is often thought of as the culmination of all the factors that effective speakers make use of to convince others to agree with and follow them. However, to try and isolate out various societal and individual biases and to narrow the scope of discussion most scholarly articles related to political rhetoric use a working definition wherein rhetoric is basically the practice of deliberatively using language with the intent to persuade a given audience.

While the application, effectiveness, and style of political rhetoric will differ from situation to situation there are consistent patterns to how speakers use language to persuade and why certain uses of language are effective in persuading others. This paper will review and comment on the

existing research on political rhetoric by examining the underlying theoretical and practical

principles of political rhetoric, the most dominant forms of political rhetoric today which have

been studied in the literature, and some of the other outlying forms of political rhetoric.

The best way to understand how and why political rhetoric works involves understanding

the intersection between moral values, political ideology, and political choice as well as the

concept of framing theory. Moral values is a tricky thing to precisely define but relevant across

most studies is the individual importance and persuasiveness of something approximating the

prioritization of compassion/agreeableness (which tends to be more common amongst liberals)

and the prioritization of traditionalism/orderliness (which tends to be more common amongst

conservatives). In Hirsh et al. (2010), these moral values are plotted out using the Big Five

Aspects Scale from psychology and the models "significantly predicted party preference" such

that "significant effects were observed for Conscientiousness; Openness-Intellect and

Agreeableness" with "Republican supporters appearing higher in Conscientiousness but lower in

Openness-Intellect and Agreeableness" (Hirsh et al., pg 658). Further, when the authors factored

in values around egalitarianism and order-traditionalism they were able to independently predict

political preferences (Hirsh et al., pg. 661). As the authors themselves note after a wide variety of

similar statistical analysis between different moral values and political behavior, "the analysis

supports the notion that liberals and conservatives are motivated by distinct domains of

morality…each profile involves a distinct mixture of motivations and cognitive tendencies"

(Hirsh et al., pg. 662).

Furthering the relationship between moral attitudes, political ideology, and political choice Knuckey (2004) investigates the relationship between moral attitudes and voting choice in the 2004 election. For the purpose of the study, Knuckey defined moral values as effectively "moral traditionalism and moral judgement" using the answers from respondents on a 4 point scale ranging from being heavily in favor of or heavily against things like gay marriage, abortion, etc. For example, agreement with the statement "By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice." Would be a 1 compared to agreement with "By law, abortion should never be permitted" which would be a 4 with low scores indicating moral tolerance and high scores indicating morally traditional responses (Knuckey, 229). After running the results, Knuckey finds "an almost linear relationship between moral values and the percentage of the vote received by George W. Bush" where "Bush received landslide support (atleast 70%) among those respondents with scores on the moral value index of .70 or higher (where 1.0 is all responses being 4's)… but only minimal support (as much as 30 percent) among those with scores less than .40." (Knuckey, pg. 230). Especially important as it relates to the powerful role of moral values, "even after imposing for controls for other potentially confounding variables (such as party identification), moral values exerted a statistically significant effect on voice choice in 2004". Further analysis of the data given the relationship between moral values and voter choice show that "moral values have the capacity to induce some vote defections among Democratic identifiers, especially independent leaning Democrats, and it is especially important in affecting the vote choice of Independents" (Knuckey, pg. 235-236).

With a clearer understanding of the importance and influence of moral values on peoples'

political choice, it's now important to understand framing as a function of political rhetoric.

"Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue

or reorient their thinking about an issue". Framing effects are when "(often small) changes in the

presentation of an issue or event produce (sometimes large) changes of opinion… for instance

20% of the American public believes that too little is being spent on "welfare" but about 65%

says that too little is being spent on "assistance to the poor" " (Chong and Druckman, 2007 pg.

103-104). As the authors note, one's frame in thought can have a marked impact on one's overall

opinion and so politicians often attempt to mobilize voters by encouraging them to think about

policies along certain lines – especially a policy's likely effects or its relationship to important

values such as freedom of speech, traditionalism, etc. (Chong and Druckman, pg.106). Exactly

what values a politician invokes, how, and how effective their words are is largely context

dependent but the underlying mechanism of framing is effective in and of itself.

In terms of how framing works, "people draw their opinions from the set of available beliefs

stored in memory. Only some beliefs become accessible at a given moment. Out of the set of

accessible beliefs, only some are strong enough to be judged relevant or applicable to the subject

at hand. Framing can work on all three levels, by making new beliefs available about an issue,

making certain available beliefs accessible, or making beliefs applicable or "strong" in people's

evaluations." Importantly, "there is nothing inherently superior about an applicable or strong

frame other than its appeal to audiences...They can be built around exaggerations and outright

lies playing on the fears and prejudices of the public. Strong frames often rest on symbols,

endorsements, and links to partisanship and ideology, and may be effective in shaping opinions

through heuristics rather than direct information about the substance of a policy" (Chong and Druckman, pg. 111). Also, "framing effects depend on a mix of factors including the strength and repetition of the frame, the competitive environment, and individual motivations. Additionally, under certain conditions, the aggregate impact of a mix of frames may differ from the sum of their individual effects" (Chong and Druckman, pg. 111).

Having established how framing and framing effects work its also important to give some caveats. For one thing, communication and peoples' values are generally complex and the effect that a given frame might have can be mediated by things such as strong preexisting values (assuming that the frame given is in opposition to said value). Interestingly, while there is some disagreement about whether knowledge is a mediating factor when it comes to framing the authors conclude that "when controlling for prior information knowledge enhances framing effects because it increases the likelihood that the considerations emphasized in a frame will be available or comprehensible to the individual." (Chong and Druckman, pg. 112). That said, other factors such as the credibility of the source delivering a frame, whether information is available to the public which goes against the frame they're being presented, etc. can and do also mediate the effect of frames (Chong and Druckman, pg. 112). Given that politics is often competitive in nature, it's also worth noting that " in competitive contexts, the strength of the opposition frame determines the distance one is pulled away from his or her values even when the frame that is congruent with those values is represented in the debate." (Chong and Druckman, pg. 113). Put another way, in the authors' analysis of framing literature and in their research the strength of one frame relative to its opposition is more important for convincing others than value-congruence between the frame and the listener.

Since framing is such a nuanced topic, it's also important to spell out exactly what framing is and how it differs from other related ideas. From the authors' perspectives, and in mine as well, framing and priming are effectively interchangeable as concepts because they both cause a greater weight to be placed on a given belief in a person's mind (such as, using the example from Knuckey (2004), the importance of traditionalism) as a result of information which is both "accessible and applicable" to the judgement one makes (Chong and Druckman, pg. 115). Theoretically, framing alone is different from persuasion in that framing deals with changing the weight of existing beliefs in one's mind whereas persuasion deals with altering the beliefs themselves (eg: changing whether money or time is more important compared to changing that one views money or time as important) (Chong and Druckman, pg. 115). That said, in practice most frames end up also being persuasive as they involve both increasing the weight of existing beliefs and presenting new information which changes how people make their judgements (Chong and Druckman, pg. 116).

Explaining and showing the intersection between peoples' moral values, their political action, framing theory, and framing effects in a scientifically robust way is a difficult thing to do shortly. However, having a nuanced understanding of how these concepts work and how exactly they are all interconnected is crucial to fully understand real-life political rhetoric.

The most popular and most well studied form of political rhetoric today is undoubtedly populist rhetoric. However, what exactly is populist rhetoric? In practice and in theory, I think that the best definition of populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately

separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people." (Cas Mudde 2004, pg. 562). Following from this, populist rhetoric is effectively the persuasive framing of ideas by drawing on anti-elite sentiments, general societal discontent, and purporting to enact rightfully and simply the "will of the people". As an ideology, populism is also somewhat unique in that the simplified nature of its ideas lends itself well to both right- and left-wing ideologies.

One interesting study surrounding populist rhetoric comes from Hamleers et al. (2021) who examined the extent to which messages with different populist identity frames (anti-elite, centrality of ordinary people, or both) affected the extent to which people agreed with populist attitudes on the topics of the belief in homogenous people, popular sovereignty, and anti-elitism. For their experimental design, Hamleers et al. used 4 relevant questions for each of the 4 populist topics and had respondents rate their agreement with each question on a 1-7 likert scale where 1=completey disagree and 7= completely agree after being exposed to one of the populist message conditions. For the purpose of the study, Hamleers et al. (2021) tested this experiment in a controlled way across 15 different European countries while controlling for political ideology and ideological extremity. The authors' multilevel analysis found that "messages stressing the centrality of the ordinary people activate all dimensions of populist attitudes. In contrast, anti-elite messages activate anti-elitism attitudes only for those individuals with lower levels of education and extreme positions on the ideological left–right spectrum" (Hamleers et al., pg. 1).

Relevant to the effectiveness of political rhetoric, the above study points to populist rhetoric in particular being statistically significant and therefore somewhat effective at persuading people to report more populist attitudes across multiple countries. In understanding the appeal of populist rhetoric, its also important to note how the single message which could activate populist attitudes across all 3 metrics was a belief in the centrality of ordinary people – an attitude which although mostly populist also has ideological roots in liberalism and contemporary democracy which respondents have all likely been positively exposed to for many years.

Further evidence for the effectiveness of populist rhetoric comes from an analysis of right-wing activism and communication surrounding the ousting of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff. In their analysis, the authors find that "the framing mechanisms of antagonism (everything as a we the virtuous people vs the corrupt elite) and reductionism (all issues fundamentally being about corruption and popular sovereignty) enabled actors to build unified diagnostics and targets while at the same time presenting different motivating messages and maintaining contradictory views of the country's future" (Dias et al. 2021, pg. 2). In other words, populist rhetoric and framing uniquely enabled disparate groups on the far right to come together and stay together in pursuit of ousting a Brazilian president despite their considerable differences. It's worth noting that the reductive and antagonistic nature of populist rhetoric which was so crucial to the success of the movement examined by Dias et al. is not exclusive to populism, however it seems that these distinct aspects of populism in combination with its popularity and the lack of publicly acceptable, similar alternatives (for instance, fascism) are part of what make populism such a powerful force in todays political world.

The Dias et al. study being primarily content analysis means that it is somewhat more difficult to summarize the results of their findings in any more significant depth without simply pasting their research data within this paper. However, their work also perfectly encapsulates the highly context-dependent and incredibly effective nature of political rhetoric in the real world and the possibility of converting strong rhetorical understanding into social change. Their analysis of antagonism and reductivism as being key to the success of right-wing groups in Brazil also sheds light on one particularly important point when it comes to rhetoric: strong rhetoric and strong framing needn't be accurate or nuanced or even reasonable. In fact, sometimes the strongest examples of rhetoric lack precisely those qualities because so much cognition related to how people make political decisions can be based in emotions and value identification rather than logic.

Other than populism, another particularly influential and famous form of political rhetoric concerns the words and actions of what one historian describes as "the paranoid style in American politics" (Hofstadter, 1964). Although Hofstadter writes primarily in relationship to the longstanding trend of especially right-wing individuals writing and acting in ways pushed by paranoia and fantasy throughout history, it also remains true that this style of speaking in American politics would not have lasted so long if it did not strike a chord with the general public. In fact, it seems that part of the appeal of this kind of rhetorical style is the inflammatory and emotionally engaging nature of the paranoid American rhetorician's books and dramatic public speeches as he convinces you that American has been taken from you by a powerful, shadowy outgroup. Whether the speaker is intending to appeal to people's' sense of paranoia and emotional vulnerability for political gain or, simply because the speaker is genuinely that paranoid, there is no difference in the effectiveness of this framing and of future political action

to a certain audience. In thinking about persuasive elements of different rhetorical styles, it's worth noting that this paranoid style of American politics also shares the principle of antagonism which helps make populism so effective in practice.

Similar in dramatic flair, the sacred and absolutist style of rhetoric as examined by Marietta (2009) is also noteworthy, historical, and ever popular. "Sacred rhetoric is the political expression of [a principle that is held to be absolute, resisting tradeoffs with other values.]" (Marietta, pg. 390), and the absolute reasoning that sacred rhetoric employs involves a combination of attributes such as "privileging values over costs or consequence, invoking a boundary of what is acceptable or tolerable, etc." which put together cause significant shifts In the effects that one's words have on people. For instance, people exposed to sacred rhetoric "become more motivated to engage in politics…convince others of their positions, and donate to political campaigns" (Marietta, pg. 392). Marietta's analysis focuses on the multiple political debates that Democrats lost over the years to Republicans who employ sacred rhetoric frequently and are consequently perceived as "more principled, virtuous, and determined" in statistically significant ways compared to their opponents who don't (Marietta, pg. 393). Taken together, Marietta's analysis points towards sacred and absolutist rhetoric being plainly superior for spurring others towards political participation, increasing one's public image, and persuading others to vote for oneself compared to even presidential-candidate tier rhetoric which lacks emotional cohesion and engagement.

Lastly, and potentially as a response to the issue of rhetorically ineffective democrats ala Marietta's analysis, Kienpointner (2013) analyses the political rhetoric of Barack Obama through

a varied content analysis and notes a somewhat unique rhetorical style. Starting with the baseline observations, Kienpointner notes that "Obama tries to select starting points (premises) and to integrate them into argument schemes which are effective in political rhetoric, for example, the "Pragmatic Argument" or the "Argument of Justice" while also adapting these argument schemes to meet audience demands" (Kienpointner, pg. 362). Further, he notes that Obama often formulates his arguments in a persuasive way such "that is, in a clear, rhythmic, well-structured way, making the central messages easy to remember, using classical figures of speech effectively, such as alliteration, anaphor, parallelism, antithesis and climax, metaphor, metonymy, irony, rhetorical questions." (Kienpointner, pg. 362). I find this observation by Kienpointner to be particularly interesting simply because while this is the classical definition and practices of rhetoric it is not often brought up or seen I scholarly articles on the subject related to politics today.

More uniquely, Kienpointner also points to Obama tending to "stick to a universalist and consensus-oriented attitude" and employ self-criticism which "on the one hand, contributes to his credibility (and, hence, persuasiveness), and, on the other hand, also makes his arguments more balanced and rationally acceptable" (Kienpointner 2013, pg. 366). While this rhetorical style is obviously somewhat recognizable as Obama's, the rhetorical effectiveness of these behaviors is also not lost even with the assumption of the self-criticism and universalism as being completely genuine. Further, relevant to most rhetorical styles but especially so in the case of Obama with his more classical techniques– these are effective rhetorical strategies that really anybody could pick up and start using. Although practices Obama uses like alliteration and anaphor may not tug

on existing moral values as most other rhetorical styles and frameworks do, they still make one's words much more persuasive than they would be otherwise.

The science of human communication, cognition, morality, and persuasion are already highly complex even before they're all put into the larger context of political science. Despite this difficulty, political rhetoric, its applications, and the existing scientific literature we do have on the subject remain paramount to understand and be aware of in the pursuit of knowledge and more perfect unions around the world.

Personally, in pursuit of a better understanding of how the world works and of exactly who I am and what I want this project and my honors education has been crucial. Like any good academic paper or person, this has involved a lot of nuance and complex understanding of the way that many factors all affect each other. Rhetoric, let alone political rhetoric, is not the last word on persuasion or election results or anything of the sort. Like most things, its complicated. Similarly, I recognize that this chapter is not the last word on my education or my personal growth. However, what is abundantly clear to me now because of all this learning and understanding is the necessity of knowing your own values and being able to connect with others in this world. As this paper has shown, if you understand your own values and you can work an understanding of values and emotions into how you speak then you can not only live a meaningful and social life – you can also accomplish great things both on your own and with the help of others. Afterall, the effects of great change cannot be heard or felt if one does not speak first.

Citations:

Hirsh, J. B., DeYoung, C. G., Xiaowen Xu, & Peterson, J. B. (2010). Compassionate liberals and

polite conservatives: Associations of agreeableness with political ideology and moral

values. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *36*(5), 655–664.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210366854

Knuckey, J. (2007). Moral values and vote choice in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. *Politics*

& Policy, *35*(2), 222–245. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2007.00058.x

Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*,

10(1), 103–126. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition, 39*(4), 541-563.

doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Hameleers, M., Schmuck, D., Schulz, A., Wirz, D. S., Matthes, J., Bos, L., . . . Andreadis, I.

(2021). The effects of populist identity framing on populist attitudes across Europe:

Evidence from a 15-country comparative experiment. *International Journal of Public*

Opinion Research, 33(3), 491-510. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edaa018

Dias, T., Von Bülow, M., & Gobbi, D. (2021). Populist framing mechanisms and the rise of

right-wing activism in Brazil. *Latin American Politics and Society, 63*(3), 69-92.

doi:10.1017/lap.2021.22

Hofstadter, R., Paoletta, K., Vanderbilt, T., & Wells, L. (1964, March 23). The paranoid style in

American politics, by Richard Hofstadter. Retrieved March 31, 2023, from

https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics

Marietta, M. (2009). The absolutist advantage: Sacred Rhetoric in contemporary presidential

debate. *Political Communication*, *26*(4), 388–411.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600903296986

Kienpointner, M. (2013, January 01). Strategic maneuvering in the political rhetoric of Barack

Obama. Retrieved March 31, 2023, from https://www.jbe-

platform.com/content/journals/10.1075/jlp.12.3.03kie