

Rhetoric and Convention Speeches

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Abstract

This paper examines four speeches given at Republican and Democratic Conventions by Presidential candidates. The author identifies four rhetorical appeals that were used by Carter, Obama, Romney and Trump in their parties' conventions. They are identified as community appeals, competency appeals, religious appeals and emergency appeals.

Keywords: Carter, Obama, Romney, Trump, rhetoric, convention, party

Introduction

When examining the speeches of politicians, it is possible to have any number of reactions to the distributed messages. There have certainly been many reactions to the messages composed by various candidates over the past election cycle and much of the discussion has revolved around the “rhetoric” of said candidates. However this discussion is not referring to the communication theory. The rhetorical theory has been defined as “The collaborative art of addressing and guiding decision and judgment-usually public judgment that cannot be decided by force or expertise.” (Craig, 1999, p. 135).

When viewing a politician’s speech through the paradigm of rhetorical theory, the message is open to immense scrutiny. This theory assumes that any message has a strategic purpose and is the result of premeditation. Under this theory every aspect of the speaker, the environment, and any previous events may be able to shed light on the speaker’s intent and preferred effect of the message.

In the court of American politics the Presidential election is arguably the most visible political event. Due to the scale of a Presidential election, individual phrases could indicate a direction of policy or a shift an existing government norm. The political turmoil of the past several years has invited much criticism of rhetoric originating from candidates and elected officials. This environment of public inspection of the government has lead me to adopt a more cynical perspective in regards to the speeches and promises of politicians. This recent and personal revelation lends itself to rhetorical theory.

When conceiving the goal and direction of this paper, I decided upon four specific candidates who would be the focus of my study. These candidates are Jimmy Carter, Barack

Obama, Mitt Romney and Donald Trump. I chose to focus on these individuals due to their differing backgrounds and distinctive styles of communication.

Literature Review

The election of an American president has attracted a good deal of examination and study that encompasses many mass communication theories and traditions including rhetoric. I have found that many of these studies provides context to the four convention speeches that are discussed in this paper. There are also clear patterns of rhetorical appeals used by the four candidates that are consistently visible before and after the specific speeches that are discussed in this paper.

The two Democrats whose speeches are examined in this paper are Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama. As Medhurst has described, both of these men used religious rhetoric to create a sense of togetherness and community among their audiences (Medhurst, 2014). While there are differences in style and composition, the religious messages of these two candidates appear to be very similar throughout the literature.

Carter is said to have created his persona intentionally, as Erickson stated, “Carter's decision to employ religious-political rhetoric was influenced by an independently commissioned poll which indicated that voters lacked faith in the American system and its public officials.” (1980, p. 221). This statement was echoed by Rarick, Duncan, Lee and Porter (1977), who concluded that Carter’s use of religious rhetoric established him as a trustworthy figure in the eyes of many voters.

Scholars have extensively studied the rhetoric of Obama as well. His use of religious appeals was examined by Maddux (2013), who concluded that Obama endeavored to utilize an

open and inclusive rhetoric. Her statement was elaborated further by Crosby in his article published in 2015. He examined Obama's speech titled, "A More Perfect Union" and concluded that Obama used a more liberal and inclusive rhetoric in religious appeals. Crosby concluded that Obama's liberal leanings were reflected in his statements regarding the progressive betterment of the United States. In describing Obama's philosophy, he stated:

There is a standard to which we should aspire, and it is to be realized in the future through the collective, transformational efforts of a committed "people." Ours is not a project of restoring the past, but of transforming the future. (Crosby, 2015, p. 315)

Crosby and Maddux also examined the rhetorical appeals of Mitt Romney. Crosby contrasted Obama's inclusive and open language with Romney's "fundamentalist" language. While Obama spoke of the progressive betterment of America, Romney alluded to the absolute truths of America and the extent to which people should have faith in those truths (Crosby, 2015). Maddux echoed this and added that while Obama was attempting to be as inclusive as possible with his rhetoric, Romney felt the need to focus on persuading a specific group. Maddux (2013), stated that Romney used dissociation appeals to convince mainstream evangelical Christians that he shared their values and that his Mormon beliefs were compatible with their more orthodox doctrines. These persuasive efforts were also discussed by Salek (2014), who stated that Romney attempted to unite with orthodox Christians through descriptions of their shared experiences.

There have also been studies of the rhetorical appeals utilized by the current President of the United States. Montgomery has portrayed Donald Trump's in a very different light than any of the aforementioned candidates. While Carter, Romney and Obama retained a more polished rhetoric, Trump appeared to use more blunt and common vernacular. He stated, "Effectively,

says Trump, I stand with you, as the embodiment of a particular version of the people, and in doing so I speak authentically for myself, but in being myself I am also sincere.” (Montgomery, 2017, p. 636).

He further identified characteristics of Trump’s rhetoric that is absent from that of the other candidates. Montgomery described how the President uses references to his own ability and the incompetence of his opponents in a very blunt manner. He also used short and simple phrases repeatedly to promote his positions (Montgomery, 2017).

Methodology

After reviewing the literature surrounding the men in question, I began to wonder if there were any commonalities among their rhetoric that could be observed in each of the candidates’ speeches. The studies conducted up to this point appear to show observable patterns within the candidates’ campaign speeches. My recognition of some of these patterns lead to two research questions which this paper seeks to answer.

RQ 1: Which rhetorical appeals, if any, were used by the candidates to convince the audience to vote for them?

RQ 2: Are any specific rhetorical appeals that can be identified in multiple speeches?

There are many speeches that could be examined. However, due to the large quantity and diversity of events where the speeches occurred, I felt that it would be difficult to establish communalities among without limiting the scope of examined speeches. To establish some uniformity among the texts that would be included in this study, I decided to confine the scope of this paper to four specific speeches.

These four speeches are Carter's speech from the 1976 Democratic Convention, Obama's speech from the 2008 Democratic Convention, Romney's speech from the 2012 Republican Convention and Trump speech from the 2016 Republican Convention. I chose these specific speeches due to the relative similarity between the venues. Each occasion not only included a friendly audience on location, but was also televised to a larger and more politically diverse group of individuals.

Before reading the four speeches, I familiarized myself with the major events and topics that had dominated that election cycle. I also took into account the political and personal background of each candidate. It was important to remember the context in which these men gave their speeches to their conventions and to the nation. I then examined the transcript of each speech line-by-line and looked for common rhetorical tactics and appeals.

Analysis

After studying the transcripts I identified specific rhetorical appeals that were present throughout all four conventions. While each candidate used these appeals, their usage and tone differed greatly. This difference may be due to the varied philosophies of the Democrat and Republican parties and the temperaments of the candidates themselves.

These rhetorical efforts may be described as community, competency, religious and emergency appeals. I have defined community appeals as a candidates efforts to establish a common cultural and moral foundation on which he and the American people rest. Competency appeals can be defined as a candidates efforts to portray his opponent(s) as inept or unable to execute the duties of the Presidency. Candidates also used this type of rhetorical appeal to establish their own qualifications and abilities. Religious appeals can be defined as a candidates

efforts to use his faith or that of his audience to establish himself as a “fellow-believer”. This appeal is used both to encourage reaction from the audience and to convince the audience that a candidate’s values are compatible with their own. The last of these appeals is emergency appeals. This can be defined as rhetorical appeals that are designed to show the audience the dire nature of their situation and that of the United States in general.

Community Appeals

As stated above, the usage of these rhetorical appeals differs from candidate to candidate. While examining the community appeals of these four men, I began to notice that certain ideological differences can be identified between the Republican candidates and the Democratic candidates. This is apparent when examining their usage of community appeals.

Carter’s speech to the Democratic National Convention in 1976 demonstrates the usage of community appeals many times. Well aware of the lack of faith that the American people had in the government at that time, he took the opportunity to project his own vision of American values. He described the American people as, “idealists without illusions, realists who still know the old dreams of justice and liberty, of country and of community.” (Carter, 1976).

He presented to his audience a view of themselves as stronger than they had been before the scandals of Watergate and Vietnam. This is presented once more when he said, “Our country has lived through a time of torment. It is now a time for healing. We want to have faith again. We want to be proud again. We just want the truth again.” Not only did Carter allude to a shared American virtue, he also used the occasion to promote his perception of the government’s role in society.

When describing economic actions that the government should take, Carter said that there should be investments “in people and not building and weapons.” He stated further that a government is judged by, “how honestly and fairly it deals with those who must depend on it.” These statements demonstrates Carter’s forethought and attempts to unite the measure of responsible governance with active social welfare programs. These statements bear a striking resemblance to those of Barack Obama some thirty years later.

In his speech at the Democratic convention in 2008, Obama made many statements that fall into the category of community appeals. He made efforts to bring individuals from different backgrounds and political perspectives into the same community of Americans. Obama spoke at length at the necessity of disagreeing with someone without questioning their patriotism. He also mentioned his opponent John McCain and said that due to his military service, “we owe him our gratitude and our respect.” (Obama, 2008).

Like Carter, he referred to the virtue and character of America within the context of governmental action. He said that the United States is, “more compassionate than a government that lets veterans sleep on our streets and our families slide into poverty.” He further stated that that America had a “moral obligation to provide every child a world-class education” and that all Americans, “rise or fall as one nation, the fundamental belief that I am my brother’s keeper.” (Obama, 2008).

This type of rhetorical appeal is found also in the convention speeches of the two Republicans whose speeches are examined in this paper. Mitt Romney gave his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in 2012 and used many community appeals. Much like Obama, Romney described many qualities that he claimed were distinctly American. He stated:

That [...] optimism is uniquely American. It is what brought us to America. We are a nation of immigrants. We are the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the ones who wanted a better life, the driven ones. (Romney, 2012)

Like Obama, Romney emphasized the pluralistic nature of the American people and the importance of the differences that exists among the citizens. He spoke at length about the bravery of that immigrants who came to the United States and their work ethic that helped create the present nation. However, while Obama emphasized their sense of group responsibility. Romney focused on the independence and autonomy that they left the home nations to experience here. Near the beginning of his speech Romney stated a list of freedoms that he believed motivated the various immigrant groups to come to America. This list included phrases such as “speak their mind”, “build a life”, “build a business”, and “with their own hands”. Such language implies autonomous operation and endeavor and differs from Obama’s language of collectivism.

Donald Trump is the last of these four candidates to use community appeals. Trump’s language was quite similar to that of Carter, Obama and Romney in structure and intent. Donald Trump however, used a stronger and more confined description when referring to the community of American culture. He also used more militant language when rallying his party. At the beginning of his speech, Trump stated:

Together, and we will lead our party back to the White House, and we lead our country back to safety, prosperity and peace. We will be a country of generosity and warmth. But we will also be a country of law and order. (Trump, 2016)

Trump went on to explain how his administration would prioritize America’s interests over those of other nations. He repeated statements such as “Americanism, not globalism, will be

our credo”, “The American people will come first again.” and “rebuild America”. He also emphasized the importance of diversity by mentioning the plight of minorities such as African-Americans and the LGBTQ communities. Despite mentioning these groups with differing political perspectives, Trump described the “Americanism” as if it was a singular ideology. Trump used rhetorical appeals to provide strong support for the American “community”, and yet provided no clear definition of that community’s values.

Competency Appeals

In addition to community appeals, all four of these candidates tried to establish their own credibility and degraded the credibility of their opponents. While all of the candidates used this tactic, the tone and delivery varied depending on who gave the message. I have identified these as competency appeals.

Carter used this type of appeal to distance himself from the scandals of the Nixon and Ford administrations. Carter referenced these scandals many times in his convention speech. He spoke of the “broken promises” and referred to the American people as, “troops who have been in combat, we have been tempered by fire; we have been disciplined.” (Carter, 1976). He stated that there had been a, “failure in leadership” and “a lack of goals and values”. All of these examples demonstrates Carter’s attempts to portray his opponent as incompetent. While most of his competency appeals were used to attack others, Carter occasionally attempted to promote his own ability through these tactics.

He spoke of the opportunity that the Democratic Party had at the 1976 election and that, “We need a Democratic President and a Congress to work in harmony for a change [...] and next year you are going to have that new leadership. You can depend on it!” Carter repeated that

sentiment five times throughout his speech, ensuring his audience that they could depend on him. He also referenced his experiences as an “engineer, a planner, a businessman”, and how these experiences had taught him the value of the capitalist system in America.

Barack Obama used competency appeals in much the same way as Jimmy Carter had. Obama used this type of strategic appeal to emphasize the incompetence of the Republican Party following the eight year Bush administration. Obama was more direct than Carter had been, saying that while not all of the nation’s problems were related to poor governance, “the failure to respond is a direct result [...] of the broken policies of George W. Bush.” (2008). He was direct again when he stated, “John McCain has voted with George Bush 90 percent of the time.”

Obama also used competency appeals to enforce his own reputation and credibility by saying that he would stop awarding tax breaks to companies, institute fuel efficiency standards for cars and make America independent of oil from the Middle East in ten years. Most of his efforts to establish his ability were focused on how he and John McCain had differing political opinions. Obama would then promise the audience a future measure of legislation.

While most of these appeals were directed at individuals, Obama spoke of Republican policy as well. When discussing the lack of available welfare services he criticized the Republican Party by saying, “You’re on your own. Born into poverty? Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, even if you don’t have boots.” He further explained his own credentials in regards to welfare services, stating “We provided healthcare to more children and moved more families from welfare to work.” (Obama, 2008).

Four years later Mitt Romney used many of the same tactics that Obama had. Romney referenced the policies of the previous four years and stated, “It is not what we were promised.” He alleged that all of the grand promises Obama had made were still unfulfilled. Romney stated:

I wish President Obama had succeeded because I want America to succeed. But his promises gave way to disappointment and division. This isn't something we have to accept. Now is the moment when we can do something. With your help we will do something. (Romney, 2012)

In the above statement Romney attempted to lessen Obama's credibility and reinforce his own. He explained to the audience that he did not question Obama's intent, only his qualifications. Romney attacked Obama's work experience and economic understanding. Romney said that Obama had primarily worked in government, while he had “learned the real lessons about how America works from experience.” He also spoke of his family and the best thing parents can do is love their children unconditionally. He stated further, “All the laws and legislation in the world will never heal the world like the loving hearts and arms of mothers and fathers.” (Romney, 2012).

Donald Trump also used competency appeals to attack his opponent. He accused the Obama's Democratic party of “corporate spin” and “carefully crafted lies”. He also blamed the Obama administration for the \$19 trillion national debt and the deaths of four Americans in Benghazi, Libya. However, most of Trump's allegations were levied at Hillary Clinton. Trump recalled that the Director of the FBI had called Clinton's actions “extremely careless” and “negligent”. Trump further stated:

This is the legacy of Hillary Clinton: death, destruction, terrorism and weakness. But Hillary Clinton's legacy does not have to be America's legacy. The problems we face now – poverty and violence at home, war and destruction abroad – will last only as long as we continue relying on the same politicians who created them in the first place. A change in leadership is required to produce a change in outcomes. (Trump, 2016)

While most of his rhetoric was intended to degrade his opponents, Trump did attempt to establish himself as the competent candidate. Trump said that he knew “the system” better than anyone else and used that as reasoning for his audience to vote for him. His other efforts were simply juxtapositions of what he would do in office versus what Clinton would do.

Religious Appeals

In addition to community and competency appeals, each of these used what I have defined as religious appeals. While there is obvious and explicit religious language in these speeches there are many references that are religious in tone, but do not mention an organized belief system. Of the four candidates it was Carter and Romney who used the most religious language. In his 1976 speech Carter spoke many times of America's “moral decay”. As discussed above Carter emphasized the lack of leadership by his two predecessors. He further stated that this lack of leadership had resulted in a crisis of values and morality. Carter stated:

We have lost some precious things that historically have bound our people and our government together. We feel that moral decay has weakened our country, that it is crippled by a lack of goals and values, and that our public officials have lost faith in us. (Carter, 1976)

While this statement does not include any explicit religious references it assumes that there is an ultimate definition of morality that is to be emulated. Carter used quite a bit of implicit religious language. For example, he stated that 1976 was a “time for healing” and referred to the relationship between money and politics as “unholy”. The phrases used by Carter in this speech brings to mind a preacher (himself) calling for the congregation (the audience) to repent after many years of sin (Republican administrations).

Barack Obama also used religious appeals, however to a lesser degree than Carter. There are numerous examples of implied religious language in his 2008 Democratic Convention speech. For example, Obama spoke of the fundamental American belief that “I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper.” While Obama used implied religious several times during his speech, he only referenced organized religion once. He did so when he said goodbye to the crowd told them, “God bless you. And God bless the United States of America”.

Out of the four candidates it was Mitt Romney who used religious appeals the most in his convention speech. He mentioned the fundamental freedoms of America and spoke of the freedom of religion. Romney made several references to church organizations as well. He said that the American people had a desire to volunteer their time or money at their local congregations and when citizens found themselves in unfortunate situations they would “spend a little more time praying that tomorrow would be a better day.” (Romney, 2012). He also echoed the Founding Fathers and said that our natural rights were, “endowed by our Creator, and codified in our Constitution.” Besides mentioning the religiosity of the American people, Romney made several attempts to establish his own religiosity. He spoke of his Mormon faith and how it did not hinder his friendships in school and of the importance of “God’s love”.

Romney also mentioned his local church and his reluctance to involve the congregation in his business for fear of going to hell (Romney, 2012).

Four years later Donald Trump also used religious appeals throughout his convention speech. Trump used all of these appeals in two specific portions of his speech. He first referenced the support that he had received from the evangelical Christians. He stated, “They have so much to contribute to our politics, yet our laws prevent you from speaking your minds from your own pulpits.” (Trump, 2016). He further stated that the religious community had been threatened by certain tax codes introduced by Lyndon B. Johnson. The only other religious references are found in the concluding paragraphs, where Trump told the audience “God bless you.” He also encouraged his audience to begin believing and having faith again. These are the only examples of religious appeals that are found in Trump’s speech.

Emergency Appeals

The last of the rhetorical appeals that I identified from the four speeches were the emergency appeals. All of the candidates used this type of appeal with varying tones and deliveries. Jimmy Carter’s use of emergency appeals is interesting because of the events that had preceded his administration. He described the future as bright, but said “Our nation has seen a failure in leadership. We have been hurt, we have been disillusioned.” (Carter, 1976). He also referred to the American people’s eagerness for a fresh start by stating, “Our people are searching for new voices and new ideas and new leaders.”

The most clear of Carter’s emergency appeals can be found in his repetition of the phrases “It is time”, “This year” and “1976”. These phrases are placed in the introductions of

new policies and programs that Carter sought to implement. He created a sense of urgency and attempted to convince his audience that the time for change had come.

Barack Obama used emergency appeals in much the same way. Obama's rhetoric also included the repetition of urgent phrases such as, "It's time" and "That's the change we need right now". He also attempted to speak to Republicans and independents, telling them that "This moment" was the time for change. The most urgent of Obama's emergency appeals is found in the following statement where he described the state of the country at the time. He stated:

Tonight, more Americans are out of work and more are working harder for less. More of you have lost your homes and even more are watching your homes values plummet.

More of you have cars that you can't afford to drive, credit cards, bills you can't afford to pay, and tuition that's beyond your reach. (Obama, 2008)

Mitt Romney also used emergency appeals in his convention speech. Romney mentioned several promises that the Obama administration had made and had not fulfilled such as the high national debt, student loans, the plight of small businesses and rising gasoline prices. When describing Obama's promises, he stated, "It's not just what we wanted. It's not just what we expected. It's what America deserved." (Romney, 2012)

Romney also stated that the American people had been patient up to that point but 2012 was the year "to turn the page." Like Carter and Obama, Romney repeated phrases such as, "now is the time", "what we need" and "we will".

Of all four candidates Donald Trump used the strongest emergency appeals. His aggressive rhetoric appears numerous times throughout his speech and was directed at both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Trump described the state of the United States by

referencing murder rates in urban areas, the threat of terrorism and the condition of the nation's infrastructure. He described America as if the nation were under siege and promised that, "Peace will be restored". He further stated:

We are going to build a great border wall to stop illegal immigration, to stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities. By ending catch-and-release on the border, we will stop the cycle of human smuggling and violence.
(Trump, 2016)

Trump then described what would happen if Clinton were elected instead of him. He stated that a vote for Clinton would bring "lawlessness", "poverty" and would "further reduce jobs and wages". Donald Trump portrayed his predecessor and his opponent as dangerous agents who should not be trusted. While Carter, Obama and Romney certainly referenced the dire situation that the nation was in, they did not go so far as to portray the United States as a besieged city.

Discussion

The central idea of rhetoric is that every message or communication is premeditated and strategically stated in order to bring about a reaction from the audience who are receiving those messages. It assumes that the speaker had crafted his message for a specific context and purpose. The examination of these four speeches has demonstrated that while there are differences of tone and philosophy, all of the candidates used specific appeals to reach their physical and television audience.

Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter used many community appeals in his speech. He referred to the experiences of the two previous administrations and said that it had brought the nation together. He also spoke of the spirit that all Americans possess and the need for collective responsibility. Carter also used competency appeals to attack his predecessors, but did so in a vague manner because he did not mention them by name. He did not use this appeal to establish his competence except for one mention of his past as a businessman. Carter used very few explicit religious appeals, and only several implicit religious appeals. He said that the American people should begin to heal and come back to the nation's collective values. This was reminiscent of a preacher calling the congregation to repentance. Lastly Jimmy Carter used emergency appeals by using phrases such as "It is time" repeatedly. He also declared that 1976 was the year to turn the country around from the failed policies of his predecessors.

Barack Obama

Barack Obama used community appeals and spoke of the values that all Americans share. Like Carter, He described the collective responsibility that he believed defined the "American Dream". Obama also used competency appeals in a direct and sharp manner. He referenced the Bush administration several times and blamed him for many of the problems that America was facing in 2008. He also mentioned John McCain by name and attacked his philosophies and voting record. However, Obama did praise McCain for his military service. Barack Obama also used a few religious appeals in his speech. He spoke of the American people being "their brother's keeper" and mentioned churches and God near the end of his speech. Lastly Barack Obama used emergency appeals. He described America as a place where people are out of work and cannot pay their mortgages and student loans. He also said that these things had to be addressed right then and there.

Mitt Romney

Like Carter and Obama, Romney used community appeals to establish Americans as a pluralistic group who share common values. Romney however, emphasized the importance of individuality instead of collective responsibility. He also used competency appeals to attack Obama's ability. Romney emphasized his belief that while Obama did not intend to harm the nation, his policies would regardless of his intent. Of all of the candidates, Mitt Romney used the most religious appeals in his speech. Romney spoke of his experiences as a Mormon in Detroit and working with his church. He also mentioned God and the love of God several times throughout his speech. Lastly, Romney used several emergency appeals. However, his used emergency appeals the least among the candidates. He referenced the broken promises of the Obama administration and the need to turn America around at that moment.

Donald Trump

As with all of the other candidates examined in this paper, Donald Trump used community appeals to describe the American people as a group of individuals that share values and principles. He emphasized the pluralistic nature of the American populace, but his definition of their shared values was confined and limited. He mentioned minorities such as African-Americans and the LGBTQ community and their importance to the United States. Despite this inclusive language he spoke in very strong terms about building a wall and protecting America from outsiders.

Trump's use of competency appeals differed in intensity from the other candidates examined in this paper. His accusations were directed at Obama and Clinton and mentioned them by name. He also praised his credentials as a businessman and dealmaker much more than any of

the other candidates. Trump only used religious a few times throughout his speech. He thanked the evangelical Christian community for their support and accused Lyndon B. Johnson of assaulting religious freedom. Lastly, Donald Trump used emergency appeals in a far stronger manner than there three other candidates. His description of America portrayed the nation as a besieged city with crumbling infrastructure.

The paper asked two questions. The first question asks if there were any rhetorical appeals that were used by the candidates to convince the audience to vote for them. The second question asks if there can be identified in multiple speeches. After an examination of the transcripts, specific appeals were identified in all four speeches and defined as community, competency, religious and emergency.

These four appeals were used by very different candidates over a forty year period. This paper has shown that while each candidate comes from different backgrounds and had different political agendas, the same tactics can be found in their speeches. I believe that there is much more research to be done in regards to the rhetoric of candidates. The results of this paper begs the question: how are we to trust our elected officials when their efforts to sway their audience is so easily observable. Perhaps further study and awareness may allow the American people to truly hear what their favored candidate is saying, not just what the candidate wants you to hear.

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