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The Altercation of Rhetoric by Politicians Throughout Different Media During a Campaign

Hugh O'Neill

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Abstract

The current study asks the question of, “how does a politician alter their rhetoric when communicating to their audience throughout different media?” There are two parts to this issue that must be discussed in order to better formulate the topic and the results respectively. The first of the two being, rhetoric, or how one formulates their words in a written or spoken context. The second being the use of media throughout a political campaign. As the age of the internet came-about, there was a vast increase in how a political campaign can reach the audience of potential voters, which in turn adds to the phenomenon of altering either stances rhetoric throughout different media platforms. The methods used in this study were a mixed-method approach of an interview with a Political Science Professor at Bowling Green State University, Dr. Melissa K. Miller and an observational study created by the researcher of Ohio’s 61st district Democratic candidate for the Ohio House of Representatives, Adam Dudziak’s 2020 political campaign. The results for the interview showed that in order to not relay misinformation, Dr. Miller could not answer all the questions, but there were some positive correlations with the observational study and the answers provided by Dr. Miller, some of which included the increased use of emotional appeals in social media posts, as well as the broadening of stances/policies for a broader audience by politicians. Even though there are correlations and a preliminary answer has been synthesized – a political candidate consciously changes their rhetoric based on where their work is being placed to fit the needs of the audience – more studies must be done to form a concrete piece of evidence.

Introduction

Every four years, there is an overwhelming feeling of despair in an American household when turning on the television. No, I am not referring to the Winter Olympics where team USA never seems to do all that great, I'm referring the beautifully retched election season. Political campaigns start slow, maybe some interviews and signage out in a citizen's yard, but by August, a different politician is begging for your attention everywhere you look.

Political campaigns are just a part of life in modern American society, no matter where one falls on the political view spectrum. Similar to the wide range of political views, with the vast expansion of technology, there is a rapid increase in outlets for a politician to relay their message. This then raises the question; how does a politician alter their rhetoric when communicating to their audience throughout different media? The reason why I ask this is because a politician can argue the same points in a 140-character tweet on Twitter as they can in a 20-minute speech. But the rhetoric has to change somehow, and that is what the purpose of this current study is, to identify the different practices that politicians use throughout different media in order to convey their message on policies, current issues, and their credentials.

Literature Review

There are two main aspects of the current study, the forms of rhetoric being used by a politician, and the different forms of media that a politician will relay their message through. Rhetoric, in terms of the current study, will be referred to as how the argument or statement is formed by a politician – a logical appeal (fact or statistic), an emotional appeal, a personal anecdote, reference to the opposing political party, and finally blatant emphasis on their own physical policies upon election – there are more forms that can be added but, for the current study these will remain as the examples. Akin to this, media will be referred to as an outlet that a

politician can reach an audience, without face-to-face communication – social media, a blog, a publicized interview, a speech, and debates – again there are more than can be added but these will be the focuses for the current study.

Rhetoric in Politics

Politics is all about formulating an argument, the act of persuading voters to secure their spot in office through their ability to idealize themselves and their policies to fit the majority of citizens. From the start of American politics, a two-party system was formed, and the presidential election was consistently based on which candidate could persuade the majority of America to vote one way or another. There are many forms of rhetoric seen throughout a political debate; logical appeals, emotional appeals, anecdotes, among others. However, each holds a different purpose when being placed within a work of a political campaign.

Considering that politicians hold a position within the government, where they must deal with heavy decisions that have a multitude of implications, logical appeals are a rarity within an American political campaign. Politicians are similar to salesmen; they try to evoke emotions and

“Emotional appeals allow candidates to emphasize consensual values, which makes it easier to mobilize their party’s base while simultaneously attracting the support of the uncommitted”

-Jennifer Jerit

feelings from their audience. Jennifer Jerit, in the *Political Psychology*’s “Survival of the Fittest: Rhetoric During a Political Campaign” contends, “Emotional appeals allow candidates to emphasize consensual values, which makes it easier to mobilize their party’s base while simultaneously attracting the support of the

uncommitted” (Jerit, 2004). The average citizen, will have a much more difficult time connecting with a politician when only facts and statistics are presented, there is nothing to draw them in. Facts may lead to informed voters, but when the tone of a campaign is too matter-a-fact, there

may be resistance to elect a certain candidate seeing as they offer no personality that their voters can connect to. Moreover, when politicians do include logical appeals in their writing, it is often difficult for those without an extensive education in political science to fully comprehend the vocabulary and issues of politics, and therefore a different rhetoric is necessary for the comprehension of the politician's logical appeals. Barbara Allen and her team in their work from *American Politics Research*, "Local News and Perceptions of Rhetoric of Political Advertising" assert that local news stations act as a way to provide a bridge between the audience and the more educationally advanced topics (Allen et. al, 2007). The claims by Allen and her team contradict those aforementioned by Jerit, where logical appeals are not seen as less important forms of rhetoric in a political campaign, but they just require multiple ways of communication in order to inform the most amount of people, in the study conducted by Allen that is local news stations. Both logical appeals and emotional appeals are compulsory in an effective political campaign, though they are portrayed in different manners.

Media in Politics

Media in politics share a symbiotic relationship, similar to moisture and mold, the more media outlets there are, the further a political campaign can reach. No longer is a political candidate only responsible for a few stump speeches and position papers, but they must uphold a social media presence, host rallies, and make televised appearances. One of the most prominent elections in American history was in 1960 after the first televised presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. This event allowed the American citizens to begin basing their votes off of more than just politics, but on the candidate is as a person. Roderick Hart and Sharon Jarvis ran an in-depth analysis for the journal of *American Behavioral Scientist* on the American presidential debates throughout the years, and how each shaped the next. Hart and

Jarvis argue that the presidential debates allow citizens and voters to see the candidates in a new light and encourage them to speak a common language for the voters to make a more informed decision (Hart & Jarvis, 1997). The debates are just one of the many media platforms that candidates have access to in order to connect to their audience more and allows for a greater outreach to more citizens. Television offered the main form of media platform for candidates to had more personalization to their audience, through interviews, commercials, and the aforesaid debates but now with the age of the internet, television has taken the back seat to social media. Social media is an entity that can relay a message to the entire world in the matter of seconds, and now politicians have made use of this. Lance Bennet of the *American Academy of Political & Social Sciences* contends that social media gave the ability for personalized politics to come about, where all the information one can possibly need is at the tip of their fingertips (Bennet 2012). Furthermore, this can be directly connected to the ideas of Hart and Jarvis, where the media gave rise to the ability to form more connections between the audience and the politician, which then just is amplified with the rhetoric used throughout the different forms of media.

Gap in Research

The current literature suggests that there are a multitude of rhetorical devices used throughout a political campaign, as well as suggesting that political campaigns now range throughout a complex series of different forms of media. The current study is determined to find if there is a correlation between the two, is one form of rhetoric more apparent in a single media platform? Or is there just a lackluster abundance of different forms of rhetoric throughout the different media that is used in a campaign? Many of the aforementioned literature asserts that certain platforms are used for different types of arguments, but there has been no research done to confirm nor deny this. The thesis for the current study states; if the media platform allows for

a larger audience to view the work, then there is a higher probability that emotional appeals will be used as the main form of rhetoric.

Methods

In order to obtain a more cohesive set of data, and a higher probability of receiving an answer to the current research question –how does a politician alter their rhetoric when communicating to their audience throughout different media? –, a dual-method approach was enacted. The current study used a combination of an interview with a credible political scientist, as well as an observation study conducted on a politician during their 2020 campaign. The use of a mixed method approach is to use both qualitative and quantitative data in order to have a better, more cohesive understanding on this phenomenon that has been seen for centuries in American

and world politics.

Dr. Melissa K Miller

Political science Professor and
Researcher at Bowling Green
State University

Professor

Researched and published
with a multitude of media

When creating the survey questions, there were two main types of questions, one that emphasized the different forms of rhetoric seen throughout political campaigns, and one that emphasized the form of media that the politicians are using. As seen in Table 1, there are two example questions taken from the interview. These two questions were the format for the entire interview, in order to better understand how the two parts of the current research question interacted with one-another, the types of rhetoric and the types of media. It is important to note that

the interview portion of the methods does identify the qualitative aspect of the data that was collected for the study. The interview was conducted online via email, due to the current study taking place amidst a global pandemic –COVID-19– this was the safest and most effective to conduct the interview. When choosing whom to interview for this topic, as a student of Bowling

Green State University, it made the most sense to ask a Political Science professor to be the candidate. The interview was with Dr. Melissa Miller of Bowling Green State University's political science department. Miller received a Doctorate in Political Science from Northwestern University, and has multiple publications focusing on American politics. Miller's special focuses in politics include, elections, voting behavior, the media, among others. These credential's made Dr. Miller the ideal subject to be interviewed in order to gain more insight on the use and alteration of rhetoric by politicians across different media (O'Neill, 2020).

Table 1

Example Interview Questions

When observing a political campaign, do you notice that there has been a shift recently from a more logical approach to that of emphasizing emotional appeals?

Is there one media over another that you notice a larger amount of emotional appeals? For example, a televised commercial versus a candidate's twitter page.

Table 1 provides the first and third questions asked in the interview, the first question can be seen on top emphasizing the types of rhetoric and the third question on bottom referring to the different forms of media. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix 1.

The second part of the methods section was an observation on a political campaign and the types of rhetoric used throughout. This observational study was conducted by creating a spreadsheet and examining the different media outputs of a political candidate looking for five different types of rhetoric. The five forms of rhetoric were, a logical appeal (fact or statistic), an emotional appeal, a personal anecdote, reference to the opposing political party, and finally blatant emphasis on their own physical policies upon election. A setup of the spreadsheet used for this study can be found in table 2.

The chosen political campaign that was going to be followed was that of Adam Dudziak. Dudziak is running as the Democratic candidate for Ohio's 61st district representative for the Ohio House of Representatives. The three sources that will be examined during the current study are Dudziak's 25 most recent tweets – the most recent 25 tweets will be direct tweets from Dudziak from October 19th, 2020 being the most recent tweet from Dudziak –, Dudziak's campaign's online blog, and an interview conducted with Dudziak by (Lobbyist for Citizens 2020). The reason that Dudziak was the chosen subject for the observation aspect of this study is because of his wide use of different media and because he is running for a smaller position than President or Congress, this made the workload easier whilst still providing accurate and a comprehensive amount of data. The

observation aspect of the study will be used for the quantitative data, where numbers will be used to keep track of the information. The use of numbers will allow for the use of ratios and percentages when analyzing the data after the observation has been completed.

Table 2

Spreadsheet Layout for Observational Study

	Last 25 Tweets	Campaign Blog	Interview
Logical Appeal	X	X	X
Emotional Appeal	X	X	X
Personal Anecdote	X	X	X
Reference Opposition	X	X	X
Personal Policies	X	X	X

Table 2 is to be used as a reference for how the spreadsheet was setup for the observation part of the methods, the table with the actual numbers will be posted in the results section under Table 3.

Results

The results section will be split into two halves, one discussing the trends of the interview questions conducted with Dr. Miller, and one discussing the numeric values of Dudziak's use of rhetoric throughout the different media he is using for his campaign.

The results referring to the interview with Dr. Miller will be in the form of a summary of trends, the complete list of questions and responses can be found in Appendix 2. As a disclaimer, there are a few questions that Dr. Miller could not answer due to either odd phrasing on the question's part or due to her not having researched certain aspects of this topic, and thus did not want to give misinformation to the current study. The questions that were unanswered were questions 4, 5, 6, and 10. A large takeaway from the first three questions is that Miller described that facts and statistics are a rarity in campaign advertisements and speeches, where the politician is playing on the overwhelming short attention span of the audience. Miller described that emotional appeals are heavily prevalent in political campaigns today as well as throughout American politics referring to Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush in the 1980s as well as some of advertisements in 2020. Miller described that logical appeals are seldom found in the public eye but are saturated in the position papers of the candidates. Similarly, to emotional appeals Miller describes that personal anecdotes are heavily common in political campaigns referring to Raegan again as well as Donald Trump. However, when referring to question nine, which can be found in appendix 1, Miller described that change in stances does not occur throughout different media, but when speaking to different audiences; using the example of Joe Biden given broad claims in his Town hall debate and specific claims to union members in Toledo.

The observational aspect of the methods was conducted on Adam Dudziak, the Democratic candidate for Ohio's 61st district seat of the Ohio House of Representatives. The completed table can be found below in Table 3. In Dudziak's most recent 25 tweets, which ranged from October 7th, 2020 to October 19th, 2020, it was seen the most common form of rhetoric of emotional appeals (Dudziak 2019). When referring to the table there are 32 uses of rhetoric identified, this is due to some tweets having multiple as well as some tweets not containing any. The results for the issues section of his website can be found below in Table 3 (Dudziak, 2019). Furthermore, the final aspect of the observational study was conducted by reviewing an interview that Dudziak had with a group of lobbyists on June 23rd, 2020, these results can also be found in Table 3 below (Lobbyist for Citizens, 2020).

Table 3

Results for Observational Study on Adam Dudziak's campaign

	Last 25 Tweets	Campaign Blog	Interview
Logical Appeal	2	6	11
Emotional Appeal	10	4	6
Personal Anecdote	6	2	1
Reference Opposition	6	0	0
Personal Policies	8	11	19

Table 3 is the full results of the observational study where each media platform was listed on the x-axis and each of the quantities are listed within the table.

Discussion

There is a statistically significant difference between Dudziak's rhetoric use on his Twitter page and within his interview with the lobbyist group, but not within his campaign blog

to either other media platform. A more detailed comparison of the trends from the study can be seen in a relative bar graph below in Figure 1. The only forms of rhetoric between these two media platforms that was statistically significant were logical appeals, personal anecdotes, reference to the opposition, and personal policies. When discussing the statistical significance, and Z-score calculator was used, and the P value was 0.05. The Z-score of logical appeals was -2.4873. The Z-score of personal anecdotes was 2.2017. The Z-score of references to the opposition was 2.7565. The Z-score of personal policies was -2.2366.

Figure 1

There are were some apparent correlations when comparing the results from the interview with Dr. Miller and the observational study with Adam Dudziak's campaign. First to discuss the agreements with the two; Miller states as her response to question three of the interview –the full length of questions and responses can be found in Appendix 2 – that,

“Emotional appeals have been a long-standing feature of political ads on television. They tend to feature even more prominently in social media posts. Each campaign’s goal is to see their social media posts go viral. Those that have a quick, clear emotional message are more likely to be reposted, retweeted etc.”

This shows a prominent positive correlation with the results of the observational study where Dudziak inserted more emotional appeals in his most recent 25 tweets, over his campaign blog and his interview with a local group of lobbyists. As inferred by Miller, the reason this trend is so prominent is due to the viral protentional of a social media post, and the limited amount of information that is accessible to the users of social media. Therefore, a short and impactful post will help get the message of the campaign and the knowledge of the candidate across the minds of more voters, quicker than other forms of media. Akin to the use of emotional appeals having a greater abundance in social media post, there is another positive correlation when discussing the use of person policies and more in-depth details. Miller used Joe Biden as an example, where when he would be discussing policies with a larger audience, he would use more broad, non-specific terminology, whereas when he was discussing his plans with union members, he had a very straightforward, detailed planned laid out. This change of detail over policies is seen in Dudziak’s campaign as well, where from most detailed to least when discussing his policies was seen in the interview with lobbyists, his campaign blog, which is mostly viewed by supports, and his Twitter account, which can be seen by anyone at any time.

The apparent correlation between the changing of detail and rhetoric when in reference to what media platform is in use is eye-catching, but not enough to call for causation. In order to fully comprehend what Dudziak’s intensions were with his altercation of rhetoric between media and if it was the same causation as Dr. Miller inferred is an interview with Dudziak himself. Due

to the vast ether of the human brain, these changes in rhetoric could have been a mere subconscious coincidence, rather than a thoughtful plan of persuasion as suggested by Dr. Miller.

Conclusion

The current study offers a multitude of points to consider, when discussing the current research question on, “How does a politician alter their rhetoric when communicating to their audience throughout different media?” An important point to note is that when regarding the results and discussion of the research, correlation does mean causation or proof, it simply offers the ability to formulate new research and continue the conversation of this phenomenon where politicians alter their rhetoric in different situations and through different media. Though this preliminary study does not “prove” anything, seeing as it was only one study and something much more comprehensive is needed, there are some very important factors that go into a political campaign that through this study can either be seen more clearly, or offer a direction to be followed in order to fully understand the answer to the current question.

There were definite correlations in the uses of rhetoric between the responses of Dr. Miller and her extensive list of examples and the rhetorical observation of Adam Dudziak’s political campaign throughout the different medias. As aforementioned in the discussion section, there is a visible difference in where politicians add emotional appeals and in-depth policy plans throughout the different forms of media, as stated by Dr. Miller and as observed in Dudziak’s campaign, but a more comprehensive study with a much larger group of politicians will need to be conducted before a straightforward answer can be given, one to which holds true statistical significance. One inference that can be drawn is that the change in rhetoric throughout media is a conscious decision by the politician in order to format their platform to whichever situation they

are in at the time. Dr. Miller offered this quote to question nine of the interview, “Differences in stance have less to do with media platform and more to do with audience.” This statement offers the idea that the change of rhetoric is a conscious decision based on who will have this information, rather than how the information will be executed.

“Differences in stance
have less to do with
media platform and more
to do with audience.”

-Dr. Melissa Miller PhD

A necessary next step to allocate a more definite answer to the current question and continue the conversation, would be to conduct a multiple interview study with different political candidates and discuss their thought process when creating a tweet, writing a speech, formulating a position paper, as well as relaying their stances throughout different medias. Similarly, the same setup of the observational study for the current research can be used to observe multiple campaigns in order to draw cross references and look for positive correlations across different campaigns when discussing the altercation of rhetoric throughout different media within a political campaign.

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Interview

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Appendix 1

1. When observing a political campaign, do you notice that there has been a shift recently from a more logical approach to that of emphasizing emotional appeals?
2. Is the use of facts and statistics a prevalent form of persuasion in a modern political campaign?
3. Is there one media over another that you notice a larger amount of emotional appeals? For example, a televised commercial versus a candidate's twitter page.
4. When listening to a political candidate give a speech, or answer interview questions, is there a definite change to their rhetoric from their written to their spoken word?
5. Do you feel that there has been an increase in "slam campaigns" over the more recent presidential elections?
6. Is there one media over another that "slam campaigns" are more prevalent in? For example, a televised commercial versus a candidate's twitter page.
7. The use of personal anecdotes is a popular way to connect an audience to a message, is this still used in American politics, despite the fact that most politicians do not resemble an average American?
8. Is there one media over another that you notice a larger amount of personal anecdotes being used by politicians? Why do you think that the media is more prominent for these anecdotes?
9. Have you noticed that some politicians have slight differences in their stances when discussing issues across different media?
10. What are some practices politicians use, in order to properly convey the same message over different media? For example a 10 minute speech versus a 140 character tweet on the same topic.

Appendix 2

1. When observing a political campaign, do you notice that there has been a shift recently from a more logical approach to that of emphasizing emotional appeals?

Political advertising has long used emotional appeals. We can think back to Reagan's famous "Morning in America" commercial in 1984, which used beautiful visual images of the United States and a soothing narration while providing little substance about the issues in the campaign. Even ads that are substantive have strong emotional appeals. A good example is a 1988 ad run by the George HW Bush campaign against the Democratic nominee, Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts. The ad, known as the "Willie Horton ad," criticized the governor for a prison furlough program under which a convicted felon, Willie Horton, was released and committed a violent crime. The ad used imagery of a revolving door and showed the mug shot of Willie Horton, who was black. Critics alleged that the ad was a racist dog whistle to white voters. Emotional appeals made by campaigns in 2020 are nothing new.

2. Is the use of facts and statistics a prevalent form of persuasion in a modern political campaign?

Campaigns have to work in an environment where most voters have a relatively short attention span for facts and figures. As such, they tend to load their websites with highly detailed information – often in the form of position papers – while sprinkling their stump speeches with just a few facts and figures to underscore key aspects of their platform.

3. Is there one media over another that you notice a larger amount of emotional appeals? For example, a televised commercial versus a candidate's twitter page.

Emotional appeals have been a long-standing feature of political ads on television. They tend to feature even more prominently in social media posts. Each campaign's goal is to see their social media posts go viral. Those that have a quick, clear emotional message are more likely to be reposted, retweeted etc.

4. When listening to a political candidate give a speech, or answer interview questions, is there a definite change to their rhetoric from their written to their spoken word?

I have never analyzed the difference, so feel I cannot answer this one.

5. Do you feel that there has been an increase in "slam campaigns" over the more recent presidential elections?

I'm not sure what you mean by "slam campaign."

6. Is there one media over another that "slam campaigns" are more prevalent in? For example, a televised commercial versus a candidate's twitter page.

I'm not sure what you mean by "slam campaign."

7. The use of personal anecdotes is a popular way to connect an audience to a message, is this still used in American politics, despite the fact that most politicians do not resemble an average American?

Personal anecdotes have long been a feature of presidential campaigning. Sometimes the anecdotes pertain to the candidate themselves; other times they pertain to someone they have met on the campaign trail. They are often used to distill a complicated issue of public policy – as when Joe Biden describes someone he met on the campaign trail with a preexisting condition who is worried about losing their health insurance coverage, or when Donald Trump points to someone who has been victimized by an undocumented immigrant. Rather than go into great detail about the policy issue (i.e. the Trump Administration's efforts to overturn Obamacare; the immigration issue), the candidate uses an anecdote to convey implications of a certain policy by way of a personal story. Such stories are relatable and generally elicit emotional responses.

8. Is there one media over another that you notice a larger amount of personal anecdotes being used by politicians? Why do you think that the media is more prominent for these anecdotes?

I haven't really studied such differences. Personal anecdotes about the candidate or folks they have met on the campaign trail have been a key feature of stump speeches for years.

9. Have you noticed that some politicians have slight differences in their stances when discussing issues across different media?

Differences in stance have less to do with media platform and more to do with audience. For instance, Joe Biden made broad appeals in his CNN Town Hall a couple weeks ago. But when he appeared in Toledo at the UAW local on Jackman Road, he made very specific appeals to union workers, promising to protect the interests of union workers if elected.

10. What are some practices politicians use, in order to properly convey the same message over different media? For example a 10 minute speech versus a 140 character tweet on the same topic.

I don't really have answer for your last question. I've not studied such differences in any systematic way.