

## Chapter 9

# Is Candidate Rhetorical Tone Associated with Presidential Vote Choice?

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### ABSTRACT

*Can voters be persuaded to support a candidate based on a candidate's rhetoric instead of a candidate's issue positions? Combining theoretical insights on voter decision-making drawn from valence theories of candidate position-taking with insights from theories of rhetoric and persuasion, the authors argue that candidate rhetorical tone can sway voters to a candidate's side. Using DICTION 5.0, the tone of candidate speech in U.S. presidential elections is examined from 1976-2012. Candidates who present themselves using language that draws on themes of commonality, activity, and realism are more likely to win a citizen's vote in elections. Rhetorical tone can sway voters, but only those moderate voters who are distant from both candidates. Rhetorical tone is unlikely to have an effect on voters who perceive high ideological agreement with the rhetorically-disadvantaged candidate.*

### INTRODUCTION

*We have demanded that the American people sacrifice, and they have done very well. As a matter of fact, we're importing today about one-third less oil from overseas than we did just a year ago... [Our] new energypolicy has been predicated on... conservation, which requires sacrifice. -Jimmy Carter, in a 1980 presidential debate*

*Four years ago in similar circumstances to this I asked you, the American people, a question. I asked, are you better off than you were four years before? The answer to that obviously was no, and as a result I was elected to this office and promised a new beginning. Now, maybe I'm expected to ask that same question again....But I think that most of the people in this country would say yes they are better off than they were four years ago. -Ronald Reagan, in a 1984 presidential debate.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5003-9.ch009

The quotes from presidential debates above show that the tone of presidential rhetoric can vary widely across candidates. Carter's emphasis on "sacrifice" and "conservation" strikes a very different tone than Reagan's optimistic declarations of a "new beginning." Aristotle stated "[i]t is not enough to know what to say; we must also say it in the right way" (Book III, Chapter 1, *On Rhetoric*). Do Aristotle's words hold true in modern U.S. presidential elections? Is *how* a candidate speaks as or more important than *what* is said about the issues? Do candidates convince voters using optimistic, active, and positive-toned rhetoric? We argue the answer to these questions is yes. Verbal communication in modern U.S. campaign politics has the ability to move voters. Candidates can use rhetoric as an instrument to persuade some voters to cast their ballots for the rhetorically-advantaged candidate.

Combining theoretical insights on (1) voter decision-making drawn from valence theories of candidate-position taking; and (2) the importance of rhetoric and persuasion in presidential campaign politics, we maintain that candidate rhetoric can have the power to sway voters to a candidate's side, though this effect is bounded by the effect of ideological congruence between candidate and voter. When a voter is close to a candidate on the issues—yet that candidate's rhetorical advantage is not strong—the voter will still vote for that candidate. However, if a voter is relatively indifferent to candidates on the issues, then the power of high-quality candidate rhetoric and tone can persuade the voter to vote contrary to ideological preferences. While presidential campaign rhetoric matters in vote choice in presidential elections, it only matters for those voters not strongly committed to either candidate on ideological or partisan grounds.

Specifically, we conceive of a candidate's rhetorical advantage as the quality of connections (such as activity and optimism) emanating from the tone of candidate rhetoric. Rhetorical tone is measured using the DICTION algorithm (Hart

2000a). We match American National Election Study (ANES) survey data on citizen vote choice from all U.S. presidential general elections from 1976-2012 to the differential in tone of the rhetoric between the candidates, quantitatively scaling rhetoric during televised presidential debates during these elections.<sup>1</sup> Our analysis finds that candidates who present themselves using language that draws on themes of commonality, activity, and realism are more likely to win a citizen's vote in the election. Finally, we find that a candidate's advantage on campaign rhetoric can cause some voters—those relatively indifferent between the two candidates on issues—to vote against their issue preferences and support the candidate with superior rhetorical skills.

### **Background: Why Does Rhetorical Tone Matter? The Valence Advantage of Communication**

Some candidates are better than their opponents at signaling a positive tone in rhetoric and speeches. High-quality campaign rhetoric can be conceived of as a *valence advantage* that a candidate has over the other candidate. A valence advantage is defined as any non-policy advantage a candidate may possess.<sup>2</sup> Ignoring valence, initial spatial voting models in political science focused primarily on policy, ideological, or positional considerations (e.g., Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1982). Stokes (1963) famously critiqued such spatial models as not incorporating a valence dimension, which is an evaluative dimension voters use that is not based upon positional issues.

Other approaches downplay issues relative to the importance of factors such as party identification. Substantial research finds strong correlation between party identification, demographics, education, and citizen vote choice (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Garand 1988; Godbout et al. 2004; Hayes 2005; Hetherington 1999; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Berry 1996; Niemi and Weisberg 1992; Stanley, Bianco, and Niemi 1986; Grose, Husser,

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