

Rhetoric in Politics

Rhetoric is a linguistic device used to change the hearts and minds of the listener or reader, much like the illocutionary device. Political discourse is most often exemplifying rhetoric as the topics discussed in political forums are usually ideas and concepts that attempt to guide a popular opinion, though they do not always command the listener to immediately obey or cause a direct action as an illocutionary act would call for. Many politicians would hope to influence or persuade their audience into causing a direct change or action, though they are limited only by their ability to utilize rhetorical devices in speech and writing. Rhetoric is a necessity in politics because the speaker appeals to the logos, ethos and pathos and effect a change in the audience.

Rhetoric and politics go nearly hand-in-hand as the rhetorical device's primary function is to enact a change of perspective or incite action through the speaker's voice and use of persuasive technique. Political discourse itself can be considered almost entirely filled with rhetoric, as the politician or debater are using the platform of speech or the written language in order to cause an effect in their audience's hearts and minds. Politics has little room for empty speech, and most politicians employ a biased flavor to their language in order to be persuasive on almost every occasion. It is possible to make these characterizations in today's world as rhetoric solely defines the American political spectrum, amplified by the medium of television and other mass media outlets. To Plato, rhetoric is all about flattery and drumming up the spirits of the ignorant masses and compares it to cooking, which hides the offensiveness of food with spices.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as "speech that can produce persuasion either through the character of the speaker, the emotional state of the listener, or the argument (*logos*) itself." Aristotle then defines the rhetorician as "someone who is always able to see what is persuasive"

(Rapp). Because rhetoric is a linguistic device and therefore a learned skill, a rhetorician or politician (or perhaps religious leader) would have had success with using rhetoric in causing some marked effect on their target audience, though it is not a guaranteed fact or possibility that they will win the hearts and minds of each and every listener. It is simply a technique employed by public speakers that calls to the ideas of their philosophy by which they have become activists for their cause by seeing through alternative ideas or rhetoric. The job of the politician can be related to a physician as they are not able to reach and heal every patient, but have the training and skill necessary to touch some members of their audience.

Rhetoric can be applied in any way, to further a cause or to destroy it, to promote peace or incite violence, for good or for bad. One who studies rhetoric for political gain may use their persuasiveness to raise awareness for a good cause for his local community, to drive business to a starting entrepreneur or mark a ceremonial event with an inspiring speech of hope. A function of political rhetoric in persuasive technique is limiting (or in some cases, broadening) the scope of what issue is being argued for or against in order to develop a stronger response from their audience. Often this leads to a dialectical problem where many other factors are ignored or allowed to be distorted by rhetoricians in politics or the media to garner support for a cause they identify with. The problem in recent American history is lobbying and the introduction of corporate wealth and influence in politics, which will be a factor in the development of political rhetoric in the open forum.

The ideas of central focus in political rhetoric are usually related to functions of power, equality, and justice among other hot topics which are frequently debated in formal and informal circumstances. Many of the cultural criticisms of politicians seek to polarize the framework of the debate to provide simple answers to the public to consume; either one stance or another are

proffered and very little room for alternative opinions remains on the main stage. Rhetoric is applied to open political forum in varying degrees by both democratized and dictatorial nations as the civilizing act of performing a political function is to collectivize the will of the public or to draw a means for consensus regarding a pertinent topic. “Look too closely at the particulars of the democratic vista and the whole horizon seems to break apart into the Many, but stand back in appreciation of the whole and it recombines into a harmonious One” (Crick 370).

Though not all rhetoric is political in nature, most political speech is rhetorical as its primary purpose is to produce persuasion in the speaker’s audience and strike an emotional chord. Any rhetoric about the way humans relate to each other is immediately political in nature as it naturally involves the power relations of the subjects and attempts to make a statement or provoke persuasion about a function within this relationship. There are natural resources to be commodified and distributed amongst people in our current global political situation and leaders must understand and relate the evidence to the people as a means of conveying the proper resources to the right people depending on a complex network of power relationships amongst people, groups and nations. The rhetorical device can be used to prompt questions to the general public or a specific audience as an illocutionary act in order to create a vote or establish consensus on a problem that is of immediate concern or affects the constituents.

Rhetoric can be used to narrow the scope of the argument and censorship may be imposed by some leaders or politicians in order to suppress or silence certain ideas from surfacing during the debate or open forum. Dictatorships erected in some nations, like China for example, utilize these tactics to radically narrow the scope of public discourse and impose punishments or restrictions for those who think, speak or act outside of the realm of approved policies. This can be seen in the limiting of access to information in libraries, universities and

even the internet in order to stifle political opposition. The rhetoric that follows may provoke persuasion in order to homogenize cultural beliefs and relations that may benefit certain agents of power.

Mass media is also a popular medium for political rhetoric as the pundits and talking heads of talk-show news broadcasts seek to limit political discourse in favor of their benefactors' interests. Each television news network uses entertainment and a varying degree of censorship or suppression in order to highlight certain political ideals within the scope of their programs' political aims. No longer is the evening news a neutral space for open forum and "pure politics," but rather an increasingly honed objective that is undoubtedly connected to sources of wealth, power and influence. Two of the most shining examples of this new characterization in political discourse via mass media today are FOX News' Bill O'Reilly and Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert.

Stephen Colbert's television program "The Colbert Report" began in 2005 after filling a secondary role in Jon Stewart's program "The Daily Show" on the same network. Colbert acts as "Stephen Colbert," a parody of right-wing news pundit Bill O'Reilly's character on his program "The O'Reilly Factor" who champions his political viewpoint as just, proper and backed by the will of the government and public at large. Colbert's undying quest for "truthiness" parodies this intense feature by comically espousing radical viewpoints which are reminiscent of O'Reilly's position on his show, subtitled "The No Spin Zone." The subtitle aims to reflect an air of honesty and commitment to resisting foreign influences when broadcasting O'Reilly's views on his nightly news program, although the truth may be far from that pleasant phrase. O'Reilly is criticized as promoting radical statist viewpoints that have caused major controversy almost daily

by rendering his stubborn and fanatical perspective as a valid position in contemporary political discourse.

Justine Holcomb states that Colbert's parody complies with the *modus operandi* of the news business “from providing perceivably objective news reporting to selling highly opinionated, personality-driven commentary to actual political involvement”. Stephen Colbert continues to “foray into the blurry space of pundits who not only talk politics but also become politicians, entertainers who take up politics as their latest act, and politicians who seek votes by getting laughs. Colbert's frequent shifts and blending of characters – from actor and entertainer to pundit and politician – call attention to the similarly performative nature of figures in national politics and media” (Holcomb 11). His performances provide a stark contrast to O'Reilly's self-aggrandizing commentary by openly satirizing his own viewpoint to allow the viewer to receive the message more openly through comedy and laughter. While the rest of the pundits on national news broadcasts often take their job and political positions very seriously, Colbert relieves this pressure by essentially acting as a fool on the air in a satirical jab at O'Reilly's foolish behavior when he conducts his broadcasts. Colbert “appeals to viewers to become better critics themselves by providing tools to identify and question certain rhetorical conventions that are otherwise taken for granted” (Holcomb 12).

In 2007, Colbert announced that he would be campaigning for President of the United States of America under both the Democratic and Republican Party tickets, but only in his home state of South Carolina, which he claims would be very good for his public reputation. This act is a parody of the political situation where members of various entertainment and unrelated industries vie for political power positions simply for the recognition rather than to achieve the goal of winning and performing the tasks of the job as required. For many it is simply a

popularity contest in which the self-interested candidates of American politics appear much more like caricatures of themselves when using rhetoric to address “important” issues that relate to their individual cause, usually driven by monetary concerns. Under the same pretext, Colbert’s attempt at earning a political seat in office carries as much validity and authenticity as many of the other candidates of the 2008 election who were not actively seeking the position of President but rather used the platform to criticize Barack Obama or to rally support for their benefactors in the Republican party and other lobbied interests.

Parody in politics is usually not a viable option for those whom actually seek political power and support, though recent efforts by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert evince the instructional nature of comedy, and exposes popular political candidates and media pundits’ monopoly on truth or justice. Viewers are able to discern what is factual from what goes beyond the scope of validation by separating these ideas and opinions in an ironic fashion. This performance helps to train the viewing public of the schemes that are conducted by major media outlets who parade around opinions as justifiable facts. Colbert’s program is the counterpart to the nightly news (wherever the public accesses this information) as it corrects the form that these talking heads proffer and exemplifies a lighter attitude towards taking oneself or one’s ideas too seriously.

The Onion news network offers a similar comparison to major print news sources by releasing very dry and satirical articles that reveal problems in that area of news publication in the political discussion. If a reader is trained to understand the basic methodology of the rhetoricians in politics, they may be better equipped to see through the distortions that are glazed over and passed off as factual representations of a given topic. Though there are many channels of news dissemination in contemporary culture, there are very few true alternatives to the major

networks as they are all owned, along with their subsidiaries and alternative conglomerates, by the same large multinational corporations with the same interests in mind. When the general public is consistently inundated with itemized information that is made ready to digest, they are often subject to misinformation and have been provoked by the persuasive techniques of rhetoric.

The new political model in America sees individuals in the public audience as consumers of their businesses' products rather than citizens of a nation that are to be informed of the facts that surround any given political situation. Every current event, including those which are apolitical, is coopted to service those who stand in power in order to remain in a comfortable position of power and to gain more wealth and support. These alternatives to the major news networks offer no clear solutions to the privatized news industry or to politics in general, though they do assist in challenging the rhetorically-designed status quo which exists in America today. It is especially important to remember not to trust information baldly displayed by mass media when there are many factors that go into effect in order to create a political stage that is coherent and profitable for those organizations that stand to benefit from their success in promoting their views with political rhetoric.

Although rhetoric as an academic study and as a tool of great power in the political arena is not inherently negative or untrustworthy, the recent developments in technology that allow a continual bombardment of political spin and even falsified information or heavily distorted information do not do well to service the original political aim of uniting and educating the public citizens of realistic problems and situations. It was once possible to receive unadulterated content from major news networks that competed with each other in a natural fashion in order to earn their own stake in political economy. Now, those same formerly trustworthy news outlets have been conglomerated by corporate interests in order to effect a more focused goal in

sweepingly broad areas of communication. The parody of Colbert's "truthiness" brings an upfront concern to the idea of accurate representation in the media's news reporting, though the solution lies in each individual who would partake in the consumption of mass media today.

Rhetoric is displayed all around us in various forms and usually politically charged by private interests that hope to earn profits from operation. Though the original concept lends well to organizing a relatively large body of people toward a singular or focused goal, much skepticism has been observed recently in the way that these pundits are representing what they claim is truthful. By provoking persuasion in the audience and striking an emotional chord in the audience, many powerful political and business entities have discovered that it is a very powerful tool to streamline revenue into artificially designed areas of special interest. Each news article or event will be represented by each news organization differently depending on who lies behind the scenes awaiting a greater profit margin. In the "age of information," it is not only important to receive and relate information in order to better understand the world and relations, but to be critical in considering what is true for each individual in their locus of power or control.

Works Cited

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