

Donald Trump's Process of Political Persuasion: Using Communication Theory to Explain an Unexpected Voter-Rally during the 2016 Presidential Campaign

Rebecca K. Dixon

Undergraduate Student in Communication Studies
The University of Texas at Tyler
3900 University Blvd
Tyler, TX 75799
USA

Justin C. Velten, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Communication
The University of Texas at Tyler
3900 University Blvd
Tyler, TX 75799
USA

Abstract

Many have watched the 2016 Presidential campaign in shock at the events that have occurred up to this point; the most shocking of these being the rise of Donald Trump. This rise has brought to question how this man, who seemed to be the punch line of the 2016 Presidential Race, has gained such a large support group. This paper argues that Trump's rise in the polls can be understood at the intersection of symbolic convergence theory, rhetoric, and dramatism. Through this analysis and implementation, we might understand how politicians may create shared fantasies that result in symbolic convergence, utilize the dramatic pentad to persuade their audience, and enact the elements of rhetoric to create a persuasive argument.

Keywords: Political Persuasion, Symbolic Convergence, Dramatism, Rhetoric, Communication.

1. Introduction

How a politician communicates reveals a lot about their character. Their communication can reveal their intellect, ideologies, values, and beliefs, as well as their ability to persuade. Politicians are like the traveling salesman; they come by unannounced and try to force you to believe in what they are selling. Both make you feel uncomfortable but you end up buying whatever it is they are selling, leaving you to wonder how this happened. While the traveling salesmen industry has died out, politicians are still in business and do not seem to be going away anytime soon. Now they are not only at your doorstep, but also in the television, on the radio, magazines, social media, and newspapers.

In the 2016 Presidential Campaign, one candidate has taken the world by storm in a surprising turn of events—Donald Trump. Even if you do not agree with Trump, you cannot ignore him. While people may have questioned his run for office at first, Trump's success in the polls has been spellbinding. However, by applying three theories of communication theory (symbolic convergence, dramatism, and rhetoric) one can better understand the process of how politicians are able to persuade the masses. Through careful examination of his campaign, one may also understand how Trump applies these three theories in order to gain power in the race for President. Finally, by cross-examining Trump and Hitler's political careers, one can see how both of these unlikely candidates were so successful. Donald Trump's political success may be best understood through the intersection of symbolic convergence, dramatism, and rhetoric, along with a brief overview of his policies, and by understanding the connection between his political career and that of Adolf Hitler.

2. Symbolic Convergence Theory

Bormann's (1983) theory of Symbolic Convergence explains the process of how shared fantasies come to be symbolic convergences. This theory is based on two assumptions, the first being that reality is created by communication and the second being that symbols not only create reality for individuals but one shared by many. This shared understanding of reality can exist in fantasies. Fantasies are "the creative imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group's psychological or rhetorical needs" (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks, 2015, 233). These fantasies are a group understanding of how certain events take place and the interpretation of what these events mean. This is not just one individual's opinion of the events that occurred, but groups of people's shared understanding of the way things are. Shared fantasies bring people together to form a group and "as those worlds intersect, group members develop a unique group consciousness", a process known as symbolic convergence (Griffin, et. al, 2015, 234).

When "the content of the fantasy has chained out within a group" they may use symbolic convergence theory to analyze these shared fantasies in a process known as fantasy theme (Griffin, et. al, 2015, 233). When large groups of people share a fantasy that creates a shared sense of reality, this is known as rhetoric vision (Griffin, et. al, 2015). Symbolic convergence at its core is the idea that groups can come together and develop a sense of group identity (Beebe & Masterson, 2006). The formation of group identity through symbolic convergence can be seen in everyday situations such as the formation of cliques, political parties, and religious groups. Such utilization of a sense of community may seem harmless, but can be used for both good and evil if purposed for personal gain.

For example, through the study of Adolf Hitler's rhetoric battle, Burke discovered that Hitler used symbolic convergence in his rise to power. Hitler believed that, "Men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all" (Burke, 1967, 193). Hitler was able to play on the preexisting notion that the Jews were responsible for Germany's problems (Gilbert, 2004). As a result, he was able to get otherwise good men to do terrible things because they believed it to be a necessary evil that would help them reach the mission that was first formed by their symbolic convergence.

However, researchers often do not have the ability to recognize the evolution of symbolic convergence and rhetorical vision while it is forming. Burke had to look back at Hitler's battle to recognize his use of symbolic convergence to build his empire. So Bormann, along with his team, developed a procedure known as "fantasy theme analysis" to help researchers identify the development of fantasy themes and rhetoric vision (Griffin, et. al, 2015, 236). Here in, critics must look for the characters, plot lines, scene, and sanctioning agents. A further extension of this process of recognizing symbolic convergence, fantasy themes, and rhetorical vision could be the application of Kenneth Burke's dramatism.

3. Dramatism

Kenneth Burke states in his theory of Dramatism that "life is not like a drama; life is drama" (Griffin, et. al, 2015, 293). This is to say that all life consists of men and women who try to convey messages through everyday conversations. As human beings, we desire to share our ideas and to be understood. Burke says that this process can be understood through the dramatic pentad, "a tool critics can use to discern the motives of a speaker or writer by labeling five key elements of the human drama: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose" (Griffin, et. al, 2015, 294).

The motive may also be understood through use of language, such as the god-term and devil-term, which are the most frequently used words that tell what the speaker believes is virtuous and wicked. The motives of the speaker may also be understood by how they assign blame in a situation. They may either assign the blame to an outside party, victimization, or take responsibility for the actions that transcended and ask for forgiveness, mortification (Griffin, et. al, 2015). Another way that speakers may attempt to persuade their audience is through creating a common enemy for them to stand against (Griffin, et. al, 2015). Returning to the example, Hitler was able to unify his audience by creating a common enemy, the Jews. He also strongly insisted "upon the total identification between the leader and people" as a method of persuasion (Burke, 1967, 195).

Burke (1986) states that it is crucial that speakers are able to identify with their audience in order to gain influence. In a street study done by social psychologists in New York, a man looked up to sky and stared off into space to see how many people would follow (Cialdini, 2001). What they found is that by increasing the initial amount people who looked up, they could drastically increase how many would follow (Cialdini, 2001).

The number of initial participants was so significant because it increased the social validation of the follower (Cialdini, 2001). The same could be applied to politicians. The more people the politician connects to initially, the larger his following support group will be. By identifying with their audience, politicians give social validation to their support group. Politicians need to make their followers feel as though they are a part of a change, part of a movement for a better world. Burke's theory of dramatism may be seen as an extension of analyzing rhetorical vision and fantasy themes within symbolic convergence. Once the groups are formed under a common ideal, they can be persuaded to follow a leader whose motive is fueled by this ideal. A speaker's motive can be further understood through the analysis of his or her rhetoric.

4. Rhetoric

Aristotle insists in his *Rhetoric* that for an argument to be successfully persuasive, it must contain logos, ethos, and pathos (Griffin, et. al, 2015). A speaker may persuade his audience through use of logos by providing evidence to support their claims, ethos by giving the correct impression of their character to the audience, or pathos by playing on the audience's emotions (Aristotle, 2013).

How a speaker conducts himself or she can tell you a lot about them. Aristotle believed in five canons that determine the quality of the speaker: the "construction of the argument (invention), ordering of materials (arrangement), selection of language (style), and techniques of delivery" as well as how well the audience remembers what's been said (Griffin, et. al, 2015, 288-290). However, the crowning jewel of all the cardinal values is Aristotle's Golden Mean, which is the happy medium between extreme secrecy and extreme honesty that makes a speaker virtuous (Griffin, et. al, 2015). Aristotle believed that the most virtuous of speakers could achieve this golden mean when presenting his rhetoric (Griffin, et. al, 2015).

According to Bitzer (1992), "to say that rhetoric discourse comes into being in order to effect change is altogether general" (4). Rhetoric does much more than just evoke change, it also shows the desires and values of a community. Even with all of the rhetoric elements in place, not even the best speaker could propose radical ideas without the foundations for his or her ideas already in place. Rhetorical discourses does not come into existence by mistake or chance. Rather, a rhetorical "discourse comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation which invites utterance" (Bitzer, 1992, 4). Such sentiments echo of symbolic convergence in that shared fantasies must already exist in order for a leader to create symbolic convergence and rhetoric vision.

5. Theoretical Intersection at Trump's Campaign

These three theories of symbolic convergence theory, dramatism, and rhetoric make up the formula that politicians use to persuade their target audience to vote for them. By using symbolic convergence to form a rhetorical vision, politicians can successfully create a sense of group identity that will make voters rally for their respective causes. Trump successfully does this by recognizing the border crisis that exists in America. Trump utilizes a preexisting shared American fantasy, that the surplus of Mexicans illegally migrating into America is a bad thing, to create symbolic convergence within the Republican political party. Even Democrats are voting for him because they are Americans first. Therefore, they believe in his rhetorical vision that "building a wall" to keep immigrants out will "make America great again" (Trump, 2016). So by creating a common mission, Trump can build his political empire on a sturdy foundation of what this group holds as true.

A politician's motive may best be understood through use of dramatization. By watching a short political commercial, one can recognize the motive of Trump's campaign. The scene is America, the agent is Donald Trump, and the agency is a commercial. The act is Trump promising to end "radical Islamic terrorism" by enacting a "temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States", "cut the head off ISIS", and "stop illegal immigration" by building a wall at the southern border (Trump, 2016). The purpose of this rhetoric is to invoke fear through use of shared fantasies so that listeners will vote for Donald Trump who will take care of all of our country's issues and provide a sense of hope that we can still "make America great again" (Trump, 2016). Trump uses this desire to change our country in order to unite his support group and validate their need for group unity. His motive is to become president; however, he invokes fear as a method to get people to elect him for president.

A strong rhetoric is the glue that holds together their political career together. By looking again at his commercial, it is easy to see the line of reasoning behind his policies, even if you do not agree with him. First, examine the line of reasoning behind the banning of all Muslims. Trump's major premise is that we want to end terrorist attacks within America. His minor premise is that many of these terrorists have been Muslim.

Therefore, he proposes that we should temporarily ban all Muslims entering America. When looking at his ethics, many perceive him as intelligent because he is a successful businessman. They also see him having virtuous character because he is not a politician, and they perceive his good will because he wants to make the country great again. He also utilizes the emotional aspect of rhetoric by playing on the fears that exist within the country and then giving the people a sense of confidence that by electing him as President he will take away those fears.

6. Rhetorical Connection between Trump and Hitler

By comparing Trump's political career to that of Hitler's rise, we may better understand his rise in the 2016 Presidential Campaign. This is not to say that Trump is equivalent to Hitler or that he shall follow in the footsteps of this former German dictator. However to say that their political careers are not similar would be inaccurate. In their political careers, Hitler and Trump both gained authority through their heroism, separated themselves from their predecessors, and played on the fears that already existed within a society.

Hitler was not born a vicious dictator; in reality, he was just a starving artist who was rejected from art school in Florence and made money by painting post cards for passersby (Gilbert, 2004). It wasn't until the World War I that he saw the opportunity for something more (Gilbert, 2004). He was not a vital player in the events of World War I, however his participation in the war is what gave him power. Hitler participated in many battles, and was wounded in a battle which gained him recognition for his bravery (Gilbert,2004). In every country, soldiers are seen as men of honor and dignity and Germany was no exception. Hitler was the underdog artist who became the average hero.

Trump is not only successful businessmen, but a celebrity who had his own reality-television show (Keneally, 2015). People are persuaded by authority figures or the appearance of authority (Cialdini, 2001). People are more likely to follow an authoritative figure, such as a man in a suit and tie, than they would follow the average man (Cialdini, 2001). America is currently in a huge financial crisis, and it only seems to get worse as time goes on. Trump's success in business, despite the financial crisis, may lead people to believe that he could fix America's debt by running it like a business. He fits the role of the average hero in the twenty-first century as both a celebrity and a businessman. Through his heroism, it is perceived by the people that he holds great authority and ability to make a difference in our nation's debt.

Hitler also strengthened his case by separating himself from the 'other' politicians, making it an 'us' and 'them' situation and siding with the people. Germany was in a state of desperation after losing the World War I, which left them in a vulnerable state (Gilbert2004). Hitler used this to his advantage. Hitler spoke openly about the many failures of the German government that had been spoiled by socialism and Jews (Gilbert, 2004). Hitler used the failures of the government to help boost his own campaign. Hitler separated himself from his predecessors and led the people to believe he was on their side against the politicians who had ruined the once great Germany. "It is part of the genius of a great leader to make adversaries of different fields appear as always belonging to one category only..." (Burke, 1967, 193). By creating a sense of separation he also created a sense of inclusion and made the people feel as though they were a part of a driving force that was working for the benefit of the greater good, in order to make their country great again.

Trump has also separated himself from other politicians. Trump constantly vocalizes that he is not like the 'other' politicians who have run America into ruin. Trump also separated himself from the current President Barak Obama in 2011, by calling to question the legitimacy of his presidency. There has been a lot of discrepancy about where President Obama was born, so "in 2011, when he was vocally mulling over a possible presidential run, Trump launched a public pursuit of Obama's birth certificate, announcing that he has sent private investigators to Hawaii to see what they could find" (Keneally, 2015). Even though the issue had been dead for a while, Trump used this widespread stipulation; he further galvanized the supporters of his political career. One might even argue that Trump's hesitation in running for president in the 2012 campaign, despite his vocal interest, was because he was spending the last five years building his presidential campaign.

The key to Hitler's victory as a politician was that the people were not only desperate but also afraid. They were afraid that the outsiders would take over the country, and events that had transpired within the country had already led many to separate themselves from Jews. As discussed previously, Hitler built on these fears and created a common enemy for the people—the Jews. Because he was able to gain the people's trust, they did not question his later proposal of the Holocaust camps. Hitler was able to take total control of the country without anyone questioning him because of the tactics he used to attain his power.

Similar to Hitler, Trump has turned his eyes to the two groups of people who he believes poses a threat to the American lifestyle—Muslims and Mexicans. Trump has proposed to build a wall on the border of Mexico and Texas in order to keep any more migrants from entering America illegally (Trump, 2016). As a result of the recent terrorist attacks around the world, he has also proposed to not allow any Muslims enter America (Trump, 2016). Whether or not his actions are justified is not important for the sake of this argument. However, much like Hitler he is gaining supporters by uniting both Republicans and Democrats against a common enemy.

Although Trump has not won the presidency, one should not disregard the striking connection between him and Hitler. Hitler was able to use these tactics in order to gain unlimited power in a time of desperation for Germany, which leads the nation to do some despicable thing in the name of one man. Now we see Trump using these same tactics, and while he may not follow the same path as Hitler, it is questionable of what he would do with this power he's gained.

7. Conclusion

It can be difficult to decipher which politicians are legitimate in their use of persuasion and which ones are manipulative. However, we may better understand how to distinguish the two apart through use of communication theory. Politicians use symbolic convergence theory, dramatization, and rhetoric in order to persuade voters to elect them. By using these three theories to explain the process of political persuasion, one can better understand Trump's seemingly unexplainable rise to power in the 2016 Presidential election. Also by comparing his political career to that of Hitler's, it is easy to see how both of these men were successful in politics. Even though we may laugh at Trump's ridiculous behavior, he is using persuasion tactics that have worked in the past and this should make us consider him as a serious candidate for presidency.

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