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ENC4280-0W61

19 November 2024

Emotive Language and Bias in Our Modern, Two-Party American Democracy

In modern society, the use of emotive language in politics has developed in a way that feels more powerful and manipulative than ever. In an effort to sway the American public to a side, politicians have perfected the art of getting inside people's heads. They have added tremendous depth and meaning to the metalanguage they spew to their audiences and layered their word choices with confusing dialogue that can sound like nothing to some but a clarion call to others. In a world that stands politically charged and obsessed with power, technical writers have a unique opportunity to influence the weight and impact of these tactics of emotive language, which act as a powerful tool that directly contributes to bias and perpetuates unequal power dynamics in politics.

If you were to walk into the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., down the halls of Congress, you would be consumed by the loaded language. This language is used for one specific reason: to persuade the general public that there is one right way and that we must stand with them in that pursuit. Emotive language, particularly when used with euphemism or undue harshness, can present genuine consequences that persuade public policy and shape how our society addresses current and trending issues. The Public Issues Writers' Groups is a collective of writers, technical and journalistic, that concern themselves with this exact language. They dive into the political messaging that is disseminated to millions of Americans through varying branches of government and politicians. These writers play a critical role in creating and

spreading these radically charged messages. In doing so, ethical concerns and questions regarding our democracy are brought to light. In the context of normal conversations, emotive language provides opportunities for empathy and understanding. It is a basic part of our language that has long been weaved into the ways we communicate. It is essential that we aim to not take that for granted, especially when masses of people start using similar types of emotive language and that begins to influence power shifts and political signals.

According to cognitive dissonance theory, there is a level of discomfort people begin to feel when their thoughts or beliefs are conflicting. This tends to motivate people to make a change within those thought patterns. It is this theory that underpins the art of political persuasion and helps us better understand why and how people manage to hold conflicting beliefs and attitudes (Pazzanese). When those same beliefs make up a person's entire being or are fundamental to their identity, it becomes even more of a motivating factor. It is no secret that language has the power to do much more than simply communicate information, and politicians have fully embraced that. When they are in a position to take full advantage of their audience, they turn to emotive language as a mechanism of control. To do this, politicians will craft a narrative about a story that makes the audience feel something by speaking or writing with freighted attitude. *In Technical Writing Style* by Dan Jones, William Lutz is quoted stating, "Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable" (243). Doublespeak encompasses the use of emotive language and is considered unethical when used with intention.

Using allusions or conventional narratives only seems to deepen the emotional connection of these initiatives with the people listening. When interpreted by those that feel

bonded to the information or principles, a collectively shared cultural understanding begins to develop. These political messages correspond with pre-existing emotional frameworks and strengthen the level of persuasion and remembrance. The idea here is not to make a difference in political policy or political science, but instead to convince the audience emotionally toward what they are expressing.

Within the discourse community of politicians, use of emotions, because of its effectiveness, becomes quite appealing. In a publication on emotional appeal and political participation, authors wrote:

> "Research has shown that feelings of anger prompt citizens to engage in greater electoral participation, while feelings of anxiety lead to an increased interest in politics in general, and positive feelings such as hope or enthusiasm increase awareness of one's environment and confidence that preferred outcomes will occur" (Jones 1133).

In moments such as a political debate, parliamentary speeches, or during campaigns, firing up the audience and instilling a particular emotion can have great benefits or consequences. Using emotive language to illicit an intended emotion will inherently induce public opinion. To implement this strategy successfully, we typically find two strong emotional motivators: fear and hope. These two emotional triggers pull the strongest amount of feeling from voters. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is through crisis rhetoric during hard times, coupled with aspirational language during "normal" times when discussing public policy. Because politicians strive to be relevant at all times, their consistent use of emotive language convinces their audience to be okay with what they are demanding or asking. This ensures that their messaging

has the greatest impact possible and creates a streamlined political narrative that typically resonates with followers on an emotional level.

Over the course of American history, political speechwriting has moved closer to seamlessly integrating emotional appeal with plain, direct messaging. In the Gettysburg Address, you can feel the why behind the Civil War and what it was supposed to achieve. Even today it serves as justification for political decisions and actions as they stand with equality for all. As we approach the 20th century, mass media began to transform political messaging. Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats altered political communication from a distant to an even closer manner of executive address. These events allowed listeners to feel a more personal connection to the speaker and to get a grasp on what the president was trying to communicate. During this time, there was a shift toward a more personable manner of political speechmaking. Emotional appeal is still relevant, but they favor the ideal politician. Voters want intimacy from their leader, but they also want them to be profound. The use of varying media elements could have potentially added more pressure to politicians to use emotive language to make the appropriate connections with their audience.

In modern American culture, the use of emotive language has become something of a gladiatorial contest. Politicians speak as if their very survival and their way of life depend on the outcome of elections. Social media and the consistent looping of varying news outlets has created an environment where messaging can be felt instantaneously. Politicians can use this opportunity to employ even more polarizing rhetoric and create substantially more division within our society. This battle of choosing sides creates even more political passion and helps fuel the perceived rationality behind why we choose to follow certain leaders. It seems the more extreme the emotive language and behavior, the more appeal there is. Take, for example, the

recent assassination attempt on Donald Trump. The images that followed that event, as well as the speech he gave afterward, were all used to create a sense of rage and hope for all his followers and all those who were potentially on the fence about him.

The emotive language in politics of today has developed into something completely different from what was used in the past. Political speeches from a century ago would exert more logic and reason, relying on a balance between logos and pathos. In more recent political engagements, however, this balance has changed. In a study regarding emotions as a rhetorical tool in politics, Georgeta Cislaru stated, "A rhetorically strong discourse is a discourse that may generate power and thus sustain politics; from this point of view, the analysis of the political discourse is concerned with the evaluation of its rhetorical efficiency" (107). Using emotive language in politics has evolved to a level of sophistication. It now functions to mobilize supporters, frame the opposition, and set public agendas.

The evolution of political discourse continues to influence modern societies. It has raised significant questions about how to reconcile emotionally charged and substantively debated policymaking in democratic institutions. Going back even a few decades, the steady ascent of political discourse that is meaningful to the average citizen is obvious, and at this time citizens were the only participants in political discourse that mattered. At the same time, emotive language has come under the increasing scrutiny that comes with political discourse being viewed through the lens of political communication. Even so, the use of emotive language will not be letting up any time soon and will become more refined as technology and media expands.

In contemporary political applications, debating has gravitated toward emotional outcomes. Pitting opponents against one another during questioning brings forth that sense of a divide. As American voters, we are made to believe we must be for or against proposed notions,

and me must agree or disagree with one of our two elected choices. Politicians are intentionally

choosing emotive language to make stronger connections with their audience (Osnabrugge 885-

899). When used in speeches, this is even more apparent, as politicians will tear down their

opponent using emotive principles. The whole experience of watching and listening to such

applications gives the impression of a show, and as the audience, we determine who performed

best.

      For our American two-party system, emotive language in politics can be a window into

the soul of a party. Between the democratic and republican parties, we see different emotional

strategies used for different purposes. Whichever party currently represents the United States

may take a different approach to emotive language than the opposing party. This cross-party

dynamic works separately and together to get their message across. The opposing party has an

opportunity to point out significant flaws with the current governing party and appeals to a sense

of hope. They rely on strategies that promise a better future. Parties that are currently in office

rely more on a sense of fear to let voters know they should be worried about significant change.

Operating in this way allows the governing party to project its narrative of political competence

while reinforcing the political and ideological identities of both parties.

      With the changing dynamics and current trends in the upward rise of emotive language, it

becomes even more necessary to employ writers who can achieve success in effectively swaying

the people. Today's political world needs people to build emotional resonance and establish a

sense of power within their communication. Politicians need to feel elevated among the people

so they can establish themselves as leaders that their audience wants to follow and listen to.

Technical writers are used for this, and they help support the unequal power dynamic we see in

politics. They have the capability to engage with the audience and help them receive information through professional integrity and sensible shorthand.

This power to influence politics puts technical writers in an interesting position, one that challenges moral and ethical responsibilities. They must maintain a type of communication that feels thrilling while also being clear, direct, and truthful. They must persuade voters but keep their integrity as a writer. For political writing, that means using strategy. As Dan Jones states in *Technical Writing Style*, appealing to pathos would create a "benefit for the audience from understanding and applying the data" (73). In essence, the written message should be memorable and impactful in its emotive approach, while also providing clarity. To make it as a writer in the political world, it is also imperative that technical writers construct themselves credibly. It would be important to work with a politician who aligned with their current values so their writing portrayed a voice and tone of genuine integrity. This will further push the political positioning in a successful direction. Technical writers also have a keen sense of their audience and can generate content that reaches the voters at their emotional intensity. They know who they are writing for and will structure a political narrative that effectively persuades.

The future of political communication needs to be considered as we move through current practices. The implications of emotive language have the power to create bias within politics. According to authors from the article "Emotion and Reason in Political Language", "That measure evolves over time, varies across individuals and changes in response to electoral and media pressures" (Gennaro). These same authors found "that emotionality has been increasing over time in Congress while it has been decreasing in the broader culture" (Gennaro). This means that politicians, equipped with their technical writing counterparts, are establishing themselves as the primary leaders in the United States by utilizing emotive language. As we

move toward a future with even more social platforms and forms of communication that push out news more immediately, the need to set a standard for emotive control is additionally pressing. Technological algorithms further assure the success of these endeavors and highlight them as a growing industry. Whatever is popular and trending, based on what we are being made to believe, is what we will continue to see in the media. This will only further enhance the agenda of using emotive language as a powerful tool.

The appearance of artificial intelligence and natural language processing technologies presents new prospects and problems in the effort to make sense of emotive language in political conversation. These smart new tools can help us discern when and how patterns of language use become "manipulative," and they can help us understand the real-time dynamics of political messaging (Adnan). Once we start raising new worries about the potential for biased human use of these powerful new tools, however, we must reflect on what kind of political effect might transpire from using these tools in an automated way, especially if the intended purpose is to generate an emotive response that will influence public opinion.

Moving forward, governmental parties should implement protocols that prioritize transparency and accountability but also recognize the acceptable and often essential role that emotional engagement plays in our democratic discourse (Foust). Political messages that are emotionally charged need to be evaluated with a more sophisticated and critical interpretive lens than many citizens currently possess. Technical writing and communication professionals have a vital part to play in this evolving landscape. They must ensure the need for engaging communication does not come at the cost of ethics; when technical writers inform, they must make the audience feel like they are on the same side and not emotionally scourged. There are

currently no standards for addressing emotive language strategies or distinguishing between emotionally engaged rhetoric and emotionally manipulative rhetoric.

Political communication's future is in its effectiveness, and effectiveness is in the emotive language used. It is essential we create a dialogue about the potential emotive language has for leading societies astray and coming up with frameworks of responsibility that actually take political discourse ethics seriously. In our current culture, it is urgent that we convey the misuse and biased approach to emotive language, and that as a society we lean into the methods of action that will lead us to a more rational and grounded future.

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