Mediated political campaigns: The Presidential Rhetoric and Presidential Debates

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After considering some of the key Aspects surrounding political Rhetoric through presidential figures like JFK and Donald Trump, the biggest take aways are nonverbal communication, symbolism, and the start of weariness over accurate statements coming from political figures.

When delving into strategic opportunities presidential candidates use to persuade the people, we can look at Richard Nixon. Nixon “made polling a centerpiece of his governing strategy, going so far as to manufacture supportive opinion poll findings and fabricate calls to news organizations, trying to make it appear like large numbers of ordinary citizens disapproved of what he saw as stridently negative media coverage of the presidency (Perloff, 1998, p. 272).” It seems like for now a long time coming that in order to get a message across you have to in a sense either make your oppositions take on a negative symbolic figure like Nixon did to Humphrey in 1968 naming him “tragically naive” or be like Donald Trump with naming Kamala Harris a “Marxist” in the 2024 presidential debate. Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” and Nixon’s “Law and Order” are both symbolic tools to aid the rhetoric of Republican’s whole message of Order being the primary goal.

Now, analyzing more rhetorical messages throughout our history we can look at social media as a place where symbolism and weary statements really have found its place. Donald Trump seems to have found twitter to do just that, not only during his 2016 campaign but his 2024 campaign as well. There have been both pros and cons to this form of Rhetoric for Trump. The idea of getting straight to the point with twitter’s less than 140 characters has made him seem like all business and straight to the point. While his random naming and hateful speech like his latest “I hate Taylor Swift’ tweet has displayed him to be impulsive. It has been shown throughout his time on Twitter that “Twitter has shortcomings as well. It encourages impulsivity, amplifies incivility, and dimin- ishes respect; when used by journalists, it reinforces gender biases by granting more legitimacy to male than to female reporters (Perloff, 1998, p. 280).”

Within presidential debates we can see through the rhetoric an number of things. Composure, willingness to debate, and false statements said to appeal to a certain demographic. The functions play in so many different areas and forms. They apply to people who don’t want to vote, who do want to vote, and to the different levels of government. The “Presidential debates, at their best, also perform symbolic functions for the political system as a whole. They represent the only live, real-time forum in which candidates stand, side by side, discussing policy issues. They put poten-tial leaders before citizens in a relatively unmediated forum (Perloff, 1998, p. 427).” How this plays a roll on voters is complex but at the same time simple. You can see how a candidate handles under pressure. You can see it through non verbal’s. Through nonverbals you can see levels of respect the candidates have for one another. Donald Trump if any hardly ever looked or addressed Kamala Harris. He always looked straight into the camera. What this tells me and I would say others is that he doesn’t view her as a respectable human being or rather have any respect at all for her. When vice president Harris made it a point to walk over to his side of the stage and shake his hand, this showed me she didn’t fear him, wanted to be classy, but also send a symbolic message that she was going to come for him in this debate.

When looking at the formats I would have to say the most crucial is the Town Hall Meeting. The **“town hall meeting**, featuring questions from the audience, frequently undecided voters, typically moderated by a well- known journalist (Perloff, 1998, p. 429).” I think that since the audience is involved it can lead to a less biased debate. Whether we like it or not news stations are somewhat leaning towards one side or the other. Even if they don’t and ask reasonable unbiased questions, it eliminates that idea right off the bat using the Town Hall Meeting approach so that it is not up for debate.

Looking back to the September 10th debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former president Donald Trump we can see the way their branding and effectiveness towards the audience took place. Trumps whole idea about saving Fracking Jobs was going to be one of his claims to support the oil workers of the United States. I think everyone saw that argument coming as well as attacking Harris about “wanting to take guns away”. Harris claimed that she’s an advocate for gun control which is not banning guns as whole but controlling the issue. The statement where she said her and Walz were both Gun owners made her brand seem to fit the American narrative of the right to bear arms while also understanding the long-lasting issue of mass shootings we have here in the United States. Harris stand on abortion and her nonverbal looks when Donald Trump had made false statements about “babies being ripped out and executed” seemed to seal the deal on her brand. The idea that Donald Trump is a dangerous man and can't be trusted because of his impulsive and rash behavior was expressed through this form of communication.

**References**

Perloff, R. M. (2022). *The Dynamics of Political Communication.*