

Survival of the Fittest: Rhetoric During the Course of an Election Campaign

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Despite the tradition of studying campaign effects, we know little about the rhetorical strategies of candidates. This study speculates about the types of appeals that incumbents and challengers find most effective and that are, as a result, most likely to dominate an election campaign. Candidates have an incentive to use arguments that evoke emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger. Emotional appeals allow candidates to emphasize consensual values, which makes it easier to mobilize their party's base while simultaneously attracting the support of the uncommitted. The use of emotional appeals is also consistent with the media's preference for drama and excitement in news reporting. Thus, emotional appeals will be more enduring than other types of appeals, and hence more likely to dominate the rhetorical landscape. A content analysis of newspaper coverage of the 1988 Canadian federal election campaign provides suggestive evidence in favor of this view.

KEY WORDS: campaign rhetoric, emotion, fear, anger, priming, campaign effects

William Riker (1996) described campaigns as “a main point—perhaps *the* main point—of contact between officials and the populace over matters of public policy” (p. 3, emphasis in original). And yet, he lamented, “we know very little about the rhetorical content of campaigns, which is, however, their principal feature” (p. 4). Given the rich tradition of studying campaign effects (e.g., Iyengar & Simon, 2000), this is a curious void.

This study seeks to fill that gap by theorizing about the types of appeals that candidates find most effective. I construe “effectiveness” in terms of the repeated or sustained use of an argument throughout the course of a campaign. In doing so, I deliberately invoke the metaphor of natural selection to understand the process by which some types of appeals survive longer than others. I argue that candidates have strong incentives to evoke emotions such as anger, fear, and

anxiety; thus, appeals that are high in emotional content will survive longer than other types of arguments.

Existing Perspectives on Campaign Strategy

When it comes to campaign strategy, there is evidence that candidates seek to control the agenda by emphasizing or “priming” particular issues (e.g., Carsey, 2000; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1994; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crete, 1992). Examining the use of private polls by presidents Kennedy and Nixon, for example, Jacobs and his colleagues found that the public statements of both presidents highlighted issues that most concerned voters. Kennedy’s public statements emphasized increasing Social Security, passing Medicare legislation, reforming education, fighting unemployment, and combating the high cost of living—all of which were cited as important problems by White House polling reports (Jacobs & Shapiro, 1994). Similarly, Nixon sought to draw attention away from Vietnam by emphasizing domestic issues that enjoyed popular support (Druckman, Jacobs, & Ostermeier, *in press*). The evidence for priming also extends to the parliamentary context. In their analysis of the 1988 Canadian federal election, Johnston et al. (1992) found that the major party candidates sought to divert attention away from an issue of monumental importance: the 1987 Meech Lake Accord establishing Quebec as a distinct society within Canada. Because identifiers within all three parties were deeply divided over the national question, the candidates made a tacit agreement to contest the election over commercial policy—in particular, the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

The notion that candidates engage in priming is persuasive; it is consistent with the everyday observation that candidates talk past one another, as well as with formal treatments of candidate strategy (Riker, 1996; Simon, 2002). But knowing that candidates emphasize issues on which they perceive a comparative advantage does not permit us to make general statements about the types of rhetoric candidates use.¹ To put it somewhat differently, the subset of issues that become important in any given election tends to change over time. Topics that received a lot of attention in one election may not even be on the radar 4 years later. Thus, in order to characterize the content of campaign rhetoric—and its likely impact on citizens—we should seek to generalize about the words, images, or symbols used by competing candidates.² This approach is a logical extension of the work of Jacobs and Shapiro (2000), who found that political operatives

¹ Moreover, West’s (2001, pp. 119–120) distinction between a fixed and fluid agenda suggests a constraint on priming. If the agenda is fixed (e.g., the economy in 1992), candidates may find it difficult to shift attention to another issue.

² Druckman (2001a) referred to the “words, images, phrases, and presentational styles” of a speaker as “frames in communication.” Research in this area examines whether alternative frames affect an individual’s evaluation of a political issue or candidate (e.g., Druckman, 2001b; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Nelson & Oxley, 1999).

invest considerable resources in figuring out how best to convey their message to the citizenry. To date, however, the question of whether candidates rely on certain types of rhetoric in crafting those messages remains an open one (but see Jerit, Kuklinski, & Quirk, 2002; Riker, 1996).

Survival of the Fittest Argument: A New Approach to Studying Campaign Rhetoric

One way of gaining leverage on this question is by divining the words, images, and symbols that candidates themselves think are most effective. This is the approach adopted by Riker (1990):

We assume that experienced rhetors know something about how persuasion works. . . . If they then use a particular technique frequently, we can infer that this technique is believed to be persuasive. Furthermore if many rhetors use the technique, it is then widely believed to be persuasive. (p. 57)

Insofar as Riker's intuition is correct, the sustained use of a particular type of argument reflects strategic decisions candidates have made about how best to communicate with voters. We can therefore operationalize the perceived success of an appeal as its *duration* or *survival* throughout the course of a campaign.³

Focusing on survival directs our attention to the factors that increase or decrease the life span of an appeal. This study advances the idea that an important class of variables is argument-specific; that is, they characterize properties of the arguments themselves rather than the source of the argument or other contextual influences that might be operating. One characteristic that comes immediately to mind is the valence of an argument (i.e., the positive-negative distinction). Several scholars have noted the persuasive power of negative arguments (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997; Riker, 1996), and their prominence in campaign advertisements suggests that the most enduring appeals might well be those that are negative (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Jamieson, 1992; Kaid & Johnston, 1991). At the same time, this designation may obscure as much as it reveals. For example, it makes no distinction between the infamous Willie Horton ad of 1988 and the typical contrast ad that candidates frequently sponsor (both of which may be labeled "negative"). From the standpoint of generalizing about the content of campaign rhetoric, then, a more useful starting point might be the reaction—or, more precisely, the emotional reaction—that candidates seek to evoke with their rhetoric.

³ In a similar vein, Hershey (1984) contended that the most important factor in the spread of a campaign strategy is its functional value: "Strategies that bring clear, visible, and rewarding results are most likely to be modeled by other campaigners" (p. 77).

Underlining the importance of this conceptual shift, psychologists are beginning to accumulate evidence that specific emotions have a differential impact on judgment and choice. Although anger and fear belong to the family of negative emotions, they have dramatically different effects on decision-making (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001). Fearful people perceive greater risk across new situations, leading them to be risk-averse. Angry people, by contrast, are characterized by a sense of certainty and individual control that leads them to make risk-seeking choices.

These findings suggest several strategic possibilities. Rhetoric that highlights the frightening consequences of a particular course of action can be used to block political change if it makes the electorate risk-averse. On the other hand, arguments that cause citizens to feel angry might inspire them to mobilize for—or against—a particular candidate. Because cognitive biases cause citizens to give emotionally compelling data disproportionate weight (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Piatelli-Palmarini, 1994), candidates have a strong incentive to counter emotionally laden appeals with visceral images of their own (Jamieson, 1992). This tendency to engage in tit-for-tat might explain why emotional appeals endure even though their repeated use seemingly would have a declining marginal effect.

More generally, there are a number of reasons why candidates might have an incentive to appeal to emotions such as fear or anger. To begin, citizens routinely rely on their feelings when evaluating political stimuli (e.g., Clore & Isbell, 2002; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Schwarz & Clore, 1988). Even when citizens are not conscious of them, the impact of emotional memories—especially those relating to fear—can be long-lasting (LeDoux, 1996). Thus, political elites who speak the language of emotion have a better chance of connecting with the electorate than those who do not. They also are more likely to capture the attention of citizens in the first place. According to Lazarus (1991), “emotion shifts the focus of attention from what the person was doing before the emotion to some other concern, namely, the focal demand and the emotional experience it creates” (p. 17).⁴ Hart (2000) has characterized campaign rhetoric as having an “unmistakable energy and immediacy” compared to other kinds of political talk.

Second, emotional appeals allow candidates to capitalize on the time-honored strategy of emphasizing widely shared, or consensual, values and goals (Jamieson, 1992; Page, 1976). In other words, emotional appeals are powerful precisely because they project images that are universally valued or reviled. Consider, as an illustration, the notorious “Daisy” commercial of 1964. In this television ad,

⁴ It is a matter of some debate what happens next. Insofar as emotional appeals cause citizens to suspend habitual decision-making routines (Marcus et al., 2000), the likelihood of persuasion may increase (Brader, 2002). Others contend that gut instincts can lead individuals to immediately accept or reject certain courses of action (Damasio, 1994), effectively closing off opportunities for opinion change.

Lyndon Johnson clearly sought to evoke fear and anxiety by arguing that his opponent, Barry Goldwater, was all too willing to use nuclear weapons. What gave the ad such broad appeal was the fact that it invoked values (peace, security, etc.) that were cherished by all citizens, not just Democrats. Arguments that bring to mind other emotions, such as anger, have a similarly broad appeal if they suggest that consensual goals, such as the desire for honest government or empathy in elected officials, have been violated by the opposing candidate. The revelation during the 1992 campaign that President George H. W. Bush did not know the price of a gallon of milk engendered disgust, suggesting to millions of Americans that he was out of touch with the experiences of the average voter. Thus, emotional appeals allow candidates to show their support for widely shared values and goals, enhancing their ability to attract the support of broad segments of the electorate.

As a result, arguments that incite fear or anger seem especially good at resolving one of the “essential tensions” of a campaign: the need to mobilize the party’s base while attracting the support of the uncommitted (Johnston et al., 1992). Because citizens, even partisans, are notoriously inattentive to politics, they must be mobilized anew every election (Johnston et al., 1992, p. 79). Emotional appeals signal that the stakes of the election are high, thereby rousing citizens from inattention. For partisans, anger surrounding the opposing candidates’ qualifications or issue positions may reinforce the differences between candidates and provide partisans with a reason to turn out.⁵ These same words and images may be used to sway the uncommitted. Once their attention has been captured, the uncommitted are likely to accept—and act upon—whatever message is dominating the environment (Zaller, 1992).

Finally, the use of emotional appeals is consistent with the media’s preference for drama and excitement in news reporting (Bennett, 2003). To the extent that they convey urgency or a potential crisis, emotional appeals are more likely to be reported in the print and broadcast news than sustained analyses of policy problems or detailed presentations of the candidates’ platforms. Or, to put things somewhat differently, the use of emotional appeals by candidates reflects their belief that these arguments are more likely to be covered than sober, factual formulations.

The preceding argument suggests the following set of expectations. Candidates, knowing that certain types of appeals elicit more affect than others, rely on emotional appeals with the expectation that they will resonate with both partisans and uncommitted voters. As a result, arguments evoking fear, anxiety, and anger will be more enduring than those that do not elicit an affective response, all else held constant. The literature on priming leads us to expect that the content of campaign appeals across different elections will be somewhat idiosyncratic, with the precise mix of group appeals, references to values, and issue emphasis determined

⁵ According to Riker (1996, p. 66), these individuals are most affected by *b*, the difference between the success of their favored candidate and the success of their disfavored one.

in large part by the strategic conditions of a particular election. By contrast, I expect that the feelings political candidates seek to evoke with their campaign rhetoric—feelings of fear, anxiety, and anger—will be more invariant.⁶ Finally, despite the relative superiority of arguments that evoke negative emotions such as fear or anger, elites cannot rely on them exclusively (Riker, 1996). In order to be credible, campaigners must convince the electorate that they are worthy of its support by drawing attention to their favorable personal characteristics or the expected benefits of their policy positions. Riker (1996) has noted that the burden of this task falls disproportionately on candidates who propose dramatic changes in policy, which leads to the expectation that those who propose such changes will use fewer fear and anger appeals relative to their opponents, all else held constant.

Of course, any number of other factors also may affect the duration of a campaign appeal. Take the characteristics of the candidates themselves. Because incumbents can use the spoils of the office to make news, they are likely to receive more free media than challengers (Bennett, 2003). Thus, a particular line of argument might be more enduring simply because it is articulated by the incumbent. Candidates also react to strategic features of the political environment, such as movements in public opinion. For example, Geer (1998) has found that candidates who are behind in public opinion polls change their appeals more frequently than do their opponents. The appeals made by the trailing candidate might be of shorter duration than those of the candidate who is ahead.

At this juncture, it is useful to consider two simple tests of the preceding argument. According to the position advanced here, there should be a substantial amount of variety in the life span of campaign arguments, and the most enduring arguments will evoke emotions such as fear, anxiety, or anger. A second implication is that opponents of policy change will rely on emotional appeals to a much greater extent than supporters of policy change.

Suggestive Evidence From the 1988 Canadian Federal Election

If candidates do not make distinctions regarding the effectiveness of different arguments, the life span of all appeals used throughout a campaign will have the same trajectory. If, on the other hand, they do make such distinctions, some arguments will persist while others (presumably those that fail to resonate with the voters) will fall by the wayside. One way of testing the validity of this argument is to examine the persistence of the major campaign themes uttered by the candidates in the 1988 Canadian federal election.⁷ These themes addressed the

⁶ Without data across multiple campaigns, it is impossible to test the proposition that the feelings that political candidates seek to evoke with their campaign rhetoric (e.g., fear, anxiety, and anger) are invariant over time.

⁷ Evidence reported in this section is based on a content analysis of *The Toronto Star*, Canada's largest metropolitan daily newspaper. Articles were collected over a 13-month period beginning on 4

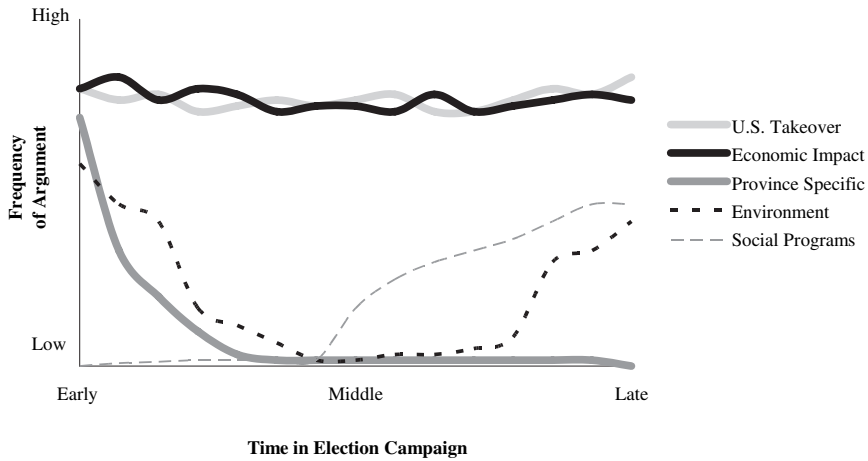


Figure 1. Approximate life span of the major arguments during the 1988 Canadian election.

impact of the FTA on the economy, Canadian autonomy, social programs, the environment, culture, unions, and Canada's regional development programs.⁸ (The first two of these are referred to below as Economic Impact and U.S. Takeover.) Early on, a number of province-specific claims—such as Ontario's assertion that the FTA would kill its wine industry—also were made.

Figure 1 illustrates the approximate life span of five of the major themes. Some, such as U.S. Takeover and Economic Impact, persisted throughout the course of the entire debate; others had only a brief stay on the campaign stage. The life spans of the union and culture themes are not pictured in Figure 1, but their use peaked in the middle period of the debate and rapidly declined thereafter. Arguments about the impact of the trade deal on regional development did not appear until the final months of the debate. Taken together, the patterns observed in Figure 1 indicate that candidates *were* discriminating between different types of appeals.

What was it about the U.S. Takeover and Economic Impact themes that made them an attractive rhetorical strategy? In their most common formulation, both provoked a visceral reaction. Consider the U.S. Takeover argument. Opponents of the FTA argued that Canada would become a satellite of the United States.

October 1987, when the United States and Canada completed a legal version of the treaty, and ending on Election Day (21 November 1988). A coder unfamiliar with the project examined stories from three 2-month periods corresponding to the beginning, middle, and later phases of the debate. Of course, media reports of the campaign are only a proxy for campaign rhetoric. They are a reasonable proxy, though, because candidates anticipate journalistic norms and calibrate their public remarks accordingly (e.g., Cook, 1989; Entman, 1989).

⁸ The FTA was one of the most important issues in the election (Johnston et al., 1992).

Prime Minister Mulroney, the leading proponent of the trade agreement, was charged with “selling out” his country, “betraying” the nation, and turning Canadians into “America’s puppets.” Research on emotion shows that when people feel they have been slighted or that there has been a demeaning offense committed against themselves or their loved ones, anger is the most common reaction (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; see also Lazarus, 1991). In characterizing Mulroney as a traitor, opponents intended to evoke these very feelings. Similarly, because arguments about the economic impact of the FTA made reference to a series of hypothetical threats (plant closings, job loss, etc.), they were more likely to arouse anxiety or fear—emotions that typically are associated with threats to one’s personal security (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; see also Lazarus, 1991).⁹

Appeals that turned out to be the least enduring (e.g., arguments about the impact of the trade deal on provincial economies, unions, and Canadian culture) did not register in the minds of most Canadians as either an attack on their country or a threat to their personal security. Whereas most people could identify with the fear of losing their job, the threat posed to the local wine industry, unions, and the arts seemed more remote.¹⁰ It was precisely because these themes appealed to relatively narrow constituencies—and therefore did not incite a widespread emotional reaction—that candidates ultimately abandoned arguments about provincial economies, unions, and culture. Consistent with the evolutionary metaphor, the trajectory of the environmental theme indicates that some sort of learning took place. Early arguments about the environment, which stressed loss of control over the country’s natural resources, were a variation on the U.S. Takeover theme. Later arguments, by contrast, raised the specter of energy shortages and brownouts, which suggests that they were intended to incite fear rather than anger.

Examining the most enduring themes (U.S. Takeover and Economic Impact) allows us to determine whether supporters and opponents of Mulroney and the FTA adopted different rhetorical strategies. As I noted earlier, proponents of the trade deal faced the burden of explaining why the agreement was worth supporting. Although they could point to the dire consequences of failing to sign the FTA, they also had to convince the electorate that there were real economic gains to be had. Opponents of Mulroney and the FTA bore no such responsibility. The most effective way to defeat the trade agreement was to mobilize the opposition with appeals to anger (U.S. Takeover) or weaken support for the trade deal with appeals to fear (Economic Impact). As a result, the proportion of fear and anger appeals should be lower for Mulroney supporters. This relationship is shown in Figure 2.

⁹ Fear arises from concrete threats, whereas anxiety is triggered by uncertain or existential threats (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; see also LeDoux, 1996).

¹⁰ A few examples are instructive here. On the theme of culture, a popular musician predicted that the FTA would “decimate” the music industry by flooding the market with albums made in the United States; labor leaders charged that an open border would weaken Canadian labor laws; and wine industry representatives predicted the “total devastation” of wine production and grape growing.

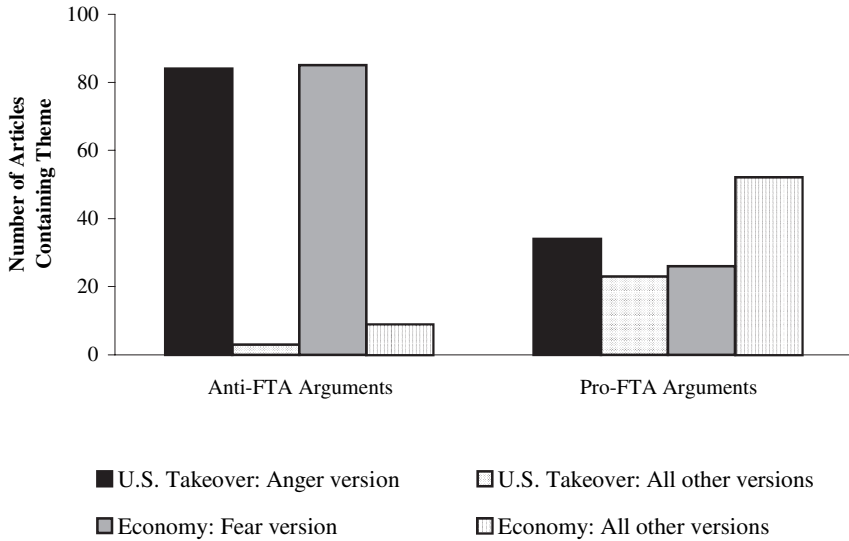


Figure 2. Different versions of the U.S. Takeover and Economic Impact arguments in the 1988 Canadian federal election. Stories were coded at the article level on two dimensions: U.S. Takeover (anger version of theme or not) and Economic Impact (fear version of theme or not). A sample of 314 *Toronto Star* stories were coded. This represents approximately half of all stories covering the campaign and the FTA from 4 October 1987 to 21 November 1988.

The overwhelming majority of U.S. Takeover and Economic Impact arguments made by opponents evoked fear or anger. Proponents of the trade deal relied on this tactic too, but there was more balance in their appeals. Differences in the proportion of fear and anger appeals articulated by proponents and opponents are significant at the $p < .001$ level.

The content analysis reveals that Mulroney and supporters of the FTA truly did not begin to rely on fear and anger appeals until the final months of the campaign. And yet the dynamics of the pro-FTA rhetorical strategy are a testimony to the value of these appeals. Early on, Mulroney responded to his opponents with arguments that were intended to foster positive feelings about the trade agreement:

“This country wasn’t built for timid souls. This is the path for the daring, the innovative, and the nation-builders, who are now called upon to make a firm decision on a strong, united and prosperous Canada.” (Vienneau & O’Donnell, 1987)

“If you are a consumer, you will find lower prices and more choice. If you are a manufacturer, your costs will go down. If you are an exporter, you will welcome improved and fairer access to the huge U.S. market.” (Sears, 1988)

Once public opinion began to shift against him, however, Mulroney changed his tactics. It was in Canada's national interest to sign the trade deal, he claimed, and anyone who argued otherwise simply did not have confidence in their countrymen (Cohn, 1988a). He also stoked lingering anger over regional imbalances and claimed the FTA would redress these unfair differences. A similar transformation took place with Mulroney's rebuttals on the economy. Earlier arguments in favor of the trade deal highlighted the benefits of free trade. In the weeks leading up to the election, however, Mulroney warned that "entire towns and thousands of jobs could be at risk if the Progressive Conservative government is defeated and the trade deal dies" (Gordon, 1988). Supporters also charged that Canada would be left out of important international agreements, that it would be drawn into a recession, and that it ultimately would become an economic backwater. Much as one would expect (Jamieson, 1992), opponents responded with rhetoric that was just as extreme:

"[It's] not appropriate to gamble with the fate of the nation, with the fate of our traditions, with our social programs. Brian Mulroney had no right to gamble away the future of Canada." (Walker, 1988)

"[The deal] would make Canadians second class citizens in [their] own country." (Cohn, 1988b)

"If Mulroney wins the November 21 election, there will be massive unemployment in the province of Ontario, lower wage levels and a rapid decline in the standard of living as a result of the Canada–United States free trade agreement." (MacKenzie, 1988)

In sum, there is evidence that candidates in the 1988 Canadian federal election made distinctions regarding the effectiveness of competing arguments. There also is support for the idea that candidates cast their appeals broadly and that the most frequently used arguments were intended to evoke fear and anger. The next logical step in the study of campaign rhetoric is to determine whether the patterns observed here characterize the rhetorical strategies of a more representative sample of campaigns. We also have much to learn about the different uses to which candidates put anger and fear appeals.

Conclusion

Being able to generalize about the types of appeals most likely to dominate a campaign is at the heart of attempts to understand campaign rhetoric and its likely impact on citizens. During the 2000 presidential election, for example, Vice President Al Gore characterized George W. Bush's plan to privatize Social Security as a "risky scheme." The purpose of such a strategy was straightforward: suggest that the plan to let workers invest some of their Social Security taxes would jeopardize their retirement benefits. In a word, *scare* them out of support-

ing privatization. But did this argument survive the entire length of the campaign? Or did another argument come to trump the “risky scheme” appeal? This leads to perhaps the most critical question: What characteristics of an argument lead it to have a long life span? If we could determine which arguments are most likely to survive the process of an election campaign, we would have the ability to characterize the rhetorical environment—and candidate strategy in that regard—more effectively than we have done to date.

This approach to the study of campaign rhetoric has the potential to reorient the focus of political psychology, at least in the near term. For decades, researchers have documented how various factors, such as source or message characteristics, affect the likelihood of persuasion (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991, for a review). Despite the advances in our knowledge as a result of this research program, findings from the laboratory may not shed light on the impact of real-world political rhetoric—especially if experimental treatments are devised with little or no attention to the types of appeals that candidates actually use. Consider message length as an illustration. There is evidence that “length means strength,” or that longer messages are more persuasive than shorter ones (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). However, in most political campaigns, candidates strive to have concise messages that can be conveyed easily in 10- or 30-second sound bites. Candidates with long messages might not get heard, or—even worse—their messages might be recast into a shorter formulation by members of the media. Thus, not only are long messages likely to be relatively uncommon, there may be little variance in the length of actual campaign messages (with most candidates using short messages). This example, limited though it may be, reveals the potential for an intellectual mismatch of sorts, with political scientists knowing a great deal about factors that may not square with candidate strategy or, alternatively, not knowing enough about the impact of factors that do matter. A psychological approach to the study of campaign rhetoric must *begin* with well-developed theories about the types of appeals that candidates are most likely to use. Only then can we know which existing studies to draw upon and how better to devise future experimental work.

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