Chapter 10
Gubernatorial Rhetoric and Public Responsiveness

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the relationship between the rhetorical styles utilized by American governors and public responsiveness. Using DICTION, the authors code 564 State of the State addresses delivered by 156 governors during a 12 year time period and relate variations in the resulting styles to measures of gubernatorial approval. The analysis suggests that variations in two elements of rhetorical style, creativity and optimism, affect levels of approval.

INTRODUCTION
Scholars of political communications and political practitioners view rhetorical skill as critical to the performance of political leaders. They argue that the manner in which political leaders deliver their messages, the words they use, the length and complexity of their sentences, their use of inflections, their use of pauses and other elements of speaking (verbal style) is central to the impression they create in the public consciousness and to their effectiveness as leaders. Some political scientists are skeptical of these claims, arguing instead that style rarely moves a national audience. In this paper, we attempt to clarify the relationship between rhetorical style and public responsiveness through an examination of the rhetoric of the governors of the American states.

Rhetorical Style and Political Success
A large academic literature on political communications and political leadership suggests that presidents and governors can move public opinion if they have the skills necessary to exploit their public visibility and the opportunities inherent in the position to promote their policy positions. This literature views the public as “a mass of fluid voters who can be appeased by…clever rhetoric” (Blumenthal, 24, 198) that words matter (Powell and Cowart, 155) and those particular words have specific persuasive power. Frank Luntz, the wordsmith to America’s conservative movement, argues, “Specific words and phrases can change how people think and how they behave.” (Luntz, xxi).

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Many political practitioners share this assumption about the value of oratory. Winston Churchill, the famed British Prime minister who rallied his nation against the Nazis with great oratory claims, “He who enjoys (the gift of oratory) wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world.” (London. The Churchill Society). Former Republican Speaker of the US House of Representatives Newt Gingrich rose to political power largely as a result of the construction of politics “as a war in which the weapons of choice were words, and where the winners were those who define them, redefine them, test them, deliver them and repeat them in ways that devastate the opposition, or provide the best protection against enemy attach” (Marannis and Weisskopf, 129). Thus his admonition to Republicans, that Democrats and their proposals should be regularly labeled “intolerant,” “pathetic,” “sick,” etc. and that Republicans and their proposals should be characterized as “principled,” “proud,” and humane” (Gingrich, 1996).

Political scientists have mixed reactions to these claims. In examining presidential rhetoric, B. Dan Wood and Jeffery Peake (1998), and Edwards and Wood (1999) show, that presidential rhetoric often follows, rather than leads, media attention to issues. Moreover, George Edwards, in On Deaf Ears (2003) and in Governing by Campaigning (2007), shows that presidents who “go public” are rarely successful in swaying public opinion. Others, however, have shown that rhetoric does have an impact: on agenda setting, on spending priorities and, occasionally, on public perceptions of economic conditions (Cohen, 1995; Hill, 1998; Druckman and Holmes, 2004 and Canes-Wrone, 2006). In one recent methodologically sophisticated analysis of the impact of presidential rhetoric, B. Dan Wood (2007) shows that economic policy rhetoric has a strong influence on the public’s perception about the economy.

Our research here expands analysis of this topic to the arena of the governors of the American states. By enlarging the numbers of executives and varying the circumstances in which they serve, we hope to improve the generalizability of findings on this important topic. In carrying out the analysis, we employ a data set only recently made available to scholars. It comes from the Pew Center on the States and consists of 564 State of the State addresses made by 156 governors from 2000 through 2012. We are indebted to the Pew Center for these data.

Defining and Measuring Verbal Style

Verbal (rhetorical) styles reflect the influence tactics that speakers choose in order to move policy, shape opinion and respond to the mood of the public. As is the case with humans in general, a range of verbal strategies is available to political leaders. Scholars have characterized these styles in different ways. In The Politics of Economic Leadership, Wood (2007) characterized verbal style as a variation in the intensity and tone of public pronouncements. While an imaginative definition of verbal style, its focus on presidential economic rhetoric limits its usefulness in other arenas.

A more general classification of verbal style, developed by Roderick Hart (1984), has been employed in a variety of efforts designed to understand the relationship between political communications and political outcomes. These include analyses of presidential campaign ads (Ballotti and Kaid, 2000), studies of the relationship between the content of gubernatorial state-of-the-state speeches and the ideological predispositions of state electorates (DiLeo, 2002), and research seeking to explain variation in the legislative success of Florida governors (Crew and Lewis, 2010).

Hart characterizes verbal style as variation in speech along (among others) four basic dimensions: activity, optimism, certainty and realism¹. He provides dictionaries of words reflecting these dimensions and a computer program (DICTION) that scans texts for these words and classifies the speakers’ verbal style according to their use. We adopt Professor Hart’s classification scheme of
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