

Political Communication in America is Better - and Worse - Than You Think.

How political candidates and elected officials in the United States decide what to say and how to say it.

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Estudio español todos los dias con “Duolingo”

The screenshot shows the Duolingo interface for the Spanish course. At the top, there is a blue navigation bar with the Duolingo logo and menu items: Home, Words, Discussion, Labs, and Stories. On the right side of the bar, there is a user profile for 'Peter988849' with a dropdown arrow, a fire icon with '90', a red shield icon with '308', and a notification bell icon with '1'. Below the navigation bar, the text 'TOPIC: SPANISH' is displayed on the left, and a green button labeled 'FOLLOW DISCUSSION' is on the right. A horizontal line separates the header from the content area. The content area features two example sentences, each with a blue speaker icon to its left. The first sentence is '¡El gato está en la nevera!' with the translation 'Translation: The cat is in the fridge!'. The second sentence is 'Mi perro no usa pantalones.' with the translation 'Translation: My dog does not wear pants.'

duolingo

Home

Words

Discussion

Labs

Stories



Peter988849



90



308



1

TOPIC: SPANISH

FOLLOW DISCUSSION



"¡El gato está en la nevera!"

Translation: The cat is in the fridge!



"Mi perro no usa pantalones."

Translation: My dog does not wear pants.

Tengo que estudiar mas.

My talk will be in English, when I come back to Bilbao my Spanish and Basque will be better.

Four Topics:

Political communication in America is better because it was worse before.

Why people use political communication.

The basis of political communication in America now.

Why this is worse than you thought.

Political Communication in America Has Always Been Angry, Loud, Difficult, and Mean

“Ambition, avaric, personal animosity, party opposition, and many other motives not more laudable than these, are apt to operate as well upon those who support as those who oppose the right side of the question. Were there not even these inducements to moderation, nothing could be more ill-judged than that intolerant spirit which as, at all times, characterized political parties. For in politics, as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword. Heresies in either can rarely be cured by persecution.

And yet, however just these sentiments will be allowed to be, we have already sufficient indications that it will happen in this as in all former cases of great national discussion. A torrent of angry and malignant passions will be let loose. To judge from the conduct of the opposite parties, we shall be led to conclude that they will mutually hope to evince the justness of their opinions, and to increase the number of their converts by the loudness of their declamations and the bitterness of their invectives.”

- Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist #1* 1788

America Was Founded on Political Rhetoric

Chapter I THE LITERATURE OF REVOLUTION

What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington. The records of thirteen legislatures, the pamphlets, newspapers in all the colonies, ought to be consulted during that period to ascertain the steps by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of Parliament over the colonies.

— John Adams to Jefferson, 1815

Bernard Bailyn *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* 1967



That Rhetoric Immediately Got Bad

One pro-Adams newspaper predicted that if Jefferson were elected, “murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes.”

- Peter Wehner, *Commentary Magazine* 29 October 2010

The “President of Yale University, a John Adams supporter... publicly suggested that were Jefferson to become the president, “*we would see our wives and daughters the victims of legal prostitution.*”

- Rick Ungar *Forbes* 20 August 2012

Then it Got Worse

“The campaign of 1800 set the standard for dirty presidential campaigns in America—one that would be taken to new heights during the election of 1828.

The race was between President John Quincy Adams and his challenger, military hero Andrew Jackson. By the time Jackson prevailed in the race, the headlines would be filled with charges of murder, adultery, and pimping...”

When he was running for President, Abraham Lincoln’s opponent “... accused Lincoln of being a drunk—stating that the future emancipator could “*ruin more liquor than all the boys in town together.*”

- Rick Ungar *Forbes* 20 August 2012

In 1804 Vice President Burr Shot Hamilton



In 1804 Vice President Aaron Burr shot and killed Alexander Hamilton, the former US Treasury Secretary and one of the three authors of *The Federalist Papers*.

The US Congress is Bad Now, But has Been Worse

SENATOR CHARLES SUMNER of Massachusetts was an avowed Abolitionist and leader of the Republican Party. After the sack of Lawrence, on May 21, 1856, he gave a bitter speech in the Senate called "**THE CRIME AGAINST KANSAS.**" He blasted the "murderous robbers from Missouri," calling them "hirelings, picked from the drunken spew and vomit of an uneasy civilization." Part of this oratory was a bitter, personal tirade against South Carolina's **SENATOR ANDREW BUTLER**. Sumner declared Butler an imbecile and said, "Senator Butler has chosen a mistress. I mean the harlot, slavery." During the speech, Stephen Douglas leaned over to a colleague and said, "that damn fool will get himself killed by some other damn fool." The speech went on for two days.



REPRESENTATIVE PRESTON BROOKS of South Carolina thought Sumner went too far. Southerners in the nineteenth century were raised to live by an unwritten code of honor. Defending the reputation of one's family was at the top of the list. A distant cousin of Senator Butler, Brooks decided to teach Charles Sumner a lesson he would not soon forget. Two days after the end of Sumner's speech, Brooks entered the Senate chamber where Sumner was working at his desk. He flatly told Sumner, "You've libeled my state and slandered my white-haired old relative, Senator Butler, and I've come to punish you for it." Brooks proceeded to strike Sumner over the head repeatedly with a gold-tipped cane. The cane shattered as Brooks rained blow after blow on the hapless Sumner, but Brooks could not be stopped. Only after being physically restrained by others did Brooks end the pummeling.

Northerners were incensed. The House voted to expel Brooks, but it could not amass the votes to do so. Brooks was levied a \$300 fine for the assault. He resigned and returned home to South Carolina, seeking the approval of his actions there. South Carolina held events in his honor and reelected him to his House seat. Replacement canes were sent to Brooks from all over the south.



United States Senate

Preston Brooks beats Charles Sumner with a cane.

<http://www.ushistory.org>

Even the Basics of Social Media is Old

The pamphlet [George Orwell, a modern pamphleteer, has written] is a one-man show. One has complete freedom of expression, including, if one chooses, the freedom to be scurrilous, abusive, and seditious; or, on the other hand, to be more detailed, serious and “high-brow” than is ever possible in a newspaper or in most kinds of periodicals. At the same time, since the pamphlet is always short and unbound, it can be produced much more quickly than a book, and in principle, at any rate, can reach a bigger public. Above all, the pamphlet does not have to follow any prescribed pattern. It can be in prose or in verse, it can consist largely of maps or statistics or quotations, it can take the form of a story, a fable, a letter, an essay, a dialogue, or a piece of “reportage.” All that is required of it is that it shall be topical, polemical, and short.³

Bernard Bailyn *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* 1967

Political communication in America used to be worse than it is now. It is bad now, but it is better than it was. That is almost good news.

Why is Political Communication so Divisive?

One way to think about political speech is to think about language. Why do we talk about politics at all?

To start, is easier than killing each other. At some point, people have to talk to each other to get other people to do things like come to class, vote for a candidate, or support an idea.

Talking is also Part of Being Human

“It is thus clear that man is a political animal, in a higher degree than bees, or other gregarious animals. Nature, according to our theory, makes nothing in vain; and man alone is furnished with the faculty of language.”

- Aristotle *Politics* 350 B.C.E.

“If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.”

- Kenneth Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 1950

Language Tells Us Who We Are



ATHLETIC CLUB



Political Language Helps Create an “Us.”

Political language helps tell us who we are. It tells me who I am. There is more to being Basque than happening to live in Bilbao, Donostia, or Gernika. Basque is not a postal address. Basque is an identity. If you say “I am Basque” you are not only saying you live in a beautiful place with great food. You are saying you are part of a culture, a history, a language, and a political identity.

¡Aupa Athletic!

Political Language Also Tell Us Who “They” Are

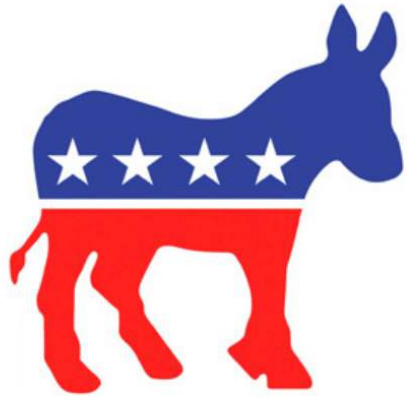
One way to know who you are is to be clear about who you are *not*. If we are good *they* are bad. We know we are just because *they* are unjust.

They are not like *us*.

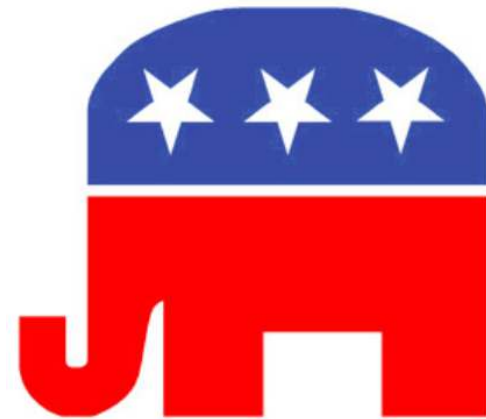


“Rhetoric deals with the possibilities of classification in its *partisan* aspects; it considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another.”

- Kenneth Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 1950



Language puts us together and keeps us apart.



What Does this Have To Do With American Politics?

Winning in politics requires getting enough of “us” together to win.

That means using language to make it clear who “we” are, and that we do not act “they” will win, and that would be terrible.

But What Does This Have to Do With Political Communication in America?

Winning in politics requires getting enough of “us” to take action to prevent “them” from succeeding. Political communication - rhetoric, advertisements, speeches, online ads, lobbying, and all of the other available means of persuasion - is about constructing this “us” and getting “us” to take action.

Political communication professionals are not interested in persuading everyone, or even most people. Political communication professionals are interested in persuading the *right* people.

Who are the right people? That depends.

The Right People

Not everyone in America is allowed to vote. In most place you have to be more than 18 years old to vote and in many places you are not allowed to vote if you have been in prison.

Not everyone in America who is allowed to vote is registered to vote.

Not everyone who is registered to vote, does vote.

Most American elections are “winner take all” - the person with the most votes, even if it is only one more vote, wins. The losing candidate and her supporters get nothing, no matter how many votes she got.

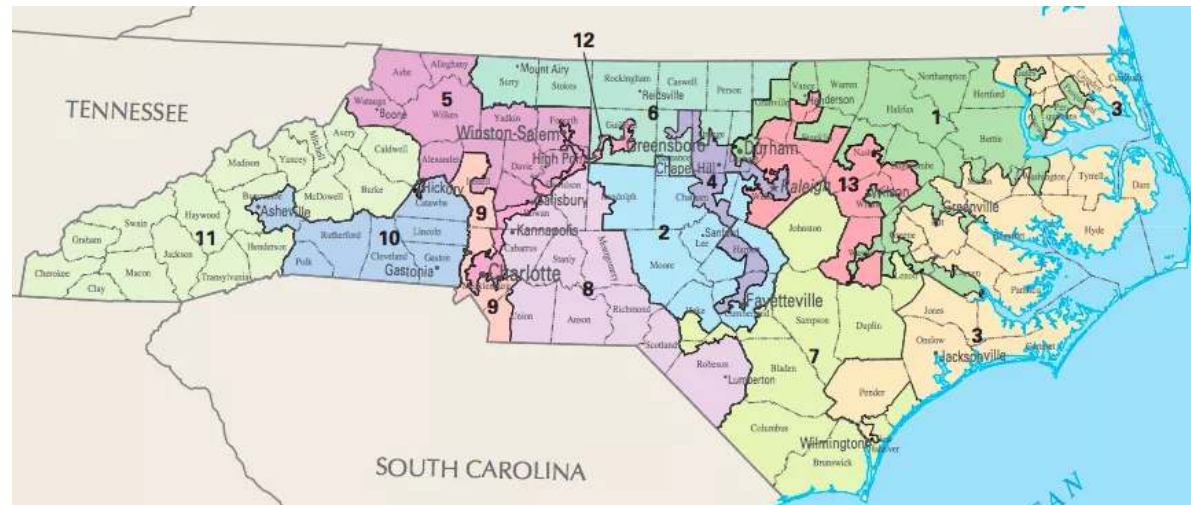
There is More

Not all votes always count the same, or count the same way.

United States Senators are elected by the majority of legal votes cast in a whole state (California, Florida, Texas, and so on. Each state has two Senators. That means some Senators represent 40 million people (California), some 10 million people (Michigan), and others fewer than 1 million (Vermont, Wyoming, Alaska).

And More

Member of the United States House of Representatives are elected from Congressional Districts. Each District has about 750,000 people. Some districts are very small - cities for example - others are very large - the whole state of Montana has only one Congressional district. And the lines for those districts do not always make sense. For example, this is a map of Congressional Districts in North Carolina.



Elections for the US President are More Complicated

The two big political parties in the United States, the Democrats and the Republicans, select their nominee for President with delegates. Candidates try to get delegates. Some states select delegates in elections that are run by the parties. Some have caucuses - big meetings in which people stand in the corner of the room assigned to their candidate.

Some delegates are political insiders.



The Electoral College

When America was founded people thought that having a popular vote for the President was a terrible idea. People could not be trusted, and candidates that helped cities at the expense of farms would always win because more people live in cities. So they invented the Electoral College. Every state gets as many electors as there are Senators (every state gets two of those) plus the number of Representatives - that number ranges from one for places like Wyoming and Montana which are very big but very few people live there, to California which has 55 and Texas which has 38.

Most states are “winner take all” - the candidate with the most popular votes in California gets 55 electoral votes, the other candidates get zero.

Because state electoral votes are all or nothing - you win or lose Texas, you win or lose New York, and so on - and the goal is electoral votes and not popular votes, candidates focus on states with lots of electoral votes they can win. Democrats win New York (29 electoral votes) and Republicans win Texas (38 electoral votes). But Ohio (18), Pennsylvania (20), and Florida (29) can typically go either way.

That means candidates do not spend a lot of time in Texas - the Republican will probably win not matter what - and no one spends time in Montana. But they spend a lot of time in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, and a handful of other places with a lot of electoral votes that can go either way.

One result of this is that candidates for President can win the popular vote (of those who vote, who are registered to vote, who are allowed to vote) and lose the electoral vote.

2000^[17] 1	George W. Bush		R	271/538	50.37%	50,456,002	-543,895	47.87%	-0.51%	Al Gore		D	51.20%
2016^[31] 1	Donald Trump		R	304/538	55.50%	62,984,828	-2,868,686	46.09%	-2.10%	Hillary Clinton		D	56.30%

Answering the First Question (at last)

Candidates and elected officials in the United States - and probably everywhere else - decide what to say and how to say it depending on who has to hear what in order for the candidate or politician to get what they want: Votes, money, and volunteers.

Candidates and elected officials rely on a relatively small number of people to win elections. That often means ignoring voters they will probably get no matter what, and ignoring voters they will lose no matter what. In the United States, Democrats vote for Democrats and Republicans vote for Republicans.

The Votes They Need and Need to Get

During primaries, those elections that choose each party's candidate for office, candidates focus on small groups of voters to get them enough votes. The more candidates, the smaller the number of votes needed.

That means creating differences and groups of shared identities. They say "vote for me because I am different and better than..." They create an "us" with the party. In America there are "Republicans in Name Only" (RINOs) and "the Democratic Wing of the Democratic Party."

During the general election candidates focus on the handful of voters who do not vote with their "team" - Republican or Democrat - every time. They also focus on those who are allowed to vote and who are registered to vote, but who do not always vote.

The Messages that Work

Voters do not pick candidates the way they pick which computer or phone to buy. They do not have lists of issues in spreadsheets and vote for the person who checks the most boxes.

Voters pick candidates based on feelings, if they trust the person, if the person seems like someone who “gets” them, seems to share their values, or seems to understand them.

Voters pick candidates the way we pick football teams: Athletic embodies Basque values, regardless of how well they do or their style of play. Barcelona is “more than a team” and their fans support that *idea* with or without Xabi Alanso or Messi.

We are Us!

**I'M
WITH
HER**

Clinton wanted to create a team, “we” are together.



Trump said “they” took something from “us” and we need to take it back.

People Need to be Motivated to Participate

Voting takes time and energy. Donating to campaigns means giving money to someone you don't know and getting nothing physical in return. Volunteering takes time that could be spent doing something else.

Some people participate because they believe in it - but winning requires more than those people. Winning requires persuading people who would rather be doing something else or spending their money somewhere else to spend their time and money on the candidate.

Fear Motivates More than Hope

Many people are motivated by hope. Many people save a little today to have a lot tomorrow and want to work together for a greater good.



But Fear Sometimes Works Better

“...when it is advisable that the audience should be frightened, the orator must make them feel that they really are in danger of something, pointing out that it has happened to others who were stronger than they are, and is happening, or has happened, to people like themselves, at the hands of unexpected people, in an unexpected form, and at some unexpected time.”

- Aristotle *The Rhetoric* 367 - 322 B.C.E.

Recent Research Proves Aristotle Was Right

Behavioral economists have found that most people usually more motivated by fear of loss than they are motivated by the promise of possible gain.

E C O N O M E T R I C A

VOLUME 47

MARCH, 1979

NUMBER 2

PROSPECT THEORY: AN ANALYSIS OF DECISION UNDER RISK

BY DANIEL KAHNEMAN AND AMOS TVERSKY¹

This paper presents a critique of expected utility theory as a descriptive model of decision making under risk, and develops an alternative model, called prospect theory. Choices among risky prospects exhibit several pervasive effects that are inconsistent with the basic tenets of utility theory. In particular, people underweight outcomes that are merely probable in comparison with outcomes that are obtained with certainty. This tendency, called the certainty effect, contributes to risk aversion in choices involving sure gains and to risk seeking in choices involving sure losses. In addition, people generally discard components that are shared by all prospects under consideration. This tendency, called the isolation effect, leads to inconsistent preferences when the same choice is presented in different forms. An alternative theory of choice is developed, in which value is assigned to gains and losses rather than to final assets and in which probabilities are replaced by decision weights. The value function is normally concave for gains, commonly convex for losses, and is generally steeper for losses than for gains. Decision weights are generally lower than the corresponding probabilities, except in the range of low probabilities. Overweighting of low probabilities may contribute to the attractiveness of both insurance and gambling.

Why That is Worse

Candidates and parties in the United States and around the world want to win. Candidates run to win elections. Voters vote for people they want to win. People give money and volunteer time to parties and candidates to win.

Winning makes it likely policies we support will be enacted.

Winning also reinforces “us” - it reassures us how important we are, that we are right, and just, and good. Winning says that we do not just have what we think are better ideas for ensuring everyone gets a good education. Winning says that our ideas - that we - are bearers of the light.

If we are just and good, they must be unjust and bad.

If we are bearers of the light, they are forces of darkness.

Rhetoric that brings enough of us together to win an election can also tear us apart as a nation. Rhetoric that gets someone to give their time or money, to come out and vote, is rhetoric that may make it more difficult to govern once the election has been won.

Opinion

Our Culture of Contempt

The problem in America today is not incivility or intolerance. something far worse.



By Arthur C. Brooks

Mr. Brooks is a scholar of public policy and the president of the American Enterprise Institute.

March 2, 2019



A [2014 article](#) in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences on “motive attribution asymmetry” — the assumption that your ideology is based in love, while your opponent’s is based in hate — suggests an answer. The researchers found that the average Republican and the average Democrat today suffer from a level of motive attribution asymmetry that is comparable with that of Palestinians and Israelis. Each side thinks it is driven by benevolence, while the other is evil and motivated by hatred — and is therefore an enemy with whom one cannot negotiate or compromise.

Rhetoric that brings enough of us together to win an election can also tear us apart as a nation. Rhetoric that gets someone to give their time or money, to come out and vote, is rhetoric that may make it more difficult to govern once the election has been won.

Winning becomes more important than governing.
Winning may make governing very difficult, or even impossible.

Worse, it may make a nation impossible.

If there is not a shared commitment to a shared set of values or principles it is not clear how we hold together.

Only political dialogue can bring stability to Catalonia - and the EU must help

Iñigo Urkullu

Mon 23 Oct 2017
17:43 BST

I cannot understand or share Madrid's approach to either Basque autonomy or the Catalan crisis

In the Basque country, after decades of violence and terrorism, we are promoting a model of self-government that combines nation-building and social construction with the participation of all Basque political traditions.

The premise is coexistence between different identities, based on mutual recognition and respect. This ideal could root a plurinational Spanish state closer to its reality. It would mean the cultural, social and political-legal recognition of the Basque and Catalan nations, along with the Spanish. It proposes an agreed and constructive view of distributing sovereignty. The goal of coexistence between different identities can be achieved by assuming the European concept of co-sovereignty, or shared sovereignty. I therefore advocate setting up legal channels to allow political communities who wish to consult their citizens on their future to be able to do so.

Political communication in America has always been bad. We have never fully agreed on who “we” are or what “we” stand for. We have always exploited those divisions for political gain - we have always tried to win elections and political debates by calling our opponents evil.

But it is worse now than it has been in a very long time, and if we are not careful we may not be able to step back.

Gracias, eskerrik asko.

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