

Talking Trump: Exploring the use of Populist Rhetoric in Partisan Rallies

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Abstract

Presidential speeches have immense power to advocate for policy, influence public opinion, and portray an image of a president. While extensive literature exists studying presidential addresses until the Obama era, this body of work needs to be updated to include the Trump presidency. Donald Trump's rhetorical strategies have become a spectre of public attention, and a complete anomaly when compared to his predecessors. Notably, his use of the partisan rally format suggests his unwillingness to present issues to a bipartisan format. This study compares Donald Trump's rally speeches to a form of traditional address, his 2019 State of the Union Address. Specifically analyzing for instances of informative, evaluative, and action based statements, it was found that rally speeches contained significantly more evaluative statements than his bipartisan addresses. These findings are consistent with accepted theories of populism, and suggest that these rallies may be a part of a larger strategy to increase populist appeals amongst the Trump voting bloc. These results certainly hold critical implications when it comes to understanding both Donald Trump, and the prominent shift within the Republican Party.

Presidential speeches have long been used to inform the public, shape the party agenda, and influence presidential approval ratings. However, in the current Trump administration, there has been a newfound trend in using partisan political rallies during the presidency. Trump hosts frequent rallies around the country for members of the Republican Party. During these rally speeches, Trump frequently endorses local candidates, outlines policy platforms, and mobilizes his voting bloc. This unique use of the presidential platform has drawn several close parallels to populist theory, furthering the widely accepted claim that Donald Trump is a populist president. Acting as the voice of the people in these rally formats, Trump stands out in presidential history for his unique mobilization of conservative voters while leaving others on the sidelines.

Understanding the newfound importance and relevance of Trump's speeches, we must ask: how does Donald Trump use partisan rallies to enforce populist notions? To answer, it is important to critically explore the nature of presidential speeches, examine how Trump fits these patterns, and explore some models of populist theory. Conducting an in-depth analysis of Trump's speeches, we can extrapolate speech, text, and rhetorical patterns, ultimately comparing the results to the populist models discussed prior. This study seeks to explore the differences between Donald Trump's rallies and his more traditional forms of speech. Noting key differences provides critical updates to the body of scholarly work existing on this topic.

The Nature of Presidential Speeches

While the nature of presidential speeches has been constantly evolving, the purpose behind these public addresses has largely remained consistent. President Washington's first State of the Union Address was delivered in January, 1790 with the explicit purpose of informing Congress of new policy proposals. Though Jefferson discontinued the practice of delivering these speeches, opting instead for a written submission to Congress, President Wilson reinstated the regular practice of delivering the address to Congress in person as a way to rally support for the President's agenda. Though the informative purpose has remained consistent, presidential rhetorical strategies have been evolving and changing with each presidency. Savoy (2017) found that in public addresses, vocabulary and syntax has become increasingly less complex and the preference for common words and expressions has subsequently increased with time. Presidential addresses now tend to rely heavily on emotional terms, references to God, and expressions of symbolism. This suggests that with time, presidential speeches have been increasingly geared towards the public electorate to gain popular support.

Using speeches to reach a broad, public audience, presidents have historically used both content and rhetorical strategies to influence voters and public opinion. Presidents may choose to deliver a speech at a strategic point in time based on their approval rating or the recency of a national event. Moreover, it has been found that a president's popularity

and approval rating will increase significantly following the delivery of a major public address (Ragsdale, 1984). The rhetorical strategies employed by presidents varies significantly based on the political environment of the country. Deteriorating political conditions such as scandal or economic downfalls prompt more policy-driven speeches. Policy improvements or stagnant conditions often prompt presidents to deliver speeches that are less policy-driven (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010). Understanding these rhetorical strategies, patterns, and their implications are critical to gaining insight from presidential public addresses.

The Trump Model of Public Address

It is clear, however, that the current Trump administration and presidency has deviated from the previous patterns employed by presidents in the past. Donald Trump's speaking style is noteworthy for his informal, narrative-style structure. While Trump's style stands out from past presidents and politicians, his rhetorical strategies are also indicative of a larger trend. Trump's speaking style is the next step in the continuing shift towards less analytical speeches and increased reliance on emotional appeals (Dickinson, 2018). Though Trump's rhetorical style stands out for his distinct use of simple language and direct emotional appeals, it is increasingly clear that his speaking style directly appeals to his voting base.

Analyzing Trump's speaking style, scholars have found that when compared to other politicians Trump stands out for his dynamism. When compared to other presidents of the era, Donald Trump's speeches score higher on metrics of grandiosity, use of first person pronouns, greater pitch dynamics, and the use of informal communication (Ahmadian, Azarshahi, and Paulhus, 2017). This finding suggests that these strategies were determining factors in the 2016 Republican primary elections. Additional research conducted during the 2016 general election against Hillary Clinton suggests that Trump's speeches relied heavily on the use of presupposition, in which he makes claims about others framed within factual statements. Specifically, Trump was found to use strategies including character construction, framing, and emotional resonance to make these claims (Argina, 2018). Beyond Donald Trump's usage of unique rhetorical strategies, his presidency stands out for his use of the partisan rally format.

Traditionally used in political campaigns, politicians use rallies to gather support from voters of their own party. Trump has gained noteworthy attention for his use of these rallies during his presidency. During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump was able to gain partisan support by mobilizing Republican voters against the political establishment. Research notes how Trump was able to gain immense support from Republicans by painting an image of an economic system that no longer rewarded hard work (Dickinson, 2018). Using the rally format during his campaign, Trump was able to mobilize Republican voters around these claims. However, this mobilization has continued long past the campaign season into

his presidency. Existing literature retains a primary focus on Trump's rallies and speaking styles during his campaign. Thus, this work will instead apply these theories to his current presidency and administration.

Trump's use of the rally format of public address during his presidency has largely been used as a rhetorical device to cement his belief in a centralized executive presidency. Milkis and Jacobs (2017) explain how despite Trump's idiosyncrasies, his rally speeches are designed to reinforce the centrality of his executive actions. These rallies are perhaps a means to overcome the institutional weaknesses and polarization within the Republican party. Ultimately, Donald Trump's unique usage of the rally format prompts the need for greater research. This paper seeks to explore how Trump strategically uses these rallies to reinforce both his role within a centralized executive as well as populist notions within the presidency.

Applying Models of Populism

The rally speeches given by Donald Trump during his presidency differ vastly from the rallies given during his campaign. In his current administration, Trump frequently uses these rallies to endorse local politicians, advocate for new policies, and maintain his voting bloc of working citizens. Trump's rhetoric in these rallies centers around the white working class's concerns regarding their declining social status. To address these concerns, Donald Trump relies heavily on victimizing the working class, voicing concerns about the social hierarchy, drawing strong boundaries between citizens and non-citizens, and stressing the role that working class voters play in society (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado, 2017). It is clear that these strategies are indicative of a larger trend: Trump's self-definition as a populist president. Existing literature has yet to address these rallies within the context of a populist presidency.

It is increasingly clear that Donald Trump has used the rally format to mobilize a very specific subset of the American electorate. Muller (2016) explains how populist leaders use rhetorical devices to claim that a specific group of people, is the people. As Trump uses his rallies to amplify the voices of working class Americans, he forces the continuation of this voting bloc. More specifically, Trump's populist rhetoric draws a sharp duality between people and the elites, establishes a raw emotional appeal to the people, and claims authority as the voice of the people (Ragsdale, 2019). Though existing literature clearly links Trump's presidency to populist theory, this work will specifically apply these populist theories to his rally speeches. What existing research has not considered is how Trump deliberately uses rallies to strengthen populist appeals. Applying the theories of Ragsdale and Muller to Donald Trump's use of the rally, this research will explore how his rhetorical strategies differ between partisan and traditional speeches.

Hypothesis

Trump uses rally speeches to create an in group within the Republican party, establish emotional appeals, and act as a voice of the people, satisfying the three tenets of Ragsdale's model. Thus, we expect Trump will employ more evaluative and judgement based statements in his rallies than traditional speeches. There should be no difference in the action or informative statements used in rallies and traditional speeches, as these do not directly link to populist appeals.

Method

In this project, I conduct a detailed analysis of Donald Trump's rhetorical strategies in his speeches and public addresses. I aim to determine the primary differences between his traditional speeches compared to his partisan addresses. To do so, I closely read two speeches, each representing either partisan speech or a traditional speech.

To analyze Donald Trump's use of partisan speech, I examined Donald Trump's Rally in Montoursville, Pennsylvania, delivered May 20, 2019. In this speech, Donald Trump is addressing a predominantly Republican crowd. Because Donald Trump frequently involves guest speakers and other Republican politicians in his rallies, this speech was deliberately selected due to the primary focus on Trump himself. Though the rally features brief remarks from Representative Fred Keller, this rally revolves around Donald Trump himself.

After analyzing Donald Trump's rally in Montoursville, Pennsylvania, his use of partisan speech will be directly compared to Trump's use of traditional, bipartisan speech. In this analysis, I examined Donald Trump's 2019 State of the Union Address, delivered on February 5, 2019. This speech is classified as traditional speech as it is delivered to politicians of both parties and broadcast to the entire electorate on television. The State of The Union Address is designed to be presented to an audience of all parties and political orientations.

Analyzing these two speeches, I examined three primary components: informative statements, evaluative statements, and action statements. Furthermore, these three categories were broken down into statements regarding policy, and statements not regarding policy. Each individual sentence was used as the unit of analysis.

Informative statements are presented as statements of fact. I classified Trump's informative statements as sentences which did not contain any subject judgement. An informative policy statement may directly state the effects of a policy, explain what a policy intends to accomplish, but does not attribute any positive or negative valence to the policy. Informative non-policy statements present information regarding individuals, groups, or concepts without direct reference to policies or policy proposals.

Evaluative statements make claims as to the value of an action. Evaluative statements may claim things to be good, bad, moral, immoral, positive, or negative. An evaluative policy statement may refer to either policies implemented by others, or the current administration. Non-policy evaluative statements make judgements on individuals, groups, or concepts unrelated to policy.

Finally, action based statements claim that future steps must be taken. These claims are call to action, typically suggesting that a change of some sort must be made. A policy action statement may refer directly to a future policy. These calls to action demand a response from voters, Congress, or other political actors to implement some form of policy. A non-policy action statement will involve a call to action against a group, individual, or some ideology. These statements may frequently be mislabeled as evaluative statements, but instead contain no judgement statements. Non-policy actions statements state that a decisive step must be taken to accomplish something.

After conducting a close examination of both Donald Trump’s Rally in Montoursville, Pennsylvania, as well as the 2019 State of the Union Address, statements were classified into one of the six aforementioned categories. For example statements and their classification, see appendix A.

Data

In total, 93 statements were analyzed in the 2019 State of the Union Address and 79 statements were analyzed in the Rally in Montoursville, Pennsylvania. In addition to the raw count of sentences, the percentage of total statements that each category made up were included for the purpose of data analysis.

Table 1: Traditional Speech

	Policy	Not-Policy
Information	24 (25.8%)	32 (34.4%)
Evaluation	6 (6.50%)	8 (8.60%)
Action	17 (18.3%)	6 (6.50%)

To analyze the differences between the statements made in the rally and the State of the Union, a series of two-proportion Z tests were conducted. This method of statistical analysis was chosen because of the large data set and the independence of the two speeches. Ultimately, it was found that the proportion of evaluative policy statements are significantly

Table 2: Partisan Speech

	Policy	Not-Policy
Information	12 (15.4%)	18 (23.1%)
Evaluation	14 (17.9%)	14 (17.9%)
Action	16 (20.5%)	4 (5.13%)

higher in Trump’s Rally speech (.179) compared to his State of the Union Address (.065), $z=-2.3301$, $p=.0198$.

Table 3: Differences Between Partisan and Traditional Speech

	Traditional	Partisan	Z	p
Informative Policy	.258	.154	1.665	.097
Informative Non-Policy	.344	.231	1.623	.105
Evaluative Policy*	.065	.179	-2.330	.020
Evaluative Non-Policy	.086	.179	-1.818	.069
Action Policy	.183	.205	-0.369	.711
Action Non-Policy	.065	.051	0.367	.711

* indicates statistical significance at the $p=.05$ level

Examining the table above, we see that Donald Trump used significantly more evaluative policy statements in his partisan rally in Montoursville, Pennsylvania than he did in the 2019 State of the Union Address. There was no significant difference in informative policy statements ($z=1.665$, $p=.097$), informative non-policy statements ($z=1.623$, $p=.105$), evaluative non-policy statements ($z=-1.818$, $p=.069$), action policy statements ($z=-.369$, $p=.711$), and action non-policy statements ($z=.367$, $p=.711$).

With this thorough investigation into the differences between Trump’s traditional and partisan addresses, significant results were reached. It was hypothesized that Donald Trump would use significantly more evaluative statements in his partisan rally speeches, satisfying the tenets of Ragsdale’s model of populism. Examining the z value in the above table ($z=-2.330$) We were able to conclude that Donald Trump did indeed use significantly fewer evaluative policy statements in his traditional speech compared to his rally address.

Discussion

It was initially hypothesized that Trump will use more evaluative statements in his rallies than in his traditional speeches. This hypothesis helped support the three tenets of

Ragsdale's (2019) model: ingroup creation, emotional appeals, and Trump's role as the vox populi. The findings of this study not only support our initial hypothesis, but satisfy the conditions of Ragsdale.

First, Trump's use of evaluative statements establish a strong dichotomy between an ingroup and an outgroup. Because evaluative statements make judgements as to whether a subject is good, bad, moral, immoral, positive, or negative, Trump's audience is immediately forced to take a side. Trump's rally contained significantly more evaluative policy statements. These statements were frequently making judgements as to the content of other politicians' policies or policy platforms. Considering that Trump uses the rally platform to solidify his party and voting bloc, it makes sense that these evaluative statements further cement the views of Republican voters. The use of evaluative statements creates a clear division between rally goers and the voices of other politicians, typically Democrats. Establishing this us versus them dichotomy is a strategic measure being taken to solidify Trump's platform as a populist president.

Second, Trump uses these evaluative statements to establish emotional appeals. These judgement statements made in rallies frequently include inflammatory rhetoric used to evoke a strong response from the audience. These emotional appeals become most apparent in evaluative statements regarding the morality or immorality of a particular policy. Donald Trump's use of these evaluative statements within the partisan rally format cements his role as a populist president.

Finally, the use of evaluative statements in the partisan rally format provides a claim for Trump being the voice of the people. This conception of the 'vox populi' is rooted in the populist theory that the populist leader is the legitimate voice of the people. Though, it is important to consider that the voice of the people is not necessarily the voice of all people, just the ingroup established in our first tenet. In the case of Donald Trump and his partisan rallies, he claims to be the voice of working-class, conservative American citizens. While this group is not representative of all Americans, it is his established ingroup. The strategic use of evaluative statements attempt to illustrate Trump's expertise in these policy realms. These valence claims allude to the suggestion that Trump's voice on these matters is the correct, and only voice to listen to. Furthermore, Chen (2018) identifies Donald Trump's distinct use of third person pronouns and phrasing. Frequently referring to himself as 'your president' in his speeches, this use of phrasing uniquely fits the 'vox populi' conception. Quite literally reminding his audience of his status as the leader and voice of the people, Trump uses these phrases to claim as position of authority over the ingroup he has created. Though this research primarily focused on the classification of claims, future work may wish to consider Trump's unique use of third person rhetoric.

Furthermore, the results of this study raise some critical considerations weighing the importance of non policy statements relative to policy statements. The results of this work

indicate how Donald Trump uses significantly more evaluative policy statements in his partisan rallies when compared to his State of the Union Address. While these findings add a new consideration to the body of work on this subject, we must ask why these policy statements were more significant than non policy statements. Certainly, populist theory would also predict Trump would use more evaluative non-policy statements as well, yet we found this was not the case. Evaluative non-policy statements use the same inflammatory rhetoric as policy statements to reinforce the emotional bond between Trump and his supporters, yet we saw no significant difference in their presence.

Considering this, it is necessary to note how the difference in evaluative non-policy statements is approaching significance ($z=-1.818$, $p=.069$). In determining why this differential exists, we can again turn to the third tenet of Ragsdale's model. Perhaps, Donald Trump uses significantly more evaluative policy statements in his rallies to maintain a position of legitimacy. To serve as the *vox populi*, we would expect Trump to use statements that establish a voice of reason and authority. Using more policy statements than non-policy, Donald Trump establishes a voice of credibility within his ingroup. Overall, Donald Trump's use of evaluative policy statements hold greater significance amongst his voting base, as they contain greater practical value serving as credible statements of authority and legitimacy.

Conclusion

The results of this study present promising research when it comes to understanding Donald Trump's unique rhetorical style and strategy. Despite this, the results indicate many important limitations that must be taken into consideration. First, this study only examines two speeches: one rally and the 2019 State of the Union Address. Certainly, further research on this topic must consider more speeches to examine whether these results are generalizable across the entirety of the Trump campaign and presidency. With improving technology and software, new coding programs are being developed to automate and quickly analyze text and rhetorical patterns. In the future, these tools may play a critical role in understanding presidential speaking strategies. Second, conducting text analysis by hand leaves much room for human error. Though the rubric used to classify statements was deliberately crafted to be consistent across the two speeches, it may be impossible to determine whether other researchers could replicate the results. Moving forward, future researchers may wish to tackle this issue by studying more speeches, working with third-party, unbiased coders to classify statements, and automating the process to reduce human error.

The results of this study hold critical implications when it comes to understanding presidential speechmaking. Ultimately, Donald Trump's presidency and unique rhetorical style is an anomaly in the context of presidential history. Many will classify Trump as one of The United States' only populist presidents, and his strategic use of evaluative language supports this claim. Donald Trump has been able to successfully create a devoted ingroup within the Republican party. Using populist appeals, he has been able to deliberately draw

in large groups of voters, which certainly assisted in his 2016 victory. Moving into the future, researchers should be paying close attention to how Trump approaches the 2020 campaign season. Continued research in this field will lead to a better understanding to both Donald Trump himself, as well as the complexities of presidential speech.

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Appendix A: Examples of Statement Classification

Examples of Informative Policy Statements

- “We passed a massive tax cut for working families and doubled the child tax credit.”
- “We have created 5.3 million new jobs and importantly added 600,000 new manufacturing jobs”
- “Just weeks ago, both parties united for groundbreaking criminal justice reform”
- “I am proud to be the first president to include in my budget a plan for nationwide paid family leave”
- “Two weeks ago, the United States officially recognized the legitimate government of Venezuela”

Examples of Informative Non-Policy Statements

- “My relationship with Kim Jong Un is a good one.”
- “I campaigned and I made 32 major stops in a short period of time”
- “Our country is full, we don’t want people coming here”
- “San Diego used to have the most illegal border crossings in the country”
- “18 years ago, terrorists attacked the USS Cole”

Examples of Evaluative Policy Statements

- “NAFTA was such a disaster.”
- “Walls work and walls save lives”
- “They want to destroy your Second Amendment, no more Second Amendment”
- “The TPP would have been a catastrophe for the people of Scranton and Allentown and Pittsburgh”
- “Democrats are the party of high taxes, high crime, open borders, late-term abortions, killing your Second Amendment, and radical socialism”

Examples of Evaluative Non-Policy Statements

- “Now you have to understand, [the caliphate] is stone-cold crazy.”
- “The Academy Awards used to look before they decided to go political against us”
- “The 12th congressional district, the Democrat running for the seat is a radical socialist”

- “This is a cheap poll, but it’s better than any poll you could get”
- “Tolerance for illegal immigration is not compassionate – it is cruel”

Examples of Action Policy Statements

- “Tonight, I am also asking you to pass the United States Reciprocal Trade Act.”
- “We will work on a new trade deal with China”
- “The time has come to pass school choice for America’s children”
- “The United States is officially withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, or INF Treaty.”
- “I have ordered another 3,750 troops to the southern border to prepare for the tremendous onslaught”

Examples of Action Non-Policy Statements

- “We must confront this [anti-Semitism] anywhere and everywhere it occurs.”
- “We must always keep faith in America’s destiny”
- “We are going to stand for the sacred rights given to us by the hand of almighty god”
- “We must keep freedom alive in our souls”
- “This is the time to rekindle the bonds of love and loyalty and memory that link together as citizens, as neighbors, as patriots”