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Tracking the Language of Space and Time, 1948–2008

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Abstract

This article explores how contemporary historians can avail themselves of quantitative approaches to examine how elusive concepts like ‘time’ and ‘space’ have been used in the public domain. By making use of specifically designed programs, historians can use digital tools to harness an unprecedented mass of information. This is a particularly important methodological innovation at a time of rapidly expanding data: news, speeches, and commentary are available first electronically, and they are available on countless sites in an unprecedented array of formats. Mastering these sources digitally is not only imperative for the contemporary historian; it also provides essential source material for understanding how language and meanings change over time, between contexts, and across different media.

Keywords

communication, place, rhetoric, space, time

Barack Obama soared to the presidency on the wings of time. Everything about his campaign was timely: he announced his campaign on 10 February 2007, a full two years before he would take the oath of office as president; he began building a campaign organization much earlier than his Democratic rivals, and he mastered the untested ‘social media’ before most politicians had heard of Facebook or Twitter. Time was also his handmaiden during the general election campaign: he was more youthful and vibrant than rival John McCain; he took a perfectly timed trip to Israel in July 2008 to solidify the Jewish vote back home; his campaign’s ‘Fight the Smears’ website was both informed and agile. In the end, the American

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people chose ‘change’ over ‘a steady hand at the tiller’. As if to repay his debt to time, Mr Obama used 105 temporal words when delivering his inaugural address on 20 January 2009. Here is what he said, in part:

We remain *a young nation*, but in the words of Scripture, the *time has come* to set aside childish things. The *time has come* to reaffirm our *enduring spirit*; to choose our *better history*; to *carry forward* that precious gift, that noble idea, *passed on* from *generation to generation*: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.

Don’t all politicians use the language of time? They do, but not always in the same proportion, and that is what intrigues us here. Conservatives, for example, often plan for the future by consulting the past, drawing on the wisdom of the ancients to light the way. Liberals, on the other hand, often point to the present – to pressing needs and recent scandals – and they use such rhetorical momentum to open up future possibilities. We humans live in time and time lives within us. We cannot help but talk about time, pray about it, worry about it.

We also live in space and that too affects how we see the world. Literal space, of course, is just rocks and trees and streams and land. It is agnostic about meaning. Place, on the other hand, is filled with meaning – the secret haunts of childhood, the sacred shrines to which devotees make pilgrimage, the icons surrounding the nation’s battlefields. As numerous commentators have observed, to take the place out of politics is to take the politics out of politics. Wherever we roam, politics is there: in the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago, at the fishfrys in the Southland, in the snows of New Hampshire during the primaries.

The presidency of George W. Bush was a spatial presidency far more than a temporal one. Like Barack Obama, he referred to matters of time in his second inaugural, but he used far more spatial terms in proportion. He spoke of Americans’ ‘journey of progress and justice’ and of those living in ‘the darkest corners of the world’. His metaphors were often banal (citizens living in ‘a chosen nation’; others making ‘their own way’), but he occasionally stretched rhetorically, referring to the ‘truths of Sinai’ and to an ‘edifice of character’. Mostly, though, the Bush presidency was about a place savaged (in lower Manhattan) and other places savaged in return (Afghanistan, Iraq). For George W. Bush, space was a very real thing:

At this second gathering, our duties are defined not by the words I use, but by the history we have seen together. For a half century, America defended our own freedom by *standing watch* on *distant borders*... We have seen our vulnerability and we have seen its deepest source. For as long as *whole regions of the world* simmer in resentment and tyranny – prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder – *violence will gather*, and multiply in destructive power, and *cross the most defended borders*, and raise a mortal threat... *We are led*, by events and common sense, to one

conclusion: The survival of liberty *in our land* increasingly depends on the success of liberty *in other lands*. The best hope for peace *in our world* is the *expansion* of freedom *in all the world*.

This study explores the rhetoric of space and time. It began with our casually noticing that the language of time – Barack Obama’s language – seemed to be overtaking the language of space – George W. Bush’s language – and that it was doing so in a number of different genres. Not all of these changes were of great statistical magnitude, but they kept presenting themselves in political speeches, candidate advertising, campaign debates, and political news coverage. During the last 60 years, we found that references to place – city, country, continent – have declined, while references to time – weeks, months, years – have increased. What does this mean, and why should we care?

We pursue those questions here, offering a case study of how historians can fruitfully apply a quantitative approach to studying something as everyday and yet as elusive as our references to time and space. When stumbling upon our findings, our initial instinct was to treat them as artifactual, the sort of random result produced in any large-N study. Several things prevented us from doing so, however: The risings and fallings were not always linear, but they often were, and they were repeated across different datasets, a suggestion that something broadly cultural was going on. That impression was heightened when one considers the nature of our data. They result from simple dictionary searches conducted by DICTION,¹ a language analysis program that passes over a verbal text, guided by some 10,000 search terms, 361 of which refer to time and 364 of which focus on space. The program paid no attention to the context in which the words were used. That is the program’s strength and also its weakness. By ignoring context, it cannot detect exactly how the terms were used, thereby making subtle textual interpretations impossible. But that is also the program’s value; by keying exclusively on vocabulary, DICTION does something that no human being can do: track lexical choices that lie out-of-awareness, and do so in real time. This is especially helpful in tracking temporal and spatial references, which are often deployed not merely and consciously for their own sake, but inadvertently, as the basic ontological categories we use to think and speak with each other. At the same time, because context in contemporary history is either in debate or in unsettled flux, there is occasional value in leaving it out (or, more precisely, in assuming that it stays constant). In exchange for what is potentially lost by ignoring context, aggregating observations can add a level of analysis to the interpretative enterprise, which could otherwise suffer from a small-N bias.²

1 R.P. Hart, *DICTION 5.0: The Text-Analysis Program* (2002), www.dictionsoftware.com.

2 For more on these matters, see R. P. Hart, ‘Redeveloping DICTION: Theoretical Considerations’, in M. West (ed.), *Theory, Method, and Practice of Computer Content Analysis* (New York 2001), 43–60; www.dictionsoftware.com.

Methodologically, then, DICTION lets a researcher travel with great speed through a welter of texts, shedding light on the seemingly mundane things that people say. It does so with the aid of some 40 dictionaries or word-lists, two of which are these:

SPATIAL TERMS: Terms referring to geographical entities, physical distances, and modes of measurement. Included are general geographical terms (*abroad, elbow-room, locale*) as well as specific ones (*Ceylon, Kuwait, Poland*). Also included are politically defined locations (*county, fatherland, municipality*), points on the compass (*east, south-west*) and the globe (*latitude, border, snowbelt*), as well as terms of scale (*kilometer, map, spacious*), quality (*vacant, out-of-the-way, disoriented*) and change (*pilgrimage, migrated, frontier*.)

TEMPORAL TERMS: Terms that locate a person, idea, or event within a specific time-interval, thereby signaling a concern for processes and measurements. The Temporal dictionary designates literal time (*century, instant, mid-morning*) as well as metaphorical designations (*lingering, seniority, nowadays*). Also included are calendrical terms (*autumn, year-round, weekend*), elliptical terms (*spontaneously, postpone, transitional*), and judgmental terms (*premature, obsolete, punctual*).

When doing its work, DICTION breaks passages into 500-word segments (to ensure cross-textual comparability) and then calculates spatial and temporal terms for these genres: (1) campaign speech segments ($n = 3,903$): Formal remarks given by the major candidates between late July and early November of the 1948 through 2008 campaign years, with some years being more heavily sampled than others and with some strategic over-sampling of George W. Bush's administration; (2) political debate segments ($n = 907$): all presidential debates between 1960 and the present; all debate texts were segmented by speaker prior to analysis; (3) political ad segments ($n = 719$): Major party and independent party ads broadcast over television; years represented included 1960 and 1976-2008; (4) print coverage segments ($n = 11,037$): feature and non-feature stories from the New York Times, Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor, Atlanta Constitution, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, as well as AP and UPI syndicate stories; broadcast coverage segments ($n = 2,370$): a sample of nightly newscasts produced during the 1980 and 1988 through 2008 campaigns by the news bureaus of ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and PBS; and letters-to-the-editor ($n = 8,125$): letters written to the editors of twelve small-city newspapers between 1948 and 2008. The cities represented, all of which had populations of 100,000 persons in 1975 (the study's midpoint), contain a cross-section of political attitudes and demographic characteristics; the cities are also regionally distributed throughout the United States.

The average passage in our study contained 10.2 spatial terms (with a range from 0 to 90, $s.d. = 6.9$) and 15.3 temporal terms (range = 0 to 125, $s.d. = 8.6$). For efficiency's sake, these data were standardized and then converted into a simple time-space ratio, which distributed itself normally across the 27,231 passages examined. In effect, the time-space ratio became a measure of political urgency. A high time-space

ratio gives an audience the sense that grand happenings are under way; that pressing decisions must be made. A low time-space ratio, conversely, anchors an audience in the real world, inviting them to survey the scene at a more measured pace. A high ratio signals rhetoric on the move; a low ratio signals rhetoric in grounded reflection.

In the pages that follow, we report how these data distributed themselves over the years and across genres. Our data are not the product of a rigorous hypothetico-deductive method. Instead, we report data we happened upon and then we look for political, philosophical, cultural and rhetorical factors to explain them. Our lexical counts do not constitute grand science, but they were carefully gathered and are far too intriguing to be ignored. While the poet Andrew Marvell's lament – 'had we but world enough and time'³ – may well capture the human condition, it has a special poignancy in the world of politics. That is the story we tell here.

In recent years, scholarly questions have been raised about space and time in virtually all disciplines. Historian Andrew Grafton, for example, draws on Renaissance thought when calling chronology and geography the 'twin eyes of history',⁴ while Graham Burnett reminds us that British technologies of timekeeping in the nineteenth century made round-the-world shipping – and colonial expansion – possible, thereby changing global geopolitics.⁵ Almost immediately, time became the handmaiden of industrialization, with timepieces serving as a way of measuring productivity and giving capitalism an empirical scoreboard. Economist S.B. Linder (1970) observes that this has produced a 'harried leisure class' in the United States,⁶ while sociologist Ernst van den Haag reports the inevitable result: 'the culture of nearly everybody today' becomes 'the culture of nearly nobody yesterday'.⁷

Students of cultural studies have examined what happens when modern communication technologies turn place-based societies into 'radically open' public spheres,⁸ where geographically centered identities – what political scientist Warren Magnusson calls the 'old spatial imaginary' – yield to global cities.⁹ Although Theodore Eismeier claims that 'from the establishment of a national political economy to the Civil War to industrialization to the New Deal and beyond, American political and electoral history is in important ways a narrative of place',¹⁰ that seems to be changing. Mark Weaver notes the development of a 'rhetoric of nowhere... conducive to exploitation by destroying any sense of the

3 A. Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress', in F. Kermode and K. Walker (eds), *Andrew Marvell* (New York 1994), 22–3.

4 A. Grafton, 'Dating History: The Renaissance and the Reformation of Chronology', *Daedalus*, 103 (2003), 74–85, esp. 79.

5 D.G. Burnett, 'Mapping Time: Chronometry on Top of the World', *Daedalus*, 103 (2003), 15–19, esp. 15.

6 S.B. Linder, *The Harried Leisure Class* (New York 1970).

7 E. van Den Haag, 'A Dissent from Consensus Society', *Daedalus*, 89 (1960), 315–24, esp. 316.

8 G. Delanty, 'The Resurgence of the City in Europe? The Spaces of European Citizenship', in E. Isin (ed.), *Democracy, Citizenship, and the Global City* (London 2000).

9 W. Magnusson, *The Search for Political Space* (Toronto 2001), 201.

10 T.J. Eismeier, 'The New Geography of American Elections', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 16 April 2004, 1.

unique value of any particular place'. This rhetoric, he says, is 'a language in which particulars' – of places, individuals, and communities – inevitably disappear.¹¹ As a result, says scientist E.O. Wilson, 'schools are turning out millions of graduates who do not know, in this sense, where they are'.¹²

According to communication scholar John Hartley, the mass media are abetting this sort of placelessness. 'Journalism as a national discourse', Hartley argues, 'a discourse of spatial belonging, the modern (textualized) equivalent of the agora/forum of the city/polis, is in long, slow decline'. 'Once virtualized', Hartley suggests, 'a sense of civic or national identity is rendered portable', thereby making ties to a particular nation-state seem quaint, if not ludicrous. Living in a world in which Now, not Where, holds the upper hand, a world in which news 'that is golly-gosh today is chip-wrapper tomorrow', a world in which speed determines everything, is also a world in which the public becomes privatized.¹³ In such a world, says Hartley, 'people are simultaneously addressed as publics and audiences, citizens and consumers, and the media of democracy are expanded into areas previously thought as belonging to the private sphere and to commercial entertainment'.¹⁴ What is the result of excessive time-consciousness? According to Steven Carter, 'the law of disappearing nows' constantly goads the citizenry. 'The perverse imp of technology is time', including 'age, obsolescence, stressful boredom, which slows the clock and stressful work which speeds the clock'.¹⁵

But if time is a bully, space makes its demands as well. In a book called *Place Matters*, Peter Dreier and his colleagues call the roll of spatial politics: exclusionary zoning laws, wasteful land use, Section 8 housing vouchers, regional jurisdiction debates, neighborhood crime rates, urban sprawl, the decline of the inner cities. Problems like these leave little retreat. They are hardy perennials, persistent because they are land-based.¹⁶

Conceptually, then, one can make a case for either space or time as the central term of American political life, which is why we have undertaken this study. We ask what it means, when time or space loses to its counterpart? What sort of politics is heralded by such shifts? Which voices – professional politicians, members of the press, the American voter – are attracted to space or time and why? There are many answers to such questions, but, before exploring them, we first need data.

Figure 1 presents an overall picture of the nation's changing vocabularies of space and time. The mass media, clearly, have become increasingly obsessed with matters

11 M.R. Weaver, 'Re-Placing Politics: The Politics of Place in Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, California, 30 August 2001, 6.

12 E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York 1998), 35.

13 J. Hartley, 'The Frequencies of Public Writing: Womb, Tome and Time as Technologies of the Public', 8, at <http://wec.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/hartley.html> (last accessed 22 August 2004).

14 *Ibid.*, 10.

15 S. Carter, 'On American Time: Mythopoesis and the Marketplace', *Journal of American Culture*, 17, 2 (1994), 35–9, at 39.

16 P. Dreier, J. Mollenkopf and T. Swanstrom, *Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the Twenty-first Century* (Lawrence, KS 2001).

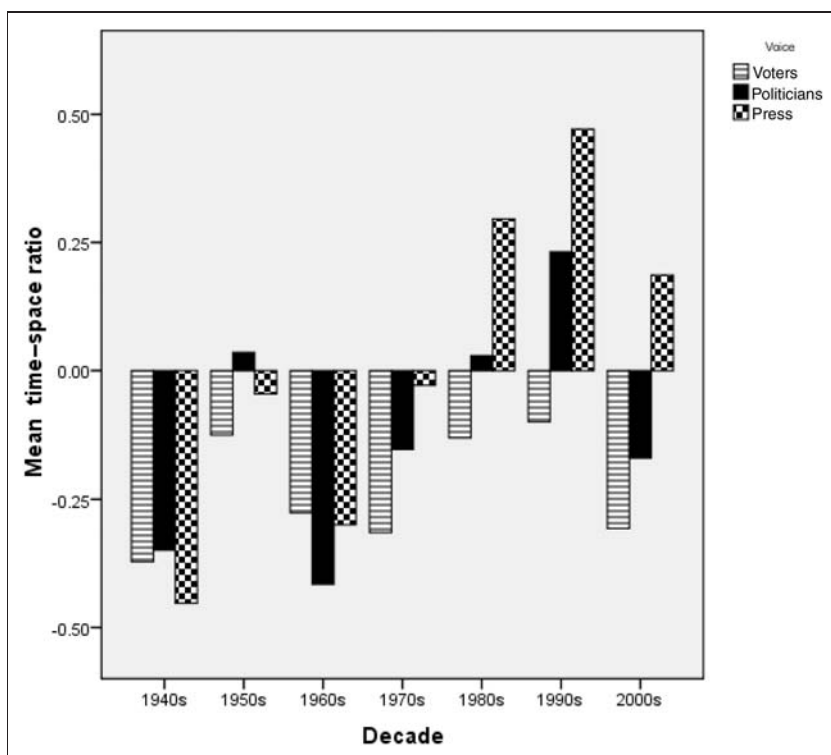


Figure 1. Time-space ratio by political voice over time.

For politicians: 1940s = -0.3492; 1950s = 0.0354; 1960s = -0.4155; 1970s = -0.1525; 1980s = 0.0290; 1990s = 0.2318; 2000s = -0.1691. $F [6, 5100] = 19.548, p < 0.000$; For press: 1940s = -0.4526; 1950s = -0.0452; 1960s = -0.2995; 1970s = -0.0288; 1980s = 0.2960; 1990s = 0.4712; 2000s = 0.1866. $F [6, 24233] = 87.749, p < 0.000$; For voters: 1940s = -0.3714; 1950s = -0.1246; 1960s = -0.2761; 1970s = -0.3149; 1980s = -0.1300; 1990s = -0.0983; 2000s = -0.3067. $F [6, 7512] = 5.152, p < 0.000$.

of time during the last 60 years. They relentlessly incorporate temporal references in their reportage, and the trend is almost linear. The 2000s appear to have arrested that pattern, but that is not really true. The 2000 and 2008 elections continued where the 1996 campaign left off, with only the 2004 election producing a dip in temporal references for the newspapers examined. As we will discuss later, this was largely a ‘Bush effect’: a candidate who emphasized space more than any presidential candidate since Barry Goldwater in 1964. Generally speaking, though, the press has kept its readers on the edge of time. In part this may result from press norms demanding a propulsive narrative. It is only when one looks carefully at the devices chosen to move the story along that one realizes how time-centric the mass media have become. Said the *Los Angeles Times* in October 2008:

John McCain unveiled a feisty *new campaign speech Monday*, but the *talk of change and promise* of a fist-shaking *fight to November* failed to allay Republican concerns

that the presidential *race may be slipping* beyond his grasp. With *21 days to the election*, there was widespread agreement that *Wednesday night's third and final presidential debate* would be a crucial opportunity – and *perhaps the last one* – for the Arizona senator to *change the course* of a race that appears to be *moving strongly* in Democrat Barack Obama's direction.¹⁷

Language like this is so thick today that it is almost invisible. It is hard to imagine any other way of telling a story, so thoroughly are we now imbued with the breathless style of modern reporting. In the passage above, the *Los Angeles Times* writers keep us enthralled as they careen from stop to stop on the campaign train. A quick, temporal style like this keeps readers asking for more – more details, more speed, more unexpectedness – and that keeps them attentive.

To find another way of telling the campaign story, one would have to go back to this same *Los Angeles Times* in September 1968. Even though the following passage is laced with facts, focuses squarely on important matters, and offers nuanced interpretations of the Nixon campaign, its prose is far too labored for the modern eye:

Former *Pennsylvania Governor* William H. Scranton *said here* Friday that he was *going to Europe* at Richard M. Nixon's request to discuss *the situation there* with *Western leaders*. Scranton told a Statler-Hilton press conference he would leave Sept. 18 for *England, France, West Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium*. He *plans to return* Oct. 19. The leaders he is to meet will be announced when arrangements have been completed, he said.

Nixon believes strongly that the *Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia* makes it important to learn what the *United States allies* are thinking, Scranton said. Scranton said reassessment was important to *world peace*, to *revitalize the free world* and to *strengthen NATO*, not just military but economically and by developing a sense of unity *among the allies*. That unity is important, he said, because only with it can the *free world* have the diplomatic leverage to negotiate a real detente with the *Soviet Union*.¹⁸

The modern eye has a counterpart – the modern ear – and that only adds to the media's preoccupation with time. When we disaggregate our data, we find, not surprisingly, that broadcast news is even more obsessed with temporal issues and less concerned with matters of space, in part because the medium permits it. With television, we can go anywhere, do anything, and return in time for a commercial. 'Since Desert Storm', according to Roger Stahl, 'liveness has become the prime news value, with all its emphasis on immediacy, presence, and experience'. 'Liveness' has become the defining feature of our era of communications.¹⁹

17 *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 2008.

18 *Los Angeles Times*, 7 September 1968.

19 R. Stahl, 'A Clockwork War: Rhetorics of Time in a Time of Terror', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 94 (2008), 73–99, at 76.

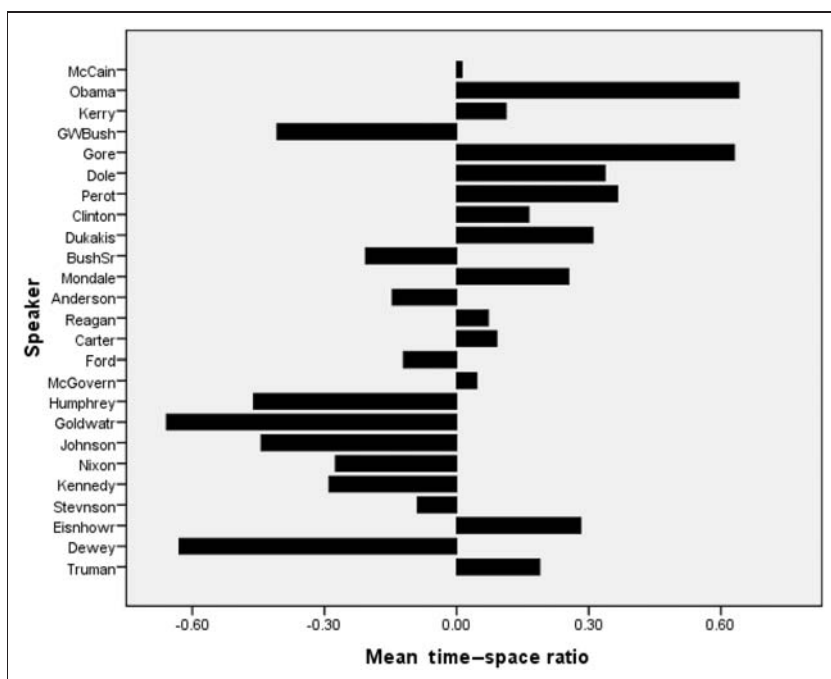


Figure 2. Time-space ratio for political candidates, 1948–2008.

We also find that time-space ratios are higher for political ads than they are for speeches or debates of presidential candidates, which comports with studies elsewhere. McCarty and Hattwick show that US advertising, like American politics itself, is more future-oriented than its Mexican counterpart.²⁰ This also holds true for television programming, where network executives ‘imbue their lineups with a relentless future orientation’, with the use of common promotional phrases such as ‘coming up’, ‘just ahead’, and ‘next’. Political ads are no different, since they can always describe the next moment as the better moment. ‘If today’s exigencies are weighing you down’, the ads tell us, ‘you can reinvent yourself tomorrow’. If yesterday’s policies have run to ruin, next week’s will surely fix things. In so many ways, time offers a rich field of possibilities to the ambitious politician.²¹

Even though the electronic media make special use of temporal references, such talk has become increasingly attractive to political candidates on the campaign trail as well, although not as powerfully and not as broadly. As we see in Figure 2, such changes took hold 30 years ago and have increased steadily since then, with the notable exception of George W. Bush, a man whose presidency became mired in

20 J.A. McCarty and P.M. Hattwick, ‘Cultural Value Orientations: A Comparison of Magazine Advertisements from United States and Mexico’, *Advances in Consumer Research*, 19 (1992), 34–8.

21 J. Weispenning, ‘Cultural Functions of Reruns: Time, Memory, and Television’, *Journal of Communication*, 53 (2003), 165–77, at 175.

other people's places. The contrast between Bush and Obama could not be starker, with Obama being the 'candidate of change', whose central icon was that of a watch slowing down – of opportunities lost, jobs ended, mortgages cancelled. It is hard to imagine a speech more rooted in its moment than the one Mr Obama gave in Columbus, Ohio, two days before the election:

*We began this journey in the depths of winter nearly two years ago, on the steps of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois. Back then, we didn't have much money or many endorsements. We weren't given much of a chance by the polls or the pundits. We knew how steep our climb would be... Twenty-one months later, my faith in the American people has been vindicated. That's how we've come so far and so close – because of you. That's how we'll change this country – with your help. And that's why we can't afford to slow down, sit back, or let up for one day, one minute, or one second in these last few days. Not now. Not when so much is at stake.*²²

Mr Obama shows how tightly intertwined politics and time can be. In part this is because time is more malleable than space, at least rhetorically. Time is an 'open text', a fact dramatized by the daylight savings debates of the early twentieth century. 'It has yet to be proved', declared a newspaper editorial of the time, 'that a return to the hours kept by hens and savages confers any ponderable benefits' on the good citizens of the United States.²³ Discussions of this sort quickly turned political, recalls Michael O'Malley, not just because human resources were at stake (agricultural productivity and urban entertainment zones, for example), but also because the present moment admits to so many different interpretations.²⁴ The rhetoric of memory is similarly indeterminate. Memorializing events such as the attack on Pearl Harbor, Richard Fenn argues, 'constitutes a rebellion against the passage of time' that turns politics into a 'contingency game' where no particular outcome is 'necessary or foreordained or inevitable'. Because time has such malleable qualities, it becomes a prize to be seized, deployed, and redeployed once more.²⁵

Strategically, then, time becomes an omnipresent resource for the politician, especially when more tangible bounties like money, land, or influence are in short supply. 'We are running out of time to act' declares the earnest candidate, as if all the nation's clocks would suddenly stop, as if policy time and mechanical time were somehow identical. 'Time is the most widely used noun in the English language', reports Barbara Adam,²⁶ so it is not surprising that it has become a kind of universal anxiety machine that lets politicians use all there is to use – the past to memorialize and comfort, the future to challenge and inspire. In other words,

22 Barack Obama, Campaign Speech at the Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio, 2 November 2008.

23 O'Malley, *Keeping Watch*, op. cit., 270.

24 O'Malley, *Keeping Watch*, op. cit., 270.

25 R.K. Fenn, *Time Exposure: The Personal Experience of Time in Secular Societies* (New York 2001), 16–17.

26 B. Adam, *TimeWatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge 1995), 19.

politics is always incomplete; it never finishes its work. As a result, it can tire out a citizenry longing 'for access to primordial time',²⁷ for once-and-forever solutions.

By discussing time as much as they do, politicians submit themselves to the dictates of modernization and industrialization and to subtler things as well: time anxiety for an already anxious people, a secular or a time-sensitive rather than a religious or atemporal worldview. Whereas politicians hurry because they are at the mercy of an unrelenting electoral clock, we hear them more often than we do our priests, who, were they heard, would slow us down with things eternal and timeless. Ultimately, our politicians' language of time addresses people in the most colloquial language of all – at the moment in which they live – and while doing so may be instrumental to achieving the political needs of the moment, it can also be deleterious to the bonds of community. In a busy, media-dominated world where temporal forces increasingly press upon us, people can become shortsighted, partisan, and anomic. Fortunately, politics also has another language – the language of space – and it too has its attractions. We turn to such matters now.

Figure 1 showed that, despite the increasing sense of urgency built into mass media reportage during the last 60 years, and despite politicians' (less pronounced) tendencies to move in that same direction, the letter-writers in our 12 small American cities were quite obdurate. Although Figure 3 approaches the limits of legibility, it tells a remarkable story: Citizens who sound off in their local newspapers are almost exclusively place-based. These trends are consistent across our sample of papers and from era to era as well. But, while they typically emphasize the spatial over the temporal, theirs is not a leisurely discourse. Rather, their forcefulness derives from intense communal concern:

I semi-agree with letters saying U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar's having *no property in Minnesota* and paying no taxes *in the state* isn't the main campaign issue, even though '*your heart is where your home is*'. The main issue is our *northern Minnesota economy*, and when you have no *vested interest in an area* there is no concern to help it. Oberstar's 5 percent approval rating from the National Federation of Independent Businesses and his zero rating by the *Minnesota Farm Bureau* are the main issues. . . Is it any wonder jobs and businesses are *leaving our area*?²⁸

I am writing because of the way the *voting places* were set up. I live less than a *mile from the courthouse*, where both Democrats and Republicans can vote together. Yet as I want to vote a Republican ticket, I have to *go across town*, about *4 1/2 miles* in order to vote the way I choose. I wonder why this election is set up this way, as it never has been before. There are *several places near me* where I could vote Democrat, but *no place closer* than said to vote Republican. I had to vote Democrat but my heart wasn't in it, as I didn't have time to *drive that far*.²⁹

27 Fenn, *Time Exposure*, op. cit., 16.

28 D.M., 'Losing Jobs', *Duluth News-Tribune and Herald*, 24 October 1992.

29 J.L.S., 'Voting Places', *Wichita Falls Record-News*, 15 March 1988.

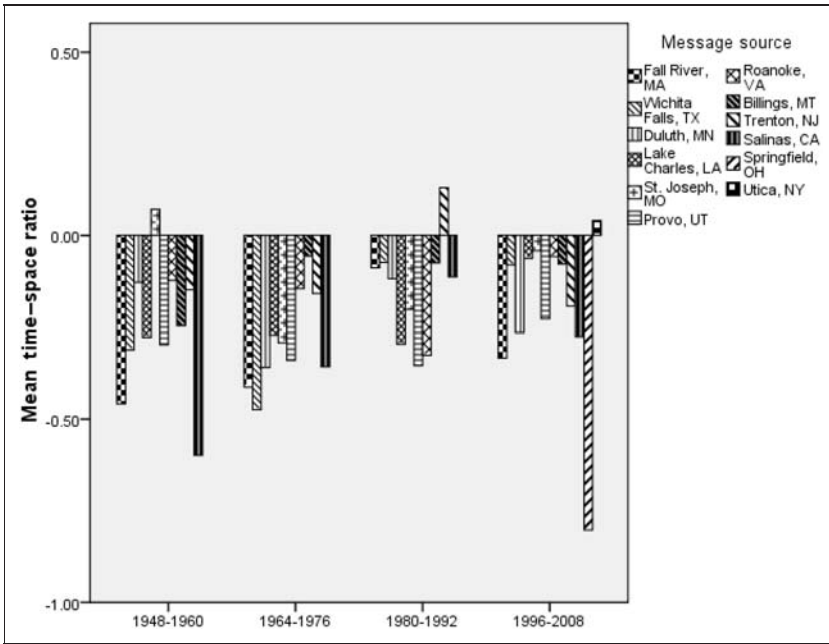


Figure 3. Time-space ratio for letters to the editor, 1948–2008.

Citizens like these are rooted in the real world and in a real place. Their settledness makes their arguments less airy than those a politician might make. The confidence displayed in their letters derives from what they see around them each day – people queuing up in the local meat market, buildings being erected, old friends being buried. The writers lend credence to Lawrence Cahoon’s observation that ‘the experience of neighborhood is the fundamental civic experience’.³⁰ Perhaps because they are rooted in these ways, the letter-writers often decry the machinations of Washington DC, even while remaining loyal to their own member of Congress. Because they are not part of the Beltway Crowd, the letter-writers are not caught up in abstractions, which makes their letters sound quaint or provincial, a sure sign that they were written by people living *somewhere*.

A number of defenses have been offered for place-based politics. Local groups, for example, often become agents of political recruitment. ‘Social ties and networks’, according to Alexandra Kogl, are important forms of resistance ‘to the deterritorializations and decodings of capitalism’. They generate ‘a sense of stability and security’.³¹ The alternative, Kogl proposes, is a society made up of ‘technomads’ for whom politics becomes a merely theoretical enterprise. But this is not

30 L. Cahoon, ‘Locale and Progress’, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, California, 30 August 2001, 32.

31 A. Kogl, ‘Place, Capitalism, and Democratic Efficacy’, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, 30 August 2002, 17–18.

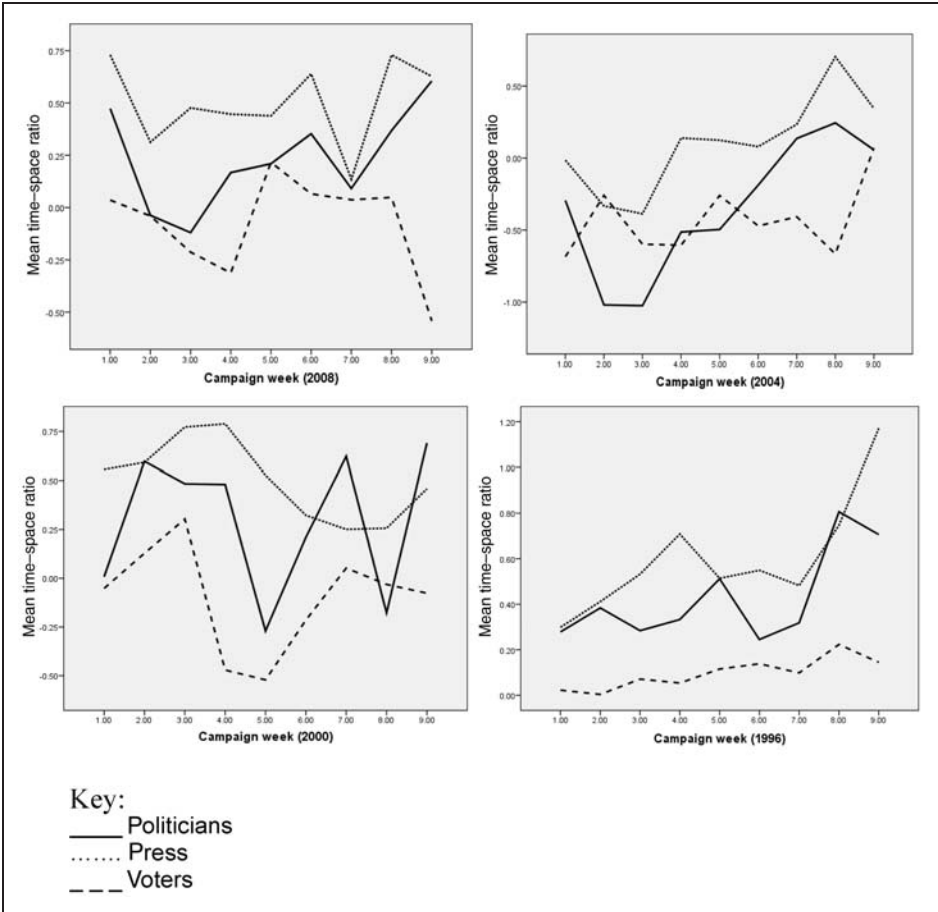


Figure 4. Time-space ratio by voice during campaign (1996–2008).

to say that ‘rooted’ individuals are instinctively political by nature. As Robert Lane observed some 40 years ago, community-based identities can produce an ‘immobile’ and hence ‘static’ society. Citizens with a more cosmopolitan worldview, Lane determined, possessed a sense of adventure that let them make ‘events in distant places more meaningful’, thereby letting them ‘pluralize the world’ in ways that locals could not.³² Unlike the letter-writers, the politicians we sampled seem conflicted by the competing demands of space and time. They oscillate around the mid-point of the time-space continuum, which we see rather dramatically in Figure 4. Sometimes, in Adam’s words, politicians refer to time

32 R. Lane, *Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does* (New York 1962), 305.

‘running out’ in order to prod people to action, which becomes part of a ‘rationalist and commodifying tendency’.³³ Equally often, however, politicians use spatial arguments to appeal to local truths and deeply situated values. As Dagger put it: ‘National boundaries and the sense of belonging they foster provide a way – even a principled way – of joining people across barriers of ethnicity, class, gender, and race’.³⁴

Bedeveled though they are by the demands of space and time, not all politicians work things out in exactly the same way. Our data show these patterns:

- First-time campaigners have significantly higher time-space ratios than do sitting presidents running for re-election (Campaigning = 0.0595; governance = 0.4257. $F [1, 1254] = 38.984, p < 0.000$).
- Most campaigners made significantly more time-based appeals during the last two weeks of the campaign than they did earlier (Main campaign = -0.1116; last 2 weeks = 0.1343. $F [1, 3714] = 31.199, p < 0.000$).
- Republicans use significantly more spatial appeals than do Democrats (Republicans = -0.2150; Democrats = 0.1862. $F [1, 3695] = 92.732, p < 0.000$).
- The most recent evidence of same: Barack Obama was much more urgent than John McCain during the 2008 race (Obama = 0.4881; McCain = -0.2229. $F [1, 512] = 39.392, p < 0.000$).

Although American politicians have used more temporal than spatial appeals during the last 30 years, George W. Bush was a dramatic exception, especially during the 2004 campaign (Bush in 2000 = 0.0830; Bush in 2004 = -0.5337. $F [1, 962] = 33.202$), when he staked his re-election on the war in the Middle East and on his status as Commander-in-Chief. The ‘swift boaters’ pressed this same theme during that campaign, easily degrading the candidacy of John Kerry despite his service during the Vietnam War. Virtually any speech by Bush during the 2004 campaign explains why his time-space ratio is so low, but a single speech in Iowa shows it as well as any:

Our first duty in the war on terror is to *protect the homeland*. This morning *at the White House*, I signed a strong law that will make *our nation* more secure . . .

. . . Since September the 11th, law enforcement professionals have stopped terrorist activities in Columbus, Ohio; San Diego, California; Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; Buffalo, New York and other places, including New Jersey, where we apprehended an arms dealer who was allegedly trying to sell shoulder-fired missiles to terrorists . . .

33 Adam, *TimeWatch*, op. cit., 157.

34 R. Dagger, ‘Republicanism and the Politics of Place’, *Philosophical Explorations*, 3 (2001), 157–73, at 167.

... The best way to prevent attacks is to stay on the offense against the enemy overseas. We are waging a global campaign from the mountains of Central Asia to the deserts of the Middle East, and from the Horn of Africa to the Philippines.³⁵

Words such as these work on an audience powerfully when rattled off in quick succession. It is easy to feel primitive in the presence of such words. They make one feel beleaguered, surrounded. The claustrophobia and even paranoia they inspire comes from a jumble of geographical images – some foreign, some domestic – and each possesses its own emotional charge. Not surprisingly, the Left objects to such a rhetoric of place. Appeals based on ethnic nationalism, gated communities, and segregated housing lead to a ‘resurgence of romantic feelings and identifications that construct or reinforce boundaries between insiders and outsiders’ says Mark Weaver.³⁶ Karen Piper notes that to map the world is to stake a claim on that which is mapped, making cartography part of ‘a colonial discourse invested in establishing “whiteness”, or transparency, as a kind of identity formation’. And according to Piper there is more than one irony here, since ‘in reality, indigenous people are the ones who discovered the discoverers, led them to food and water, and shared their territorial knowledge – only to have it betrayed by the final product, the colonial map’.³⁷

Henri Lefebvre offers an alternative perspective, arguing that because all places are spaces-constructed-by-people (as, for example, when the American people turned the Gettysburg battlefield into a cemetery and later into a national shrine), their power is real and a legitimate part of the political equation.³⁸ Stuart Elden in turn writes: ‘A park is conceived, designed, and produced through labour, technology, and institutions, but the meaning of the space, and the space itself, is adapted and transformed as it is perceived and lived by social actors and groups’.³⁹ To dismiss a place-based politics out of hand, says Lawrence Cahoon, is therefore dangerously elitist. ‘While neighborhood is not a sufficient condition for wider concern’, he continues, ‘it is a necessary condition’ for an enlightened polity.⁴⁰ Cahoon also argues that ‘local’ discussions of this sort are often more reasonable than distanced discussions, because they force people to deal with the actual conditions under which they live.⁴¹

Although Mr Bush pumped up the spatial rhetoric during the 2004 race, he, like all American politicians, used the rhetoric of time to build a sense of urgency about the other items on his agenda. He, like all political leaders, had no alternative but to deal frontally with both time and space. To be sure, thinking too much about

35 George W. Bush, ‘Homeland Security and the Presidential Agenda’, Campaign speech on 18 October 2004 in Marlton, NJ.

36 Weaver, ‘Re-Placing Politics’, op. cit., 2.

37 K. Piper, *Cartographic Fictions: Maps, Race, and Identity* (New Brunswick, NJ 2002), 14.

38 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford 1991).

39 S. Elden, ‘Henri Lefebvre and *The Production of Space*’ (1998), 7, <http://www.gradnet.de/pomo2.archives/pomo98.papers/stelden98.htm> (last accessed 22 August 2004).

40 Cahoon, ‘Locale and Progress’, op. cit., 3.

41 Ibid., 21.

place can make people provincial and unable to find the ties that bind them to other persons in other locales. As Kwame Appiah notes, the genocides and regional wars of recent years show how collective identities can ‘go imperial’, turning neighbor against neighbor in an ill-fated attempt to control some small piece of geography.⁴²

But abandoning space for time can also be dangerous. The new communication technologies, writes Johnathan Boyarin, have fundamentally changed people’s ideas about proximity and simultaneity,⁴³ leading to what Anthony Giddens has termed a kind of ‘disembeddedness’ for the modern citizen.⁴⁴ In such a world, Kogl proposes, we all risk becoming exiles in our own country. ‘Being out of place entails disorientation, alienation, and the fear of slipping into a void: of slipping across a smooth space without landmarks and without human presence’.⁴⁵ In a world dominated by global capital and virtual connectivity, says Raka Shome, ‘spaces cannot be seen any more as a settled source for some settled identity’.⁴⁶ In such a world, ordinary political activities, activities formerly recommended by one’s connection to a physical place – voting and petitioning, for example – can seem pointless, irrelevant. ‘The hegemony of time is radical, whether to the left or the right’, observes Lawrence Cahoon. ‘Place is in contrast conservative in the broadest and homeliest sense of the term’.⁴⁷

Grand theory notwithstanding, time and space nudge at us daily. That is the human condition. It is also the political condition. Our data show that the working press emphasizes time, ordinary citizens stress space, and politicians deal with them differentially. It is this ‘betweenness’ that makes politics unique. Politicians tell us that time is ‘running out’ so as to prod us to action, and that can lead to precipitateness. Space also has its liabilities, because when they are not claimed, they will soon be. ‘Sovereignty’, says Karen Piper, ‘was based in the idea of invading a void, or an unoccupied space, which – of course – existed nowhere in the colonial imagination. Sovereignty became a way to rhetorically clear space for invasion.’⁴⁸ The Bush data show that the temptations of sovereignty still abide. Barack Obama, on the other hand, was probably too presentistic for many, all of which suggests that both time and space have their temptations. And limitations. That, too, is the human condition.

We have tried to defend two broad claims in this article. First, quantitative content analysis can give us reliable tools to complement more traditional ways of studying history, especially when we want to discern ideological or sociological patterns, and

42 K. Appiah, ‘Cosmopolitan Patriots’, in P. Cheah and B. Robbins (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis, MN 1998), 91–114, at 106.

43 J. Boyarin, ‘Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory’, in J. Boyarin (ed.), *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace* (Minneapolis, MN 1994), 1–38.

44 A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA 1990).

45 A. Kogl, ‘Toward a Democratic Theory of Place: Place and the Public Realm’, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, 30 August 2001, 21.

46 R. Shome, ‘Space Matters: The Power and Practice of Space’, *Communication Theory*, 13 (2003), 39–56, at 54.

47 Cahoon, ‘Locale and Progress’, op. cit., 11.

48 Piper, *Cartographic Fictions*, op. cit., 180.

selective quotations will not suffice as a basis for generalized observations. Second, by calling attention to the variable invocation of time and space in this article, we show that time and space are not purely objective media in which history transpires. Because they are humanly constructed metrics, they are constitutive of the making of history itself, and much can be gleaned from measuring that which is normally used to measure, bringing the background into the foreground.

Cultural or sociological moods – be they harried or grounded – may be captured in analyzing our collective rhetorical output. Cause and effect may even be estimated when we discern who the rhetorical trend-setters are. In our study, we find that, while the broadcast media and politicians have harried us, letter writers have grounded us. Whereas our contacts with politicians and journalists are increasingly (and usually solely) transpiring via the airwaves and on broadband, citizens, for the most part, remind newsmakers that all politics is still local.

We find that leadership postures, or agency in the context of time and space, may be typologized in the ways in which politicians selectively invoke these fundamental and yet usually unnoticed categories of political rhetoric. In particular, we learned that political challengers tend to jump on the temporal bandwagon because they are hoping to turn a new historical page, and they do so with particular zeal in the final weeks of a political campaign.

When we measure in aggregate politicians' relative predilection for temporal and spatial terms, we are also able to tap into a fundamental indicator of ideological differences in America. The Democratic Party, the party for progress, change, and reform, has tended to produce candidates who have highlighted temporal over spatial references. The Republican Party, the conservative party of values, community, and national pride has tended to supply candidates who have emphasized space over time. And so FDR called for a *New Deal*, and Obama promised *Change We can Believe in*; while Reagan declared *Morning Again in America* and McCain maintained, *Country First*. This rhetorical patterning occurs, possibly, because while conservatism is based on values which are necessarily grounded in communities and spaces, advocates of progress must privilege time, and in particular the future, over space because the utopian society they envision does not yet exist. To be sure, conservatives reference time, and in particular the past, but the past can only be memorialized if it has already been valorized by its location in a cherished space.

Politicians talk about many things besides space and time. Newspapers write about much else as well. Nevertheless, space and time figure into American politics in special ways – the 4th of July is dutifully celebrated each year, presidential terms expire quadrennially on the 20th day in January, and CNN's 'breaking news' alerts are now permanently etched onto our television screens. Although time is an artificial construct, it rarely feels that way in the world of American politics.

Space, too, is rife with meaning. Kurds live in four countries, none of which is their country of choice. There are two Irelands in Ireland; there are Palestinians in Israel and Israelis in Palestine; there are Native Americans who feel like foreigners in their own land. Issues of space have launched a thousand conflagrations, as has

colonialism and ethnic hegemony. Politics is about more things than space, but it is never *not* about space.

The data reported in this study – that the media are addicted to time, that letter-writers feature space, and that politicians shift between space and time – are not earth-shattering but they are important. Elites' tendencies to stress time may result from the fast-moving and task-driven environment in which they live. But ratcheting up the time machine is ironic, since political change occurs so slowly. As of this writing, for example, many Americans are wondering if health care reform will ever occur, because even finding a way to begin that discussion has been so fraught. Oddly enough, the slower Congress's wheels turn, the more pronounced the president's temporal rhetoric becomes. We are told that time is running out, that there is no moment like the present, that we need to act today and not tomorrow. Rhetoric of this sort is what Kenneth Burke (1967) calls 'secular prayer': an attempt to call upon the gods of time to help us resolve issues.⁴⁹ People pray when they sense a powerful absence. In politics, there is never enough time to go around.

We need to know more about the rhetoric of time. What calls it forth? Domestic or international problems? Axiological or policy issues? Who are the agents of political time? Elected politicians? The people themselves? We must also learn why the past is sometimes central to our political deliberations and at other times irrelevant. More generally, we should inquire into the effects of these temporal injunctions. Do they make voters apprehensive, provide them with a feeling of progress, or does it resign them to a sense of incompleteness? We should also ask if the rhetoric of time is as popular in other democracies, or if it is a uniquely American obsession.

And what of the rhetoric of place? When is it a sign of provincialism and when does it become emancipatory? Do modern communication technologies – satellite phones, for example, or the World Wide Web – signal the emergence of a world without fences, or do they, instead, provide an improved delivery system for tribalism and ethnocentrism? In one of his more cryptic moments, Michel Foucault observed that 'the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time'.⁵⁰ Increasingly, he says, people are looking for a place to be, a task that becomes complicated in a world catering to high-speed consumers and addicted jet-setters. The letter-writers in our study seemed to be reacting to these modernist conditions, and so we should ask what they are trying to tell us. Are they mired in spatial nostalgia, longing for a time when chain restaurants and franchised hardware stores were the exception rather than the rule? Or are they calling for a more substantial politics that can reach out and touch people directly?

We also need to know if voters will keep the faith when important dates are ballyhooed – a new political candidacy, another Great Debate, a presidential

49 K. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (2nd edn, Baton Rouge, LA 1967).

50 M. Foucault, 'Of other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16 (1986), 22–7, at 23.

transition – only to be followed by more political torpor? How often can voters be told that they must act today lest tomorrow be forsaken, without becoming disillusioned and skeptical? And if voters become immune to an urgent rhetoric, what sort of world will be ushered in? To have a virtual media system is one thing. To have a virtual or disengaged electorate is something else. For these reasons, we must continue to ask ourselves what time it is and where we live.

Biographical Note

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