

In Search of a Genre: An Analysis of Political Campaign Rhetoric Used in Swing Races in the 2018 Midterm Elections

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Political Candidates Examined

Danny O'Connor (OH-12) John Harder (CA-10)



Chrissy Houlahan (PA-06) Beto O'Rourke (TX)



Kyrsten Sinema (AZ) Heidi Heitkamp (ND)



**Candidates were selected based on polling number as of June 2018 that put them within 5 points of their Republican opponent

Artifacts Analyzed

Press releases and video ads were looked at for each candidate

Research Question

Is there a genre of political rhetoric used by Democrats in swing races for the U.S. Congress?

Method

- Edwin Black -> Generic Criticism
- Purpose: Is to understand rhetorical practices, by “identifying the similarities in rhetorical situations and the rhetoric constructed in response to them” (Foss 179)
- Kenneth Burke -> Cluster Criticism (inserted in step 3)
- Purpose: Through analyzing a person's artifacts and finding the clusters used within them, Burke argues you can then tell what sort of values and worldview that person holds.

Results

Campaign	Justice	Inclusivity	Bipartisanship	People Above Politics	Independence	Total Score	Predicted Outcome	Outcome	
O'Rourke	1	1	1	1	1	5	38.80%	44.50%	5.70%
Heitkamp	1		1		1	3	43.70%	43.50%	0.20%
Sinema	1	1	1		1	4	37.30%	49.70%	12.40%
Houlahan	1	1		1	1	3	49.10%	58.80%	9.70%
O'Connor	1		1	1	1	4	45%	49.30%	4.30%
Harder	1			1	1	3	45%	48.60%	3.60%

Implications

- Press releases tended to rely heavily on verbal content and imagery that communicated themes of justice foremost and then inclusivity, people above politics, and bipartisanship.
- Candidates who prioritized bipartisanship and independence over inclusivity and people above politics performed better in the election results. With the exception of Heidi Heitkamp, all of the political candidates included in the study increased their polling numbers by anywhere from 3.6 points to 12.4 points from the first polls taken at the beginning of the campaign season to the final election results.
- Those who stressed justice and independence the most gained approximately 9.3 points. Meanwhile those who emphasized other traits over justice and independence averaged a net gain of 2.7 points from their initial polls to the election results.

Selected Works Cited

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966. Print.

Foss, Sonja. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. University of Colorado at Denver:

Waveland Press, Fifth edition. 2018.

O'Rourke, Beto. “Texas Should Lead the Way on True Criminal Justice Reform [Opinion].” Beto for Texas, 27 Aug. 2018, <https://betofortexas.com/about/>. Access 14 Oct. 2018.

Example Analysis: “Showing Up” Beto O'Rourke Video

Key word

- **People**

Cluster terms:

- “Just **human beings, real people,** making this happen”
- “**No one** will be **taken for granted. No one** will be **written off.**”
- “We’ve got to do this through the **power** of **people. We’ve** got to **reject the contributions of corporations.**”
- “I serve only **you**”
- A campaign strategist indicated that in addition to the use of specific terms a filter was applied to create a sense of low production quality to make O'Rourke seem like “an everyday man”
- Goal of the video was to make people feel like they mattered
- Campaign was focused on “All people, no PACs”= people above politics



Showing Up

332,466 views

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