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From Hope and Change to Anger and Anxiety:
Demagoguery and Discourse in the 2016 Primary Elections

Darlene W. Natale

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

This essay deconstructs the 2016 political campaign discourse of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump through the prisms of demagoguery and polarizing propaganda theory. It finds that both candidates employ the techniques of passionate appeals, use vague, loaded terms and negative ethical persuasion that involve fear, anxiety and emotional appeals. Both rely on polarizing rhetoric to reinforce their outsider ethos and to separate themselves from a dysfunctional and abusive political mainstream.

Keywords: Demagoguery, propaganda, politics, campaign rhetoric, Trump, Sanders

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Alexander Hamilton warned of the dangers to democracy in the Introduction to The Federalist Papers, “that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants” (Hamilton, 1787, No.1).

The 2016 presidential primary has seen the elevation of two insurgent populist candidates who set burgeoning crowds ablaze with polarizing political rhetoric and demagoguery. Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump both berated establishment politicians, trade protectionism, the media, Super Political Action Committees (PACs), and lobbyists. Their stump speeches, debate rhetoric, and media comments excited their base and dismayed moderates. This essay attempts to identify themes of demagoguery and polarizing propaganda in the campaigns of both Sanders and Trump through a content analysis of their primary campaign advertisements. On the campaign trail, these candidates have expressed passionate appeals aimed at the middle class, nativist rhetoric, and even tacitly accepted the endorsement of white supremacists. This study attempts to discern if candidates are using demagogic techniques in their advertising.

Review of Literature

History

The etymology of the word ‘demagogue’ is Greek for a leader (*agogos*) of the people (*demos*) - people of the lower class (Signer, 2009). E. Culpepper Clark (1983) deemed ‘demagogue’ a “slippery” word that suggests someone who “panders to emotions and prejudices of the baser sort” (p. 423) rather than acting as a leader. The Athenian ruler Cleon, whose wealth

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was derived tanning skins, was one of the first to be dubbed a demagogue because of his unsophisticated proclamations from the podium (Thornton 2016). Aristotle wrote of demagoguery in *Rhetoric* (350 BC) - and his disdain for the use of it as an impassioned assertion (Jasper, 2013). The United States Founding Fathers' were wary of demagogues and referenced the works of Cicero, Aristotle, and other ancients as cautionary tales of the danger they present to democracy (Signer, 2009). R.H. Luthin (1951) traced the term's modern roots to Revolutionaryera Pennsylvania, where the Commonwealth's constitution did not require voters to be landowners. Pennsylvania's populist position opened the door to voting for a man of the people – a non-aristocrat. The demagogue is “a leader of the rabble” (Cooper, 1931/1981, p.120), although if he challenges the status quo to the benefit of the rabble, the term may have a positive connotation. Signer (2009) defined two kinds of demagogues: beneficial and destructive. He cites Lech Walesa and Boris Yeltsin as the beneficial variety and cautions that there are degrees of demagoguery. Cooper (1931/1981) asserts that demagogues transform themselves into one of the masses (a billionaire sporting a ball cap), “appeal to passions and prejudices rather than reason, and is in all respects, a man of intrigue and deception, of sly cunning and management...” (p. 123). Cooper wrote that the demagogue's politics connects with the audience on a primal level, and the demagogue places the people (supporters) before the law (Cooper, 1931/1981). However, Signer (2009) disagreed with Cooper on the issue of lying and said a demagogue may be “sincerely committed” (p.36) to a cause – but only as long as it serves his purpose to endear himself to the masses.

Condemnations of the wealthy minority are an essential attribute of the demagogue's repertoire (Luthin, 1951). In 1832, Andrew Jackson made his appeal to the poor by attacking the

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wealthy and the Bank of the United States. He sent his stump speakers and noisy rhetoric out to the capture voters. Jackson led the move by liberals to a style of campaign demagoguery that even the conservative Whigs eventually adopted. As did Republicans in the 1850s, when demagogues exploited “antislavery” sentiments (Luthin, 1951).

In 1938, Sigmund Neumann declared “It is the historical hour of the demagogue” (p.487) because of the transition to mass democracy. He claimed that the most potent demagogues believe they can save the people who are enamored with that “very defect in self-valuation,” (Neumann, 1938, p. 487). Two famous American demagogues were taken to task by General Hugh S. Johnson in 1935: Louisiana politician Huey Long and the Catholic priest Charles B. Coughlin (Signer, 2009). Long divided his state into “us” (the common man), and “them” (the upper class), and launched his career with his “Share our Wealth Society” (Signer, 2009). Joshua Gunn (2007) surveyed the polarizing populist Huey Long’s demagoguery through a psychoanalytic lens. “Demagogic rhetoric is goaded by the desire-driven, psychical structures of neurosis, namely obsession and hysteric” (p.6). Gunn further declared the demagogue an “obsessional neurotic” (p.6) who claims affection for his mass audience while using it as a tool. Coughlin hosted his radio show speaking in an unpretentious manner and espousing “anticapitalist” rhetoric (Signer, 2009). He created the Christian Nationalists political party where he was joined by Huey Long acolyte Gerald L.K. Smith, who is responsible for establishing the Huey Long Museum and his bronze likeness (Jeansonne, G. 1983). Fifteen years after Huey Long’s assassination a new demagogue emerged from Wisconsin. The architect of the Red Scare, Joe McCarthy used television to carry out his tactics and hid a list of communist sympathizers behind his back as he addressed the media. McCarthy’s blacklisting polarized the nation; on one

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side were those instilled with the fear of communists, and on the other, citizens who felt his hunt for communists threatened the democracy. Eventually, the country tired of his tactics and he was censured by the Senate (Signer, 2009). Political candidates got their first shot at reaching a mass television audience with the first TV ads in 1952 when Dwight D. Eisenhower outspent Adlai Stevenson by almost \$1 million (Gronbeck, 1992). Television provided the candidates with a platform where viewers were susceptible to many of the traits of demagoguery that had traditionally only been effective in person such as passionate appeals, pageantry, and an ethos of sincerity.

Rhetoric

Roberts- Miller (2005) expressed concern that the term ‘demagoguery’ has disappeared from academic journals and books, and that demagoguery has evolved from a form of rhetoric to descriptive for speakers with opposing views. Hogan and Tell (2006) suggest that RobertsMiller’s attempt to revive the rhetorical term demagoguery is unnecessary because interest never subsided - rather it was the word itself that was rejected. Goldzwig (1989) wrote that RobertsMiller’s contribution, through her interest in renewing the term “demagogue,” might be positive as it may aid in the understanding of democratic deliberation. Hogan (2006) agrees with Roberts- Miller’s assertion that for democratic debate to function successfully, there is a need to identify what comprises positive public speaking, but argues that rules and definitions for responsible public discourse may further disenfranchise minority groups and populists’ movements. Hogan and Tell trace the evolution of rhetoric from the “movement studies” of the 1960s to the 1980s, and posit that rhetorical scholars have included “activists” dialogs in their discussions of

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democratic discourse. They suggest that Roberts-Miller's desire to revive demagoguery as critical rhetoric will not work until there are separate political and rhetorical definitions of the term until then demagoguery will remain a label. Scholars have continued to explore this discourse and demagogue will remain a term or offensive rhetors.

Demagogues polarize groups by simplification of complex issues and by scapegoating "out" groups (Roberts-Miller, 2005) often through the use of pejorative terms. Roberts-Miller uses the example of Hitler reducing his opponents to "Jews" to illustrate this point, as well as Joe McCarthy blaming the "Soviets" for working against the United States from within. In the current political climate, Latino and Muslim immigrants are two groups in the bullseye. These immigrants are treated as threatening "out groups," according to Roberts-Miller (2005) and may represent the "other" of Edward Said's (1978) Orientalism. Polarization provides only two choices, such as "us or them" or "conservative or liberal," according to Roberts-Miller.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote about rhetoric and physical intimidation "such as provoking hecklers whom his goons could assault" (Roberts-Miller, 2005, p.473). This tactic may be a useful comparison to Donald Trump's rallies. Roberts-Miller (2008) describes demagoguery as "polarizing propaganda" which may be offset by criticism, but she posits that demagogues make it dangerous to criticize them by inciting followers who will "harm" those not suitably-inclined. The demagogue uses provocative and galvanizing rhetoric to appeal to people's baser instincts. "The very purpose of intimidating hate speech is to perpetuate and augment existing inequalities. Although the spread of intimidating hate speech does not always lead to the commission of discriminatory violence, it establishes the rationale for attacking particular disfavored groups" (Tsesis, 2009, p.505). Propaganda often incorporates symbols and theatrical elements like flags,

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and the propagandist highlights potential problems and consequences, which are used to justify a call to action (Walton, 1997).

Gustainis (1990) reasserts Luthin's (1951) contention that every politician who uses demagogic rhetoric is not a demagogue; as every speaker who agitates is not a demagogue. The author distinguishes three key demagogic traits: egoism, opportunism, and lack of concern with the veracity of his statements. Lomas (1961) fashioned a distinction between the demagogue and demagoguery. The "habitual" demagogue makes distortions and twists the truth regularly, whereas demagoguery when occasionally used as part of rhetoric, is a blend of truths and less apparent misrepresentation. Lomas outlines some characteristics of demagoguery that may appear in the speech of respectable leaders. For instance, oversimplification finds its roots in the Aristotelian philosophy that suggest that good speakers should speak unambiguously and unpretentiously. The trait of emotional persuasion can be found in techniques that invoke fear and employ a trigger or loaded terms (Lomas, 1961).

In the Gustainis' (1990) literature review, he cites fundamental literature on demagoguery and briefly explores its characteristics of anti-intellectualism, oversimplification, and emotional appeals among other qualities. "To the Demagogue, fighting Communism is a very simple matter; to experts of Communism it is a matter of the most subtle strategic and tactical maneuver," Levenstein (1953, p. 264-265) wrote in explanation of the characteristic oversimplification of demagogues. Gustainis' (1990) description of political pageantry evokes particular interest in the 2016 election cycle as candidates have adopted the tactics of personal and emotional messages coupled with repetitive messages and chants. An example may be seen in media interviews where Trump supporters parrot "Make America Great Again" or Sanders supporters issue the imperative to "Feel the Bern." At Trump rallies when a dissenter is located,

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they are surrounded by supporters whose cavillous shouts of “USA, USA” or “Trump, Trump” drown out the protestor’s expression.

“The rhetorical problem of demagoguery remains unsolvable, so long as political debate attends merely to popular desires, stoking an assumption that existing forms simply inhibit satisfaction” (Woodard, 1992). Demagogues often exploit traditional rhetorical devices, and negative ethical persuasion may evolve into accusations of short fingers or an ugly wife. Logic may be subsumed by humor and valid contentions by leaders may be replaced irrelevant quotations. The characteristic of demagoguery as defined by Roberts-Miller, Gustianis, Cooper, Loman, and others were integrated into the development of a content analysis coding strategy. These include polarization, hatred of groups, loaded terms, demonizing and scapegoating, simple solutions to complex problems, entitlement, apocalyptic metanarrative, denial of responsibility, simple statements, the ethos of sincerity, pandering to prejudice, junk science, antiintellectualism, misogyny, and nationalism.

Methodology

This research attempts to quantify the use of demagoguery and propaganda in American political communication by examining the “outsider” 2016 presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Specifically, I use content analysis to evaluate the televised primary campaign ads of both candidates for the characteristics of demagoguery and propaganda. Only candidate-sponsored ads were examined – not those from PACs or outside groups – because candidates do not control the messaging of outside advertising. They were obtained from the political advertising database located at <http://politicaladarchive.org/>; in total, they included 58 Sanders ads from his committee, “Bernie 2016,” and 30 Trump ads from his committee, “Donald J. Trump for President.” A Ph.D. in Communication was hired to view the ads and code them

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according to the characteristics and definitions found in a training Powerpoint and the codebook in Appendix A; these codes were spot-checked and validated by a second observer.

Findings

Table 1 and Table 2 present the findings. Both candidates rely on demagoguery or propaganda in their political communications; one or more characteristics were found in every advertisement analyzed. Both candidates frequently used polarizing language and an apocalyptic metanarrative. And both candidates relied heavily on passionate appeals: they were found in 95 percent of Sanders' ads and 70 percent of Trump's.

	DONALD J. TRUMP (30 ADS)	BERNIE SANDERS (58 ADS)
Nativism/Anti-Immigration	6.7%	0.0%
Populism	0.0%	50.0%
Motivism	3.3%	37.9%
Entitlement	3.3%	0.0%
Simple Solutions	30.0%	13.8%
Apocalyptic	33.3%	46.6%
Vague-Loaded Terms	60.0%	48.3%
Ethos of Sincerity	0.0%	0.0%
Pandering to Prejudice	13.3%	0.0%
Scapegoating/Orientalism	3.3%	0.0%
Demonizing	3.3%	0.0%
Misogyny	10.0%	0.0%
Junk Science	0.0%	0.0%
Anti-intellectualism	0.0%	0.0%
Nationalism	23.3%	5.2%
Misrepresentation	36.7%	1.7%

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Refusal to Justify Statements	3.3%	0.0%
Incendiary Language	53.3%	36.2%
Political Pageantry	33.3%	67.2%
Ad Hominem Attacks	43.3%	0.0%
Passionate Appeals	70.0%	94.8%

Table 2		
<i>Percentage of primary campaign ads that display the following characteristics of propaganda.</i>		
	DONALD J. TRUMP	BERNIE SANDERS
Polarizing Language	55.2%	40.0%
Repetition	25.9%	50.0%
Negative Ethical Persuasion	56.9%	50.0%

However, there were also significant differences between the candidates: ads from Bernie Sanders never utilized ad hominem attacks, while 43percent of Trump’s did. About a third of Trump’s ads pandered to prejudice, while none of Sanders’ did. In contrast, half of Sanders’ ads employed populism, while none of Trump’s did, and Sanders was far more likely to engage in political pageantry.

Discussion

This content analysis indicates that demagoguery and propaganda – two communication techniques with a long and chequered history in political discourse – are both prevalent the “outsider” presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Future research should contextualize these findings by examining the primary ads of other presidential campaigns in 2016, and perhaps earlier election cycles.

Demagogues have long been a part of our history and they “will find new areas of ignorance and prejudice to exploit,” (Luthin, 1951, P. 46) and do so using existing and emerging

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forms of communication technology. Moreover, the potential consequences are grave: Trump's us-versus-them narratives and incitements to violence are reminiscent of Hitler's invective in *Mein Kampf*. Media commentators also found fault with Trump's final ad of the Fall campaign because of anti-semitic underones. According to Talking Points Memo, the ad was "packed

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with anti-semitic dog whistles, anti-Semitic tropes and anti-Semitic vocabulary” (Marshall, 2016).

It remains the responsibility of the electorate to be vigilant in identifying demagoguery, and recognizing it as such; hopefully this paper will play a minor role in that larger effort.

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Demagoguery Codebook

Coding 2016 Primary Campaign Ads – ads (unit of analysis)

Donald J. Trump for President (artifacts)

Bernie 2016 (artifacts)

Source: <http://politicaladarchive.org/>

Sponsor Type: Candidate Committee

Coding for the characteristics of *demagoguery* and *propaganda*

1. CANDIDATE 1= Bernie Sanders, 2= Donald Trump
2. SPONSOR 1= Bernie 2016 (Please code only the primary campaign ads of Bernie 2016 run until the start of the Democratic Convention on July 25, 2016). 2 = Donald J. Trump for President (Please code only the primary campaign ads of Donald J. Trump for President run until the start of the Republican Convention on July 18, 2016)
3. AD CODE – found on the play button of the video and w archive information near end of data
4. DATE first aired OO/OO/OO (found in ad data)
5. AIR COUNT number of times ad aired (found in ad data)
6. LENGTH in seconds:OO
7. LANGUAGE 1=English, 2=Spanish, 3=other
8. NATIVISM – anti-immigration. Protecting the interests of native-born.
9. POPULISM – regular people should control government, not political elite. Attack on the 1% and wealthy (Wall Street Bankers)

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10. MOTIVISM – politician’s act is right if done with good motivation.

“Out Group” has base motives

11. ENTITLEMENT – double standards. Bad behavior of “In Group” justified. Trump, Giuliani, Gingrich have many wives but talk about Bill Clinton's indiscretions.

12. SIMPLE SOLUTIONS to complex problems. Bring back steel jobs.

Create manufacturing jobs.

13. APOCALYPTIC metanarrative – Our cause is good in the battle of good v evil

14. Vague terms – using words with connotations (loaded words)

15. Ethos of SINCERITY – willing to lie and when caught in lies still claim they are after and supporting truth

16. Pandering to PREJUDICE – racist images (immigrants, single moms)

17. SCAPEGOATING – orientalism – HATRED of an “out” group which may vary

18. DEMONIZING - based on race ethnicity, religion

19. MISOGYNY – emphasis of traditional sexual roles

20. JUNK SCIENCE – climate denial, determinism

21. ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM – threatened by scholars and experts, ridicule scientists. give flippant remarks

22. NATIONALISM – we are better than any other nation, patriotism

23. MISREPRESENTATION misleading statements. Lies.

Misrepresenting candidate or opponents behavior or position

24. Refusal to JUSTIFY statements

25. INCENDIARY language

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26. Political PAGEANTRY banners, slogans, carnival like rallies
27. Ad hominem remarks – attack opponents character instead of policies (lyin Hillary)
28. PASSIONATE Appeals rather than rational. Specious remarks
29. POLARIZING – divide people into two distinct groups.
propaganda motivate people to hate
30. REPETITION
31. Negative ethical PERSUASION – may involve fear, anxiety, deceit, trickery, linking candidates' idea to emotional appeals