
The creation of communities, which are reliant on the existence of strong interpersonal relationships, is based on conversations that promote discourse. Those communities then form societies. According to modern rhetoricians like I.A. Richards, many of the issues confronting modern society today arise from the misuse and lack of effective communication (Foss 19). Perhaps the greatest institution of our society that requires the use of effective communication more than any other is our government. Considering that we are a representational republic and that we are dependent on the people to adequately choose our leaders, the health and efficiency of the electorate in choosing its leadership is paramount. From modern thinkers like Deborah Tannen to our founding fathers, the existence of a strong and educated electorate has always been believed to be rooted in discourse. Benjamin Franklin stated that, “both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick.” Even the Supreme Court has ruled, according to New Times v. Sullivan, that a “profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide open” (Jamieson 215). The creation of that national debate, the hearing of all sides by the public, and the development of a strong, educated electorate is rooted in a return to and continuing support of finding consensus and truth through discourse, known to classical rhetoricians as political rhetoric.

While any audience has the ability and the right to choose to not pay attention to reasonable discourse, or the “organizing process of disciplined thought,” the ability for them to do so should not be hampered. Within a true discourse community based on reasonable discourse, wild and irresponsible accusations should be easily pinpointed and discounted. While our nation’s sheer size and heterogeneous nature prevents any form of direct democracy and the inherent political rhetoric that comes with it, we should never allow ourselves to throw away political rhetoric and replace it with display rhetoric just to ease the responsibility of the process that comes with living in a republic.
True discourse should not be civil nor easy. The belief that using discourse methods that do not require confrontational interactions are more effective is not accurate once you consider what the different forms of discourse are meant to achieve. Civility suggests politeness, according to Deborah Tannen, which is superficial and unproductive. At the same time, political discourse does not have to verge on constant war between the different parties (Tannen 3). Discourse must be open to criticism, as Tannen continually teaches us that critical thinking and criticism are the same things. A real, in-depth, and tense discussion, not built on the need to beat or persuade, but to come to consensus and understand, can exist.

And, according to many modern rhetoricians, it must exist for us to continue to grow and develop as a society. I.A Richards believed that the view of rhetoric as primarily a mode of persuasion was faulty. Rhetoric, or the “philosophic inquiry into how words work in discourse,” has many uses, including exposition, adjustment, and compromise (Foss 23).

Yet, by analyzing the very way we choose our leaders, especially our highest office, the Presidency of the United States, we can see the dangers of argumentative and persuasive language winding its way into society. In 1956, Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson ran on a platform of abolishing the draft and outlawing nuclear weapons testing. While he lost in a landslide, he practiced traditional political rhetoric by laying out the issues and then presenting his ideas on how to handle those issues. He neither attacked Eisenhower for his stances nor tried to attach Eisenhower to the policies in place. Instead, he only tried to show that his position was superior, not that it was the only logical position available. Compare that with today, where, in the 2006 midterm elections, 89% of all ads were negative “attack” ads (Lau2).
Attack ads are political advertisements that criticize another competitor for their positions and beliefs. They are widely criticized for their over-simplification of issues and their use of stereotyping to create a negative link between the electorate and the targeted candidate. This is clearly much different than when Stevenson tried to create a positive connection with the electorate through a reasonable and elaborate discussion meant to further discourse. While Stevenson used true political rhetoric, most modern day politicians rely solely on attack ads, or display rhetoric. While display rhetoric might not work well to stimulate discourse and find new understanding, it is extremely efficient in energizing a fanbase.

Display rhetoric acts to create “affinity for competition... propensity to become a festival... proclivity to excess and exaggeration... and susceptibility to the propagation of dominant values” (Poulakos 63). Plato viewed this type of rhetoric, which he thought void of any real content, as only useful for praise (Poulakos 72). He understood that the quest to find understanding that we currently don’t hold comes with consensus and only comes through the use of real political rhetoric. Classical rhetoricians were adept at understanding the clear differences between display and political rhetoric. Today, however, that ability seems to be a lost art form. Yet, that doesn’t mean that the national electorate would not recognize clear display rhetoric if it was being used to spread self-praise by a candidate. Instead, the candidate uses the rhetoric to praise the beliefs of the audience, allowing them the comfort of never having to challenge their own beliefs nor compromise with the beliefs of others.

The primary mode by which display rhetoric does that is by replacing reasonable and well-thought out definitions and ideas with stereotypes, as mentioned before (Jamieson 64). Display rhetoric uses language that creates a defining characteristic of an individual, albeit usually anecdotal in nature, and then ascribes the “stereotype” characteristic to an entire group the individual is a part of. Once persuasion, especially based on stereotypes, becomes the goal of any politically-motivated communication, the primary focus of said communication is to use “force and elegance of speech” to
accomplish “one’s own purpose upon the weakness of men” (Enos 91). This use of rhetoric is vastly different than that of creating discourse and disseminating knowledge among the electorate, which is the pursuit of political rhetoric.

While the argument that display and political rhetoric are vastly different from one another is easily made, it doesn’t necessarily mean that display rhetoric is useless. It has become the major form of political communication and there are rhetoricians who believe that the primary use of rhetoric should also be to persuade. Yet, we live in a republic, which is based upon ideas of democracy. To function correctly, as stated by classical teachers like Aristotle and Plato and reinforced by the men who founded this country, like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, political discourse must take place among the people who choose their leaders. That discourse must be real and must seek to find the best answers, not reinforce old beliefs by overpowering the ideas of the opposition. If we are to accept that view and agree that discourse-communities that use discourse are more adept at creating sound societies, then we must look to support the type of rhetoric that is most efficient in strengthening those communities, which, in our society, is the general electorate.

Display rhetoric attack ads are, however, slowly debilitating our populace’s ability to make those social judgment calls needed for discourse. In fact, that lessened ability at social discourse has led to the very real inability to form widespread consensus, or compromise (Paek 4). Compromise, as you remember, is one of two main goals of political rhetoric. Rhetoric that inhibits consensus, is, naturally, not living up to the requirements of political rhetoric.

Furthermore, the US public is growing fretful of attack ads during campaigns. The people cite the pushing of partisanship, conflict, and civility as the major causes of their dislike for the ever popular advertising (Greenberg 70). Partisanship is not the only problem found to have come into existence due to the attack ad. The stereotypes that are at the root of display rhetoric indirectly support sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination.
It was found, for instance, that female candidates do not suffer as negatively from attack ads as men do. Research found that men were more likely to be hurt by the effects of the ads because they are seen as being naturally “aggressive, forceful, and independent” while women are seen as being “kind, helpful, sympathetic, and passive” (Fridkin 3).

The harmful effects of the attack ads are multifaceted, however. Not only do they propagate dominant, and not always positive, values, but they subvert the need to determine the unknown. The discovery of new truths is the second main characteristic of political rhetoric. The female aimed attack ad study also found that wide spread gender biases were less likely to occur among highly educated subgroups (Fridkin 17). This finding is especially important, as it shows that, as Deborah Tannen points out, that a more educated electorate is more likely to take part in and support political rhetoric and, therefore, perhaps also support the building of a strong electorate discourse community.

One of the major hurdles of using political rhetoric in our society is adapting a rhetorical strategy meant for Ancient Athens’ direct democracy to our modern republic. The political rhetoric that we use today grew into its current form through the Platonic belief that it should work as a blend of techne (art) and technical skill (Poulakos 43). Even more importantly, according to Isocrates, the everyday world works on the basis of partial knowledge and limited options. With that in mind, he believed that political rhetoric should work to find the highest consensual benefit to the public (Poulakis 47).

Display rhetoric attack ads do not adhere to Isocrates and his views of what political rhetoric should accomplish. Instead, individual members of our society have now come to view their own knowledge as superior. While they still believe that there should be a consensus, they are not willing to accept that others know something that they don’t or that their personal views might be wrong. Because of this, they resist the demand of the political rhetorician to find consensus (Paek 20).
many people are making political and social decisions based on their viewings of attack ads and their belief that their insufficient knowledge is nothing short of omniscient (Ran 5).

The act of watching and absorbing the information from attack ads is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, according to Isocrates, display rhetoric has extrinsic rhetorical value. When used as a tool or a means to a final goal or end, display rhetoric can aid in the spreading of political ideas.

That action is, however, highly dependent on how the message is sent and how it is received. Since attack ads are so grossly over exaggerated through the use of stereotypes, those who view them see them as an affirmation of their own beliefs and as a condemnation of others within the discourse community, not a single stream of information that should be viewed with caution and discussed with the other members of the entire discourse community (Ran 5).

That self-ascribed expertise can even cause more social issues. Every attack ad has a competing ad from the other side. If a liberal, for instance, buys into the message of a liberal attack ad, then they will view the ideas of the conservative attack ad as ludicrous and not deserving a place of discussion within the community. They will treat any conservative who has accepted the ideas put forth in the conservative ad as easily swayed and controlled by advertising. This will reinforce the belief of the liberal community member that it is best not to compromise or come to a consensus with anyone who would believe conflicting attack ads (Paek 6). This same scenario is true, of course, for conservatives who also buy into display rhetoric as unwavering truth. In this manner, display rhetoric uses our views and values against us (Dardis 13).

This harks back to Plato’s condemnation of display rhetoric as being void of any real content. Instead, it is only useful for praise of oneself or of others (Poulakos 72). Even when that praise is not directed towards us, it is meant to call praise or blame on a person by inciting the values of the audience and explaining that those same values are being threatened. The defense of personal values always
leads to a heated and incoherent forcing of ideas and beliefs on others, it never allows for sensible and reasonable debate.

Beyond the bolstering of an individual’s own values, are other backlashes attached to the use of display rhetoric as the new political rhetoric. For those wanting to take part in true political rhetoric, like political moderates, for example, voter turn-out has plummeted. Meanwhile, turnout among those with clear party affiliation has went up (Lau 9). Members of the electorate discourse community who feel their party values are too precious to sacrifice to compromise are striving more and more to separate from the general discourse community in favor of creating two ideologically separate communities who are fundamentally at odds with one another. Fundamentally different groups do not traditionally coexist and create productive and progressive societies.

This mass movement of rallying the soldiers along such strict ideological lines is having long term effects that stretch far beyond just one election. It has been argued that such high level of display rhetoric has already transformed the political community of this country. That fact has led to a society that is used to and expects display rhetoric, further supporting the idea that one discourse community that strives to discover unknown truths does not exist. If that is the political reality of today, then any chance of real discourse and consensus later on becomes less and less likely (Ran 6).

Display rhetoric has become the tool by which the system elects politicians while the electorate is busy engaging in non-constructive rhetoric that breaks down true discourse. Those politicians rarely actually present the will of the people, as the people’s “will” cannot exist if no discourse has taken place to create said will. While the candidates and incumbents should want to create a national discourse to ensure the best candidate gets the job, their own ambition often times promotes actions that look to “divert public and press attention from legitimate issues by calculated strategies of distraction” (Jamieson 64).
True discourse, which should present both sides of the issues and illustrate the strengths of each, thereby allowing the electorate to come to a consensus through the development of a real discourse-community, never takes place. Instead, display rhetoric is used to vilify “foreign” and “otherly” ideas through stereotypical and, often enough, factually incorrect communication. That isn’t to say there is no hope. As our society becomes more educated, the likely-hood a new, nation-wide discourse community developing becomes more of a reality. The key, however, is to change the institutions in place that support display rhetoric. As the general populace becomes more educated, it is not helpful if the system in place subverts their attempts at discourse.

Political rhetoric, as a techne, must be “concerned with [modern] man as a spatiotemporal creature” (Enos 81). Specifically, political rhetoric must address the people as a multimodal audience. To truly be political rhetoric, it must support discourse in such a way that compromise is supported and the creation of understanding and meaning is paramount. Rhetoric that is persuasive in nature is not political in nature. Rhetoric that looks to educate all sides, present all sides, and develop a discourse community that connects the entire electorate is the only rhetoric truly political in nature. The constant and continual use of adversarial language in traditional media will pass as print media becomes less important to modern society.

Non-traditional media like television and, even more so, online technologies are shifting our national discourse towards complete multimodality (Jamieson 50). While national political discourse was once dominated by speeches, newspaper articles about speeches, and local debates concerning speeches, modern political discourse occurs, often enough, in real time with real people across the nation. While discourse communities are meant to be built upon the backs of interpersonal relationships, this can only happen if the discourse being used is compromising and adjusting in nature. When the discourse that exists is completely persuasive and of a “display” nature, then interpersonal relationships do not develop and the contrasts within society, not connecting factors, are highlighted.
The electorate discourse community is based upon the institutions they support. The fracture nature of politics has led to fractured, values driven discourse communities that are at odds with one another. This is clear sign of non-reasonable discourse. In 1998, for instance, 11 lawmakers retired from Congress. Their reasoning revolved around partisanship and what they cited as a broken system. That system is built upon the back of display rhetoric and is reinforced by broken institutions. True discourse stimulates academic minds and works to persuade the true experts to interact with one another and with the national electorate discourse community. As display rhetoric becomes the norm when discussing politics and developing strategies and laws to address our nation’s issues, then those with no expertise, but a skill at crafting stereotypical and discourse-damaging rhetoric take power. When that happens, “the entire society loses” (Tannen 47).

The election of Congress is done by popular vote. The fracturing of Congress is representational of the many fractured communities formed around discourse communities. Those communities can be melded into one national discourse community by a conscious effort on the part of moderate, educated individuals. The data supports that our nation is becoming one primarily made up of moderated, educated individuals. There is one very important office, however, that is not elected by popular vote. Therefore, it does not represent the nature of the electorate nor does it support the long-term health of a strong national discourse-community. The existence of the Electoral College undermines all attempts to rid our nation of display rhetoric.

As Socrates would argue, the founders believed that “political deliberation [is] a techne (art) similar to painting or sculpture” (Poulakos 42). Under this premise, the Electoral College was meant to help guide the people. The founders believed that the common man, when acting alone, acted as a person who “give[s] way to pleasure.” According to Socrates, this is not a moral flaw but a flaw in reasoning. Socrates believed that people do not knowingly choose the lesser good. Their knowledge is just too limited to differentiate between the two strong and weaker options (Poulakos 44). That, of
course, is the entire reason that political rhetoric exists, to find that greater knowledge. At the founding of our nation, however, there was no simple way to educate the general population nor allow them to search for that greater knowledge.

Though Socrates does say that all deliberation needs a reliable method of measurement, which seems to support the idea of electors who take in the people’s desires and create techne decisions based on their higher education and more developed mental capabilities, the modern age of technology has changed society’s circumstances. In modern times, we now have a larger educated population and more easily accessible banks of information. The technology available allows the general population to find, verify, and debate facts, ideas, and ideologies.

Classical theorists argued that deliberation happens in urgent situations when great uncertainty is at hand and a general consensus must be found (Poulakos 36 & 37). While this need existed before the rise of modern technology, communication is now instantaneous, as is deliberation among the mass population. While general consensus could have never been determined in the 18th or 19th centuries, technology allows for a massive number of people to partake in a national discourse meant to determine consensus.

The original role of the electors was to counter Isocrates’ view of the world. In his mind, “the world [was] ruled by partial knowledge, limited options, and imperfect choices” (Poulakos 47). The elector system allowed the people to make informed decisions through discourse to come to a consensus: which elector did they believe was wise enough to choose the President on their behalf? Isocrates believed a wise leader is one “who is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course.” Isocrates also believed that deliberation would lead to wise judgments. Therefore, a wise leader’s beliefs should reflect the wisdom of the people’s deliberations (Poulakos 48). The electors’
original purpose was to be the wise leaders who could then deliberate and wisely choose the next President.

While “some people have the ability to read a certain situation, perceive what is unique about it, and understand its peculiar meaning better than others,” those people should not necessarily be put above everyone else in modern times (Poulakos 50). To continue with the Electoral College, as it was originally designed, is to say that the American people need a more educated middle-man who can make the decision of electing the President for them. This idea in modern times is in direct conflict with what we are trying to accomplish on a national level: the development of a single discourse community based on moderation and the general education of all.

Aristotle sees deliberation as practical. People only deliberate because they have no “perfectly reliable guide” (Poulakos 54). However, once educated deliberation is finished and consensus has been found, the people can choose a future based on shared beliefs and what is conceived within the population as wisdom. Protagoras states that “deliberation is crucial to the creation of a social order from within the community, a social order that the majority of citizens would be willing to uphold, defend, and reform (Poulakos 38).”

In simplest terms, this means that the election of the President should include the deliberation of all the people. The original Electoral College included the people in an ingenious way. It made a discourse possible in a world of limited communication. Yet, today, that very College restricts discourse by limiting the importance of the Electoral College to only highly populated states. This creates the clever gimmicks that Isocrates warned against.

Isocrates believed that Athens could only be great if “leaders were educated in... deliberation” and if they had to “defend their choices to the public” (Poulakos 47). This belief holds true for the
United States. However, because of the Electoral College, that is not so in the case of Presidential candidates. Since electors are appointed according population, the Presidential candidates only have to focus on the needs of the states with the most electors. The candidates don’t have to focus on taking part in a national discourse that includes the entire US population. The candidates very much pander to the views and beliefs of those few states. They dismiss the ideas and views of the people in the other states. They do not ask the populations in the highly populated states to enter into a national discourse, determine, on a national scale, what is best, and then choose accordingly. Instead, they pander their “shared” values with those of the larger states, reinforcing the existing views of localized, state community over the will of any possible national discourse community.

While the chance of winning the Electoral College without winning the plural vote is extremely difficult—it has only happened three times—it can occur. As I stated above, a discourse must occur among the people and between the people. If there is any chance—which there is—that an intense, inclusive, and educated discourse could lead to a consensus that is not reflected in the final election, then the system does not work. Any system that ignores and disregards the discourse of the people is a threat to said discourse, and, according to classical and modern rhetorical theory, is a threat to society.

The primary way to fight against the abandonment of true political rhetoric is through education. The legal measures that must be met to change the heavily entrenched political practices of our country lie with raising tolerance and understanding. Low-self esteem is linked to seeing “the world as a dichotomous struggle between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Jamieson 66). As a person becomes more educated, dichotomous understandings of the world fade, leading to more discourse, more compromise, and more reasonable changes within the system. The educational system does not exist within a vacuum. We know that the public discourse of the national electorate permeates our private conversations. Those private, and public, conversations shape the citizens our children will become. We
cannot wait for the system to fix the problem. We must work to change the rhetoric being used now if we want to begin to fix our broken discourse community. As our children learn, they will strengthen it. But, as with any form of discourse, “contentious public discourse becomes a model for behavior and sets the tone for how individuals experience their relationships to other people and to the society we live in” (Tannen 280). This very nature of discourse means that the changes must start now. We must look at all political institutions, from the Electoral College to term limits for judges or members of Congress. Any institution or any political practice that interferes with the ability of the people to develop, maintain, and strengthen our own discourse community will, ultimately, need to be modified or eliminated to support political discourse.
Works Cited


