ELECTION RHETORIC OF POLITICAL PARTIES

AN APPRAISAL AND A PROPOSAL

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Abstract

Political rhetoric may be regarded as unchanging, following ancient and universal rules of persuasion. However, scholars sometimes argue that political language has changed substantially over the last decades, due to its adaptation to media logic or to new modes of electoral competition. In this article I propose a model for empirical research of party propaganda in different election campaign channels. Rather than to offer a comprehensive view of political rhetoric, this model is designed to provide more knowledge of what media changes may have meant for the language of political parties. Does election rhetoric vary systematically? If so, does rhetoric change over time, adopting qualities associated with media logic? Or, do we find a non-changing pattern which can better be explained by party competition factors? Three rhetorical dimensions are identified in the model: message concreteness, direction, and identity construction. These correspond to hypothesised media effects, as well as being relevant to parties making strategic campaign choices.

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The Place of Rhetoric in Election Propaganda

Considering the goals politicians have to achieve, it is no wonder that language is in focus, as perhaps the most important instrument for success. Communication — the symbolic exchange of meaning — is necessary to all political activity, since politics in some sense is "doing by saying." Words are not merely shadows of deeds. They contain the very essence of politics. Political language is the common denominator. At the same time elevated as a sacrosanct value in democratic theory ("free speech") and rejected as a means of deception, distortion or fraud ("mere rhetoric"), communication is an essential part of the political process.

The primary goal of politicians in an election is to get elected, and in order to achieve that goal they need to communicate their views. Potential voters demand sufficient information to make up their minds to vote. To provide and to receive information is a prerequisite both for control of power and for participation in a democracy. In political communication, all this is achieved using language.

This paper will focus on political rhetoric from political parties to the citizens — the electorate — during campaigns preceding national elections. Election campaigns constitute crucial test points, where communication is of special importance to both politicians and citizens. Most studies so far have concerned media or journalists' communicative behaviour. I propose a model for studying patterns in party rhetoric with respect to an important societal process: political actors' adaptation to media logic.

The controversy over political communication and rhetoric is by no means surprising. In many countries, public discourse is constrained by detailed regulation, one indicator of the delicacy of these matters. A public debate on the quality of politicians' verbal expression often emerges during and after the election campaigns. If misused, political language is likely to have negative consequences for the political system, i.e., lower rates of citizen participation and trust in the political process, and thus less legitimacy for the polity.

Language is undoubtedly a tool with a high power potential. Political rhetoric therefore deserves a systematic study. It has been studied from different angles and in different disciplines: linguistics, anthropology, psychology, communication science, political science, to mention a few. I will start my examination of rhetoric in election campaigns from a common but rarely proven assumption: that of the changing political language in an age of all-embracing mass media.[1]

A New Political Rhetoric — or Same as it Ever Was?

We are often told of the decline of political communication. Politicians of today, compared to their predecessors, are said to be bad speakers who provide little substantial content, elaborated arguments or ideological vision. The value of words is reduced, and debates are described as pointless squabbling. The common assumption is that mass media corrupts political language. Media has its own logic and news criteria, to which politicians must adapt (Altheide and Snow 1979). According to a democratic ideal of electoral communication, the election campaign should provide citizens with enough information to make an enlightened choice. This demands a logical and elaborated argumentation (Dahl 1989, 118). In reality, we are far from achieving this

goal. The practical result of media logic is often at odds with the democratic ideal: "The watchdog role of journalism is often shunted into channels of personalisation, dramatisation, witch hunting, soap-operas and sundry trivialities" (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 1; see also Corcoran 1979, 172; Patterson 1980).

Over the last four or five decades, the world of mass media has changed fundamentally, and this change has had great implications for election campaigns. First, the **technical** conditions have changed. Political parties have encountered new media channels, such as television, as well as greater diversity within media, which has altered their ways of campaigning for elections. Second, the **relations** between the media and the political sphere have changed. Journalism has developed from a partisan practice to a profession with a mission — including to question, to criticise, and to shape opinion.

Mass media has become increasingly important, both as an information supplier and as an actor in the political system. The interdependence between political parties and the media has formed special patterns of interaction. Relations between journalists and politicians have been described by some scholars as a function of "media logic" (Altheide and Snow 1979, 197), "mediatisation" (Mazzoleni 1995, 291), "media turn" (Hernes 1978, 189), or the like. Politicians adjust to the criteria by which media cover the election campaigns (and to some extent the other way around). The effects on election communication, when these actors meet, may be of various kinds. Among the most frequently mentioned are:

 Personalisation — the actions of (top) representatives of the parties become increasingly covered, at the expense of collective bodies. As a consequence, trustworthiness and other personal traits of politicians play a more important part.

 Incisiveness — political issues and standpoints are presented as clear-cut in character, with little balance and deliberation.

 Simplification or trivialisation — abstract and complex matters are presented in a simple, unidimensional and concrete fashion.

 Conflict centring — issues are presented as a struggle between two camps, which in turn is likely to lead to a more negative type of campaign, where antagonism is focused.

Empirical studies conducted in the research field of elections and media have above all concerned the political content and form of journalist-controlled news media. Many of them have confirmed results like the ones suggested above (Patterson 1980; 1993; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Åsard and Bennett 1997). Less studied, however, is the rhetoric of the **parties themselves** (as opposed to news media rhetoric). By that I mean such propaganda that is produced and (mainly) controlled by the parties. If we admit the consequences of "media turn" hypotheses[2], the change in political rhetoric is likely to have reached further than to journalists and their editorial offices. According to some rhetoricians, politicians have internalised media rhetoric, even when they do not explicitly appear in news media (Johannesson 1990, 201; Åsard and Bennett 1997, 46). Other scholars emphasise the difference: the politicians' own propaganda is less negative, less personalised, more issue-centred and argumentative than the media reports of the same (Patterson 1993). One aim of my study is to determine whether significant changes have occurred in those aspects of party political language relevant to election propaganda.

Apart from the specific development of the media, there is also another macro trend in society that should be mentioned when discussing changes in political rhetoric. Observers of party politics have claimed that ideological differences between parties have diminished over the years, whether or not this is attributable to media. The electoral messages of the parties have accordingly become harder to distinguish (Kirchheimer 1966; Page 1978, 179-191; Katz and Mair 1995, 22). In the wake of sociological and demographic changes, parties have adjusted to new situations. Mass parties with specific social classes as electoral bases have been transformed into parties which claim nearly the entire populace as potential voters. Kirchheimer (1966) names this phenomenon the **catch-all party**. Although Kirchheimer does not explicitly address the question of party propaganda and behaviour in election campaigns, some consequences of this development for rhetoric can be extrapolated from his work: (1) In order to reach more voters, parties need to be restrictive in expressing specific policy stands. A vague rather than a precise message is likely to be a consequence. (2) The parties' propaganda messages become increasingly similar, as campaigns focus on creating a positive image of party and person. Similar consequences have been suggested by other researchers. Helenius (1969) finds less ideological or dogmatic party programmes over the century, when studying several Western European parties. Katz and Mair (1995) start from the view of the decreasing place of ideas in party politics, when they discuss the more recent development of the age of the "cartel party."[3]

With a more heterogeneous electorate, messages to voters will be formed by the logic of electoral competition rather than by that of ideology. Rhetoric will adjust to the power game, where media and media logic play an important role. Political scientists Åsard and Bennett (1997, 18) claim that the debate between parties with clear ideological differences has been replaced by a more standardised and indifferent rhetoric, without clear party differences, in the US as well as in Sweden: "What the public seems to get […] are increasingly similar ideas marketed in increasingly similar ways to increasingly smaller audiences." Parties are also likely to choose vague messages, because of their general uncertainty about the future. The greater the field of human life that has become subject to "political" action, the more actors have become involved, and subsequently the outcome of political action has become harder to predict. Politicians will try to avoid the embarrassment of being caught making faulty predictions of the future (…we could not foresee…) or misperceiving the past (…we did not know…) (Manin 1997, 221).

"Media turn" hypotheses state not only that election messages become increasingly vague, but that they also become more concrete in nature. This may seem paradoxical, since vague messages are associated with abstract, high-falutin speech, but down-to-earth rhetoric appears to fit media logic better than the abstract in some ways. To speak of the consequences of economic policy for individuals may be more appealing to the media than is the discussion in macro-economic terms. Illustrative examples ("I know a shopkeeper in x-town; I know what hard times he is going through due to the heavy taxes on labour") both give the message a concrete quality and function to strengthen the identity between speaker and audience (see below). Examples of this kind have also proven to be easier to remember than abstract arguments (Brosius and Bathelt 1994).

To a great extent, transitions into the age of the "catch-all" party and the "media turn" of politics are parallel developments, and probably also intertwined. The common denominator is that they point towards a changing political rhetoric. A few as-

sumed effects of these trends can now be listed:

- more concrete or pragmatic messages, less ideology (Ĺsard and Bennett 1997, 17, 47; Kirchheimer 1966);
- more vague and ambiguous messages, less clear, substantial ones (Page 1978, 152-162; Ĺsard and Bennett 1997, 146, 160);
- more focus on persons/ personal image, qualities, trustworthiness (Corcoran 1979, 166-171; West 1984, 74; Manin 1997, 221-227);
- more negative campaigning, polemics (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Johnson, Cartee and Copeland 1991. See, however, Lee 1993, 76-77.)

The hypothesis of the new political rhetoric of the mass media age is not an unchallenged one, however. Contrary to this concept stands another common notion: political language as something fundamentally **constant**. This is closely related to the perspective provided by classical rhetoric. Rhetoric is among the oldest arts. It was systematised in Antiquity, and its fundamental principles still guide politicians and other persuaders.[4] According to this view, politics is politics and nothing has changed, nor will it change. Politics is basically about persuasion, and the tools of rhetoric work just as well in today's world as in the quasi-democracy of Athens 2,500 years ago.

A diverse literature is at hand when it comes to describing and explaining how parties and politicians campaign for election. In many studies, the conformity of elections and their context is stressed. They are sometimes described as the most important political ritual in the democratic system. Politicians prepare their campaign work rigorously, employing strategic and tactical plans (Maarek 1995, 29-63; Ware 1996, 289-290). From this perspective, parties are also likely to control their words — no statements will be left to chance.

Election communication can thus easily fit into the formula of stability and immobility. Elections are games of power and persuasion in which parties play roles determined by a strategic consideration of the actors (Sjöblom 1968, 30). The rules of the game cannot easily be changed in their basic principles. From this perspective, differences in rhetoric are attributable to the roles communicators play in the power game, rather than to major societal changes.

The parties' place is between ideology and strategy. To begin with, a party has a programme — a plan of action founded on ideas — which it wishes to realise. This wish is to some extent the **raison d'être** of the party. Politics is a struggle between different idea systems, or ideologies, and programmes (Sjöblom 1968; Robertson 1976). Thus party propaganda is likely to reflect these **ideological** differences.

However, parties also strive for power. This objective is most often seen as a means to achieve the more fundamental goal of programme realisation. Sometimes the two are seen as independent goals, which may conflict. We know that parties differ in their propaganda concerning agenda and policy stands. Do parties also differ when it comes to the mode of communication, the electoral rhetoric? A more plausible explanation of party variances in rhetoric than ideology may be the different **strategic positions** of the parties**.**

Sjöblom (1968, 77, 158-180) stresses the importance of a party's relation to its opponents in the production of election propaganda. As rational actors, parties employ strategies to achieve their goals in different arenas. In the electoral arena, parties must consider not only the reactions of presumptive voters, but also the actions and reactions of political opponents. Patterns of conflict and interaction between parties are of

great importance to the shape of electoral messages.

The most obvious distinction that can be made concerning competitive position in the party system, is the one between **government** and **opposition**, or between **incumbent** and **challenger.** Usually, general elections can be viewed as a choice between a party (or a candidate) defending its/her/his position in office, and one or more challenging it. This distinction provides an explanatory variable when examining variations in election rhetoric (Sjöblom 1968, 125; Trent and Friedenberg 1983, 63-88; Bowler and Farrell 1992, 9; Skaperdas and Grofman 1994; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 1995, 213-217).

I have briefly sketched two views of political rhetoric — one of change and one of stability. Which of the views is more accurate, if either? Is rhetoric changing with major transformations of society? Or does rhetoric reflect the old truth of "politics as usual," where the same principles guide the actors, and any variations occurring reflect strategic positions of the parties? In order to determine the accuracy of these theses, we need to define rhetorical categories important to the parties in their election communication, which are also relevant to the assumptions of rhetorical change stated above. The model will be designed for use in studies of the rhetoric of parties in a number of national elections over a long period of time. The scheme will enable the comparison of the rhetorical patterns of individual parties with the characterisation of the rhetoric of each election as an aggregate.

The first question is whether there is any systematic variation in parties' election rhetoric, regardless of the particular situation, i.e., a pattern that can be observed in several channels of propaganda over many national elections. And secondly: Is there a trend in the direction that has been hypothesised by advocates of the "media turn" theories? Or are the differences between parties — in their roles as opponents and defenders — within each election greater than differences between elections on the whole?

To summarise: Two major distinctions can be made when it comes to the variations that may be found in party electoral rhetoric. The first and overarching separation is between systematic and unsystematic variation. If no systematic variation can be found between elections, between parties or between political systems, we are likely to conclude that personal and idiosyncratic factors are behind political rhetoric. Each election is a unique case, in which unique factors are present. On the other hand, if systematic patterns **are** found, will they show a change over time in accordance with media development and the assumed "media turn" effects? Or will we find a stable, universal pattern? If this is the case, we can still expect to find "internal" differences (between the parties), attributable to the position in the power game, or "external" differences (between political systems and cultures). The discussed possible patterns of election rhetoric are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Patterns of Variation in Election Rhetoric

Pattern of election rhetoric	Variation			
	unsystematic/ idiosyncratic	systematic		
Variation in election rhetoric	no systematic variation over time or between parties/systems	changing over time	stable over time varies between parties	stable over time varies between systems
Factors important	personality	"media turn" decline of ideology	place in party competition	competition rules political culture

A Model of Election Rhetoric

Having outlined possible factors behind variations in election rhetoric, the next step is to determine how to define what may vary — the dependent variable of the model. What "rhetoric" are we discussing? What variations are to be examined? There are numerous ways for politicians to vary a political message, substantially as well as stylistically. Below I will argue for three dimensions of rhetoric (see Table 2) which I consider universal, in the sense that each party must make a choice of how to form its messages in each of the dimensions. The model is, in principle, applicable to all parties in all systems of two or more parties. For each of the dimensions I suggest operational indicators which may be used in an empirical analysis of party rhetoric.

1. Parties must communicate their standpoints in order to position themselves. This is central in rational theories of democracy. The citizens need information about the stands of the parties in different issues to provide an incentive to choose one party before another. This information is therefore essential for the voter (Downs 1957, 208; Sjöblom 1968, 221; Page 1978, 187; Dahl 1989, 118). Parties have a choice not only of which standpoints to convey, but also of the precision by which they do it. Here we may speak of a dimension of **concreteness**, or specificity. A party may choose to focus more on abstract and ideological goals, or to turn to concrete, down-to-earth policy stands.

According to the hypothesised "media turn" effects, we should expect not only less ideological and more concrete and pragmatic rhetoric, but also a greater number of vague messages. Concreteness manifests itself in several ways. The **type of issues** the parties choose is one indicator. It is possible to measure to what extent parties mention matters of principle or ideology and specific policy areas, respectively (Mazzoleni 1987, 87; West 1984, 71-75; Patterson 1980).

Not only the type of issue raised is relevant to the specificity or concreteness: different framing, or **perspectives**, of a particular issue will also yield different levels of concreteness. A perspective of principle (e.g., "the social security system should embrace all citizens") indicates an abstract rhetoric. A material perspective (e.g., "We must cut social security expenditure by 10-15 percent over the next several years"), where legislative measures or exact levels of expenditure are mentioned, is concrete in character. This corresponds to some extent to West's (1984, 71) distinction between "general goals/problems" and "specific policy statements."

Regardless of issue orientation and perspective, parties may also vary the number of concrete **policy proposals** (or promises of particular actions) and their abstract, **broad goals**, or bases for action. They may concern both what I have defined as concrete and abstract issues or perspectives. For example, concrete proposals may concern an abstract issue area, such as "ownership of societal resources" (e.g., "We suggest that several big government industries be privatised"). Abstract goals referring to concrete and specific issue areas are also possible (e.g., "Higher education reform must be characterised by firmness and long-term planning"). Explicit references to **values**, such as "freedom," "justice," "responsibility," etc., indicate by their presence an abstract type of propaganda. References to specific **groups** in society (e.g., workers, farmers, tax payers) will, on the other hand, specify policy statements or descriptions, and thus offer a more concrete statement.

Apart from distinguishing between concrete and abstract rhetoric, I also need to separate clear and substantial standpoints from vague or ambiguous expressions (Page

1978, 152). This is somewhat complicated, as vagueness and ambiguity are extremely context-bound concepts. I choose to address the perhaps most politically relevant problem: the question as to what extent parties articulate an opinion on political issues. I make use of the distinction between **position issues** and **valence issues**, proposed by Campbell et. al. (1966, 170) and Butler and Stokes (1974, 189). In accordance with their view, I regard as valence statements those expressions which are obliged to nothing and include no controversial standpoints (e.g., "We stand for peace and prosperity"). These are to be regarded in contrast to position statements, which express a (potentially) controversial opinion on an issue (e.g., "Essential industries should be the property of the state").

2. Parties must not only tell us what they think about issues in different ways. They must also relate to their environment in the political world: both to other parties and to the reality in which they exist. In other words, parties must decide on the **direction** of their messages (West 1984, 75). First, parties may vary the degree to which they mention other political parties and organisations. Parties do not exist in a vacuum, where they can ignore the other actors. Instead, they must be prepared to react to the proposals or actions of others. Second, parties also turn to descriptions of reality in general, to establish "truths" from which they build arguments and standpoints.

Particularly in American discourse, the concept of "negative campaigning" is crucial. This means, in short, that parties and candidates focus their propaganda more on the faults of their opponent, and less on their own politics (Lee 1991, 48; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). One party's criticism of other parties may even be a way of diverting attention from the weaknesses of its own programme or actions (Page 1978). Some studies show unwanted effects of negative campaigning, such as political apathy among citizens (Garramone 1984; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). I consider both directions of rhetoric — descriptions of other parties and of reality — as equally important when it comes to the negativity of messages. Therefore, measuring the **valence** of the message becomes an important task in an empirical analysis. How much of the rhetoric consists of negative descriptions, in contrast to neutral and positive accounts?

3. Parties must relate to themselves and their trustworthiness. Many experts on rhetoric regard the construction of **identity** as perhaps the most important tool in the art of persuasion (Burke 1962; Corcoran 1979, 171; Bitzer 1981, 234; Llewellyn 1994, 59). Burke (1962, 522, 546) provides a typical example of identification, with the candidate speaking to an agricultural society: "I was a farm boy myself." This is the **ethos** proof of classical rhetoric. Ethos is about the image of the speaker, about establishing a sense of affinity or unity between the speaker or sender of the message and the audience (see also Nir 1988; Bauhr 1996). This may be done either by praising and flattering the audience ("you know better than to be fooled by x's dirty tricks!") or by making a show of sharing experiences with the audience (as in Burke's example above).
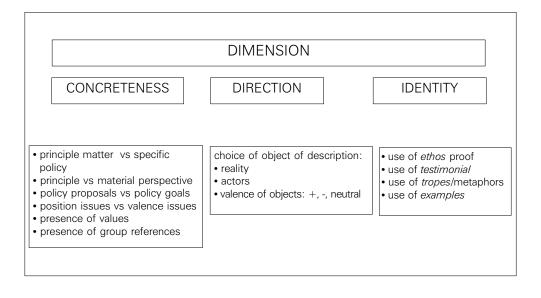
Testimonial is another technique for stressing the value of trust and for indirectly establishing proximity between the persuader and the audience. The persuader refers to a widely respected person (or a collective body of some kind), thus getting a "free-ride" on that person's authority ("almost all leading experts believe that the nuclear waste problem will be solved") (Lee and Lee 1939; see also van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 213).

Two other properties of rhetoric relevant to the construction of identity, and possibly also to the concreteness of rhetoric, are tropes and examples. **Trope** is a generic term for metaphors, metonyms and similes. Tropes facilitate communication about new, complex and abstract phenomena by connecting them to something known and understandable (e.g., "to steer the ship of the state" for "governing the country"). Tropes also encompass a deceptive element, so they have considerable persuasive power. To make things easier to understand often means to simplify matters to a great extent (Rigotti 1994, 36; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Miller 1979). **Examples (exempla)** have a similar simplifying function when dealing with complex matters. They also bring complex matters closer to the audience, making them apprehensible. Examples may take the form of references to individuals, either as role models or as victims of wrongful political measures of opponents ("When travelling the country, I met NN, the owner of a small shop. Due to heavy taxes on labour, he is prevented from employing another assistant"). Exempla may also identify with other nations ("In x-land a similar policy to what you propose has been implemented. The consequences were devastating. Let us not try it here!"), or allude to literature or history.

The presence of ethos proof, testimonial proof, tropes, and examples, are each used as indicators of a rhetoric communicating identity between speaker and audience, between party and citizens.

"Media turn" effects may appear in each of the three dimensions. Increasing vagueness will appear, among other ways, as an increasing number of valence issues compared to clear positions. Personalisation will cause more emphasis on the politicians as persons and their relation to their audience, the public. Therefore they are likely to employ more of the rhetorical devices of the identity dimension.

Table 2: Dimensions of Party Election Rhetoric and Their Operational Indicators

DIMENSION		
CONCRETENESS	DIRECTION	IDENTITY
• principle matter vs specific policy • principle vs material perspective • policy proposals vs policy goals • position issues vs valence issues • presence of values • presence of group references	choice of object of description: • reality • actors • valence of objects: +, -, neutral	• use of *ethos* proof • use of *testimonial* • use of *tropes*/metaphors • use of *examples*

Context and Design of the Study

The questions I would like to answer can be summed up accordingly:

1. if systematic variation in the three dimensions of party rhetoric presented above can actually be confirmed, and if so…
2. if party rhetoric changes over time according to the hypotheses of "media turn," and/or…
3. if possible differences in rhetoric can be attributed to the parties' roles in the power game,
4. if possible differences vary with differences in the political system.

To test the hypotheses of the changing party rhetoric, an extensive comparative study over time and space would be required. First, the study should be conducted over a long time span, to include the most crucial events in media history associated with "media turn." Over the last 50 years, most European countries have experienced the emergence of television, professional journalism, and the commercialisation of broadcast media (Euromedia Research Group 1992). Comparing rhetoric from before and after these events will give us an answer to the question of whether change has taken place in rhetoric, and, in that case, whether it has taken on "media turn" characteristics.

Furthermore, the study should consist of several parties' election messages, in order to conclude whether status in the power game has an impact on rhetoric . Therefore, the parties are to be categorised as belonging to government or opposition, respectively. The long period of time will also allow us to control ideological differences as parties alter in government/opposition position.

However, it is not sufficient to study election rhetoric within one single political system only. The rules for party competition are different in countries with different numbers of parties, with majority or proportional representation. For example, the majority representation system, with the (often) consequential two-party structure, theoretically gives parties little incentive to provide clear and profiled policy stands. According to Downs (1957, 117-127), parties must compete for the majority of voters holding "close to middle" opinions in a left-right spectrum. Parties must thus adjust their views towards the middle, which produces less concrete standpoints. The differences in competition pattern between two-party systems and multi-party systems may also affect the direction of the election propaganda.

The ideal design would include parties from at least one country with each proportional and majority election system, respectively.

Apart from country differences stemming from party systems or electoral systems, one cannot neglect the importance of other national peculiarities when choosing cases for the study. Although hard to define, national political culture — in a broad sense — is likely to be important in defining the way rhetoric is used. When comparing Swedish political rhetoric with that of other countries (especially America), Åsard and Bennett (1997, 145) consider the former issue centred, serious in character, quiet and unobtrusive, and with only little rhetorical "colouring" (Åsard and Bennett 1997, 145; Åsard 1990; see also Brandorf et al 1996, 27). Countries with different histories and traditions may also differ in rhetorical culture (Bowler and Farrell 1992, 7; Ware 1996, 306).

Only a few previous studies have systematically compared the form and content of different propaganda channels in elections, though we know that parties use dif-

ferent media for different purposes (Maarek 1995, 59; Graber 1981, 210). As citizens are likely to use and evaluate channels in different ways, it will also be of interest to characterise and compare rhetoric in various settings. For example, we may expect written rhetoric to be distinct from oral in some respects. Rhetorical behaviour in a debate will also differ from that of a rally speech.

The channels used in electoral rhetoric may be of two kinds: party/ politician-controlled and journalist-controlled, respectively. Channels may also be direct and interactive (politician and audience meet directly and may interact) or indirect and unidirectional (no direct feed-back between sender and receiver).

Table 3. Important Channels for Election Propaganda
          (based on Maarek 1995)

	party controlled	journalist controlled
direct/interactive	rallies, public meetings, canvassing, Interment servers	
indirect/unidirectional	posters, brochures	TV news, TV interviews
	TV debates (semi-controlled)	

I will focus on messages transmitted by parties to the citizens during the election campaigns. Accordingly, I choose to include such channels of propaganda as are controlled by the political parties, with as little journalistic involvement as possible. I will include material listed above both as "direct" and "indirect" in character. I will, however, ignore the interactive aspects of the communication. While I focus on the parties and their rhetoric, I regard communication as a one-way process. This is the dominating direction of communication during election campaigns (Wachtel 1988, 12).

Except for party control over the messages, four additional conditions should be fulfilled. The material in the analysis should:

(1) be authoritative in character, i.e., sanctioned by the highest possible level of each party. Local or regional propaganda, as well as propaganda produced by a faction or a sub-organisation of the party, is thereby excluded.

(2) be as broad and comprehensive as possible when it comes to topics. Debates, brochures, etc. should be of general content, reflecting the programme the particular party tries to implement. Thematically specialised material of any kind (e.g., "X-party on drug policy" or TV debates on unemployment) will therefore not be included.

(3) turn to as broad a public as possible. Nation-wide propaganda in national elections are qualified for the study. Propaganda internal to parties will thus not be studied.

(4) include channels of different character. Since language is a question of style and varies in different contexts, I need to study the different settings of propaganda. Direct and indirect communication is represented in the sample, as well as written and oral messages.

Below I list the channels I have chosen for a previous study of Swedish rhetoric in referendum and parliamentary election campaigns (Håkansson 1996):

Election manifestos. These make up an old tradition in Swedish politics, as in many other countries. Parties produce manifestos as little booklets, with the purpose to give an overview of the stands and proposals of the party for the next parliamentary term. The main target group is the more-than-averagely interested voter and/ or party members (Budge, Robertson and Hearl 1987; Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge 1994). By including manifestos in the study, it will be possible to examine written rhetoric, which is probably more formal in style than oral rhetoric.

Public speeches by the party leaders. Public meetings, or rallies, constitute an important feature of election campaigns. Party leaders and other significant representatives tour the country and appear in front of mass audiences indoors or outdoors (e.g., in schools, theatres, main squares). I will use speeches from the beginning of the election campaigns, which, in Sweden, traditionally start four to six weeks before election day with a major speech delivered by each party chairman (Esaiasson 1991). In the US, candidate speeches are often used to determine the main issues and general symbols of an election campaign (West 1984).

TV debates. At the very end of the election campaign, the leaders of all parties represented in parliament gather for a debate transmitted on public TV and radio. The tradition dates back to 1932, and the format of this event has remained virtually unchanged since. The debate lasts between two and three-and-a-half hours, and the representatives have equal speaking time and are free to bring up any subject. The function of the moderator is only to keep track of the time elapsed and the order of the speakers, not to pose questions or to control the agenda. Typical traits of this channel compared to the others are the limited time resources given each participant and the fact that the parties interact with each other, forcing them to react to one another. This ensures a blend of prepared speech and more spontaneous rhetoric.

Short note on methodology. Political texts and political communication in general may employ a number of methods. The aim of the study proposed in this paper is to uncover rhetorical variation in election debates. Both form and content are addressed. To answer the questions posed, party propaganda messages must undergo an analysis in which their properties are categorised and systematised. In order to determine whether changes have occurred, and which differences are most important, I need to be exact in presenting results. Thus, it is not only the presence of the investigated phenomena that is of interest, but also the frequency by which it appears. A content analysis is likely to be the most useful method of the empirical study. Content analysis is a generic term for several techniques used to analyse the content of texts or pictures. They all enable a systematic study with the aid of predefined variables and categories. This procedure provides precise results and measurable reliability, which, in turn, facilitate more secure conclusions (Holsti 1969; Hofstetter 1981).

Conclusion

In a political world where more resources than ever are spent on political persuasion, we need to improve our knowledge of how politicians actually persuade. In this respect, I wish to provide some answers to the fundamental questions: "What do they say?" and "How do they say it"?

Apart from determining whether politicians have changed their manner of addressing the public during decades of media development, I hope to contribute to knowledge in two more specific, and somewhat neglected, fields: First, the framework is designed for comparative research. This is an important task in a field where much inquiry stops at the border of one single political system. Second, it also takes into account that political parties will vary their rhetoric based on the setting. With a scheme of analysis, it will be possible to characterise and compare the levels of rhetorical traits in several propaganda channels used by the parties.

No normative aspects of political rhetoric are directly addressed in this paper. The effects of the "media turn" in politics are most often referred to as negative traits. Sometimes, it is taken — in almost apocalyptic terms — as a sign of the coming breakdown of representative democracy as such. This is not the place to evaluate any such possible outcome of a study based on the party rhetoric model. Nevertheless, such a study may well serve as a new basis for the long-standing discussion of who is the hero and who is to blame: the journalist or the politician.

Notes:

1. Examples of studies of political rhetoric are Zimmermann (1969); Dieckmann (1975); Corcoran (1979); Riker (1996); Åsard and Bennett (1997).

2. In the following, I use the term 'media turn' to refer to the above mentioned media logic effects on election rhetoric. The term is taken from Hernes (1978, 189).

3. Findings of this kind are also in line with the hypothesis of the 1950s and 1960s known as 'end of ideology' (Bell 1960).

4. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (4th century BC) is the oldest known textbook on persuasion, while probably the most famous classical work on rhetoric is Quintilian's *De institutione oratoria* (1st century AD). The world's oldest chair in political science, the Skyttean professorship in Eloquence and Government at Uppsala University (Sweden), shows by its very denomination the status of rhetoric in the study of politics by the time of its foundation in 1622.

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