

# Communication and Language Analysis in the Public Sphere

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This chapter begins with an assumption that while democracy means the people rule, how the people are supposed to rule is both always in need of articulation and subject to change over time. Given this, this chapter explores the rhetoric of commencement addresses delivered at various colleges and universities between 1935 and 2012 to examine the ways in which democracy is imagined. What an analysis of these 158 speeches reveals is that democratic citizenship has increasingly become understood as the ability to pursue individual happiness and success. Moreover, such a vision of citizenship has been given to young adults through the increasing use of personal narratives instead of arguments derived from shared or universal values. Such changes in how the American people imagine democracy ultimately present the nation with some important challenges for self-governance.

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Although prior research demonstrates that charisma and rhetoric are two determinants of voting behavior, few studies have examined the effects of charismatic rhetoric and affect as they pertain to the outcomes of presidential elections. Using DICTION software for content analysis, 432 pre-convention speeches from the 2008 presidential election were analyzed to explore the effects that charismatic rhetoric and affect have on presidential candidates' success. Results indicate that there were more similarities than differences in the charismatic and affect-laden rhetoric of successful and unsuccessful presidential candidates in both the Republican and Democratic parties. Overall, the results demonstrate that both successful and unsuccessful presidential candidates used charismatic rhetoric and emotional language to motivate their followers in the 2008 presidential election.

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Socioscientific controversies are “extended argumentative engagements over socially significant issues ... comprising communicative events and practices in and from both scientific and nonscientific spheres” (Stewart, 2009, p. 125). While global warming is not controversial among the vast majority of climate scientists, socioscientific controversies over global warming abound in various media, as citizens, politicians, journalists, and others discuss and weigh the scientific evidence for and appropriate policy responses to global warming. In this chapter, the authors investigate the lexical choices used in the New York Times in straight news articles reporting on controversies about global warming from 2001-2006, as partisan differences on this issue became more pronounced. Specifically, using DICTION 5.0, the authors analyze 87 news reports, comparing those focused on science issues with those focused on policy issues. These statistical lexical comparisons are supplemented with qualitative discourse analyses.

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A powerful tool for content analysis, DICTION allows scholars to illuminate the ideas, perspectives, and linguistic tendencies of a wide variety of political actors. At its best, a tool like DICTION allows scholars not just to describe the features of political language, but also to analyze the causes and the consequences those features in ways that advance our understanding political communication more broadly. Effective analysis involves helping academic audiences understand what the measures being used mean, how the results relate to broader theoretical constructs, and the extent to which findings reveal something important about the political world. This involves exploring both the causes and the consequences of linguistic choices, including by attending closely to how those texts are received by their intended audiences. In this chapter, the authors review ways in which DICTION has been used and might be used to better understand the role of political leadership, the meaning of democracy, and the effects of political language on the political behavior of ordinary citizens.

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## Chapter 24

# DICTION and the Study of American Politics

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### ABSTRACT

*A powerful tool for content analysis, DICTION allows scholars to illuminate the ideas, perspectives, and linguistic tendencies of a wide variety of political actors. At its best, a tool like DICTION allows scholars not just to describe the features of political language, but also to analyze the causes and the consequences those features in ways that advance our understanding political communication more broadly. Effective analysis involves helping academic audiences understand what the measures being used mean, how the results relate to broader theoretical constructs, and the extent to which findings reveal something important about the political world. This involves exploring both the causes and the consequences of linguistic choices, including by attending closely to how those texts are received by their intended audiences. In this chapter, the authors review ways in which DICTION has been used and might be used to better understand the role of political leadership, the meaning of democracy, and the effects of political language on the political behavior of ordinary citizens.*

### INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this volume represent an impressive array of possibilities for using DICTION to examine and illuminate American politics. Because language is at the heart of much of the political world—as Wilson Carey McWilliams put it, “politics is fundamentally a matter of speech, and in democracies, of public speech” (quoted in Hart 2002, 8) – the potential contexts for content analysis using tools like DICTION are practically boundless. Even a quick perusal of the chapters in this volume shows a nearly dizzying variety

of approaches. These range from understanding various aspects of campaign rhetoric – debates, stump speeches, and other campaign communications – to many different facets of governing, including press conferences, speeches, budget communications, and many more. Access to multiple drafts of speeches even allows readers to observe White House communication efforts as they take shape. Automated content analysis also enables scholars featured here to explore topics as diverse as Bill Clinton’s childhood homes or the democratic implications of university commencement addresses. The range of data analyzed is a

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testament to DICTION's flexibility as a content analysis tool, its ability to open new understandings of political communication, and the creativity of the scholars using it.

At the same time, the chapters dedicated to the study of politics also highlight some important lessons – both positive and negative – for scholars hoping to use DICTION and other such tools in the future. In this sense, the chapters are doubly valuable; they both reveal DICTION's capacity to shed light on substantive elements of American political life and prompt broader reflection about its role in the study of political communication. If the goal is greater understanding of the causes and effects of political language, the study of political communication with tools like DICTION is a promising path, but it must also ground the use of the measures DICTION creates in careful theory, attend to relevant results from other corners of political science and communications, and reflect thoughtfully on the normative implications of the results.

In other words, content analysis resources like DICTION should allow scholars not just to describe the features of political language (though that is an important first step), but also to analyze the causes and the consequences of those features in ways that advance our understanding of political communication more broadly. In this new age of data in which scholars have access to more and more diverse raw material for analysis than ever before, those who use DICTION have an obligation to help audiences understand what the measures they are using mean, how the results relate to broader theoretical constructs, and the extent to which their findings reveal something important about the political world. This involves exploring both the causes and the consequences of linguistic choices, including by attending closely to how those texts are received by their intended audiences.

All of this is important because, as Roderick Hart has written, political language “is an instrument of power” (2002, 26). DICTION's contribution is that it allows scholars to take words

seriously. Researchers can explore systematically how language is used by creating quantifiable (and replicable) variables, comparing the results from one text or set of texts to others generated in different contexts or by different political actors, and combining the variables – much as we might stack building blocks – in unique and creative ways. Thus, scholars who choose to adopt DICTION can certainly make use of the five master variables – certainty, optimism, activity, realism, and commonality – and these are the constructs that much of the best-known existing research has explored, but the possibilities are also much broader than that, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate. Through lexical layering, scholars can also build their own measures of abstract ideas, operationalizing the concepts that are most useful to their theories and hypotheses. They can also generate their own dictionaries, using them to identify concrete themes and track specific, substantive terms of interest.

Such flexibility makes DICTION an extremely powerful tool, one that can gauge both the presence (and absence) of specific, politically meaningful terms and plumb the broader, less immediately obvious elements and patterns of word usage. These patterns can be described as tone, and Hart, Childers, and Lind define it as “a tool people use (sometimes unwittingly) to create distinct social impressions via word choice” (2013, 9). They assume that tone is “the product of (1) individual word choices that (2) cumulatively build up (3) to produce patterned expectations (4) telling an audience something important (5) about the author's outlook on things” (Hart, Childers, and Lind 2013, 12). Tone involves how speakers consciously or unconsciously construct their world through language. The promise of DICTION is that it allows scholars to observe these verbal patterns to illuminate the ideas, perspectives, and tendencies of political actors.

My hope in this chapter is, therefore, to ask some broader questions, both about what we have learned already and about how DICTION might be used in the future. I hope that exploring such

questions will spark additional discussion not only about the ways language shapes politics, but also how scholars might profitably use DICTION to further develop our understanding of the political world.

Along the way, I will highlight these themes and questions by reviewing what we learn from the chapters in this volume. Given the constraints of space, even in a volume as large as this, the choice to explore some chapters in more depth than others is not in any way meant to slight the value of other chapters. All of the chapters that contribute to this volume shed some helpful light on the uses and meaning of language, and a different author would surely have chosen a different set of chapters for additional consideration. Still, I hope that what follows will be helpful both to those who use DICTION as part of their scholarly work and the wider audience of political scientists and communication scholars who care about the meaning and the effects of language.

### **The Sounds of Leadership**

Not surprisingly, the scholar who has set the agenda for using the new tools of computer-aided content analysis to better understand how political actors use language is the creator of DICTION, Roderick Hart. Beginning with his *Verbal Style and the American Presidency* (1984) Hart traces basic differences in linguistic tone within and across the presidencies of Truman through Reagan. More recently, in his *Campaign Talk* (2002) and, with Jay Childers and Colene Lind, in *Political Tone* (2013), Hart has again used DICTION to explore the contours of political talk among aspirants to (and winners of) political office. These classic monographs establish the foundation of how content analysis can uncover both expected and surprising patterns in political talk. Importantly, some of the volumes also expand beyond formal political actors and even the press to begin to capture the voices of ordinary citizens, a theme to which I will return in much greater detail below.

The bulk of the political analysis making use of DICTION has focused, however, on candidates and office-holders, and the chapters in this volume continue this general tendency. But they also push the uses of DICTION forward in several creative ways. For example, Ken Collier's contribution in this volume (Chapter 11) allows readers a firsthand look at the rhetorical presidency under construction. Collier's dataset comprises 494 speech drafts of 67 speeches across 10 presidencies. By taking the inventive step of analyzing multiple drafts of the same speech and making effective use of the normal ranges found in DICTION's library of comparison texts, Collier is able to shed light on the push and pull of different interests within the White House or different agencies within the executive branch, each trying to shape important speeches as they develops.

The results show considerable change during the speech-writing process for most presidents, though considerable variation across presidencies as well. For example, Ted Sorensen's leading role in speech preparation within the Kennedy West Wing meant greater consistency across the drafts of speeches relative to most presidents. This contrasts sharply with the much less centralized process – and much greater variability across drafts – under Lyndon Johnson. Such results allow Collier helpful insights not just into the content of speeches, but into the power dynamics within the White House and the organizational processes that shape both public rhetoric and public policy. Collier's analysis thus leads to a question that is worthy of further study: how do the organizational choices presidents make influence both the process of speechmaking and its end results? Scholars have already shown that presidents organize the West Wing in a host of different ways (for an overview, see Pika 1988); Collier's analysis prompts a desire to link more carefully to the larger literature on executive organization and an opportunity for more reflection about the relationship between those management choices and the texts of various kinds that emerge from it.

Colene Lind's work (Chapter 6) moves readers out of the White House and onto the campaign trail, providing a fascinating glimpse into the rhetorical patterns of unsuccessful aspirants to the presidency: the Republican candidates in the 2012 presidential primaries. Her focus is how the candidates make use of the "language of deference," which she contrasts with the idea of civility. The key difference is that deference is shown "to someone or something," while civility is a broader category of behavior. As Lind defines it, democratic deference is "a style whose presence is indicated by words of appreciation for the people's power and wisdom; of accommodation and consideration of voters and their needs; and of leaderly obligation to citizens as their dutiful, responsive servants. It also includes words of disregard for political leaders and their ability to exact competent change." In this sense, deference is about how the relationship between leaders and citizens is formed in the speech of presidential candidates, and Lind's dataset includes several different forums for candidate talk, including debates, speeches, and question-and-answer sessions.

Her operationalization of deference makes thoughtful use of DICTION's capacity for lexical layering – the ability to develop new measures by combining the raw material of output produced by DICTION in unique and theoretically meaningful ways. Thus, Lind is able to fashion new variables that tap into the key dimensions of her theory of deference – presentational appreciation, avoidant appreciation, accommodation, and obligation. Each of these variables is formed with a linear combination of discrete, subaltern measures available from DICTION. For example, Lind's measure of accommodation adds passivity and embellishment but subtracts words that involve aggression and denial. Her variable tapping presentational appreciation adds words indicating praise, satisfaction, accomplishment, human interest, rapport and cooperation. Together, these new variables and others like them are meant to show the larger concept of deference in practice.

The ability to create variables through lexical layering is one of the most powerful aspects of the DICTION program, but its success depends nearly entirely on two factors: 1) the value of the theory being operationalized and 2) the researcher's ability to show that lexical layering leads to the construction of variables that are valid measures of the theory. In other words, researchers hoping to follow Lind's example must attend closely to theory and must make the case that they have constructed measures that do, in fact, combine tonalities in ways that "add up" to be empirically meaningful and true to the theory. It is possible, of course, that linear combinations are not always the correct way to construct such variables, and each construction needs an adequate theoretical and methodological defense. As Hart and Scacco mention in this volume (Chapter 4), "Ultimately, the usefulness of the approach will be determined by its face validity – Does the created variable capture tonalities that reasonable people would notice when inspecting the discourse on their own?" Such validity will not be immediately obvious in every case to readers, which means that researchers carry the obligation to defend and explain their measures, grounding them with illustrative textual examples and connecting them explicitly to their theory and hypotheses. While critics of automated content analysis like DICTION might despair that quantification strips language of its richness, in fact the use of tools like lexical layering increases the scholarly need to attend carefully to rich theoretical constructs and the connection between those constructs and the texts. In other words, when used well, such layering allows for a theoretically meaningful view of textual elements that might not have been immediately obvious, even with a close qualitative reading. Again, whether or not such insights are found depends on researchers who carefully develop their theory and who think hard about the operationalization of that theory.

In Lind's case, the results of her exploration of democratic deference allow for illuminating comparisons of the candidates, but perhaps more

importantly, they also reveal sharp differences between candidates' level of deference toward citizens and their level of deference toward each other. (This part of the analysis allows her to combine lexical layering with custom dictionaries designed to capture references to leaders and citizens.) Specifically, Lind finds that politicians tend to have a "cool and socially distant but reverential attitude toward leadership," including high levels of obligation with respect to other leaders. Toward the people, candidate speech included higher levels of presentational appreciation, but lower levels of avoidance, accommodation, and obligation. These differences raise a host of additional questions about the relationship between leaders and citizens in our contemporary political environment. For example, did such patterns stay constant as the primary context changed and the field of candidates was winnowed down? And would such patterns also be found among Democrats, who might construct their rhetorical relationship to the people quite differently than Republicans? More importantly, how do citizens respond to the way candidates behave toward them? Do they rally to certain forms of deference and reject others? Lind concludes her chapter by speculating that "tonal deference might be one part of the equation" explaining electoral success, and more remains to be done to find out whether that is true. No matter what the answer, knowing how citizens respond to difference or its absence will illuminate something important about the sound of leadership – and its efficacy – in contemporary politics.

Perhaps the most impressive example of using DICTION to explore the sound of leadership is Hart and Scacco's work on the modern presidency's changing uses of the press conference (Chapter 4). The list of this chapter's virtues is long, and it is in many ways a model for how to lay out key concepts, defend the operationalization of variables, and connect the results to meaningful political phenomenon with a host

of real-world implications. Scholars interested in using DICTION effectively would do well to emulate its example.

Using a sample of ten press conferences for all presidents from Truman to Obama as well as comparison samples drawn from campaign and public policy speeches, Hart and Scacco develop custom dictionaries that allow them to compare and contrast domestic policy with foreign policy. They also make use of the same sort of lexical layering that can be found in the Lind chapter, which allows them to develop measures of "promotional tone," "protective tone," and "transcendent tone," each of which reflects a concept present in the scholarly literature. In addition to the words of presidents, Hart and Scacco analyze the behavior of reporters at press conferences, comparing them with a sample of news broadcasts and print news stories. This comparison relies primarily on measures that are the reciprocal of those for presidents – "interrogatory," "clinical," and "grounded" tones. The analysis can thus embrace multiple comparisons – contrasting presidents over time and with each other, comparing presidents' behavior in press conferences with other forms of presidential rhetoric, exploring differences between presidents and reporters, showing how reporters have changed over time, and examining how reporters' statements in press conferences compare to their linguistic choices in other venues. Each of these comparisons yields valuable insights, and all connect back to well-developed scholarly theory about the meaning and uses of press conferences.

A complete rehearsal of everything readers might learn from this impressive research is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Hart and Scacco clearly show that the language of both presidents and reporters at press conferences varies with context – both the context of issue domains and the context of time. For example, reminiscent of the "two presidencies" thesis (Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008; Wildavsky 1966), presidents' tonalities in the realm of domestic

politics appear to be quite different from the type of speech used with respect to foreign policy. Over time, the presidential uses of the press conference have also changed, with presidents becoming more pro-active and less reactive to reporters' inquiries. Reporters have changed, too, becoming less clinical, grounded and interrogatory – “mild-mannered,” the researchers describe, and less willing than reporters who are not in the room with the president to “adopt a forceful, empirical style.” As Hart and Scacco summarize, the presidential press conference “is now less a sharp give-and-take and more a series of set-pieces where a reporter occasionally interrupts a script the president has already practiced and perfected.” Prime minister's question time it is not.

Without a doubt, these are findings with substantial implications for our understanding of accountability, the role of the media, and the practice of contemporary politics, all of which deserve further discussion and investigation. The Hart and Scacco chapter reveals in microcosm the power of content analysis tools like *DICTION* to operationalize theoretically meaningful concepts with custom dictionaries and lexical layering, the ability to explore those concepts across contexts, and the possibility of connecting them to larger theoretical concerns found in political science, communications, or broader normative theories of democracy. Most importantly, then, it shows how attending carefully to word usage allows researchers to illuminate the political world in meaningful ways. Put simply, when used well, tools like *DICTION* really do allow scholars to “hear” the sounds of leadership.

### **DICTION and the Meaning of Democracy**

However, the language of democratic life is not found only in explicitly political settings like debates or press conferences. For example, Childers and Wonnacott (Chapter 5) draw creatively on a sample of university commencement addresses

to explore the changing meanings of democracy and citizenship between 1935 and 2012. Their research question is clear and important: how has our public discourse about democracy and American values changed since the mid-20th century? The extent to which their analysis represents a satisfactory answer depends, in part, on whether university commencement addresses are a meaningful window into public norms and values. Childers and Wonnacott argue that as a form of epideictic rhetoric, commencement speeches are precisely the place where speakers, chosen for their cultural prominence, are expected to reflect on communal life more broadly. In these settings, speakers offer guidance, emphasize shared values, and invite graduates to imagine their place in American society. And as recent coverage of Barack Obama's speech to Morehouse College graduates indicates (Capehart 2013), they are rhetorical moments that tap into larger political issues and disputes of the day.

The results of the Childers and Wonnacott analysis are striking: since 1935, the nation's democratic discourse has changed dramatically. Levels of certainty, discussion of core principles, and inspirational talk about moral values have declined precipitously, with the loss of the language of absolutes replaced by autobiographical story-telling in which the speaker charts his or her path to individual-level satisfaction. In essence, commencement addresses since the Great Depression trace the loss of the language of common moral anchors and the rise of a more self-satisfied, more individualistic approach to public speech. Childers and Wonnacott worry that such change ultimately portends a loss of communal identity and an unwillingness to shoulder the hardships that might attend democratic life, perhaps by decreasing Americans' ability (or willingness) to sacrifice on behalf of their fellow citizens.

Like the chapters from Collier, Lind, and Hart and Scacco, the Childers and Wonnacott chapter highlights some of the unique virtues of automated content analysis tools like *DICTION*. The

authors ask an important question and identify a moderately large sample of 158 texts that could shed light on that question (though the method of selecting the texts is not entirely clear). The DICTION analysis yields statistically significant results that might not have been immediately obvious, even with a close qualitative reading. Just as crucially, the authors use lexical layering in a sophisticated way, establishing how the discrete DICTION variables, such as Human Interest, Motion, and Temporal Terms, combine to form a measure of narrative style. Though they note that these variables are only a “rudimentary” measure of narrative, making the case that these individual measures add up to a valid indicator is critically important for the larger argument, as I argued earlier. The authors bolster their case by supplementing their findings with meaningful examples that enrich the discussion and give life to the quantitative results. Finally, Childers and Wonnacott connect their results to some larger substantive and normative themes. In other words, they pair their analysis with a discussion of why the results might matter for democratic life more broadly. This combination of creative dataset, defense of basic measures, and connection to normatively meaningful conclusions about the nation’s political culture and communal identity enables the authors to use DICTION in especially productive ways.

Perhaps because the authors aspire to comment on the meaning of democracy more generally, a single chapter can only be the first step in a larger research program. As striking as they are, the results also raise other questions relevant both to the use of DICTION in the future and to a more complete understanding of American political culture. For example, to what extent are these results limited to university commencement addresses, which, as the authors themselves point out, are a unique rhetorical form? Can listeners hear the decline of the language of communal sacrifice and the rise of self-centered (and self-satisfied) storytelling in other politically relevant

rhetoric, such as inaugural or State of the Union addresses, campaign stump speeches, or responses to citizens at town hall meetings? DICTION would allow for a relatively easy comparison with the political speech that emerges in other contexts in which speakers reflect about American political norms and values.

As Childers and Wonnacott rightly point out, much has changed in American political life since 1935, so it is difficult to isolate any single cause for the change in political rhetoric. Nonetheless, it is possible to explore more deeply the extent to which these new forms of political talk are found across the political spectrum. In a political culture that is increasingly defined by elite polarization (Fiorina and Abrams 2011; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Mann and Ornstein 2012), for example, we might expect partisan differences in both the form and the substance of political communication. Further study can explore the extent to which Republicans and Democrats speak differently about democracy, individualism, and common moral foundations. Exploring such potential differences would allow readers to better contextualize the authors’ conclusions about the larger implications of the shifts they document.

Other normative implications of the tendency to talk about moral absolutes or the propensity to engage in individualistic story-telling are also possible, and these too speak to the implications of the findings. For example, Lynn Sanders (1997) has described narrative as part of an alternative model of public discourse, one that stands in contrast to the focus on common interests, common goals, and common language that is typical of democratic (and especially deliberative) theory. Narrative, in the form of personal testimony, is instead a rhetorical form that “allows for the expression of different perspectives rather than seeking what’s common” (371; see also Young 1994, 2001). In that sense, it can “include and represent a fuller range of critical voices” and may be especially valuable to groups whose voices have been excluded in the past, including both African-Americans and

women. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that two of the most striking examples of narrative employed by Childers and Wonnacott are drawn from speeches by Nora Ephron and Nancy Pelosi, both of whom tell stories of their rise to positions of authority and prominence.

Sanders urges that the inclusion of such narrative voices represents an improvement in democratic culture, not a loss. She concludes that the goal of political discourse ought to be an effort “to ensure that those who are usually left out of public discussion learn to speak whether their perspectives are common or not, and those who usually dominate learn to hear the perspectives of others” (1997, 373). This perspective runs strongly counter to Childers and Wonnacott’s concern that the rise of narrative means decreasing ability to commit to shared sacrifice or the loss of other important democratic values. By ignoring the approach of Sanders and others who have highlighted the rhetorical value of narrative, Childers and Wonnacott miss an opportunity to ground their discussion more firmly in the large and vibrant literature about the meaning and purpose of democratic discourse. One of the virtues of *DICTION* is its ability to uncover normatively important trends in the usages of public language, but that also means connecting more directly to the work of political and social theorists who care about language.

Ultimately, the question of the consequences of the change Childers and Wonnacott so ably highlight extends beyond the scope of their paper. A full treatment in one chapter would be impossible. It requires both additional normative theorizing of the kind I have urged and greater empirical attention to the effects of narrative on ordinary citizens. With respect to the effects on the audience, the perspectives of both Sanders, on the one hand, and Childers and Wonnacott, on the other, call out for additional testing. Moreover, it is to this theme – how those who hear political rhetoric receive it and respond – that I turn next.

## **What about the Audience?**

The relationship between rhetoric and citizen responsiveness has been an issue for political observers at least since the Sophists, and one perspective on political rhetoric holds that politicians do not change opinion; they merely parrot back what the audience already believes (Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995). Political scientists Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2000) have argued, though, that politicians do not pander to public opinion; instead, they seek to shape it by crafting their public statements in ways that are likely to win support for the policies they want. This is an important argument, and Lakoff (2006) and a host of others have asserted that language use shapes how citizens respond to policy alternatives. Research directly connecting elements of presidential rhetoric to public opinion is, however, surprisingly thin.

Politicians certainly behave as if language matters. The political scientist Samuel Kernell (2006) has famously argued, for example, that modern presidents increasingly draw upon the strategy of “going public” as an important element of presidential leadership. Kernell defines “going public” as what occurs when “a president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing to the American public for support” (2006, 2). Similarly, Jeffrey Tulis has called popular or mass rhetoric “a principal tool of presidential governance,” one that, for some contemporary observers at least, may be the “essential task” of the presidency (1988, 4). In the American system, no other public official can command the public’s attention and the channels of mass communication in the same way as the president (Key 1964). The rise of the strategies of “going public” and, more broadly, what Tulis calls “the rhetorical presidency” represent key elements of the modern presidential leadership, and both White House and congressional staffers say that this sort of presidential speech-making and appeal beyond the Beltway makes a difference (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Continuing this

theme, Edwards (2006) provides considerable anecdotal evidence that presidents believe their “permanent campaign” of speeches and other public communications will move the public. The assumption that presidents can move public opinion is, in Edwards’s words, “widespread and pervasive” (2006, 24).

But perhaps such assumptions are wrong. It is possible, after all, that the expectations of elites are mistaken and that presidential language does not much affect public opinion. Several scholars have found, for example, that major speeches are often accompanied by a small bump in public approval, but that such changes are ephemeral and likely to evaporate quickly (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Ragsdale 1984, 1987; Simon and Ostrom 1989; Welch 2003). In *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*, the presidential scholar George Edwards (2006) provides the most forceful articulation of this perspective. Edwards shows that with respect to a host of issues, even presidents who are thought to be the most gifted communicators have little success moving public opinion. The public is remarkably stable with respect to its views about most issues, and if anything, the trend moves away from public support for the president’s preferences. Edwards finds little evidence of charismatic leadership or other personal qualities of presidents that might enhance the effects of presidential messages and translate a president’s words into increased public support, even for presidents who are typically thought to be great communicators (Reagan, Clinton, Kennedy, or Roosevelt) or our most honored and venerable leaders (Washington).

What is more, given the flood of modern media communications, presidents will generally find it very difficult to focus the public’s attention on their narrow set of preferred issues. As Edwards puts it, “If the president’s messages are to meet his coalition-building needs, the public must sort through the profusion of communications in its environment, overcome its limited interest in government and politics, and concentrate on

the president’s priority concerns. It is not exaggeration to conclude that focusing the public’s attention is usually a substantial challenge” (2006, 155). Edwards allows that presidents can try to frame issues or to prime certain considerations that might affect public evaluations, but these attempts are complicated by competing frames, media coverage, lack of attention from the public, and the previous ideological, partisan, and policy commitments of those who do hear the president’s messages. As Edwards summarizes, “Most people ignore or reject arguments contrary to their predispositions,” and even those most inclined to accept the message may resist if national opinion trends run counter the president’s preferences (2006, 238). In other words, a low percentage of Americans is listening to the president’s words; among those who are listening, low levels of political knowledge make comprehension more difficult, and even those who hear and understand may resist because of their policy preferences and partisan predispositions. Presidential rhetoric thus faces some profound limitations, both in terms of the messages presidents attempt to send and the audience’s willingness to listen and respond.

If Edwards is correct, then perhaps the attention lavished in this volume on the language of presidents and aspirants to the presidency is excessive. After all, a president’s words rarely account for more than a small percentage of the crush of media messages that are available for consumption, and we have long known that most Americans do not pay close attention to the political world (Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). Perhaps presidential rhetoric is, to borrow the jargon of formal theorists, just so much “cheap talk.” But such a conclusion seems equally as misguided and overly simplistic as the notion that presidential speeches will always lead directly and inexorably to a change in public opinion. Edwards makes the case that presidents’ words cannot move the public at will, but this hardly means that presidential rhetoric is never meaningful for other political actors or the public at large.

With her Theory of Public Appeals, Princeton political scientist Brandice Canes-Wrone (2005) strikes a middle ground between either excessive optimism or unfounded pessimism in the power of words. Canes-Wrone uses the tools of formal theory to specify hypotheses about the conditions under which presidential rhetoric is likely to matter. Her theory holds that presidential speeches and other public appeals will not always make a difference and sometimes might backfire. However, this does not mean that presidential appeals are always doomed to fail. Under some circumstances, they can be effective in furthering the president's policy goals and even in moving public opinion (see also Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992). Among other variables, Canes-Wrone's theory calls special attention to the difference between domestic and foreign policy and to the state of public opinion prior to the president's public statements, as well as the interaction between policy domains and public opinion.

Canes-Wrone provides persuasive evidence in favor of her theory, but her focus is largely on the presence or absence of presidential appeals, not on the substantive content or the verbal style of the words political leaders actually use. Nor does she examine the individual-level responses among those who hear the appeal; hers is an aggregate-level study. Still, by focusing scholarly attention on the conditions under which appeals are likely to matter and by developing and then testing hypotheses about those conditions, Canes-Wrone pushes the debate about the rhetorical presidency and the effect of words forward in helpful ways. Her claims about when and how public speech-making might matter call for further exploration and more rigorous examination that brings the content of speeches and the quality of the rhetoric into play.

DICTION can play a key role in such examination. After all, the specific words a president or other politician chooses to utter – their quality, content, and tone – may matter just as much as the presence or absence of any words at all. Presidents can make their public cases well or

poorly. They can stumble through or inspire ... and all sorts of possibilities in between. DICTION can help scholars identify both substantive and tonal elements and tendencies of politicians' "crafted talk" that are likely to resonate with (or be rejected by) ordinary citizens. Though it has been seldom used for these purposes, DICTION can be used as the first step in a research agenda that aims to understand not just the speaker, but also the reactions of the audience. And drawing on Canes-Wrone's (2005) example, such analysis can also explore the conditions under which rhetorical features of public talk are likely to have more less of an effect. DICTION's results can thus serve not simply as a dependent variable, but also as an independent variable, allowing scholars to measure more precisely when and how citizens – as well as which citizens – respond to political speech with different attributes.

The most extended treatment of how the public responds to the content of presidential rhetoric is B. Dan Wood's *The Politics of Economic Leadership* (2007). Wood does not use DICTION to analyze presidential speeches, but he does use the Public Papers of the Presidents, which include all the papers, speeches, and public remarks issued, by the office of the press secretary, to measure both the frequency and the direction of presidents' rhetoric on the economy. Frequency (which Wood labels "intensity") is operationalized as the number of sentences that refer to topics like the economy, unemployment, inflation, or the federal deficit. What Wood labels as "tone" is a simple measure of the relative optimism or pessimism of the president's remarks, which was generated with a combination of machine and human coding. Wood then adds a temporal dimension to the analysis by exploring how the content and tone of the president's speech varied within each term of office and across presidents. This allows him to explore president-specific differences in economic rhetoric and to investigate how rhetoric changes as the economic and political context varies.

Wood's approach allows him to extend beyond major speeches to a more comprehensive examination of messages, and he finds that presidential rhetoric about the economy does matter. Though the direct effect of presidential optimism about the economy has only a small effect on public approval, the indirect effects can be substantial and involve multiple pathways. Presidential optimism or pessimism, for example, affects the news people hear about the economy, which in turn influences people's approval of how the president is handling economic matters. Presidents' intensity and tone of economic messages can also affect citizens' evaluations of the economy, and these can change patterns of presidential approval. Such indirect effects are in turn reinforced by feedback along many of these pathways. As Wood summarizes, "The consistent picture that emerges from the analysis is that presidents are adaptive to and influential of people's assessments of the economy. This in turn affects the public's aggregate levels of approval of the president's job performance" (2007, 135). In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, presidential rhetoric can change the economic behavior of Americans, again through both direct and indirect routes. For example, optimistic talk from the president makes a difference for consumer confidence, interest rates, and news coverage, all of which can affect economic behavior. The words a president chooses are, Wood concludes, "a powerful instrument of economic leadership that can affect consumer and business perceptions of current and future economic conditions" (2007, 159).

The results of Wood's analysis provide some reassurance that presidential rhetoric can make a difference in both the attitudes and behavior of ordinary Americans, but this is only a first step in understanding the relationship between the president's verbal choices and the wider public. Where Wood's analysis is limited to a simple measure of how optimistic or pessimistic the president's pronouncements were, DICTION provides a greatly expanded array of tonal di-

mensions. These might incorporate the master variables, the measures that comprise the master variables, new variables created through lexical layering, or other measures created through custom dictionaries. The possibilities are nearly endless and can be applied to nearly any set of texts the researcher might choose.

Among the set of chapters included in this volume, only two – Robert Crew and Christopher Lewis's analysis of U.S. governors (Chapter 10) and Christian Grose and Jason Husser's exploration of verbal skill on the presidential campaign trail (Chapter 9) – employ DICTION to ask how ordinary citizens respond to the rhetoric they hear. Crew and Lewis collect the State of the State addresses for 156 governors across 50 states between 2000 and 2012. Building on their work connecting governors' verbal styles to their legislative successes (Crew and Lewis 2011), they use the resulting dataset of 564 speeches both to track how governors' verbal patterns change with the political and economic circumstances and to show how gubernatorial approval is sensitive to the characteristics of governors' speeches, controlling for other factors that are also likely to influence approval levels. Governors whose tone becomes more certain and more optimistic subsequently see corresponding increases in their approval levels. These are aggregate level models, and they are limited by the scarcity of consistent public opinion data at the state level.

Moreover, it is currently unclear how many citizens listen to State of the State addresses, or were even aware that they were given. If the audience for presidential speech-making is small, it is even smaller – bordering on miniscule – for governors. As Zaller (1992) and Edwards (2006) have argued, in order for messages to have an effect, they must first be heard and understood. Given that levels of public attentiveness are likely quite low, the fact that Crew and Lewis find any relationship at all between gubernatorial rhetoric and state-level public opinion is remarkable and worth considerable additional exploration.

Much more needs to be done to understand how responsiveness to the verbal characteristics of state leaders works on an individual level – who, exactly, is responding and why? Such next steps can also extend the analysis of verbal style outside the DICTION master variables to a host of other elements of verbal style and substance.

Beyond the state level, Grose and Husser argue that a presidential candidate's rhetorical skill can sway voters, at least under some circumstances. They measure rhetorical skill by using DICTION to analyze all presidential debates between 1960 and 2012, focusing on the master variables of certainty, optimism, activity, realism, and commonality. In many election years, Grose and Husser find substantial differences between the candidates with respect to each of these speech characteristics, and they create a summary measure of general rhetorical skill by adding the differences between the Democratic and Republican candidates across all of the master variables for each election year. They then combine these measures with individual-level data about voters from the American National Election Study, which allows them to explore how rhetorical skill, at least as seen in the presidential debates, correlates with vote choice even after controlling for many other individual-level characteristics of voters, including the voter's ideological distance from the candidates.

Grose and Husser find that greater rhetorical advantages do affect vote choice, pushing voters toward candidates who score higher on measures of verbal tone. This is true for both the summary measure that combines all five master variables and separately for the measures of activity, commonality, and realism, but not for optimism or certainty. In other words, candidates whose performance in the debates emphasized activity (“movement, change, and the avoidance of inertia”), commonality (words “highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group”), and realism (“tangible ... matters that affect people's everyday lives”) more than their opponents were more likely to attract votes.

Importantly, Grose and Husser's results show that rhetorical advantage is not the whole story: voters whose issue positions place them clearly closer to one candidate are likely to stay with that candidate. But for voters whose ideological preferences leave them evenly divided between the candidates, rhetorical skill can tip the balance.

When it comes to comparing the verbal skill of presidential candidates, the DICTION results do uncover some potentially surprising patterns. Given Ronald Reagan's reputation as a communicator who could inspire listeners with positive and uplifting rhetoric, the fact that he scored lower than both Carter and Mondale on measures of both optimism and commonality might not have been predicted. Equally unexpected is the fact that Reagan's debate performances included fewer uses of words involving certainty than did Jimmy Carter's. Similarly, Barack Obama scores as much more optimistic than John McCain, but much less than Mitt Romney. The fact that these results are unexpected does not mean that they are wrong – conventional wisdom is not always wise – but some additional attention to issues of face validity, perhaps with examples from the debates themselves, would further strengthen this part of the analysis.

The real strength of the Grose and Husser chapter is that they use DICTION in the service of understanding, both what was said and how different voters reacted to it. After all, the meaning of any political rhetoric is found in not only the vocabulary and the tone of the speaker but also in how the audience hears and responds. Grose and Husser take seriously the audience for rhetoric and, just as importantly, the conditions under which the audience is more or less likely to respond. For some voters, a candidate's advantage in verbal skill is unlikely to make much difference: for these voters, the distance between their own issue positions and those of the rhetorically talented candidate are simply too wide for tone to matter.

This difference across contexts also raises the question of whether the authors should model some

sort of interaction between ideological distance and verbal tone advantage. That is, perhaps the effect of tone changes with the ideological or partisan commitments of the listener, factors that Edwards (2006) highlighted as an important limit on the effect of presidential rhetoric. Theories of motivated reasoning would predict, for example, that responses to political arguments are likely to be conditioned on prior political beliefs (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Redlawsk 2002; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). An unexplored question is whether such prior beliefs also affect responsiveness to tone and to rhetorical skill or whether listeners of all stripes judge – and react to – verbal skill similarly. After all, it is quite possible that what, to one voter, is confident certainty comes across as prideful haughtiness to another. That is a possibility that no one has yet examined.

Such analyses are possible because Grose and Husser make use of individual-level datasets. This is an important element of their research because, as I have indicated, much of the scholarship on the effects of presidential rhetoric has occurred at the aggregate level, attempting to find a correlation between features of the president's language and aggregate patterns of public opinion. As Druckman and Holmes (2004) assert, research connecting any facet of the content of presidential rhetoric to individual-level approval (including vote choice) has been surprisingly rare. This is an important oversight. Reviewing the history of scholarly understanding of presidential approval, Gronke and Newman (2003) argue that individual-level analysis can uncover important determinants of approval in ways that are not possible with aggregate analyses. Individual-level analysis can, for example, help scholars isolate who responds to presidents and why. Are those with certain partisan predispositions (or, alternatively, no partisan attachments at all) more or less likely to approve? What about those with more or less political knowledge? How does responsiveness to the president differ across groups? In other words, individual-level analysis enriches the study of the

connection between leaders and citizens by helping us better understand the possibilities and the limits of presidential action, including rhetoric. Such analysis also introduces a host of innovative methodological possibilities into research on political elites.

Druckman and Holmes (2004) provide a helpful model of how such research might be structured. They combine a content analysis of an important presidential speech with both survey data and a laboratory experiment. Though their content analysis did not use DICTION, they found clear evidence that what the president says affects those who heard the speech “by priming his own approval” – in other words, by changing the criteria on which individuals base their approval evaluations (Druckman and Holmes 2004, 757). Priming is not the same as persuasion, which involves changing individual opinion on the issues. Nonetheless, if a presidential speech is to prime certain criteria or considerations over others, then we must know something about the content of the speech. Druckman and Holmes use their content analysis to explore whether the approval judgments of speech watchers gave greater weight to the themes of the speech, compared to non-watchers. In both a carefully controlled lab environment, where individuals were randomly assigned to complete their approval judgments before or after watching the president's speech, and in a larger survey where respondents self-reported whether they saw the speech, Druckman and Holmes find strong evidence of a match between what the president said and the criteria by which speech-watchers judged his performance in office.

The content analysis undertaken by Druckman and Holmes simply identified major themes of a single important speech, but with DICTION, researchers can significantly expand the elements of the speech that might be analyzed. The master variables, lexical layering, and custom dictionaries could all contribute to an understanding of the tone and substance of the speech. Given that its ability to analyze many texts quickly and ef-

ficiently, DICTION might also widen the number of texts available for analysis, a fact that could significantly deepen our understanding of the linguistic contexts in which citizens respond to the president. For example, Diane Heith (Chapter 8) underscores the importance of the distinction between campaign and governing rhetoric and provides some initial evidence that Barack Obama's governing speech differed from his campaign rhetoric in subtle but measurable ways. But key questions remain. Does governing speech prime approval more or less effectively than campaign speech? And what about other elements of the political environment that are likely to surround a major presidential speech, such as the response from the opposing party or the subsequent media commentary? For example, what if the tone and substance of the president's speech differs sharply from that of the media covering the speech? The chapter by Hart and Scacco has already shown how the president and reporters can pull in different directions. Alternatively, what if messages from the president and the media reinforced each other? In other words, presidential priming occurs in a complex environment where counter-frames and counter-primers are also possible. The presence of this larger rhetorical environment is likely to profoundly affect levels of responsiveness to what the president had to say (see, for example, Druckman 2004).

As a tool for research, DICTION is well suited to help scholars understand and quantify the linguistic tone and substance of this complex environment. It allows not only a more sophisticated measure of the president's words, but also a richer understanding of how responses to presidential rhetoric differ in a world in which partisan or media messages may mute or enhance what the president has to say. The experimental and survey approaches utilized by Druckman and Holmes (2004) are still possible – and can even be improved by drawing upon the much richer measures of rhetoric available through DICTION. In other words, DICTION is a resource for content

analysis that can substantially add to sophisticated, multi-method approaches to both the causes and the consequences of rhetoric.

In sum, much of the political research to date that employs DICTION has focused – and rightly so – on understanding and describing the rhetoric of political actors. But if we take language seriously – and the assumption behind DICTION is that we should – that is only half the story. The next step is to bring the audience in to the analysis, seeking to understand how those who hear rhetoric respond. Such research will need to be theoretically sophisticated, incorporating careful hypotheses about the conditions under which certain responses are likely as well as the kinds of listeners who are likely to resonate with – or reject – the message. Such research can also be methodologically sophisticated, making use not just of aggregate measures, but also of individual-level data and its possibilities for understanding both the dynamics and the diversity of responses to rhetoric. It can also make use of multiple methods, combining content analysis with survey, experimental, or other approaches. Political science research has seen an explosion of interest in experimental methods, and content analysis with tools like DICTION need not be an alternative to experimentation. Instead, it can combine with experimentation and other promising methods for a rich understanding of not only what was said, but also how the audience responds.

To this point, I have argued that the political behavior of ordinary citizens needs to be brought in to the equation. They are the audience political elites are trying to reach. However, ordinary citizens are missing in another sense, too: they can be speakers in their own right. Very little of the analysis that has made use of DICTION has explored the rhetoric of ordinary citizens. In stark contrast is the work of Sebold and Dowdle (2013) who analyze non-elite voices. Their dataset is a set of oral histories of Bill Clinton's childhood friends and relatives. While this study sheds valuable light on the social and cultural factors that

contributed to Bill Clinton's formative years, the voices of ordinary citizens are used primarily in the service of understanding an elite political actor.

Yet, citizens engage in political speech all the time, and the tone and substance of what they have to say is worth sustained attention of its own. We are, of course, currently saturated with public opinion polls, which represent one measure of the voice of the people, but these are primarily discrete responses to questions, leaving less room for ordinary citizens to articulate their views in their own words. What is needed is increased attention to the venues where the people themselves speak up.

As with so many other elements of *DICTION*, Roderick Hart has blazed the trail. In both *Campaign Talk* and *Political Tone*, Hart undertakes analyses of what ordinary citizens have to say in their letters to the editor. In his study of the 1996 election, Hart finds that the language of the people is an "alternative voice in the campaign" (2002, 213). Their linguistic choices are quite distinct from those of politicians or the press – more prone to embellishment than either comparison group, but striking a middle ground with respect to realism, self-reference, tenacity, insistence, patriotism, inspiration, praise, satisfaction and several other variables. They appear unafraid to express uncertainty but are simultaneously frequently willing to incorporate value-laden terms into their discourse. Less wrapped up in the horse race and the changing fortunes of the campaign season, they are also more stable in tone over the course of the campaign, compared to the volatility of the press or politicians.

In *Political Tone*, Hart, Childers, and Lind also analyze a sample of letters to the editor, this time more than eight thousand texts written between 1948 and 2008. This expanded sample confirms that the voice of the people stands out from that of either politicians or the press across a host of variables – the *DICTION* master variables as well as other custom measures. For example, the people are much more prone to religious language than

politicians are and even more so than the press, which actively rejects such terms. In other ways, the people strike a middle ground – less prone to patriotic language than politicians, for instance, but much more so than the press. All in all, both *Campaign Talk* and *Political Tone* show the value of attending to what the people have to say. Their words stand distinct in a host of politically meaningful ways from the voices of other important actors in the system.

Yet, letters to the editor are hardly the only venue in which the people express themselves in their own words. America is a nation of meetings, and at many of these, ordinary citizens talk (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). Town hall gatherings with candidates, school board or town council hearings, neighborhood associations, and the union hall – all of these are places where ordinary citizens gather and speak up about issues of concern to them. Scholars of public administration report, for example, that as many as 97 percent of localities hold public hearings of one sort or another (Adams 2004), and in public opinion surveys, up to three-quarters of Americans say they have visited such a gathering at least once during their lifetimes (Karpowitz 2006). What citizens might say in these venues is politically meaningful and normatively important. From development, property rights and land use to the nature and quality of local schools to the kinds of commercial and housing options available in their locality to the nature of personal freedoms and their exercise to the very shape and meaning of the places we live, the issues taken up in these places are the stuff of democracy. The sites of political and civic gatherings are, therefore, alive with the sound of democracy, expressed by ordinary citizens. Their words deserve careful attention and analysis, and *DICTION* can be a key part of that effort.

By now, it should be clear that a wide sea of possibilities await researchers willing to wade in and employ the tools of computer-aided content analysis, and *DICTION* offers some especially

valuable tools for systematic understanding of texts. The set of possibilities in this volume is only the beginning. As the scholarly discourse employing DICTION continues to develop, the issues I have raised here will, I hope, provide some helpful guideposts. Grounding measures in theory and defending their validity, exploring change over time and across contexts, delving deeply into the normative implications of results, attending to the audience for rhetoric and the conditions under which audience members are likely to respond (or reject) what is said, and taking seriously ordinary citizens as a source of meaningful democratic speech – all of these can help scholars further develop the uses of DICTION as part of a large, sophisticated, and multi-methodological research program. But these guideposts, too, are only a partial and incomplete list. In this new age of data, the future for scholars who care deeply about political communication is wide open and very bright.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**American Politics:** The study of the political system of the United States.

**Audience:** Those to whom persuasive political messages are directed.

**Content Analysis:** The systematic study of language, texts, or other forms of communication. In the words of Harold Lasswell, content analysis is about “who says what to whom and with what effect.”

**Democracy:** The rule of the people; a system of government in which ordinary citizens exercise power, either directly or through elected representatives.

**Leadership:** How those with power influence, persuade, organize, guide, or enlist the support of others.

**Political Communication:** The study of the content, purposes, and effects of political information and messages.

**Public Opinion:** The study of the attitudes, beliefs, perspectives, preferences and values of ordinary citizens or groups of citizens.

**The Presidency:** The president is the chief executive in the political system of the United States.