

Divisive Rhetoric and Adverse Language in American Political Discourse

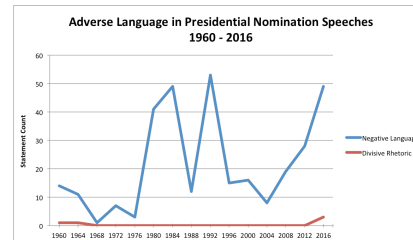
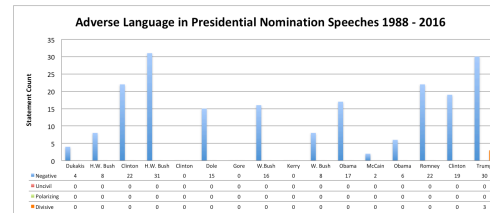
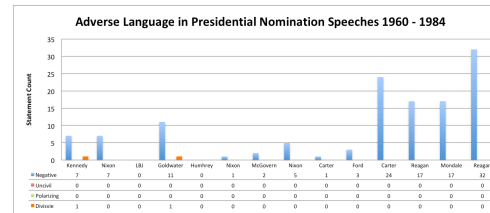
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Abstract

Although frequently cited by elected officials and those in the news media, divisive rhetoric has yet to find a place in political science literature. This paper fills the necessary gap in political communication research by investigating the existence of divisive rhetoric, its growth, and its implications. In order to construct a proper definition for divisive rhetoric, I look to three other forms of adverse political language: negative campaigning, polarization, and incivility. Already existing research on these concepts helped to craft a conceptual understanding for divisive rhetoric. Next, I look to investigate whether the use of divisive rhetoric has changed over time. To answer this question, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of every major party's presidential nominee acceptance speech from 1960 to 2016. By using the established conceptual definitions as a guideline, I classified statements in the addresses as being negative, uncivil, polarizing, or divisive. Overall, there were very few instances of divisive rhetoric in the speeches analyzed and no conclusions could be made on the development of this language overtime. However, there is evidence of an overall increase in adverse language holistically among candidates.

Methods

I completed a content analysis of presidential campaign rhetoric. My goal of the content analysis was to determine whether speeches made by presidents at their party's respective convention have increased the usage of the four kinds of language defined earlier in this paper: negative campaigning, incivility, polarizing language, and, most importantly, divisive rhetoric. In addition to the content analysis, I utilized outside participants to validate and test my coding. These participants allowed me to provide evidence toward the legitimacy of my analysis.



Types of Adverse Language

Negative Campaigning: language that is entirely focused on an opposing candidate.

Uncivil Language: language that does not follow social conversation norms concerning respect and politeness.

Polarizing Language: rhetoric that expresses points of views that are far from the middle of the ideological spectrum. This language is concerned exclusively with the content concerning policy, not tone or style.

Divisive rhetoric: language that has the distinct intention of pitting groups against each other. This includes wildly inaccurate attacks and aggressively questioning of the morality of opposing candidates. It is the most extreme form of adverse language.

Results

Although the analysis of presidential nomination acceptance speeches cannot shed light onto whether divisive language is growing in American political discourse, it proved beneficial to the research in a number of ways. The content analysis showed a slight increase in the use of negative language over time from 1960 – 2016 in presidential nomination acceptance speeches. Although the data greatly fluctuated from year to year, negative language overall has found a greater place in the discourse today than in 1960. The analysis also showed reluctance by presidential candidates to engage in polarizing, uncivil, and divisive rhetoric. With zero instances, candidates in their acceptance speeches refrained from using uncivil and polarizing language completely. Divisive rhetoric, on the other hand, was seen a few times across all the addresses. The acceptance address itself has proven to be one of primarily heightened and positive language. Although revealing in some ways, these speeches may not completely reflect the discourse of each era.