

Analyzing Political Rhetoric

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Now that the 1980 elections are history, it's time to gather your classes around you and like a football coach viewing films with the team on Monday morning look back on events of the past several months to see what can be learned about language manipulation. The timing is advantageous because the elections are recent enough that interest is still high and plenty of examples of political rhetoric are available in magazines and newspapers. On the other hand, many of the political fires have dissipated themselves so that it will be easier for both you and your students to be disinterested—though not uninterested—observers.

Political rhetoric in a modern democracy has some inherent complexities: the sheer number of speakers, quantity of information, diversity of viewpoints, variety of candidates and issues clamoring for our attention, the impact of the electronic age, and the growing sophistication of modern persuasion techniques. In an election year thousands of claims and charges, promises and threats, made by politicians and professional persuaders, advocates and amateurs, are broadcast to millions of people.

One result has been that many people, overwhelmed by the chaos of this blitz, cannot handle the political process and drop out completely, justifying their position with universal attacks: "it's all lies. . . it's all bullshit . . . it's all phony promises anyway." Another common response is that people take sides too early (often inheriting the parents' beliefs), ignoring or discounting everything which doesn't fit into their preconceived notions. Other people get disgusted because "politicians are always arguing" or because reformers are "always complaining about something." Such an attitude doesn't recognize that conflict is essential in a democracy in which people

with different interests, different values, and different viewpoints are free to disagree.

As English teachers, we have an obligation to give more attention than we usually do to how language can be used in politics. We can act not only to counter apathy, ignorance, and authoritarian attitudes, but also to help students articulate their frustrations and encourage a systematic analysis of political language. We can teach students how to deal with a mass of information, how to sort it out, how to identify the messages sent, how to recognize the techniques and the patterns of persuasion whether coming from Left or Right or Anywhere Else. It is cynical *not* to teach these students. The teacher's job is not to tell students which side is "right" or "wrong," but to show students there are certain patterns of persuasion, certain options available to any candidate, certain things that can be done with language, and these can be anticipated.

To analyze political rhetoric, the first step is to focus very closely on the *content* and *form*, to identify *what is being said* and *how it is being said*. While this may seem obvious and self-evident, it's all too seldom done. Most political discussions are characterized by their randomness and lack of coherence as people switch from one topic to another and soon lose any continuity or direction. In addition, such discussions often generate intense emotional involvement, not at all conducive to a rational discussion or systematic analysis.

To clarify complex issues, it helps to impose some kind of pattern or structure to identify and sort out the various messages. Such patterning also gives a greater sense of detachment and perspective.

Various approaches are possible. Earlier (in *Teaching about Doublespeak* and in *College English*, Sep-