

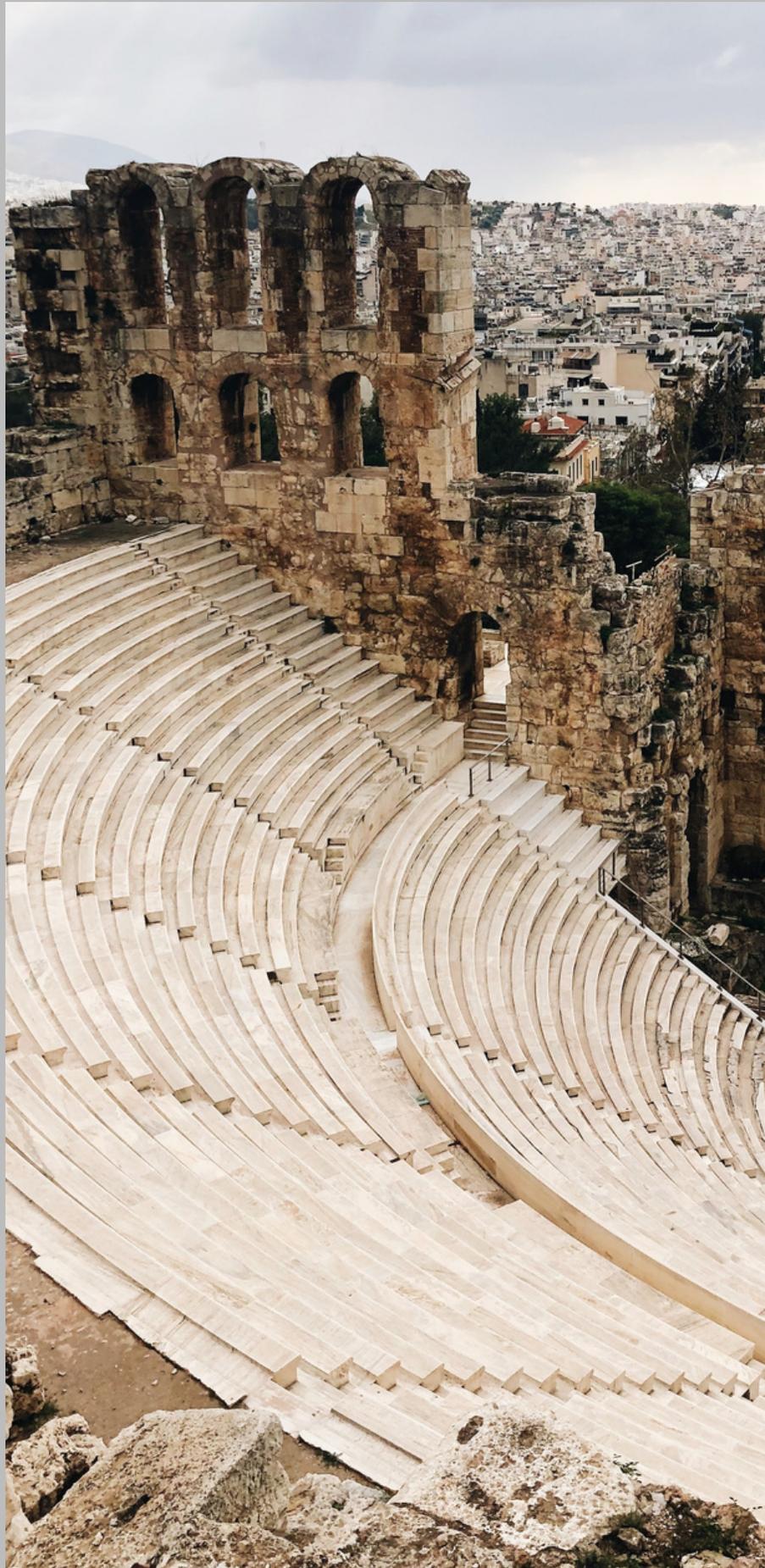
RHETORIC AND EMOTIONS IN CIVIL DISCOURSE

NICD RESEARCH BRIEF
NO. 4 (REVISED)

LEAH SENATRO, JERRY LEE, AND
ROBIN STRYKER

JULY 2021

NICD.ARIZONA.EDU



National Institute for Civil Discourse Research Brief No. 4: The Role of Rhetoric and Emotions in Civil Discourse

Key Issues

Should civil discourse avoid emotional appeals? Are there desirable ways to use emotions to encourage debate about political issues and policies?

Overview

The term “rhetoric” today does not always have a positive connotation. There is a common misconception that rhetorical skills are often used to manipulate thought and that rhetoric condones and encourages persuasion by any means necessary, including manipulating the audience’s emotions. However, ancient rhetoricians like Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian were well aware of an audience’s vulnerability to emotional appeals, so each promoted ethical solutions to public discourse. Collectively, these classical rhetoricians expressed great concern about appeals to emotions, including anger and fear, and shared a common purpose of maintaining integrity in civic oratory.

Given recent advances in the science of emotions, one might ask whether the teachings of the classical rhetoricians can still be useful. Contemporary science tells us that emotion is *not* the antithesis of reason; instead, it plays an important role in reasoned decision-making. Additionally, no political issue or object is devoid of emotional resonance. Therefore, a “rational politics” cannot be separated from an “emotional politics.” If we presume that politics involves passionate commitments and arguments, we can draw on the emotions that arise during civil discourse to help create a set of institutional incentives for civil discourse. The aim of doing this would be to dramatically reduce deception, intentional exaggeration, vitriol, intimidation, and personal attacks – while channeling the passions that drive such behavior into debate that fosters mutual respect, considers all evidence, challenges established opinions (even our own) – and gives both sides the emotional room to change or maintain their respective positions without fear of humiliation. We can learn some tips on doing this from classical rhetoric.

A Brief History of Classical Rhetoric

Many of the ancient rhetoricians feared that audiences were vulnerable to being manipulated by the persuasive powers of highly-skilled but unscrupulous rhetoricians. Ancient rhetoricians understood that emotional stimulation is effective and perhaps inevitable in political discourse, but they discouraged rhetoric that directly targets an audience’s emotions to rouse anger and enmity.

Plato (ca. 428-347 BCE) believed that rhetoric as practiced in his time was necessarily deceitful, and he blamed rhetoric for the political chaos in Athens. Plato’s charges against rhetoric were directed toward the Sophists, teachers in ancient Greece whose relativistic philosophy was antithetical to Plato’s pursuit of a higher order of truth. While Plato’s portrayal of the Sophists may well have been somewhat exaggerated, his apprehension of and warnings about rhetoric wielded by an opportunistic speaker of manipulative prowess have had an enormous influence on the Western intellectual tradition, so much so that today the term “sophistry” is often taken to mean deception to most, and “rhetoric” is often thought to involve unscrupulous manipulation.

Rather than dismissing rhetoric, **Aristotle**, a student of Plato's, provided guidelines for how rhetoric could be deployed effectively *and* ethically. Aristotle defined rhetoric as "an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion." Rhetoric, Aristotle argued, is the "*antistrophos* [counterpart, correlative or coordinate] to dialectic," a process by which two or more individuals engage in a discussion about some topic and collectively determine what is true.

Aristotle outlined the three types of appeals: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. *Ethos* pertains to the speaker's character, *logos* to reason fundamental to speech, or, simply "what is said," and *pathos* to the emotional appeal. Aristotle argued that persuasion from character was the most authoritative appeal, but that it should result from the speech itself, and not from a previous opinion of the speaker held by the audience. A persuasive speech would reflect three traits in the character of the speaker: practical wisdom, virtue, and good will.

Aristotle's concept of rhetoric was based on his knowledge of the civil court system, in which citizens (there were no professional lawyers at the time) generally did not rely on their fame or reputation to sway a jury. Thus, he would not have foreseen modern audiences' tendencies to be swayed by various aspects of a speaker's reputation, or the vitriolic political rhetoric of particular concern today. The unfortunate reality is that irrelevant attacks on an opponent's character occur frequently not because they are scrupulous means of persuasion, but rather because politicians and their campaign advisors *perceive* that vilifying an opponent will be effective, even though systematic research does *not* necessarily support this claim.

In addition to his emphasis on *ethos*, Aristotle valued the role of logic in the persuasive act and offered detailed guidelines for common methods of argumentation. However, despite this emphasis on *ethos* and *logos*, Aristotle's discussion of *pathos* makes it clear that he understood that humans are emotional beings and provided detailed taxonomies of emotions and discussed in length how a speaker could manipulate audience emotions including: anger, calmness, friendliness, enmity, fear, confidence, shame, shamelessness, kindness, un-kindliness, pity, indignation, envy, and emulation. In short, although he does not explicitly advise his users to avoid appealing to the emotions of an audience, Aristotle seemed to presume that even the most logically-sound argument presented by

Some Key Quotes from Ancient Rhetoric

Plato (ca. 428-347 BCE)

In the *Gorgias* Plato criticizes rhetoric and the Sophists who practice it as morally corrupt, declaring rhetoric is "a producer of persuasion for belief, not for instruction in the matter of right and wrong." Plato compares rhetoric to mere "flattery" which he calls a "disgrace."

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

In his *Rhetoric*, a text written for teaching purposes, Aristotle explains that rhetoric's usefulness comes from its ability to determine the truth: "Rhetoric is useful because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites." To arrive at this truth, Aristotle implies the importance of using all available means of persuasion, including *pathos*, writing, "We must be able to employ persuasion, just as strict reasoning can be employed, on opposite sides of a question...in order that we may see clearly what the facts are."

Cicero (106-43 BCE)

In *De Oratore* (*On the Ideal Orator*), Cicero explains that the more eloquent and skilled a speaker is, "the more necessary it is for [such skills] to be combined with integrity and supreme wisdom." If we train orators to persuade rhetorically without good faith, we might as well have "put weapons into the hands of madmen."

Quintilian (ca. 35-96 CE)

In his *Institutio Oratoria* (*The Orator's Education*), Quintilian offers a definition of rhetoric that includes the moral character of orator: "The definition which best suits [rhetoric's] real character is that which makes rhetoric the *science of speaking well*. For this definition includes all the virtues of oratory and the character of the orator as well, since no man can speak well who is not good himself."

the most righteous and good-willed speaker could be dismissed easily in favor of an emotionally manipulative speech deployed by his or her unscrupulous opponent.

Cicero was the most influential rhetorician of the Roman period, and the political climate in which he wrote was turbulent and violent. Many Roman political leaders acquired power and influence through questionable means. After Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE, Cicero feared that Mark Antony would rise to power as a tyrant, exercising his power and rule through military force. Cicero saw it as his duty to protect the Roman citizenry from Mark Antony. Oratory was threatening to ruthless dictatorship, and orators who opposed the state were censored, or in the case of Cicero, executed.

Where Aristotle insisted that appeals to a speaker's character should be based on the speech itself, Cicero acknowledged how easily audiences are won over by a speaker's prestige, accomplishments and reputation. Cicero suggested that appeals to a speaker's character be deployed subtly, but that such an effort was inconsequential if a speaker manipulated an audience's susceptibility to fear and anger. Cicero likened a speaker who possessed oratorical prowess – but lacked integrity and the highest measure of good sense – to a madman in possession of weapons. Cicero argued that the *ideal* orator – one who did not exist at the time but who, if he existed, could rescue Roman society from its dilapidated, tumultuous state – need not summon such exploitative rhetoric. One obvious and unfortunate limitation of this argument is that refraining from use of unscrupulous rhetoric does *not* mean that one's opponent will do the same.

Quintilian, like his predecessors, sought a corrective to the corrupt uses of rhetoric. Quintilian believed that the emotional appeal was the “queen of all” appeals and could sway even the most impartial audience member. Quintilian reminded his readers that even judges could be swayed, through their emotions, to develop a personal investment in a court case, much akin to impassioned lovers who are not able to think rationally.

Because of his concerns about the manipulative powers of emotional persuasion, Quintilian emphasized the moral character of the orator, declaring that a good orator must be a good person. For Quintilian, oratory practiced by an evil person was in fact *not* oratory, since eloquence could not be possessed by a person of vice. In other words, an evil person could be persuasive and move audiences at will, but this was not oratory as conceived by Quintilian. Quintilian insisted that a good orator be of good moral character, and he claimed this to be an essential trait of the child or young adult seeking instruction in oratory. The instructor then had the responsibility to nurture the student's capacity for honesty, integrity and humility through instruction grounded in moral philosophy. Though it is not clear what Quintilian's “moral philosophy” curriculum would resemble today, his underlying argument suggests that a well-educated and well-informed speaker could persuade an audience without resorting to deceit or other unscrupulous methods.

In sum, the rhetorical treatises of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian suggest that appeals to the emotions will invariably be a part of a persuasive act. None of these treatises overtly discouraged all emotional appeals. Instead, all of them acknowledged the significant role that emotion plays in persuasion. However, all were apprehensive about the possibility that an audience's emotions might be exploited by an opportunistic or self-serving orator.

Modern Scientific Findings

Modern social scientists have explored some of the same questions the ancients did regarding the role that emotional appeals play in persuasion. Fields ranging from cognitive neuroscience to social, cognitive, and political psychology, to sociology and political science have all come to the same conclusions as ancient rhetoricians: emotional appeals are effective and persuasive. We now know much more about the relationship between cognitive reasoning and decision-making. We know, for instance, that emotion, though powerful in its ability to trigger swift action, can also promote systematic and persistent thought with cognitive consequences. Modern researchers have also explored the ways that emotions are rooted in our social structures and social interactions, as well as how emotions impact political discourse, behavior, and activism. There has also been extensive research on the effect of social media and digital advertising on or emotions. A key theme in much of this research is that emotional appeals are not just effective means of persuasion and changing opinions; they are also highly effective in moving individuals to take political action including voting and political activism.

The table below summarizes just a few of the major social scientific findings on the role of emotions in political rhetoric:

Social Decision-Making and Taking Social Action	Policies and Institutions	Persuasion
<p>Studies have mapped neural networks within the brain which contribute to moral judgement and social decision-making made within the context of the legal and political system. Emotions play an important role in these processes.</p> <p>Emotions are linked to taking political action individually and in groups because they strengthen individuals' sense of identity with a particular group. Social emotions produce prosocial actions and a better awareness of the community.</p>	<p>Emotionally resonant messages “prime” individuals’ responses to a broad range of economic and social policies and issues.</p> <p>The persuasiveness and motivational capacity of symbols such as national flags and war memorials comes at least in part from their emotional component.</p>	<p>While political attitudes are based both in affect (our attitudes toward things) and cognitions (our knowledge about things), affect-based persuasion is more influential than cognition-based persuasion in changing an attitude that is affect-based, but not an attitude that is cognition-based.</p> <p>Emotions affect not only the audience, but also the speaker, by motivating audiences to share information and ideas to persuade others which can lead to a greater social impact.</p>
Social Media	Voting	Advertising
<p>When used by elected officials, social media can play a role in escalating or de-escalating conflict because of its ability to represent and invoke emotions.</p> <p>Emotionally charged tweets tend to be shared at a higher rate than less emotional ones.</p> <p>Social media posts that use moral language to discuss political policies are more likely to be shared among members of the same party, but less likely to be shared between parties.</p>	<p>Emotional cues are known to have significant influence on voter judgement.</p> <p>As many as 30% of voters change or make up their minds within a week before voting in an election. Emotions and affect often play a key role in these final vote decisions.</p>	<p>During the 2016 election, viewers were “moved to tears” by political advertisements for the party they planned to support. These intense emotional feelings created a sense of devotion in viewers that correlated with an increased likelihood to vote.</p>

The message of modern researchers is clear: just as ancient rhetoricians suspected, emotions cannot be separated from reason. The capacity to experience emotion is a prerequisite for the capacity to make decisions in real-life situations. This realization has also led to changes in how the emotions are studied. For example, it has become more common for scholars of literature and culture to offer their insights into scientific studies of emotions.

In Sum

Pathos or emotion-based appeals are common and often effective in political life, but emotion and cognition are deeply intertwined, and emotion need not detract from, but rather may be a prerequisite for, “reasoned” deliberation. Consistent with this, perhaps we can draw on the force of the emotions underlying our commitment to civil discourse to help create an ethic, culture and set of institutional incentives for civil discourse. These would aim to dramatically *reduce* purposive or careless deception, falsehood and “misinformation,” exaggerated claims, verbal abuse and intimidation, *ad hominem* attacks and personal vitriol, while enhancing issue-focused discussion, empathy and mutual respect, as well as willingness to debate in good faith, listen as much as we speak, consider the evidence, explain the reasoning behind our points of view, and remain open to ideas and evidence suggesting that our established opinions could be wrong, so that we can hear and consider seriously the reasons of those with whom we disagree. All of this would be consistent with the necessarily passionate debates, fundamental disagreements, and First Amendment principles that characterize a vibrant representative democracy.

The original version of this research brief was prepared by Jerry W. Lee, at The University of Arizona (now, Professor of English, Anthropology, Comparative Literature, East Asian Studies, and Asian American Studies, UC Irvine) and Robin Stryker, Professor of Sociology and Research Director, National Institute for Civil Discourse, The University of Arizona (now, Professor of Sociology, Purdue University), September 2011. It was revised by Leah Senatro, graduate student in the Department of English at UC Irvine, July 2021.

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Arzheimer, Jocelyn Evans, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, editors. 2017. *The SAGE Handbook of Electoral Behavior*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press.
- Damasio, Antonio. 1995. *Damasio, Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Edelman, Murray. 1988. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lerner, Jennifer S. Lerner, Ye Li, Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Karim S. Kassam. 2015. "Emotion and Decision Making." *Annual Review of Psychology* 66: 2015, pp. 799-823.
- Magni, Gabriele. 2017. "It's the Emotions, Stupid! Anger about the Economic Crisis, Low Political Efficacy, and Support for Populist Parties." *Electoral Studies* 50 (1): 91-102.
- Marcus, George E. 2000. "Emotions in Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 3: 221-250.
- Pernot, Laurent. 2005. *Rhetoric in Antiquity*. Translated by W.E. Higgins. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Recommended Citation

Senatro, Leah, Jerry W. Lee, and Robin Stryker, 2021. *The Role of Rhetoric and Emotions in Civil Discourse*. NICD Research Brief No. 4. (Revised). Tucson, AZ: National Institute for Civil Discourse.

Download NICD research reports by visiting nicd.arizona.edu.

