

Extreme Vetting: Rhetoric, the 2016 U. S. Presidential Election and Immigration Policy

Gayle K. Berardi

Colorado State University-Pueblo
Political Science Department
Pueblo, Colorado 81001
USA

Abstract

U.S. presidential candidate, Donald Trump, for a variety of reasons conducted an unusual campaign. This included his lack of funding and political party support. However, perhaps the most unusual aspect of his campaign was his inflammatory rhetoric on immigration that continued throughout the election process. This research analyzes Trump's immigration rhetoric from his initial announcement speech through election day. This includes speeches, tweets and other social media sources. Utilizing Habermas' theory of the public sphere, it is asserted that Trump's rhetoric negated an active public sphere where informed decisions are made. Although the rise of technology has been proposed as a venue to develop a "virtual" public sphere, this research finds that did not happen in the 2016 presidential election.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Presidential Election, Public Sphere, Immigration

1. Introduction

This research presents an analysis of the rhetoric of Donald Trump on immigration during the 2016 presidential campaign. The analysis includes an examination of speeches, debates, and comments in social media. Although Trump's rhetoric in the public sphere is reflective of past anti-immigrant rhetoric, it is distinguished by its inflammatory and repetitive nature. Trump utilized a long-used trope by politicians of identifying immigrants, at best, as outsiders whose values are counter to American ones and at worst, terrorists who seek to destroy the United States. According to Trump's rhetoric, it is only through "extreme vetting" of immigrants and refugees that Americans will be safe. This, he asserted, will be aided by the control of our borders and revision of U.S. immigration policy. In addition, these actions will lead to a resurgence of jobs for Americans who now are unemployed or underemployed. An analysis of Trump's rhetoric will show its basis in nativism and lack of facts makes clear that America is open to a narrowly defined population and that this may narrow participation in the public sphere. The analysis will also show that Trump's rhetoric destroyed an accepted discourse convention that an argument needs to be truthful to be successful (Center 2013; Cisneros 2015; Schreckinger 2016).

Trump's rhetoric occurred primarily at political events and was covered by traditional media as well as by multiple social media sources. Trump's seemingly daily use of twitter added a new element to presidential campaigns that had not been previously experienced (Armadian 2017; Dunaway 2010). While these are the specific places of Trump's comments, it is in the broader public sphere that his rhetoric is situated. The concept of the public sphere can be found in classical political theory and more recently in deliberative theories of the state (Benhabib 1994; Cohen 1989; Fishkin 1991, 1995; Mill 1996). The public sphere is defined as an arena in which informed individuals can share their ideas, unhindered by coercion that then will lead to participation in the political process (Habermas 1970, 1996; McCarthy 1981). This type of participation is seen as a pillar of democratic government (Dahl 1989; Held: 2006, 1993). In contemporary theory, the importance of communication and politics is of special magnitude in the theoretical work of Jürgen Habermas. His analysis of the impact of communication in the democratic process led him to the development of a modern concept of the public sphere.

This sphere is a communication network where individuals are able to share their informed views that are of public concern. The significance of Habermas' work to the 2016 presidential election is that the theatrical nature of Trump's rhetoric defies, perhaps even negates, the notion of communication that is based on informed, rational debate. As Habermas asserts this has a negative impact on participatory democracy based in informed communication. In his more recent works, Habermas has developed a theory of communication that elucidates an ideal of political communication. This ideal of undistorted communication will be utilized in this research to understand the nature of Trump's rhetoric and its impact on immigration policy.

2. Habermas Theory of the Public Sphere and Undistorted Communication

2.1 The Public Sphere

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1996) by Jürgen Habermas is recognized as a significant contribution to the discussion of civil society and liberal democracy. It has been analyzed by scholars across disciplines and has received praise as well as criticism. Its relevance is seen in the number of articles and books that continue to be published about the concept and the discussion of the possibility of a revitalized sphere with the rise of the use of technology contemporary politics. Habermas' concept of the public sphere reflects his concern for a public capable of freely forming its will and articulating its needs, interests, and values. He defines the public sphere as a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed (1996:49). The access is to be open and guaranteed to all citizens. Segments of the public sphere are present when individuals assemble in conversation and form a public body. This sphere is differentiated from that of 'the public assembled' or 'crowd' by the fact that rational participation or discourse is an essential element for critical and civil debate. For Habermas, the views expressed in the public sphere, are to be critical reflections on issues or candidates.

Importantly, individuals confer in an unconstrained manner "...that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions about matters of general interest" (1996:49). Habermas situates the rise of the public sphere in Europe during the 1700 and 1800s. In this sphere there existed a number of literary and political salons and other places where individuals gathered and participated in a critique of social and political events. Overtime, the public sphere is diminished by control of political elites and private interests. As Kellner posits: "As the public sphere declined, citizens became consumers, dedicating themselves more to passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation" (2014). The revitalization of the public sphere is seen by Habermas and others as a necessity for a deliberative democracy. A key for this revitalization is political discourse that attempts to inform participants. Many scholars propose that this could occur with the rise of multiple public spheres or segments that may be facilitated through social media, for example. This view helps explain how the comments of presidential candidates are mediated through various social media platforms and through multiple public segments. This nuanced view of the public sphere helps us to better understand Donald Trump's use of the social media (especially Twitter) and how it enabled him to bypass established media sources. The key to understanding the impact of Trump's rhetoric on immigration policy and a voter's understanding of the issue of immigration, is how his communication was distorted and resulted in a lack of rational discourse in the public sphere

2.2 Distorted Communication in the Public Sphere

Although Habermas' work has always been concerned with the distortion of communication and the resultant loss of public participation by individuals, it was not until 1970 that Habermas began systematically developing a theory of distorted communication (Habermas 1984, 1996). Distorted communication occurs when claims are made in discourse that do not have a basis in truth. This can occur in the public sphere when discourse is based on irrational claims and can result in incivility among discourse participants. The possibility exists that communication, especially among political candidates, becomes mere entertainment and without substance. The importance of Habermas concept of distorted communication for this research is that it provides a theoretical foundation to understand the discourse on immigration that occurred during the 2016 election. The rise of distorted communication led to misinformation about immigration and produced, with Trump's comments, a challenge to the norm of civility. Although incivility has marked political campaigns in the past, especially during political debates, it rose to a new level with Trump's candidacy (Braden 2008). And with his election it is likely that President's Trump's distorted communication will continue and have an impact on immigration policy such as the travel ban issued at the beginning of his term.

Although this research is not proposing that the public sphere envisioned by Habermas is attainable, it does suggest that it is an ideal that can provide a standard by which we can analyze Trump's political rhetoric. Doing that will show how Trump's rhetoric was not indicative of deliberative democratic discourse. Further it is asserted that this type of rhetoric has long-term negative impacts on the election process and the ability of voters to evaluate truth claims made by candidates.

3. Trump's Rhetoric on Immigrants and Immigration Policy

Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the presidency on June 16, 2015. His speech set the tone for his campaign and his rhetoric on immigration. In his often repeated comment on immigration he stated: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with them. They're doing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapist. And, some, I assume, are good people" (June 16, 2015). These comments set the stage for Trump's policy proclamations. For example, "I will immediately terminate President Obama's illegal executive order on immigration immediately" and "I will build a wall on the Mexican border and Mexico will pay for it" (June 16, 2015). These statements are indicative of the rhetoric Trump used throughout the presidential campaign. And importantly, the rhetoric was repetitive with few changes made to the claims about immigrants, immigration policy and refugees. Perhaps one of the reasons for this was the fact that it resonated with his base, which began to grow after his announcement. Another reason, perhaps, is that Trump believed what he was saying even though facts counter some of his comments. In an attempt to better understand his rhetoric, this research focused on public comments made at rallies, presidential debates and in social media.

Analysis of Trump's Rhetoric

An examination of Trump's campaign speeches, debates and social media comments demonstrates that his rhetoric can be grouped into eleven categories. They are:

- Terrorism and Immigrants;
- Islamic Terrorists;
- Immigrants taking American jobs;
- Immigrants as Criminals;
- Immigrants being different from Americans;
- Characteristics of Immigrants;
- Immigrants overstaying their visas;
- Building a wall on our Canadian border
- Employer sanctions
- Americans killed by immigrants
- Cost of immigration

Trump's rhetoric laments the loss of an America that existed before the current arrival of immigrants who bring with them crime, different cultural values and in some instances, a desire to commit terrorist acts. In addition, the rhetoric defines a singular American identity with immigrants being outsiders who will only do harm to America. This rhetoric is reminiscent of another modern presidential candidate: Tom Tancredo. Tancredo, a former Colorado representative and a member of the Tea Party, ran for the Republican nomination for president in 2008. Unlike Trump, Tancredo did not do well in the primaries when his anti-immigrant rhetoric was challenged by other candidates and the media. This occurred when an analysis of some of his statements were shown to be false (Sowards 2013). Obviously, there were other factors in play as to why Tancredo did not succeed in his bid for the presidency such as very low name recognition outside of the western part of the U.S. In each category Trump's vision of immigrants was presented as truthful as well as being based on commonsense. Even though many of his comments were challenged by other candidates and the media, Trump continued to make them without alteration. The following sample of comments in each category shows this to be the case. (The full text of Trump's remarks are available upon request.)

Terrorism and Immigrants

Jan 24, 2015 "certainly have terrorists"

Jan 14, 2016 "creating a country that's not going to have the kinds of problems we've had with people flying planes into the World Trade Center's"

April 27, 2016 "recent migrants inside our borders charged with terrorism"

June 22, 2016 "hundreds of recent immigrants...charged and convicted of terrorism"

August 15, 2016 "380 foreign-born individuals charged with terrorism..." "temporarily suspend immigration from...regions of the world that have a history of exporting terrorism"

Aug 31, 2016 "terrorists entering on visas"

Sept 20, 2016 "hundreds of immigrants...implicated in terrorism and terrorist-related activity"

Islamic Terrorists

Jan 24, 2015 "You can certainly have Islamic terrorists. You can have anything coming across the border."

December 15, 2015 "in the migration...tens of thousands of people having cell phones with ISIS flags on them" "When had the world trade center go...They knew what was going on"

Jan 14, 2016 "look at the kind of damage that two people that got married, they were radicalized" "Can't use the term you're never going to solve the problem. My Muslim friends..."

Feb 6, 2016 "I talked about Muslims. We have a problem"

April 27, 2016 "Refuses to say the words radical Islam, even as she pushes for a massive increase in refugees" "the struggle against radical Islam also takes place in our homeland"

June 22, 2016 "The father of the Orlando shooter was a Taliban supporter"

Aug 22, 2016 "To defeat Islamic terrorism we must speak out... a new immigration policy is needed as well" "The common thread linking Islamic terrorists attacks... involved immigrants"

Sep 20, 2016 "There were Islamic terrorist attacks in Minnesota and New York City...made possible because of our extremely open immigration system"

Oct 13, 2016 "They will allow radical Islamic terrorists to enter our country by the thousands"

Oct 19, 2016 "going to stop radical Islam in this country" "taking in thousands of Syrian refugees...who are definitely in many cases ISIS aligned"

Immigrants taking American jobs

June 22, 2016 "first victims of her radical (immigration) policies will be poor African American and Hispanic workers who need jobs" "Hillary's Wall street immigration agenda will keep immigrant communities poor and unemployed Americans out of work."

Immigrants as criminals

June 16, 2015 "They're bringing drugs." "They're bringing Crime." "They're rapists"

Aug 6, 2015 "many killings, murders, crime, drugs pouring across the border"

Sep 16, 2015 "a lot of really bad dudes...from outside, they're gone. Gangs all over the place" "and so many other crimes" "they've been arrested if they've been in jail, they're never coming back"

Nov 10, 2015 "It's causing difficulty with respect to drugs"

Dec 15, 2015 "Drugs will not pour through that wall"

Jan 14, 2016 "people come in, they live, they shoot"

Feb 25, 2016 "Drugs that are pouring across" "heroin and drugs pouring in" "tremendous amount of drugs that are coming in"

March 3, 2016 "tremendous problem with crime"

Aug 15, 2016 "Iraqi immigrant sentenced 34 years in jail running over own daughter" "what a disaster this massive immigration has been to Germany - crime has risen"

Aug 31, 2016 "illegal immigrant gang member previously convicted of burglary" "illegal immigrants with criminal records" "zero tolerance for criminal aliens" "two million criminal aliens" "immigrants arrested for crime whatsoever" "large numbers of violent criminals" "keeping criminals out" "dangerous material being smuggled across the border"

Immigrants different from Americans

Jan 24, 2015 "We don't have the best coming in"

June 16, 2015 "They are not sending their best" "not sending you" "people that have lots of problems"

Aug 6, 2015 "the bad ones"

Sep 15, 2015 "really bad dudes"

Aug 15, 2016 "extreme views about religion" "hostile attitudes toward our country... believe that Sharia law should supplant American law" "don't believe in our constitution...support bigotry and hatred"

Aug 22, 2016 "don't support our tolerant values"

Aug 31, 2016 "less education" "barbaric practice of honor killings" "(ask views on) honor killings, women, gays, minorities."

Sept 20, 2016 "extreme views about religion"

Characteristics of immigrants we want

September 16 2015 "wonderful people" "great ones" "good ones"

June 15, 2015 "good people"

June 22, 2016 "share our values and love our people"

Aug 15, 2016 "share our values and respect our people"

Aug 31, 2016 "likeliest to thrive and flourish and love us" "going to be good" "share our values and love our people" "greatly enrich our country" "merit, skill, and proficiency"

March 3, 2016 "highly skilled"

Oct 9, 2016 "love for our country"

Immigrants overstaying visa

Aug 31, 2016 "1/2 illegal immigrants came on temporary visas and then never ever left" "visa overstays pose...a substantial threat" "removing overstays will be top priority"

Building the wall - stronger border

Jan 24, 2015 "building a very, very powerful border"

Aug 6, 2015 "build a wall, and it has to be built quickly" "build a wall, we need to keep illegals out"

Oct 28, 2015 "we're going to build a wall" "we can do a wall" "big, fat beautiful door right in the middle of the wall"

Nov 10, 2015 "We need borders. We will have a wall"

Dec 15, 2015 "It will be a great wall" "walls do work"

Feb 20, 2016 "we'll do the wall"

Feb 25, 2016 "wall just got 10 feet taller" "Mexico will pay for the wall" "wall that can absolutely be built"

March 3, 2016 "It's going to get built"

Aug 31, 2016 "an impenetrable, physical, tall, power, beautiful southern border wall" "above and below ground sensors"

September 9, 2016 "going to build a border wall"

Sep 16, 2015 "I want to build a wall, a wall that works"

Sep 26, 2016 "having strong border"

Oct 9, 2016 "We're going to have a strong border"

Oct 19, 2016 "We need strong borders" "they want strong borders" "we have to have strong borders" "I want to build the wall" "we need the wall" "Hillary Clinton wanted the wall"

Building a wall on the Canadian border

Feb 25, 2016 "massive border" "far less problem" "massively long 4x longer" "very hard to do"

Mention of Employer Sanctions

Aug 22, 2016 "protect jobs and stop businesses from exploiting visa programs that hurt poor workers"

Americans killed by immigrants

Jan 14, 2016 "they killed 15 people"

Aug 31, 2016 "countless Americans who have died in recent years would be alive if not for the open border policies" "He was murdered by an illegal immigrant" "Kate Steinle. Gunned down in the sanctuary city of San Francisco, by an illegal immigrant" "The perpetrators were illegal immigrants" "25,000 homicide arrests to their names"

Cost of immigrants

Aug 31, 2016 "Illegal immigration costs our country more than \$113 billion a year"

Sep 16, 2015 "costing us more than 200 billion dollars a year" "we are spending \$200 billion"

Throughout these categories, Trump's rhetoric includes numerous examples of generalizations such as Mexican immigrants being criminals and Muslims being terrorists. This is a classic example of the lumping fallacy which is indicative of a lack of distinction between individual and group actions. His rhetoric, even as distorted communication, was well received by early supporters of Trump and this support grew during the nomination process. His "immigrant as criminal" narrative portrayed immigrants in a negative light as active criminals who could cause us harm at any time. Thus, once they arrive, "they rape women and shoot guns" (September 16, 2015). This view identifies immigrants as destroying what Trump envisions as the American culture. The description of immigrants as criminal was the most often repeated sentiment in Trump's rhetoric. He continued throughout the campaign describing the "bad dudes" or "bad hombres" (now part of Presidential rhetoric) crossing the border or living in the US as "violent criminals" (June 16, 2015, July 2016). Trump did recognize that there are immigrants who are working in their communities and raising families. But these are immigrants who came here legally and have been here for a long period of time. Perhaps even worse than the 'common' criminal is a terrorist. In his rhetoric, he conflated terrorism with Islam and the act of terrorism being worse than being a criminal because it would result in the death of hundreds of Americans at one time (October 13, 2016). As he often stated this would happen, if he wasn't elected, because the current immigration policy allows radical Islamic terrorists to enter our country by the thousands" (October 13, 2016). Potential terrorists are seen as immigrants with direct connections to ISIS and with the information they receive are socializing the next generation of terrorists. Trump validated his view by saying that he had talked with Muslims and they agreed with his view (February 6, 2016). If not threatening loss of life, Trump's rhetoric suggests that immigrants are responsible for Americans losing their jobs. Sharing this view with anti-immigrant groups, Trump seldom provided data to support his viewpoint. Rather he often said "he had been told" or "those in the know support this view". This rhetorical approach worked well with his base and underlined their concerns about their declining economic position. Outside of his base, he did try to appeal to African-Americans and Hispanics by stating "the first victims of her (Clinton's) immigration policies will be poor African-Americans and Hispanic workers who need jobs" (June 22, 2016). Finally, Trump's remarks encapsulate a long-held view found in anti-immigrant rhetoric. That is that immigrants are somehow different than Americans (he does not define American). Immigrants who are acceptable in Trump's America will be like "us", "wonderful people", "good people (who) share our values, love and respect our people and will greatly enrich our country" (September 16, 2015, June 22, 2016). However, there are only a select number of immigrants who have these characteristics and thus, are acceptable to Trump. Most immigrants coming into the United States are outsiders, seen as the 'other' and incapable of contributing to the economic and social fabric of the country.

Trump's repetitive rhetoric presented a mental picture of immigrants as being inferior to Americans, having extreme views about religion and having hostile attitudes toward the United States. He continued throughout the campaign to state (usually through Twitter) that "immigrants are poorly educated, practice honor killings, don't believe in our country and fully support bigotry, hatred and are streaming across our southern border. (August 15, 2016; August 22, 2016; August 31, 2016). Two solutions were proposed to slow the flow of immigrants: One, a wall on the southern border; and Two, "extreme vetting" of immigrants. The building of a wall became a rallying cry at his rallies: "We will build a wall and Mexico will pay for it" (December 15, 2015; October 19, 2016). "It will be impenetrable, physical, tall, power, beautiful southern border wall" (August 31, 2016). By the end of his campaign, Trump stated that even his opposition (Clinton) was convinced by his argument and wanted to build the wall (October 19, 2016). The Canadian border received much less attention because it is "far less a problem" and to "hard to do" (February 25, 2016). The southern wall, paid for by Mexico, would not cost taxpayers anything and would save the United States from \$100 billion (August 31, 2016) to \$200 billion (September 5, 2016). When pushed for specifics about this assertion, Trump responded by seemingly dividing the cost at \$150 billion. The second solution was the 'extreme' vetting of immigrants before reaching U.S. borders. Early in the campaign, Trump proposed that this would be accomplished by limiting the number of immigrants entering the U.S, especially from predominantly Muslim countries. Those able to apply for admission would go through the 'extreme' vetting process. Although this process was never fully explained, it apparently included questions about one's loyalty to the United States and the role of religion in society. But Trump was not able to say how his process would be different than the current one. The lack of truthfulness inherent in Trump's rhetorical generalizations and inability or lack of desire to provide data to support his comments meets the definition of distorted communication. His rhetoric was emotional in content and certainly, had the desired impact.

This is counter to the notion of a public sphere where informed individuals meet to engage in rational discourse about immigration. Distorted communication reverberates through the public sphere and is best seen in social media such as Twitter. As utilized by Trump, it reduced his view of immigration and immigration policy to one hundred forty characters. These statements, rather than providing clarification of assertions, reduced a complex issue to short declaratory statements. The impact of Trump's rhetoric on the public sphere is that it normalizes distorted communication and perpetuates falsehoods about immigrants and immigration policy. This has a negative impact on the deliberative process especially when coupled with incivility. When this occurs not only does rational discourse suffer but this form of rhetoric influences future policies and events. This has proved to be the case with the election of Trump. His rhetoric has translated into policy decrees such as the Enforcement of the Immigration Laws to Serve National Interest Executive Order (Kelly January, 2017). Because Trump's rhetoric displayed a simplistic knowledge of immigration policy, it should not be surprising that the implementation of the executive order was not well thought out and resulted in an injunction by the courts. A revision of the executive order was issued on March 6, 2017.

4. Conclusion

The conditions of an active public sphere require informed participants who are engaged in a rational discourse. During an election this includes candidates, as well as citizens. This research has shown through content analysis that presidential Donald Trump used distorted communication throughout the nomination and general election campaigns. His immigration rhetoric contained numerous generalizations, lack of facts and obfuscations. This led to a simplistic view of immigration policy and nativist view of immigrants. His rhetoric described immigrants as criminals, terrorists and holding values that are an anathema to the American political and social culture. This type of rhetoric has a detrimental impact on discourse that is central to a deliberative democracy. Rather than resulting in discourse that challenged Trump's views it tended to result in information "bubbles" and a "viral spiral" in the public sphere. This occurs when individuals communicate primarily through social media and become balkanized in platforms that support their views. As Grossman finds, the contemporary public sphere is composed of participants who are "consumers, producers and distributors of news" in their own segment of the public sphere (Grossman 2016). These 'bubbles' perpetuate false information or "alternate" facts by repeating for example, a candidate's comments with the help of platforms such as Facebook. In addition, individuals are redirected by Facebook algorithms to sites with similar content reinforcing their worldview. The ideal public sphere envisioned by Habermas certainly did not exist during the 2016 presidential campaign. Political communication and Trump's rhetoric set the tone for overstatements and fact-free claims. Counterclaims did not have the force to challenge Trump's positions or language. Overall, Trump's rhetoric normalized new standards of polarized public discourse. And this normalization has become part of Trump's immigration policy and how immigrants are viewed. Is it possible for participants in American politics to revitalize the public sphere or has it been corrupted by the coarse rhetoric of the 2016 campaign? This is a question for future research especially with regard to the role that technology will play in making access to information easier. At the same time the barrage of information demands, borrowing a Trump term, extreme vetting. In addition, the role of the media as an arbitrator of discourse in the public sphere needs to be analyzed, especially in light of President Trump's proclamation that the media is "the enemy of the people". This questions the legitimate role of the media in the public sphere and in a democracy. Through further research we will be able to assess the possibility of a Habermasian public sphere and a deliberative democracy.

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