

# A Thematic Analysis of How a Rhetor and a Demagogue Framed Their Presidencies

---

Megan Cooney<sup>1</sup>, Shaundi Newbolt<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student Contributor, University of Denver

<sup>2</sup>Advisor, Department of Communication Studies, University of Denver

## Abstract

This essay uses thematic analysis through the lens of framing theory to dissect how former U.S. President Barack Obama and former U.S. President Donald Trump created contrasting but successful frameworks of America to win their campaigns. The paper operates on the grounds that Obama is a rhetor and Trump is a demagogue. Frames consummate a multitude of themes that are created with rhetorical tools – namely figurative language. The storylines that are created by politicians can play an instrumental role in developing the constituent’s basis of reality. This study aims to unpack how a rhetor and a demagogue can use the same rhetorical tools to forge a successful framework for their audiences. The paper starts by establishing a basis of rhetoric, political rhetoric, and demagoguery. After creating that foundation, it leads into a thematic analysis of Obama’s 2013 Inaugural Address and Trump’s 2017 Inaugural Address, through themes of community, religion, and the future of America. The results reveal that the strength of their address’s relied on the framework used. Both presidents used the same themes to create differing realities of America, regardless of the morality of the speaker. This study provides further inquiry into Communication Studies research on how rhetors and demagogues use linguistics to persuade their audiences.

**Keywords:** Political rhetoric, demagoguery, rhetor, framing, figurative language

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Figurative language as a rhetorical tool in political speech is well acknowledged for its ability to evoke intense emotion and push the audience towards the rhetor’s belief<sup>1</sup>. This study aims to fill the gap in Communication Studies research when considering how persuasive appeals of language can be used by a rhetor and demagogue to successfully frame vastly different narratives within the political landscape. The differentiating factors between the orator’s are revealed by their intent and moral character. The objectives of this paper are to better understand how a rhetor and demagogue use the same tools to shape contrasting realities for their audiences to win the presidency, so the public can become more adept at noticing a demagogue before they rise to power. Communication Studies scholars can then help to restructure the dialogue around political speech and the public’s consumption of it. This study will dissect political speech within modern politics, uncovering

Obama and Trump’s starkly different frameworks.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Rhetoric and ethics are closely aligned, and it is beneficial to first garner insight into that relationship with the use of previous works. James A. Herrick’s essay “Rhetoric, ethics, and virtue” explores how one might ground an ethics of rhetoric in virtues by practicing rhetoric itself<sup>2</sup>. His research acknowledged that rhetoric has a long tradition of being linked to virtue or human character. Someone’s rhetoric may be seen as “a reflection of the person’s character<sup>2</sup>.” Herrick pulled from Aristotle’s perception that part of a rhetors duty is to help his readers “to become good<sup>2</sup>.” Most importantly, it is argued that advocacy is a good inherent to rhetoric, which is critical in maintaining democratic institutions<sup>2</sup>. The author establishes a premise for how rhetoric should be viewed in conjunction with ethics. This is essential to note because, within this definition, a rhetor must deploy a strong moral character<sup>2</sup>; however, there is more to be considered when dealing with the persuasive appeals of ill-intended agents.

---

<sup>1</sup>As noted by researchers in the article “Figurative Framing: Shaping Public Discourse Through Metaphor, Hyperbole, and Irony”<sup>1</sup>. Their work unpacks the influence of persuasive appeals on the public.

After establishing a basis of the ethical domain of rhetoric, it is necessary to conceptualize political rhetoric in today's environment to see where it is prevalent and where bad actors can enter the scene. The article "Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric," Krebs and Jackson argued that "rhetoric is certainly a weapon of the weak, but those holding the reins of power can and must deploy it as well<sup>3</sup>" explaining that how the rhetor uses rhetoric is just as important. The researchers expounded "ideas influence how actors interpret evidence and sift through information<sup>3</sup>." The concept of ideas works in conversation with the premise of rhetoric's persuasive appeals; to push an audience towards an idea, the orator must rely on pathos and the ambiguity of a belief which is arguably just as malleable as an idea.

Stéphanie Bonnefille outlined the use of emotional appeals to provoke an audience behind an idea in "A cognitive rhetoric approach to two political speeches." Bonnefille shed light on the stark distinction between former U.S. President Obama and former French President Sarkozy's communication styles at the 2009 U.N. Climate Change Summit. She identified possibilities for figurative language to strengthen the rhetorical dimension of political speech. The analysis shows that Sarkozy emphasized literal language and Obama embraced figurative language. Obama took to storytelling and resorted "to a combination of two narratives, the apocalyptic vs. the rescue tale<sup>4</sup>." Such deployments of descriptive language prove to have a powerful performance and bring further interest to the influence of figurative language as a rhetorical tool to persuade audiences. My research will take it a step further to analyze recurring patterns within political speech that are used to frame the perception of the rhetor in the public's mind.

Although figurative language is an incredibly powerful rhetorical tool, in the wrong hands it can strengthen a demagogue. Demagogues are political leaders that rise to power in democratic institutions by pulling on the vulnerabilities of the public to polarize society and advance their personal goals<sup>2</sup>. Language becomes a weapon yielded to contain its audience. As Jennifer Mercieca explained in "Dangerous Demagogues and Weaponized Communication," "weaponized communication tactics treat communication as pure instrumentality, using rhetorical tactics and people as machines<sup>5</sup>." The use of "machine" inherently defies a rhetor's behaviors. A defining characteristic of a rhetor is their good intent and moral character that can put the hearer into a desired frame of mind<sup>3</sup>. Influencing the audience through elaborate emotional appeals can become

weaponized when the intent is to oppress the audience. It is crucial to note that the tools used in demagogic and rhetorical speech remain static—the differentiating characteristic of a demagogue is when these tools are weaponized to "overwhelm audiences<sup>4</sup>" for their own gain.

While it may be controversial that the distinction between a demagogue and rhetor appears thin, the malleability in rhetoric within democracy must be unpacked. In "Athens, the Unjust Student of Rhetoric: A Dramatic Historical Interpretation of Plato's 'Gorgias'," Michael Svoboda investigated how Tucidides, Isocrates, and Polycrates challenged both the legitimacy of political power as well as the rhetoric with which democratic Athenians rationalized their former tyranny (from the Peloponnesian War). Greek philosopher, Socrates wondered how a student could use what he has learned about political discourse for their own benefit, by breaking or bending the laws. Such an insight led Socrates to limit rhetoric to "persuasion that creates belief rather than knowledge<sup>6</sup>." It leaves more to be investigated into how language can be weaponized for to create beliefs in a people and break through the veil of democracy, producing a demagogue. Demagogues are woven into the fabric of democracy. As Svoboda explained "when one uses terms like 'rhetoric' and 'freedom' and 'democracy,' one ought to do more than encomiumize them<sup>6</sup>." This blind appraisal can glorify democratic institutions and leave the public vulnerable to a demagogue.

How a charismatic leader in democracy uses the terms outlined in Svoboda's article is a point of prevalence. Eric Patterson analyzed Obama's use of rhetoric in the article "Obama and Sustainable Democracy Promotion." Obama is a skilled orator, being perceived as composed and inspirational. He heavily emphasized the "new beginning" theme and had the public intrigued. Throughout his speeches, "[Obama] has said a great deal about democracy<sup>6</sup>" maintaining a commitment to "sustainable democracy" to express American values and promote good. His time in the presidency aimed at making comrades out of countries through a progressive lens<sup>6</sup>. More is to be explored when uncovering the rhetorical tools that contributed to his enduring vision of a "new beginning."

Conversely, there has been research into the demagoguery of Trump and how one may rise to power and play on the vulnerabilities of a disheartened public. Paul Elliott Johnson's study "The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump's Demagoguery" argues that Trump frames society in ways to make his audience "approach the unfamiliar as danger rather than opportunity" by using figurative language<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, Trump pulls on negative emotions and garners the power to do as he pleases under the shade of democracy. He em-

<sup>2</sup>This definition of a demagogue was paraphrased from Ryan Skinnell's research paper "Using Democracy Against Itself: Demagogic Rhetoric as an Attack on Democratic Institutions."

<sup>3</sup>This definition is derived from Aristotle's book *The Art of Rhetoric*.

bodies the intentions of a demagogue<sup>4</sup>. His words and actions will also be unpacked in closer analysis to see how he used language to create a narrative opposing Obama's.

The seven pieces above serve as a foundation for further inquiry into the relationship between rhetoric, rhetors, demagogues and political speech. Pulling from this literature allows for a deeper analysis of these subjects.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Frame Theory

Frame theory was coined by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* to explain how individual's perceptions of the same events (or social occasions) may vary greatly depending on that person's grounded perspectives<sup>8</sup>. He set out to develop "some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject<sup>8</sup>." Through this theory it can be explained how an individual's perception of what is happening differs from what occurred. For example, what is occurring could be described as "a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake ... and so on<sup>8</sup>." This is particularly true when embracing the concept that reality is constructed.

Goffman called the primary framework and frame(s) within it, the "schemata of interpretation<sup>8</sup>." This frame allows individuals to make something that would be rendered meaningless, meaningful. Underneath this framework lies the belief that ordinary language and writing practices can allow people to express what they want to express. Given the political context of this paper, it is advantageous to focus on the social framework, which is found within the primary one. Goffman examined this structure to understand the aim, will and controlling effort of a live agency, an intelligence, and human beings<sup>8</sup>. When the speaker uses such a frame, it facilitates "guided doings" that motivates the individual to reach a shared point of view by creating standards based on the tactfulness, elegance, safety, economy, efficiency, and honesty of the speech<sup>8</sup>.

Researchers Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman expanded this idea in their article "Framing Theory," focusing on its impact on public opinion. They went on to name framing effects—when minor changes in the presentation of an issue can produce a substantial change

in opinion<sup>9</sup>. In conjunction with this, they brought in the phrase "frame of thought" making note that the individual's mindset and priorities influence their perception. This was connected to modern day when they referenced frames in communication, specifically targeting the political sphere, noting how "politicians attempt to mobilize votes behind their policies by encouraging them [potential voters] to think about those policies along particular lines<sup>9</sup>." One more crucial insight into framing theory is the strength of the frame. Strong frames are not necessarily morally righteous nor are they the most intellectual. Rather, they become powerful when they emerge as the best rationale against a competing position on an issue<sup>9</sup>. Frames can be strategic and structured based off the intended audience.

Framing has been used by researchers to study communication in the political sphere. Notably, in the article "Understanding and evaluating Trump's foreign policy: A three-frame analysis<sup>10</sup>," the authors unpacked Trump's foreign policy record by evaluating his objectives and methods through 'Stable Genius,' 'Art of the Deal' and 'Make America great again.' This was used to provide insight into how the administration framed the president's skills and goals. Similarly, Amy Lynn Fletcher used frame analysis in her piece "Clearing the air: The contribution of frame analysis to understanding climate policy in the United States." Framing was the preferred method to establish a better understanding of the discursive strategies used when discussing climate change, specifically during the Bush Presidency. She analyzed it through the lens of climate change as an economic opportunity, climate change as a security threat and scientific skepticism. This helped her grasp how and why frames can enter public discourse and the impact on public perception<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, using and having a working understanding of frame theory is essential for this paper. Framing is prevalent throughout society—but particularly so within political contexts. When viewing political figureheads, they may be able to use frameworks to control the public by evoking intended emotions within individuals to drive them towards a belief<sup>9</sup>. To delve into the dichotomy of two vastly different president's, it is paramount to view their success through framing theory. This research will view former U.S. President Barack Obama as a rhetor, using figurative language to create a vision of "new beginnings" and former U.S. President Donald Trump as a demagogue, using rhetorical tools to build upon "making America great again." Such contrasting methods still yielded the same results: a successful campaign. It is necessary to study how a strong framework does not always mean a moral one<sup>9</sup>, because as Communication Studies scholars, steps can be taken to combat the creation of oppressive frames. Frame theory will provide the greatest insight into how both speakers were able to shape their constituents'

---

<sup>4</sup>This relates to a prominent perception of a demagogue, by Patricia Roberts-Miller in her book *Demagoguery and Democracy*, viewing it as "A polarizing discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric through framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the out-group should be punished/scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group" (p. 16).

thoughts in such a meaningful manner that they became mobilized to vote for them.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Thematic Analysis

In conjunction with frame theory, a thematic analysis will be conducted. This methodology is best used to identify reoccurring patterns, ideas, or topics within a text. It helps investigate similarities, differences, problems, and issues that can be relevant to communication<sup>12</sup>. It applies to various bodies of text and produces deep insight into the interactions and messages being conveyed from the data, while simultaneously exposing the communications field to areas of further inquiry by providing a fuller depiction of the medium being observed. Such a method does not have quantifiable measurements, therefore, leaving it up to the researcher to decide on how to structure the analysis and dictate what constitutes a theme. However, a theme generally encompasses "a common line of understanding occurring within the data<sup>12</sup>." It may be explicit or implicit within the text. Themes can also overlap or have no relation to one another. The guidelines include deciding whether to search for themes inductively or deductively, developing a systematic approach to derive the themes, repeatedly going back and forth between the text and the preliminary patterns, locating additional and/or similar thematic pieces in the next material to be reviewed, and finally discovering how this analysis contributes to the field of communication<sup>12</sup>.

Two speeches will be analyzed. Obama's 2013 Inaugural Address and Trump's 2017 Inaugural Address were chosen because it was one of the first times either president addressed the public following their successful campaign frameworks. Thematic analysis is optimal because it can break down the underlying patterns that contribute to a speaker's frame. A deductive approach will be used and first categorize the text within each speech under themes of community, religion, and the future of America. This will require continuously searching for consistencies within the speaker's verbiage. Recurring rhetorical devices that reinforce the categories and shape of their frames will specifically be sought out. Then, the three themes will be analyzed together to conceptualize the narrative that constructed the overall framework forged by both presidents.

## 5 ANALYSIS

In the analysis, figurative language was discovered that fell underneath one of three themes: community, religion, and the future of America. Figurative language may be in the form of metaphors, similes, hyperboles, personification, allusions, alliteration and so on. The

keywords and phrases derived were not mutually exclusive. Thus, to align with a theme, the selected text had to correlate (directly or indirectly) to it. This was done by rereading each speech and pulling key fragments of descriptive text pertaining to the individual themes. In isolation, Obama's speech was deconstructed to understand how he used the outlined themes to frame America's current position and its path forward. An analysis of Trump's address follows, using the same procedures above.

### 5.1 Obama's Inaugural Address

#### 5.1.1 *Community: We Must Move Together*

Obama crafted the concept of "togetherness" that enveloped his version of community. Obama promoted collaboration, rather than an "us versus them" mentality. Instead, he created a relationship between individuals and the collective in stating "that preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action." This message is consistently conveyed through continual usage of "one nation and one people," and the repetition of "we, the people." By using those keywords, it sends a message that Americans must see one another as comrades, not enemies when beginning a new presidency.

Obama reinforced this camaraderie with his metaphors, portraying Americans as fighting "society's ills" (referencing poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia, and others) which he goes on to iterate that they cannot be cured from government alone. The metaphor of illness implies that America is sick and to become healthy the people must work together to find a remedy. The usage of sickness is intertwined in the speech. He focuses on Americans needs to care for the vulnerable and protect others from life's misfortunes. Obama conceptualized it as "our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all prosperity." Thus, the placement of the keyword "obligation" implies that it is societies duty to collectively ensure the well-being of others. It is essential to note that togetherness is embodied outside of America too. He emphasized the need to resolve differences with other countries peacefully. Relations with other nations were not conceptualized as threats, instead they were spun as opportunities for engagement. Through this, Obama reified how Americans should communicate with one another and how, as a nation, individuals should interact with one another.

#### 5.1.2 *Religion: God and Greatness*

Throughout the entire speech there are underlying ties to religion. Although America established the separation of church and state in 1879<sup>5</sup>, God is repeatedly mentioned in political speeches—this text is no excep-

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Constitution Amendment I

tion. Historically, politicians use God in speeches to persuade Americans by appealing to their foundation of religion that many grew up with<sup>6</sup>. Obama similarly used religion to appeal to his audience in mentioning that, “while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth.” Using the metaphor of a gift from God to conceive of freedom implies that freedom was not earned, but rather, as Americans, there is a duty to preserve it since the people are fortunate to have it. This narrative simultaneously empowers but disempowers the public. It reinforces the theme of community by framing Americans’ commitment to do good and advance the country behind a deeper motive – a dedication to one’s God(s).

Obama reinforces this in saying that, “that is how we will preserve our planet, commanded to our care by God. That’s what will lend meaning to the creed our fathers once declared.” The reoccurring metaphor of sickness and health appear in the usage of “preserve” and “care.” He eloquently created a duty for Americans to continue forward, in accordance with a deeper calling from God. The usage of a spiritual being can be immensely powerful in motivating people towards action<sup>7</sup> – notably so with the continued word choice of “creed”, oftentimes defined as a body of beliefs that can drive people towards action<sup>8</sup>. It is critical to acknowledge that a generic God was also used to be inclusive of all religions. That is, once again, another tool used to unite rather than divide the public.

### 5.1.3 *The Future of America: A New Beginning*

Woven throughout the address, Obama tactfully positioned America as being on the precipice of further greatness. He strategically brought to light the new beginning in his introduction by tracing back to America’s past. He reaffirmed the foundation of the U.S. by referencing the Declaration of Independence and the age-old adage of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (U.S. 1776). He continued to mention historical events by juxtaposing it with the advancements made to combat oppressive norms. Specifically noting how American’s were guided through “Seneca Falls [the first women’s rights convention], Selma [1960s voting rights movement for people of color] and Stonewall [riots by members of the gay community in response to a police raid at Stonewall Inn].” Such examples expose a progressive outlook from Obama by signifying

<sup>6</sup>This statement is supported by Bethany L. Albertson’s research paper on “Religious Appeals and Implicit Attitudes<sup>13</sup>,” exploring how politicians use religious appeals to influence behaviors and attitudes of their audience.

<sup>7</sup>Researcher, Korie L. Edwards essay “Presidential Address: Religion and Power – A Return to the Roots of Social Scientific Scholarship<sup>14</sup>,” addressed how instrumental religion can be in shaping the social world.

<sup>8</sup>A commonly used definition of *creed*, pulled from Merriam-Webster.

an awareness of the progress made through the will of the people (i.e., the social movements listed previously) and the potential of America to continue upward.

An integral aspect of the new beginning theme is the optimism that the people have the power to achieve new heights, as outlined by this excerpt:

“This generation of Americans has been tested by crises that steeled our resolve and proved our resilience. A decade of war is now ending. An economic recovery has begun. America’s possibilities are limitless, for we possess all the qualities that this world without boundaries demands: youth and drive; diversity and openness; an endless capacity for risk and a gift for reinvention. My fellow Americans, we are made for this moment, and we will seize it—so long as we seize it together.”

This text intentionally places Americans at the center of the discourse and empowers them to see themselves in a heroic way through the usage of “seize.” It provides one aspect of the frame which encourages listeners to view one another as agents of change. Obama expounds upon this through the key words and phrases “resilience,” “limitless,” “without boundaries,” and “reinvention.” The concept of these boundless capabilities is a hyperbole enveloped within contexts of communal power. Obama reinforces this by emphasizing the citizens power to determine the countries future. The speech elegantly sets a stern call to action, telling Americans to carve a new beginning.

## 5.2 Trump’s Inaugural Address

### 5.2.1 *Community: It Is Us Versus Them*

Trump had an actively divisive approach to his speech, in which a win/loss mindset was emboldened. Trump implies a weak and losing America, stating, “America will start winning again, winning like never before” reinforcing the concept that American’s have been robbed of their own greatness. Trump built upon this when he conveyed that it is the citizens time to “become rulers of this nation again.” Usage of the word “ruler” creates a power imbalance between the U.S. and other nations, facilitating an in and out group. It was reinforced with phrases like, “it’s going to be only America first. America first.” Such repetition drives the importance of Americans to focus on themselves and build an iron-gated community. Trump continued to promote this by encouraging citizens to buy and hire American.

He also ousted other nations in a bold statement assuring constituents that, “we will reinforce old alliances and form new ones, and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of this Earth.” This

sentence implies that Islamic populations are uncivilized, and it creates a connection in the listeners mind to associate Islam with terrorism. This grouping can reinforce oppressive stereotypes of Muslims and promote hostile environments in the states; such stereotypes, when paired with the dramatic and aggressive imagery created in the use of the word 'eradicate,' sets a dangerous precedent in a listener's mind to generalize and marginalize an entire population, should they agree with Trump. It is no longer only about making America great again; it is about uniting on a front to discriminate against those that are not American.

This theme saturated the speech when Trump mentioned protecting "our borders from the ravages of other countries" and how America has "made other countries rich while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon." By appearing to be bluntly honest in exposing America's supposed decline, he tactfully leads the individual to conclude that borders and protectionism will bring back the wealth, strength, and confidence that Trump claims had been stolen. An essential aspect of the us versus them mentality is that American's must be ready to fight. Not only did Trump reiterate that protectionism will lead to prosperity and strength, but he also told the public, "There should be no fear. We are protected, and we will always be protected." The concept of shielding oneself from dangerous outsiders sets a precedent that Americans must join to arrive at the "hour of action" to ensure that the country remains protected rather than fearful.

### 5.2.2 Religion: God Will Protect

A less substantial, but just as prevalent theme is the usage of religion. Trump implemented this to continue his "us versus them" theme by telling American's that they'll be "protected by God." Coinciding with this protectionism, is a call to unify citizens against outsiders. Referencing the Bible, it was stated that, "[it] tells us, how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." It is an intriguing line, as it follows the sentence, "when you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice." This metaphor is in direct conflict with the former statement. Patriotism can certainly act as a divisive tool and actively lead to prejudice against other countries<sup>9</sup>. It is also contradictory that Trump emphasizes living "together in unity" as God's people but simultaneously strives to bar America from the rest of the world. The theme of religion was predominantly used by Trump to unite American's but divide them on the world stage.

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Vincent completed research that supports this statement. He unpacked the connection between patriotism, politics and human rights in his paper, "Patriotism and Human Rights: An Argument for Unpatriotic Patriotism"<sup>15</sup>.

### 5.2.3 The Future of America: Make America Great Again

Within the text, Trump outlined misfortunes in America to create the vision that, at the time of the speech, the country was doing poorly. By positioning the U.S. in a negative light, it has the effect of placing Trump as the one to guide the public through the darkness. To establish such a standing, he first elaborated on the inequalities plaguing the states.

"Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities, rusted out factories, scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation, an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge, and the crime, and the gangs, and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential."

The use of metaphors can entice an audience to listen. Pulling on the appeals of family values, Trump specifically referenced mothers and children when speaking of wealth inequality and the struggles of surviving. This can resonate deeply with lower class families on the precipice of poverty. "Trapped" implies that at the time of the speech there was no direct way to escape those hardships within the current government.

The simile that equates closed factories to tombstones conveniently alludes to the death of American manufacturing and its reverberations across the country. This use of language can strongly align with individuals that are against the outsourcing of labor<sup>10</sup>. Thus, it sets implications that Americans were robbed of opportunities to a more fruitful life. The keywords "deprived," "stolen," and "robbed" set a precedent that it must be taken back. It creates a dystopian vision of America as a skeleton of its once great stature and sets a tone that Trump is the one with the clarity to clean through the rubble and rebuild.

## 6 DISCUSSION

After conducting a thorough analysis of Obama and Trump's deployment of figurative language in shaping the themes of community, religion, and the future of America, the frames they built can be compared. It is fascinating to discover that through the same themes, both president's shaped immensely different narratives for the American public to follow. When viewing the analysis with the overarching theory of framing, it is observed that the themes play an instrumental role in

<sup>10</sup>There is further research on the impact of the outsourcing of labor, by the National Customs Brokers & Forwarders Association of America, Inc. They dissect the pros and cons of outsourcing, as well as the way that politicians frame outsourcing in a negative framework.

shaping one's framework<sup>11</sup>.

Obama embodied a rhetor because he created themes of community, religion, and the future of America on the premise of promoting togetherness, aligning citizens with their Gods, and crafting a new beginning for the country that advocates for democracy and progressive movements. As noted previously in the research, an instrumental characteristic of a rhetor is their good intent<sup>12</sup>. Trump harnesses demagogic traits through his creation of an us versus them mentality, crafting God as a protector and striving to "make America great again." Demagogues strive to unite their constituents by curating an in versus out group<sup>13</sup>. Much of Trump's Inaugural Address capitalized on the problems within America and delivered it to the audience as a weapon rather than a tool.

It is critical to draw back towards a key aspect of framing—that reality is shaped based off the perceived events and storylines being presented<sup>8</sup>. What is more influential is the strength of the frame. A strong frame does not mean that it is a moral one<sup>9</sup>. It is not outlandish to claim that although Obama created a morally strong framework to win the presidency, it was just as feasible for Trump to use the same tools to craft a powerful narrative that neglects the morality at question by creating a different truth for his audience. The morality of the speaker was less relevant in creating an influential framework for the listeners.

However, there were limitations within this study that need to be addressed. It operated under the assumption that Obama is a rhetor and Trump is a demagogue. Although there are academic resources supporting both claims, it would be advantageous in a future study to add rhetorical analysis as a second method to better incorporate and understand the rhetorical and demagogic traits depicted from the individual presidents. This could lead to a deeper study unveiling the rising of a demagogue in society and provide clearer action steps to mitigate the emergence of one. It also opens space to explore the impact of the framing on the audience. This research predominantly focused on the creation of contrasting but successful frameworks by two presidents, but it did not delve into the public's consumption of it. It could be insightful to conduct a study comparing Trump and Obama's core constituents, and how the president's frameworks created their realities.

This study encourages scholars to continue analyzing the power of rhetoric and framing in the political

environment. As frameworks forge lived realities, they become tools for those in power to shape their ideal narrative. By continuously scrutinizing the words of politicians, researchers can hope to raise greater public awareness on the ability of their words to provoke people to act and believe in a certain way. This has monumental implications for the future of society. Rather than being a gullible listener, people can become empowered to actively engage in and criticize a politician's storyline.

## 7 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

By using thematic analysis through framing theory, the research was able to address the goal of exploring how a rhetor and demagogue can use the same figurative language to shape contrasting realities for their listeners, so demagogues can more easily be noticed before they rise to power. Analyzing the nuances of Obama's 2013 and Trump's 2017 Inaugural Address, it became apparent that both create themes of community, religion, and the future of America. Although the themes matched, the narratives contrasted. The strength of their frameworks proved to be the most influential factor. Trump, by embodying demagogic traits, created a divisive framework of America, and built a perceived reality of in and out groups. Obama, having characteristics of a rhetor, shaped a framework of America focused on togetherness and a new beginning. The research was useful in uncovering those insights, however more research needs to be done relating the frameworks to the public's consumption and more papers written analyzing both Trump's demagogic traits and Obama's rhetorical qualities in relation to their respective framework.

## 8 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer-reviewed.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Burgers, C., Konijn, E. A. & Steen, G. J. Figurative Framing: Shaping Public Discourse Through Metaphor, Hyperbole, and Irony. *Communication Theory* 26, 410–430 (2016).
- [2] Herrick, J. A. Rhetoric, ethics, and virtue. *Communication Studies* 43, 133–149 (1992).
- [3] Krebs, R. R. & Jackson, P. T. Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric. *European Journal of International Relations* 13, 35–66 (2007).
- [4] Bonnefille, S. A cognitive rhetoric approach to two political speeches. *Anglophonia* 15, 145–162 (2011).
- [5] Mercieca, J. R. Dangerous Demagogues and

<sup>11</sup>As outlined in Erving Goffman's book, previously mentioned, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>12</sup>Aristotle's book *The Art of Rhetoric*, defined key characteristics of a rhetor.

<sup>13</sup>This concept still relates back to Patricia Roberts-Miller's description of a demagoguery, noting how, "Through framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the out-group should be punished/scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group" (p. 16).

- Weaponized Communication. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* **49**, 264–279 (2019).
- [6] Svoboda, M. Athens, the unjust student of rhetoric: A dramatic historical interpretation of Plato's "Gorgias." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* **37**, 275–305 (2007). URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40232493>.
- [7] Johnson, P. E. The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump's Demagoguery. *Women's Studies in Communication* **40**, 229–250 (2017).
- [8] Goffman, E. *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience* (Harvard University Press, 1974).
- [9] Chong, D. & Druckman, J. N. Framing Theory. *Annual Review of Political Science* **10**, 103–126 (2007).
- [10] Steff, R. & Tidwell, A. Understanding and evaluating Trump's foreign policy: a three frame analysis. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* **74**, 394–419 (2020).
- [11] Fletcher, A. L. Clearing the air: the contribution of frame analysis to understanding climate policy in the United States. *Environmental Politics* **18**, 800–816 (2009).
- [12] Allen, M. Thematic Analysis. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (2017). URL <https://dx-doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n624>.
- [13] Albertson, B. K. Religious appeals and implicit attitudes. *Political Psychology* **32**, 109–130 (2010). URL <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00793>.
- [14] Edwards, K. L. Presidential Address: Religion and Power-A Return to the Roots of Social Scientific Scholarship. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **58**, 5–19 (2019).
- [15] Vincent, A. Patriotism and Human Rights: An Argument for Unpatriotic Patriotism. *The Journal of Ethics* **13**, 347–364 (2009).