

The Power of Persuasion in Political Communication

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Abstract

The Power of Persuasion in Political Communication. *The aim of the paper is to present a survey of opinions about the concept of persuasion, both in general context, and in relation to areas where persuasion plays an important role, in particular in political communication. The concept of persuasion is explained in interaction with philosophy, psychology and sociology as well as from the aspect of learning theory, functionalist theories, communication theory, and from the relativist point of view. A significant part of the paper deals with the role of emotional argumentation in political communication, especially during election campaigns.*

Keywords: coercion, emotions, free choice, persuasion, philosophy, rhetoric.

Introduction

There is a holy mistaken zeal in politics as well as religion. By persuading others, we convince ourselves (Oxford Concise Dictionary of Quotations, 2010: 188) Rhetoric is frequently defined as the art and science of persuasion (Aristotle, Quintilian), thus it should not come as surprise that persuasion can be studied in the perspective of philosophy. In this paper, we attempt to briefly summarise essential approaches and theories of persuasion presented in works of philosophers, educators, psychologists, as well as social psychologists.

Approaches to and Theories of Persuasion

The process of persuasion can be seen from two basic perspectives by proponents of learning or theorists on the one hand and supporters of functionalist approach, on the other hand. While the former ascribe decisive importance to intellectual procedures in the persuasion process, the latter con-

sider aspects of subjective motivation most important. Functionalists view people as “essentially ego-defensive” and claim that the prime motivation of human activities is “to satisfy conscious and unconscious personal needs”, and these in turn have little in common with the nature of objects or persons involved in the process. According to the functionalist approach, for example, various forms of social hostility (e.g. racial or ethnic prejudice result from the personality structure rather than from the external information about particular social groups. Some theories view the persuasion process as the struggle of conflicting forces (compare e.g. Štefančík, Dulebová 2017), for instance, desires, existing attitudes, new information on the one hand and the social pressures that come from external sources. There are various approaches even among the proponents of this approach: some explore how people ascribe a particular importance to these forces when modifying their attitudes and behaviour, while others focus on the power of emotional aspects in the persuasion process.

The concept of conflict-resolution model has been extended in the elaboration-likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion, presented by two American psychologists John Cacioppo and Richard Petty (1980). Their model is based on the cognitive processing of information and the stimuli people obtain in the course of persuasion process, and on how people respond to that information. If recipients react by reflecting on the content and arguments of the message, they are more likely to be persuaded and resist counter-persuasion. In Petty’s and Cacioppo’s (1986) two-way model of persuasion, the first way referred to as the central one is based on the context. Those who are being persuaded are carefully considering their decision concerning the change of their attitude and are affected by the power of arguments. The second part of the model described as the peripheral way of persuasion is not directly connected with the message; the intended persuades can be influenced by marginal factors as for instance slogans, jokes, or emotions.

Communication scholars define persuasion as a process characteristic of the following four features:

- a communication process in which the communicator seeks to elicit a desired response from his receiver;
- a conscious attempt by one individual to change the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviour of another individual or group of individuals through the transmission of some message;
- a symbolic activity whose purpose is to effect the internalization or voluntary acceptance of new cognitive states or patterns of overt behaviour through the exchange of messages;

- a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom (Perloff 2003).

When merging these characteristics, we can obtain the definition of persuasion as a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviour regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice. The resulting definition contains the following five components:

1. **Persuasion is a symbolic process.** "Persuasion also involves the use of symbols, with messages transmitted primarily through language with its rich, cultural meanings. Symbols include words like freedom, justice, and equality; nonverbal signs like the flag, Star of David, or Holy Cross, ...; Symbols are persuaders' tools, harnessed to change attitudes and mold opinions."

2. **Persuasion involves an attempt to influence.** Persuasion need not be successful; it involves an attempt at achieving the change of attitude on the part of the recipient.

3. **People persuade themselves.** We can only agree with D. Joel Whalen (1996) who claims "You can't force people to be persuaded—you can only activate their desire and show them the logic behind your ideas." It means that what persuaders can do is to make somebody change their attitudes that already have, which "shaping, molding, or reinforcing attitudes" (Perloff 2003: 14). Miller (1980) also differentiates these persuasive effects and considers the third one the most significant. In our opinion, it is reinforcement that is also most interesting; according to this persuasion effect the aim of persuasive communication is to strengthen the belief they people already hold.

4. **Persuasion involves the transmission of a message.** It is a communicative activity; thus, in contrast to other forms of social influence, there is a message. In the various contexts, including advertising, political campaigns, or selling something to somebody, but also in the world of art (including books, songs or paintings) there is a message whose aim is some kind of influencing of attitude or behaviour. In fact, art and news can be viewed as borderline cases of persuasion. In this process, the aim of communicators is broader and more complex than just changing our attitudes.

5. **Persuasion requires free choice.** To be persuaded, one has to be able to freely decide. Persuasion in itself and freedom may appear to be contradictory and the issue of freedom has been a hot topic of discussion of both philosophers and political scientists in terms of the opposition of *free will* and *determinism*.

Persuasion Versus Coercion

There is another concept that may be easily confused with persuasion, namely coercion. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy explains this concept in terms of its “two different faces, corresponding to the two parties involved in its most ordinary cases. On one face, it picks out a technique agents (coercers) can use to get other agents to do or not do something. On the other face, it picks out a kind of reason for why agents (coercees) sometimes do or refrain from doing something.” (Anderson, Scott 2017).

A relativist perspective represented by Mary J. Smith (1982) emphasises the role of perception in the persuasion process. It means that persuasion is understood as the matter of perception. According to this author, if people feel they are free to refuse to accept the persuader’s position, the process can be described as persuasion; on the other hand, if they perceive a persuader’s attempt to influence them as the pressure that they are not free to resist, they perceive it as coercion.

Circumstances and factors considered by those who are being persuaded include the source (related to the persuader), namely his or her reliability and attractiveness. As noted by Dale Carnegie in his famous classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (2010), persuasiveness and personal attractiveness are two characteristics that go hand in hand. This explains a frequently observed behaviour of politicians who like being seen in public and photographed with good-looking and successful models, sportsmen, or actors.

When discussing persuasion process and considering what factors can accelerate or act as obstacles to this process, it is useful to mention the concept of group thinking. It is generally believed that people arrive at better decision in a group rather than individually. However, as psychologists have ascertained, group decision making involves the risk that members of the group may be affected by the illusion of being infallible and invulnerable when deciding together, or that they may find themselves under the pressure of the effort for achieving harmony and consensus. In this context, Aquilar and Galluccio (2007) refer to J. F. Kennedy’s decision (recommended by J.F. K.’s advisors) on the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, which turned out to be erroneous (Aquilar, Galluccio 2007: 18).

Rhetoric as the Power of Persuasion

Rhetoric is described by Quintilianus (1985) as the oldest science of word and speech. It has been through periods of decline and boom. Nowadays rhetoric has to be viewed and approached as an interdisciplinary field, which draws on the knowledge from such disciplines as psychology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, quantitative linguistics, speech acts theory, and pragmatics (Lepilová 2002: 70). According to Quintilianus, the most frequent definition of rhetoric is the one that identifies it as *the power of persuasion*, while the term *power* is to be understood as robustness or capability. To avoid misunderstanding, Quintilian uses the equivalent of the Greek word *dynamis* to explain its meaning. (Quintilian 1985: 106-107) The task of rhetoric is, according to Quintilian, not only to develop a fully proficient orator but also an honest person. Nowadays, rhetoric is part of the humanities culture studies. Lepilová (2002) claims that the contemporary rhetoric focuses on how the speaker wins the audience's attention.

The revival of interest in studying rhetoric – in fact, a renaissance of rhetoric – by the end of the twentieth century can be viewed as the result of several factors, which include – apart from socio-political changes – several trends in communication:

- Focus on the speaker, which is reflected in strengthening subjective (personal) features in oral and written discourse;

- Penetration of emotionally marked expressions into professional written and spoken discourse;

- A newly increased interest in spoken discourse in the mass media;

- Intertextuality as overlapping elements of various text types and interdiscursivity in public discourse as reflected in breaking traditional ways of communication, as well as in transferring elements of another type of discourse; Focus on the interdisciplinary study of languages (after: Kraus 2011).

Emotional Argumentation in Political Discourse

When exploring political communication in terms of the recipient's emotions, as a basis we can use the functions of the language developed by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle (Vachek 1964) as well as the works of Anglo-Saxon authors, for instance David Crystal's typology of language functions in *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language* (2010). The power to arouse feelings in the audience is based on overcoming three types of barrier: time, space, and those of apathy. In the case of time barrier

ers, the speaker can use stories based on their real-life experience or those contrasting the past and the future; removing spatial barriers involves providing an adequate amount of detail, which will allow the listener to understand the feelings of the unknown or a distant person only by learning about their everyday life. The third type of barrier the overcoming of which enables the public speaker to arouse the desired emotions in the recipient, is apathy, indifference, or disregard for a particular phenomenon. By using a patchwork metaphor, Jesse Jackson (1988) evoked in the audience the memories of the warmth of one's home with a blanket sewn by a grandmother. (Osborn, Osborn & Osborn, 2009). At the same time, however, the authors point out that the speaker has to be able to estimate the appropriate level of such appeal, as an excessive emotionality may result in distrust or mockery on the part of the audience. Apart from that, even when using emotional arguments, the speaker should not neglect facts and figures available.

Other means of emotional argumentation can be detected for example, in Obama's Address to the People of Mexico presented at the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City in 2013, in which the speaker addressed the auditorium with words of respect, which could almost be described as flattery. For drug-related violence and using guns in acts of violence in Mexico, Obama blamed the United States (Obama 2013: 3).

The possibilities of emotional argumentation in the political sphere are well-known to contemporary social psychologists, speakers, as well as politicians, as evidenced by speeches full of emotional images, outbursts and challenges (e.g. Obama, Trump, etc.). For example, Donald Trump used the contrast between the glorious past and the shameful presence as an emotional argument in his presidential campaign speech on foreign policy (Breveníková 2016).

The importance of emotions in decision making on political issues has been described by British psychologist James Frayne, a political and business consultant in several election campaigns in the United Kingdom, as follows: *It is becoming increasingly clear that people make political decisions based primarily on emotion rather than reason.* (Frayne 2013). Frayne adds that the voter sensitivity to emotional arguments does not present a novelty; however, what is new about this phenomenon are the findings by neurologists and neurolinguists or cognitive linguists (e.g. George Lakoff) concerning the functioning of human brain in the decision making process. This approach offers answers to questions about why for example some readers tend to receive some news better than some others. A simplified explanation of this phenomenon is that our brain stores some news in the long-term memory, which increases the possibility of their influence on the fu-

ture voter's decision. An especially strong impact is that of news with audio-visual effect. Based on research results, Frayne explains that some political news with which the voter agrees are stored in their brain disposition system. The role of this positive information is to remind the voter to participate in elections and support their (politicians') election preferences. Another type of information affects the surveillance system: in particular negative news are used to raise fears, and if applied in an election campaign, voters may be repeatedly considering their decisions and might be inclined to change their earlier decisions.

In his research into changes in voter decision-making during election campaigns, James Frayne describes communication with prospective voters. For example, arguments such as "it's good for the economy" may be misunderstood as emotional arguments used to refer to low-income families. (Politicians may describe to this group of people as hard-working families and stress that they should be left with more money to support.). Other phenomena may include controversial campaigns, a deliberate manipulation with various stories, or focusing on people and their personality traits much more than on solving real-life problems or an actual political agenda. Frayne considers the tendency towards negative argumentation to be an almost global phenomenon, but assumes that understanding the human brain functioning in the decision-making process can lead to a more conscious emotional approach (Frayne 2013).

US psychologists have been studying the power of emotions especially during election campaigns. Strahilevitz (2012) points out the power and importance of negative emotions during election campaigns and justifies this phenomenon by a strong motivation of the fear of pain in contrast to the comfort connected with pleasant feelings. Voters' selection of their candidate is frequently driven by the idea that the least favourite candidate may win the election. As a result, often negative emotions such as disappointment, concern, fear, anger, or their combination may prevail at the time of elections, and then, these emotions have the greatest impact in elections. Strahilevitz also observes that future voters usually engage in much more passionate discussions about the candidates they do not want to vote for, rather than about those they intend to support in the elections (Strahilevitz 2012). The prevailing trend to negative argumentation has also been noticed on social networks, for instance Facebook, Twitter and Google+.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, we return to the core idea pursued in this paper: Persuasion is a complex process depending on various factors. Their tricky nature has been perhaps best captured by D. Joel Whalen (1996), whose words have been cited at the beginning of this paper. “*You can’t force people to be persuaded—you can only activate their desire and show them the logic behind your ideas. You can’t move a string by pushing it, you have to pull it. People are the same. Their devotion and total commitment to an idea come only when they fully understand and buy in with their total being*” (Perloff, 2010: 14).

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