



THE ROLE OF PERSUASIVE APPEAL IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN NIGERIA

AGBIM, Kenneth

Department of Mass Communication, Imo State University, Owerri

Corresponding author: Agbim Kenneth, Email: kenagbim@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Political campaigns are intended to educate, convince and win over electorates to support and vote for a political party and candidates during elections. This article delved into how this calculated effort at getting the electorates to shift their existing position or reinforce what they already know and belief in, is achieved through persuasion. Various articles and postulations on persuasive appeal strategies were reviewed and findings showed that people easily go for messages that appeal to their existing beliefs, psychographic exposures and cultural leanings. However, new information and knowledge when carefully framed and presented strongly and consistently can sway decisions and influence shifts in opinion and attitude. The recent United States presidential election presents a good example a messaged that connects with the belief and expectations of the audience. The consistent message of MAGA (Make America Great Again) resonated with the American electorates and lead to the electoral victory of Donald Trump. On the other hand, the 2023 Nigerian election threw up another example of electorates disregarding existing affiliations and leanings to embrace a new message of from Consumption to Production espoused by Governor Peter Obi.

Keywords: Persuasive appeal, politics, political campaigns, public opinions

Introduction

Public Relations is the planned persuasion of people to behave in ways that further its sponsor's objectives.” Yet for other scholars, persuasion is an anathema that is perceived to be on the slippery slope that skids through publicity and ends up with propaganda’ (PR Academy, 2018). Public Relations can also be said to be an act of information management about a person or an organization. How information is packaged and released plays an important role in how the information is received and interpreted. In trying to send the message and create the desired image and impression Public Relations use persuasive appeal. Public Relations, a practice of management of image, impression or perception of an individual or organizations use persuasion as one of the key tools of achieving this (Oduenyi & Etumnu, 2025; Ogbemi, 2023).

In persuasion the writers/speakers employ certain rhetorical strategies in an attempt to persuade (convince) their audiences (1) that something is true or (2) to take some action and often, both. These strategies can be broadly categorized into what we call persuasive appeals, the building blocks of argumentation. The three most commonly referenced persuasive appeals are ethos, pathos, and logos, and kairos is often considered the fourth appeal (Cottey College, 2022).

To be rhetorically effective (and thus persuasive), the speaker must engage the audience in a variety of compelling ways, which involves carefully choosing how to craft his or her argument so that the outcome of audience agreement with the argument or point, is achieved. (Long & Minervini, 2020).

Persuasion is the act of trying to convince someone to believe or accept something; this can be subtle through superior argument or aggressive through consistency of argument and presentations. Persuasion is primarily a communication process, persuasion is an effort to convey information in such a way as to get people to revise old pictures in their heads, or form new ones, and thus change their behavior (Agility PR Solutions, 2016).

Persuasive appeal according to Borden (2024), is an established modes of argument that are designed to influence others. Basic persuasive appeals, such as an appeal to logic, emotion and authority

originated in antiquity. Persuasive appeal is known to be effective but it is an art to get them right against a talented opponent in debate. In the realm of politics, the art of persuasion stands as a pivotal tool for success (Borden, 2024).

Persuading people to support a particular candidate or party is an essential test of any political campaign. But precisely how to move voters successfully is a matter still not fully understood—and the *raison d'être* for political strategists and pundits. In the fields of economics and political science, conventional wisdom has long held that people generally will act in ways that support their fundamental views and preferences' (Pazzanesse, 2015).

However, there have been cases where voters go out of their traditional pattern of voting to vote across party and ideological leanings. For example, many were taken by surprise with the impact of Mr. Peter Obi in the 2023 general election in Nigeria, being a candidate who entered the race late in the day with a relatively small political party.

His message of moving the Country from Consumption to Production was so effective that he was presumed in some quarters to have won the election. It is a known fact that most voters vote purely based on partisan line or party loyalty. Which means a Democrat is naturally expected to vote a candidate of his party while a Republican is naturally expected to work for the success of the candidates nominated by the Republican Party and in the case of Nigeria an APC member will naturally vote for an APC candidate and same goes for a PDP and Labor Party members.

It is therefore, safe to conclude that the rational act or theory that people seek to act in their own self-interest sounds perfectly logical. But it fails to explain what causes some voters to change their political views or preferences over time. The sudden change of views of voters as exemplified with the Peter Obi phenomenon in the Nigerian 2023 general election defied this theory.

It then suggests that people due to new information and convictions can actually vote outside their political interest or party through persuasion. Political scientists at Harvard and Stanford universities, drawing from longstanding social psychology research, have concluded that a person's political attitudes are actually a consequence of the actions he or she has taken — and not their cause.

To minimize that mental discomfort, the theory posits, a person will adapt his or her attitude to better fit with or justify previous actions (Pazzanesse, 2015). There's a whole host of things going on in social psychology and behavioral economics about how humans act and how preferences are formed" Matthew Blackwell, Harvard Faculty of Science and Arts, in his paper on this subject, offers a new framework for understanding the origin of political attitudes and preferences and how they may change over time, and presents a formal theory about how people adjust their political preferences in order to downplay cognitive dissonance, a theory that has predictive power. "I think this gives us a lot of insights into how people's political attitudes come to be formed, and specifically how they change over time," said Blackwell. "The more we think about these different mechanisms in people's heads, I think the better we're going to be able to figure out what messages are going to work and what strategies are not going to work."

Blackwell says the findings offer the first formal theory of political attitude change framed within the context of cognitive dissonance, one that could offer new understanding across a range of political behaviors and help answer questions like what causes political partisanship, what drives ethnic and racial animosity, and how empathy with key social ties is so effective in shifting a person's political views.

In today's political world, the desire to reconcile cognitive dissonance drives the growing tendency of political candidates to emphasize apolitical qualities such as personality and demeanor while deliberately cultivating vagueness about their policy positions in an effort to minimize cognitive dissonance in voters' eyes, said Blackwell. He further stated that "The less they know about your policies, the less strife they will feel in voting for you if they disagree with you."

Central to the art of persuasion is an appreciation for the cognitive biases that guide human decision-making. These biases, often operating below the level of conscious awareness, can significantly influence the choices individuals make. By recognizing and addressing these biases, political campaigners can craft messages that resonate more deeply with their audience.

Emotional intelligence plays a pivotal role in this process. The capacity to empathize with and understand the emotional states of others allows for the crafting of messages that speak directly to the hearts of voters. Techniques such as storytelling, which can evoke strong emotional responses, become powerful tools in the political arsenal.

The principles of social proof and reciprocity are also key elements of persuasive strategy. Demonstrating widespread support for a campaign can encourage others to follow suit, leveraging the human tendency to conform to group norms. Similarly, the principle of reciprocity whereby individuals feel compelled to give back when something is received—can be utilized to foster a sense of mutual obligation and support between a campaign and its constituents.

Commitment and consistency are further pillars of persuasion. Once individuals have publicly committed to a belief or action, they are more likely to follow through and maintain that stance in the interest of appearing consistent. Political campaigns can encourage such commitments through pledges, endorsements, and public declarations of support.

Beyond verbal messaging, non-verbal cues and body language contribute significantly to the persuasive power of a political figure. Mastery of these subtle forms of communication can enhance credibility and charisma, making messages more persuasive. However, the use of such powerful tools comes with a responsibility to practice ethical persuasion. Respecting the autonomy and rights of individuals is paramount. Persuasion should aim for positive outcomes, seeking to inform and inspire rather than manipulate.

Conceptual Clarification

A look at Persuasive Appeal

There are about 27 examples of persuasive appeal according to Spacey (2023), they are;

1. **Appeal to Authority:** Here reference is made to a higher authority like the University, Government, United Nations, World Health Organization etc.
2. **Appeal to Emotions:** Trying to evoke the emotions of the audience, reminding them of past experiences that maybe unpleasant or unfavorable.
3. **Appeal to Tradition:** Here you may position your argument to be in line with ways of life and thinking or the norms. This is the way our people do it. Our forefathers did it this way or said this.
4. **Appeal to Justice:** Here the argument is couched to present the opposition or opponent as unfair especially in political campaigns
5. **Appeal to Duty:** Using the emotions attached to duty, responsibility and accountability. The audience are reminded of their civic responsibility and debt to their unborn generations to act.
6. **Appeal to Experience:** Establishing your credibility by referencing your experience and link to the authority J. Spacey 2023
7. **Appeal to the Ego:** You flatter the audience and make them feel so important and powerful. For examples in political campaigns, you make the voters know that their votes will count and power belongs to them.
8. **Appeal to Trend:** You position your argument and trendy, growing, popular and gaining ground
9. **Appeal to Consensus:** Sound like your position has already been accepted by the group. In the case of a product make it look like the most popular brand and in the case of political candidate he will posture like the winner already or the candidate to beat.
10. **Appeal to Fear:** Trying to trigger a sense of fear in the audience. For a example a vote for Peter Obi will be a vote for IPOB and the division of Nigeria.

11. **Appeal to Sympathy:** Trying to make others or the audience feel sorry for you. For example, when a politician starts to tell the audience how he used personal resources to do things for the community, how he has suffered trying to draw Government attention to their plight etc.
12. **Appeal to Likeability:** Establishing you as a likeable person or man of the people.
13. **Appeal to Populism:** Aligning you to popular negativity such as dislike for an elite or elites. Appearing to be pro masses and the downtrodden. Showing disdain to what many dislike
14. **Charismatic Authority:** Using a strong personal presence as a type of authority. Appearing intelligent and infallible.
15. **Weasel Words:** Citing anonymous powerful authorities such ‘Science’ ‘the data’ or ‘expert believes’. This could be unsubstantiated sources.
16. **Appeal to Reason:** An argument that seems logical or actually logical. This could be called superior argument or reasoning
17. **Appeal to Change:** Positioning your argument as an exciting progressive change
18. **Labeling:** Applying negative labels to the opposition to bias the mind of the audience against them. For example, labeling APC as Boko Haram party and Labor Party as Biafran Party
19. **Appeal to Freedom:** Inspiring the audience sense of freedom and individuality that triggers a positive response.
20. **Appeal to Common Sense:** Making your argument or position look obvious and inevitable. Peter Obi used this approach strongly in 2023 General Elections campaign
21. **Appeal to Popularity:** Position your argument as popular and highly accepted
22. **Visual Appeals:** The use of visual imagery to influence, often using emotions. You can imagine where someone is talking about economic hardship or bad governance using picture of people scrabbling for loafs of bread or people cuing to buy fuel.
23. **Appeal to Consequences:** This strategy paints a gloomy picture should the audience adopts a contrary opinion or position
24. **Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt:** Suggesting that there is something untested and uncertain about the opposition position that may trigger fear. For example, the opposition warned that a President Tinubu’s Government may not be far from President Buhari’s Government in terms of lack of positive ideas and initiatives.
25. **Appeal to Humor:** Using humor to bring fun. Audience is more receptive to messages when they are having fun. Politicians with good sense of humor tend to draw more crowd at rallies,
26. **Appeal to Relatability:** When an upper class privileged person tries to acquire lower class mannerisms and membership. He wants to feel at home and relate with his target audience at their level. This is where you see politicians stop over at road side vendors of Beans Cake (Akara) and Corn Roasters place to buy and eat some these items.
27. **Appeal to Pride:** Invoking sense of Pride such as Patriotism. When your audience begins to see what you asked them to do as call of duty to their motherland, the messages resonate.

Understanding the Art of Persuasion in Politics

1.1 The Psychology of Persuasion: Captivating the Voter's Mind

At the heart of political success lies the ability to sway public opinion—a skill that hinges on a deep understanding of the psychology of persuasion.

A look into complex interplay of cognitive biases and emotional triggers that shape voter behavior, providing a roadmap for engaging the electorate in a meaningful and impactful way will be the focus here.

‘Understanding persuasion can help you know how to influence others healthily and be more aware of the technique’s others might use to try and change your beliefs and behaviors’ (Better help, 2024). Persuasion can involve argument and inspiration, but in the hard business of politics, words are usually just words.

Persuasion mostly involves defeating or overcoming opposition by bargaining and coalition building (ERIC,2023).

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Building credibility and fostering long-term relationships are essential for sustainable political influence. Trust, once established, becomes the foundation upon which persuasive efforts can thrive. Additionally, the concept of self-persuasion highlights the importance of internal belief systems in shaping external behaviors. By influencing one’s own beliefs and behaviors, a political figure can embody the principles they advocate, enhancing their authenticity and persuasive impact.

1.2 The Role of Emotional Appeal in Political Campaigns

In the theater of political campaigning, emotional appeal often holds the upper hand over logical argumentation. The efficacy of emotional appeal in persuasion hinges on a deep understanding of the audience’s backgrounds, beliefs, values, needs, and challenges.

By tapping into this reservoir of human experience, political messages can be tailored to strike a chord that resonates with the personal and collective narratives of the electorate (Blumenherst, 2023). This process involves not just a superficial nod to these elements but a genuine engagement with the emotional landscape of the audience. Emotional triggers, such as hope, fear, pride, and anger, can significantly deepen the impact of a message.

These triggers, when activated, can motivate individuals towards action or sway their opinions more effectively than the most logical argument. However, the use of such triggers must be approached with emotional intelligence—a capacity that allows campaigners to not only identify and understand these emotional responses but also to predict and navigate them with sensitivity and respect. Stories play a pivotal role in this emotional engagement (Monteiro, 2024). Narratives that incorporate relatable characters, real-life struggles, triumphs, and tragedies have the power to engage voters on an emotional level that abstract policies and statistics cannot match.

Through storytelling, political messages become more than just propositions; they transform into reflections of the voters' own lives and aspirations, thereby enhancing their persuasive impact. The primacy of emotion over logic in political decision-making is well-documented.

Messages that resonate emotionally can cut through the noise of competing information, embedding themselves more deeply in the consciousness of the electorate. For instance, campaigns that have harnessed the power of emotional appeal—whether through evoking a sense of national pride, fear of adverse outcomes, or hope for a better future—have often succeeded in mobilizing support in ways those purely rational arguments might not.

This explains the magic behind the overnight growth and presence of the obedient movement the 2023 general election, the message of 'a new Nigeria is Possible with PO From Consumption to Production' etc. resonated with the electorates

However, the employment of emotional appeal carries with it a responsibility to balance persuasive power with ethical considerations. It is essential to avoid manipulative tactics that exploit emotional vulnerabilities. For example, in Nigeria the elites have always wiped up religious and tribal sentiments to manipulate the electorate who tend to vote one of their own irrespective of his inadequacies and lack of ability to function effectively in the position being elected into.

Respect for the emotional well-being of the audience is paramount, ensuring that the use of emotional appeal contributes positively to the political discourse and respects the autonomy of the electorate. In summary, the role of emotional appeal in political campaigns is both powerful and delicate. It requires a nuanced understanding of the human psyche, a commitment to ethical persuasion, and an ability to craft messages that genuinely connect with the hearts and minds of voters. Through such an approach, political campaigns can achieve not just electoral success but also foster a deeper, more meaningful dialogue with the electorate.

1.3 *Crafting Your Message: Clarity, Consistency, and Charisma*

The essence of a persuasive political campaign lies in its message. A message that is clear, consistent, and delivered with charisma forms the backbone of any successful persuasion effort.

Understanding Your Audience

The first step in crafting a persuasive message is a deep understanding of your audience. Knowing the backgrounds, beliefs, values, needs, and challenges of those you aim to persuade allows for the creation of messages that speak directly to their experiences. This alignment between message and audience fosters a sense of relevance and immediacy, making the message more impactful.

Clarity and Consistency

Clarity is paramount. A message should be straightforward and easy for the audience to grasp. Ambiguity or complexity can dilute its persuasive power, leading to confusion rather than conviction. Alongside clarity, consistency reinforces the message, embedding it more deeply with each repetition. A consistent message reinforces your campaign's core values and positions, building trust and reliability in the eyes of the electorate.

Employing Emotional Appeal

Emotional appeal, when used ethically, can significantly enhance the persuasiveness of your message. Storytelling is a particularly effective technique, capable of illustrating complex points, evoking empathy, and appealing to the values important to your audience. Stories humanize political issues, transforming them from abstract concepts into personal narratives that voters can relate to and be moved by.

Articulating Advantages and Addressing Pain Points

Your message should clearly articulate the advantages of your perspective while directly addressing the audience's pain points. Highlighting how your policies or leadership will benefit the electorate and solve their problems creates a compelling reason for support. This approach not only demonstrates understanding and empathy but also positions you as the solution to their concerns.

Enhancing Impact with Persuasive Techniques

The use of persuasive techniques such as repetition and the rule of three (presenting information in triads to increase memorability and impact) can significantly enhance the effectiveness of your message. These techniques, rooted in psychological principles, ensure that your message sticks with the audience, reinforcing its key points (Jones, 2021).

Charismatic Delivery and Social Media

In today's digital age, charisma can be conveyed not just in person but also through social media platforms. A charismatic message—one that is delivered with passion, conviction, and authenticity—can captivate and inspire.

Social media offers a unique opportunity to reach a wider audience, allowing for the personal touch of charisma to be amplified across digital spaces.

Clear Call to Action

Finally, every persuasive message should end with a clear and compelling call to action (CTA). This CTA guides the audience on what to do next, whether it's voting, attending a rally, or simply spreading the word. A strong CTA converts the momentum generated by your message into tangible actions.

In conclusion, crafting a persuasive political message is a multifaceted process that requires clarity, consistency, and charisma. By understanding your audience, leveraging emotional appeal, articulating benefits, addressing concerns, and employing effective delivery techniques, you can create messages that not only persuade but also inspire action and loyalty. The leaders who master this art are those who not only capture the attention of their electorate but also earn their trust and support.

Conclusion

The art of public speaking laced with persuasive appeal is a potent tool in the political arena, capable of inspiring change and driving action. By understanding your audience, structuring your speech effectively, framing your message, mastering delivery, utilizing body language, engaging with the audience, and employing storytelling and visual aids, you can harness this power to captivate crowds and leave a lasting impact. As history's most notable orators have shown, the ability to communicate effectively can be one of the most influential skills a leader can possess.

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