



A Critical Analysis of Fear Appeals in Political Discourse: A Corpus-based Linguistic Study of US Presidential Speeches

¹Tuba Latif*, ²Aniqa Rashid, ³Nimra Noor, ⁴Huda Noor

¹MPhil (Linguistics) Scholar, English Graduate Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Faisalabad campus

²Assistant Professor, English Graduate Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Faisalabad campus
anrashid@numl.edu.pk

³MPhil (Linguistics) Scholar, English Graduate Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Faisalabad campus
nimranoor1105@numl.edu.pk

⁴MPhil (Linguistics) Scholar, English Graduate Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Faisalabad campus
hudanoor2112@numl.edu.pk

Corresponding Authors:

*Corresponding author: (T. Latif)

Corresponding Author email

tubalatif77@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study critically examines the use of fear appeals in US presidential speeches through a corpus-based linguistic analysis, focusing on key addresses delivered by Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. The analysis explores the linguistic features and rhetorical strategies, such as evaluative language, repetition, and emotional framing, used to construct fear-based narratives during national crises. By applying Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric, the research highlights the interplay between emotional engagement, credibility, and logical reasoning in shaping public opinion and mobilizing political action. The study uncovers common patterns of fear appeal usage across different presidencies, demonstrating how these leaders manipulate cognitive biases and use rhetoric to influence political decision-making. Future research will extend this analysis to explore the long-term effects of fear appeals on political engagement and public trust, offering valuable insights into the role of emotion in political discourse.

Introduction

The main aim of the study is to critically investigate the use of fear appeals in political discourse in the US presidential speeches. Fear appeals were always used by politicians but are primarily used during times of national crisis as rhetorical tools that try to sway public opinion by means of the use of rhetoric and invoke fear in the target audience. These appeals are powerful tools that are used to manipulate emotional urgency, cognitive biases, and logical reasoning to convince the public to take a favorite political agenda in favor of national policy. Politicians have used fear for years because they understand the power of fear as a psychological motivator, which forces people into action, shapes perceptions of a situation, and maintains control over the political narrative. This is in accordance with what former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said: 'The only thing to fear is fear itself.' This demonstrates the profound influence that fear can have on shaping both individual and group decisions. This study examines the construction of fear appeals in presidential speeches in the presidential electoral campaign and the relationship between fear appeals and political discourse and public perception.

The effectiveness of fear rhetoric in all manners of political contexts has been addressed in past research. Witte (1992) and Zhao & Liu (2020) are scholars who examined the psychological mechanisms by which fear appeals to work when fear is strategically framed; individuals will act even though sometimes their rational thinking takes a back seat. Witte's (1992) fear appeal analysis for health communication illustrates the sway of emotion to influence behavior, believing that with a real threat that is both salient and imminent that the proposed solution is more likely to gain support from the audience. As Tversky and Kahneman (1981) have also shown, the cognitive bias of loss

aversion is important for making fear appeals effective. These past studies match up with this research on how emotional engagement, cognitive biases, and logical reasoning are utilized in US presidential speeches as fear appeals to persuade the people.

This study traces the historical context of fear appeals in the United States, the in political speeches. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt, U.S. presidents have repeatedly used fear to define national crises: in wartime, economic downturns, or political upheaval. Just like the speech we have all come to know well and quote, "A Date which shall live in Infamy", given by Roosevelt after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, is the strategic use of fear to unite the nation against a common enemy. Like modern presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, fear appeals have been used by them to address different threats like terrorism, economic collapse, and political division. Appeals have thus come to be a central part of the discourse of presidents, a discourse which has been shaped by the language of fear in according the spectre of foreigners to the heart of the republic. The construction of these leaders' fear appeals and the role they play in the contemporary political landscape continues to be important for the study of political life today.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to analyze the usage of fear appeal in US presidential speeches and analyze a set of key presidential addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. The study of rhetorical strategies and linguistic features that have been used to construct fear-based narratives during national crises is carried out through a corpus-based linguistic analysis of such uses. The purpose of the research is to try to find out by what means these leaders employ emotional engagement, credibility, and logical reasoning to elicit change in public opinion and move towards political action. The study will yield hints concerning the part that emotion plays in political discourse.

Statement of the Problem

A corpus-based linguistic analysis of linguistic features and rhetorical strategies in the language of fear appeals in US presidential speeches is the aim of this research. Although fear appeals have been studied in the context of advertising and contributions to public health, the research on their usage in political discourse, especially presidential speeches, is not well explored. Baker & Siegel (2011) note that emotional appeals are used in national crises, but they do not examine the use of emotional appeals across presidencies. Also, like Cunningham (2022) and Stewart (2006), scholars analyze rhetoric by individual figures, but not in big picture patterns of linguistic patterns and rhetorical devices within fear appeals. The intention of this study is therefore to fill this gap through linguistic analysis of the speeches of five US presidents: Roosevelt, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden, to unearth the linguistic focus, the framing of fear, how emotional urgency is created, and cognitive bias used. Also, during the research, the role of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos in creating fear-based persuasive narratives in political discourse will be studied.

Significance of Study

The findings of this research will therefore be extremely relevant for the study of political rhetoric and communication. It will contribute to a better understanding of how political leaders frame fear to invoke and mobilize support behind policies. The results of this study will be of great value to political communication scholars, policymakers, and analysts in general, and especially in terms of decision-making during crises. The findings will be useful from a pedagogical perspective, as they will help students to learn to critically evaluate political discourse from a political communication and rhetorical perspective. In addition, it will help to develop courses in language, politics, and psychology, giving students a complete picture of how language affects political behavior. In addition, it will feed into media literacy initiatives to ensure the public knows how fear impacts opinion. This research will provide fodder for how future work will examine the ethical implications of fear-based rhetoric and how fear rhetoric affects democratic processes, the act of political participation, and the median citizen's faith in his or her government.

Delimitations of the Study

In this study, the language of fear appeals in US presidential speeches by Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden is analyzed through a corpus-based linguistic study. The paper is limited to processes and linguistic features used during these national crises rather than speeches and debates about presidential campaigns. The theory of analysis is based on the theory of Appraisal, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian, more specifically, how fear is rhetorically constructed and influences people's perception and political decisions in the public discourse. Rather, the study does not perform a comprehensive analysis of all rhetorical strategies, but rather it investigates fear appeals as an instrument of political persuasion.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to

1. analyse the linguistic strategies used in fear appeals across selected US presidential speeches (Roosevelt, Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden) by examining lexical choices, metaphors, and evaluative language using Appraisal Theory and Persuasive Rhetoric.
2. Investigate how US presidents employ Ethos, Pathos, and Logos to construct fear appeals that persuade the public during crises, reinforcing their leadership and policy agendas.
3. Examine how cognitive biases, emotional urgency, and logical reasoning interact in fear-based rhetoric to shape public perception and influence decision-making.

Research Questions

1. What linguistic features and rhetorical devices are used in fear appeals within US presidential speeches during crises?
2. What role do Ethos, Pathos, and Logos play in constructing persuasive fear-based narratives in political discourse?
3. Why are fear appeals effective in influencing public perception, and how do they contribute to political persuasion and decision-making?

Research Hypotheses

Fear appeals in political discourse strategically combine Pathos (emotional intensification), Ethos (credibility), and Logos (reasoning) to frame threats as urgent, exploit cognitive biases, and persuade the public to support political decisions.

Literature Review

Conceptual Background

The use of fear appeals in political discourse was a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and influencing decision-making. Political leaders often used emotional appeals to invoke fear, motivating individuals to act or adopt a particular stance. Fear appeals functioned by highlighting potential threats, which evoked primal emotional responses that could override logical thinking (Feldman, 2013). These emotional reactions triggered urgency, guiding the public toward the proposed course of action (Nabi, 2015).

Fear appeals often frame discourse within a crisis narrative. For instance, Barack Obama used fear of economic instability, national security threats, and social injustice to garner support for policies like healthcare reform (Altikriti, 2016). Similarly, Donald Trump employed fear of terrorism and immigration during national crises to justify policy measures (Zirak Ghazani, 2024). Joe Biden and Franklin D. Roosevelt also used fear strategically, during the COVID-19 pandemic and World War II, respectively, to mobilize public support, amplify the legitimacy of their actions, and invoke collective responsibility (Pandey, 2024).

The psychological mechanism behind fear appeals was rooted in the human tendency to prioritize survival instincts. Fear appeals often invoked urgency, anxiety, and concern, making the audience more likely to support immediate action (Witte, 1992). For example, George W. Bush used fear of terrorism to justify military action in the Middle East, while Obama framed fear of economic collapse during the financial crisis to promote his policies (Zhao & Liu, 2020). Fear appeals in presidential speeches often relied on emotive language like "imminent" and "dangerous" to provoke strong emotional reactions and compel the public to accept proposed solutions (Nabi, 2015).

This study analyzed the rhetorical mechanisms of fear in political discourse through Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric. Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) helped understand how evaluative language conveyed emotions, particularly fear. Affect refers to emotional responses, Judgment evaluates behavior, and Appreciation assesses objects or phenomena. These elements revealed how fear was constructed in political speeches. Aristotle's Pathos focused on emotional engagement, making it central to fear appeals, as emotions drove action (Aristotle, 2004).

Persuasive Rhetoric also played a key role, with Ethos (credibility), Logos (logical reasoning), and Pathos (emotional appeal) working together to persuade audiences. The combination of these appeals strengthened the fear-based narrative, providing a sense of credibility and rationality while emphasizing emotional urgency (Cockcroft & Cockcroft, 2005). Additionally, personal pronouns such as "we" and "they" were used to foster solidarity or establish an "us vs. them" dichotomy, often portraying external threats or political adversaries as dangers that had to be confronted collectively (Ghazani, 2024).

However, the use of fear appeals has been controversial. The argument that fear could mobilize public support but at the price of polarization, uncertainty, and mistrust in a case when the threat was overblown or unconvincing was made by some scholars (Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009; Baker & Siegel, 2011). On the other hand, fear appeals could provide unity and mobilize action for situations of crises, as in Roosevelt's use of fear in the Great Depression alongside security and concrete plans (Alweldi, 2024).

Overall, the use of fear appeals in political discourse, and a lot particularly in presidential speeches, was a complex way of using rhetorical devices. This study aimed to understand how fear is used by Obama, Trump, Biden, and Roosevelt to shape public perception, influence ideologies, and get people to do things. A comprehensive approach to fear's role in political persuasion was created by combining Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric.

Theoretical Background

The study was found on three cornerstones frameworks: Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric that combined offered resources to examine how the fear appeal is deployed in political discourse, specifically in the case of US presidential speeches. The study integrated these frameworks to explore what role fear played in political communication and public perception.

The evaluative language in political discourse can be understood by the Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). It divided language into three domains: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. It referred to emotional response, such as fear, enough to manipulate one's audience. Behaviors (right or wrong) were judged, and objects or phenomena (especially threats or crises) were appreciated. Fear appeals were crucial in that they showed how political leaders used fear to get people to act. For instance, Obama used fear of terrorism and economic crises to mobilize public support for policies, while Trump used fear of terrorism and immigration for the same (Pandey, 2024; Zeng, Dong, & Fang, 2024).

Fear appeals were effective because of the role played by persuasive Rhetoric. The three core appeals that helped persuade an audience were Ethos, Logos, and Pathos. When presenting fear-based messages, both Ethos and Logos were crucial in building credibility and providing logical reasoning. During the financial crisis, Obama used Logos to support fear appeals, and during the Great Depression, Roosevelt did the same (Zhao & Liu, 2020). Fear rhetoric was most pathos, or emotional appeal, as it appealed to emotions such as fear to get people to act. Ethos, logos, and pathos combined into a persuasive strategy that was used by the speaker and who's message would align the audience's trust, reason, and emotions to his message (Nabi, 2015).

The understanding of fear appeals was further enhanced by Aristotelian Rhetoric. The idea of how political leaders used Ethos, Logos, and Pathos to influence public perception was reviewed via Aristotle's presentation of Ethos, Logos, and Pathos. In all, Pathos played a major part in fear appeals – in the case of Trump's immigration rhetoric and Roosevelt's speeches during WWII, where fear was used to unite people behind the rhetoric and behind wartime efforts (Alweldi, 2024).

The analysis performed by this study combined Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, as well as Aristotelian Rhetoric to determine how Presidents like Obama, Trump, Biden, Bush, and Roosevelt utilized fear to incite emotions, shape policies, and legitimize authority or leadership during crisis. It offered a nuanced view as to how fear was used to such effect in political discourse.

Past Research Background

The Use of Fear Appeals in Political Discourse

The strategic use of fear appeals in political discourse was recognized as a potent tool for influencing public opinion and behavior, particularly in presidential rhetoric. Fear appeals highlighted potential threats or dangers, evoking emotional responses that motivated action in support of political agendas, policy changes, or wartime efforts (Nabi, 2015; White, 2024). These appeals were often most effective during national crises when emotional appeals drove public support. Presidents utilized fear to justify military interventions, enforce security measures, and rally support for domestic policies, as detailed in numerous studies of political rhetoric.

Appraisal Theory, developed by Martin and White (2005), offered a framework for understanding how political leaders evoked emotions like fear through language. This theory categorizes emotional content into three domains: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. The effect referred to emotional responses, particularly fear, which were strategically used to influence the audience. Judgment evaluated behaviors (right or wrong), while Appreciation assessed objects or phenomena, often related to threats or crises. These categories helped reveal how political leaders framed threats to create a sense of urgency. For example, Barack Obama's speeches used Affect to trigger fear about

national security, especially terrorism, while urging collective action (Alweldi, 2024). Similarly, Donald Trump used fear in his rhetoric about terrorism and immigration, shaping public support for his policies (Pandey, 2024).

Fear Appeals in Presidential Speeches: Obama, Trump, and Biden

Using fear appeals in US presidential rhetoric, fear was analyzed as a motivational mechanism employed by Obama, Trump, and Biden. During his first term, Obama's speeches were fear and hope, and progress rolled into one. He often latched onto the notion that terrorism was a threat to the very survival of the nation and justified security measures. Obama also, however, compensated for the fear with messages of optimism and a long-term vision of global cooperation (Nagel, 2012). In Zirak Ghazani (2024), he demonstrated how both Obama and George W. Bush used fear appeals to get people to act, with Obama combining fear of terrorism with hope and progress to win support for national security policies. Trump and Biden's rhetorical use of fear to frame climate change differed, according to Pandey (2024), as Trump used fear to divide his base and build support, while Biden's rhetoric is directed at building consensus for tackling the environmental threat through collective action.

Trump's use of fear was particularly potent during his presidency, frequently employing emotional appeals to depict immigrants, political adversaries, and foreign powers as existential threats to American identity. His rhetoric, particularly on national security and immigration, used pathos to evoke fear, casting these groups as dangers to American values (Zhao & Liu, 2020). Fuchs (2018) explored how Trump's fear-based rhetoric reinforced a divisive narrative, presenting a threatening world that required authoritarian leadership. Trump's speeches were marked by the strategic use of fear to consolidate political power.

Joe Biden's rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election campaign used fear to emphasize public health threats, but framed it as a call for collective action. Unlike Trump, Biden employed fear to unify the nation and foster solidarity in addressing shared challenges (Cunningham, 2022). Biden's speeches often positioned fear as an emotional motivator, urging Americans to act responsibly and take collective action for the well-being of the nation.

Fear Appeals in Historical Context: Roosevelt and the Great Depression

The use of fear appeals was not a modern phenomenon, with one of the most notable historical examples being Franklin D. Roosevelt's speeches during the Great Depression and World War II. Roosevelt's famous declaration, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," reframed the public's fear of economic collapse into a call for national resilience and solidarity (Stewart, 2006). Roosevelt used fear not to exaggerate threats but to acknowledge them and unify the nation in the face of adversity. His speeches combined pathos with ethos, creating a sense of urgency while simultaneously building trust with the public. Roosevelt's approach showed how fear, when framed with rational solutions and moral authority, could inspire collective action and drive political change (Baker & Siegel, 2011).

Global Perspectives on Fear Appeals in Political Rhetoric

Aside from US presidents, much of the research on fear appeals in political discourse has focused on examining the use of fear appeals by global leaders like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping globally to reinforce nationalistic ideologies and buttress political power (Abdullah, 2019). Strategically, fear was used to define its external threats, be it NATO or Western interference, and frame this as a threat to national sovereignty, and so justified strong authoritarian leadership in both cases. By looking at this global perspective, it became clear that these developed Western democracies were not the only location in which fears were appealed to the public to shape their opinions and political power.

Cognitive and Emotional Dimensions of Fear Appeals

Nabi (2015) and O'Keefe (2016) also examined the psychological mechanisms of fear appeals in order to understand how fear led to emotional reactions influencing action. Nabi stressed that fear is an effective way to strengthen the perception of threat and instigate political activity. O'Keefe (2016) investigated how the fear appeals dispelled the rational thinking, increasing the persuasive traits of emotional appeals, overshadowing the cognitive assessment of risk. The power of fear in political rhetoric can be inferred from these psychological mechanisms, which help influence public behavior through emotional and cognitive responses.

Ethos and Trust in Fear Appeals

The effectiveness of fear appeals depended on the role of ethos, or the credibility of the speaker. According to Krenn (2017), telling a fear appeal works best when the speaker is perceived as credible and trustworthy, especially

during a crisis. Zhao & Liu (2020) note that leaders who combined fear and credibility most closely with each other were more likely to mobilize public support. Fear appeals were more persuasive and galvanizing action when trust in the speaker was high.

Integration of Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric

Combining Appraisal theory, Persuasive rhetoric, and Aristotelian rhetoric and allowing them to work together on analyzing how fear appeals worked in political discourse resulted in a well-defined framework. This deep understanding of evoking emotions in the language, especially fear, and the public perception was made possible by the framework of Appraisal Theory. This was complemented by Aristotelian Rhetoric, which framed its discussion within the parameters of emphasis on ethos, logos, and pathos, that is, how acts of emotion, ethics, and logic combined to convince an audience. Such a combination of theories permitted to make a nuanced analysis of fear appeals and induced some insights as to how political leaders like Obama, Trump, Biden, and Roosevelt fought to mobilize the public mood, to justify their policies, and consolidate their own leadership in crises.

All in all, the fear appeals in the political discourse were an effective rhetorical tool of public opinion, as well as influencing political behavior. This study, by integrating the theories of Appraisal, Persuasive, and Aristotle's Rhetoric, sought to provide a broad insight into how such fear, which was inscribed into the political rhetorics, ideologies, public perception, and collective actions, was constructed during the crises.

Gaps in the Literature and Rationale for the Current Study

Despite this considerable research on the use of fear appeals in political discourse, a significant lacuna remains in comprehending their function under different presidential administrations and within other theoretical frameworks. Whereas most existing literature focuses on individual case studies or isolated incidents, the existing literature provides very little insight into broader patterns of fear-based rhetoric among leaders, and with regard to the periods. There have been some studies on fear appeals in Barack Obama's speeches, Donald Trump's speeches, and Joe Biden's speeches, but no comparative, corpus-based analysis across many presidencies. This study addresses just this gap by investigating and comparing the fear appeals in the speeches of key US presidents, including Roosevelt, Obama, Trump, and Biden, within the context of political time and contexts.

The other gap lies in how fear appeals are integrated with the Appraisal Theory and Aristotelian Rhetoric. Although the two frameworks are also widely used separately, few studies combine the frameworks for a systematic examination of how emotional, ethical, and logical factors in their interplay are involved in the fashioning of fear-based narratives. Combining these theories creates an approach to evaluating fear appeals to provide a complete interpretation of the ways in which presidents create fear to ignite emotional reactions as well as harden the resolve of audiences.

Furthermore, political discourse has been explored in terms of negativity bias, loss aversion, and their direct application in fear appeals has not been fully investigated. This paper investigates how these biases magnify the emotional power of fear in political rhetoric.

Finally, the immediate effects of fear appeals on public opinion, policy, and immediate political behavior are well documented, while long-term influence on political behavior and identity formation has seen little attention. As you can appreciate, this study explores how fear appeals affect political engagement and identity over time and provides an important contribution to emotion, cognition, and rhetorical political discourse.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A linguistic analysis based on a corpus of US presidential speeches was used to analyse the fear appeals. It was the goal of this research design to study systematically linguistic features and rhetorical strategies disclosed in the speeches of five U.S. presidents like Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. The study explored how fear appeals are constructed and how they influence political discourse by looking at these leaders in such national crises. Qualitative analysis was done on the design and the rhetorical devices, emotional engagement, and persuasive strategies used by the selected speeches.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved gathering a selection of speeches from five US Presidents, with two speeches chosen from each. These speeches were delivered during critical moments in American history, focusing on national crises. The selected speeches included Barack Obama's *Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney* 2015 and *State of the Union Address January 20, 2015*, Franklin D. Roosevelt's

December 7, 1941 A Date Which Will Live in Infamy and *September 3, 1939 Fireside Chat 14 On the European War*, George W. Bush's *State of the Union Address (2002) on the "Axis of Evil"* and *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People*, Joe Biden's *September 1, 2022 Remarks on the Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation* and *Speech on COVID-19 Response Transcript January 21*, and Donald Trump's *State of the Union Address 2018* and *Oval Office Address on Immigration*. These speeches were chosen based on their historical significance and the presence of fear appeals relating to crises such as wartime, terrorism, economic recession, and political division. The speeches were sourced from authentic, reliable, publicly accessible transcripts from official archives and reputable news outlets.

Sampling

The speeches were selected for analysis using a purposive sampling technique. The addresses studied were those that explicitly address national crises and contain elements of fear-based rhetoric. The speeches selected were representative of the use of fear appeals by U.S. presidents in a range of political events and periods. Only speeches that contained fear appeals and persuasive rhetoric in response to crises were included. The sample was therefore narrowed so that fear was a dominating factor in developing public perception and influencing political decisions.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, we integrated an integrated theoretical framework of Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric to study how fear appeals are constructed in political discourse. The basis for analyzing how fear is framed in political speeches was provided by Appraisal Theory, especially its emphasis on emotional engagement. It makes us realize that attitudinal evaluation, emotional framing, and the use of different cognitive biases are used to generate emotional reactions from the audience. Political leaders could manipulate the audience's fear by bringing the threat closer and bringing it down to basic emotions. In Persuasive Rhetoric, Pathos is used to persuade the public to take action through fear. The use of pathos is very effective to make the readers realise the urgency with the help of cognitive biases such as loss aversion and negativity bias to take immediate action. Ethos and Logos are introduced in Aristotelian Rhetoric, which gives credibility and logical reasoning to support the emotional appeal. Ethos gives the speaker the authority and trust of the people, and Logos allows the emotional appeal to be connected to the rational, actionable solutions. An integrated framework for such analysis is used to explore the way in which these three kinds of appeals are all used together to create powerful fear-based narratives.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was done in a step-by-step manner. The speeches were first collected and reviewed for explicit instances of fear appeals. Handily, key rhetorical devices such as evaluative language, repetition, metaphor, and emotional framing were manually identified. The theoretical framework was used to guide the analysis substantially, first, and specifically, concerning how fear is amplified emotionally by means of the combination of Appraisal Theory and Persuasive Rhetoric. The Ethos and Logos of the speeches were then examined to pinpoint how credibility and logic fell in with fear appeals. The data were finally categorized into distinct themes based on the emotional, ethical, and logical strategies used. The speakers were then compared on a detailed basis in this way, to gain a deeper understanding of the approaches which the presidents had taken with their rhetoric.

Validity and Reliability of Methodology

To ensure validity, the methodology chose speeches from pivotal moments in US history where fear appeals played a central role in the discourse. Public knowledge of these speeches was extensive, and public documents were available for analysis. The reliability was ensured using a systematic approach to data analysis embedded in commonly used theoretical frameworks. The consistency of the approach was added by using a manual analysis method that applied the same criteria to all speeches. Robustness of the study was further ensured through triangulation by comparing findings across different presidencies.

Ethical Considerations

The study took ethical considerations into account throughout. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of academic integrity, and all sources were cited properly, and data collection was done from publicly available, legitimate sources. The analysis was not biased and was conducted objectively. Since the study was about public speeches, there was no issue of informed consent or confidentiality. But the study was careful not to overstep public understanding of political rhetoric with its conclusions.

Analytical Discussion

Findings

In political discourse, fear appeals have become a powerful rhetorical tool used by U.S. presidents to influence public opinion, mobilize action, and solidify their leadership during times of crisis. The use of fear in political speeches is not limited to one leader or era but has been a consistent strategy employed by figures such as Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. Each one of these leaders has used fear as a strategic tactic, painting bases of threats or reasons for their actions through emotional urgency, cognitive bias, and logical reasoning. In analyzing how these leaders create fear appeals in their audiences in order to persuade them to act, bolster their credibility as leaders, through the lens of Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric.

Emotional Engagement through Language: Framing Fear in Political Discourse

To understand how political leaders use language to create fear, it is essential to break emotional responses down into Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, and that forms the basis underpinning Appraisal Theory. The eulogy that Barack Obama gave for Reverend Clementa Pinckney is a powerful example of how language can be used to generate emotional urgency through attitudinal evaluation. In powerful evaluative language, Obama places the tragic shooting in the context of racial violence and oppression. "It was an act that was part of a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, not random, but as a means of control, as a way to terrorize and oppress," he says. This statement places the act of violence within a systemic issue, and thus, constructs a historical narrative that heightens fear of racial injustice and the reoccurrence of such violence. The words used, "terrorize and oppress," are put to call the public to acknowledge the deeper societal fears prompted by such acts of violence.

Similarly, in his State of the Union Address (2015), Obama uses fear of national security and terrorism. After the 9/11 attacks, he uses the phrase, "We are 15 years into this new century... but tonight, we turn the page", to emphasize the need to move forward. Instead of promoting terrorism as something that is long ago in the past, fear of terrorism is represented as still existing today and as something that demands collective action. He (Obama) urges action, and for that urgency, symbolic gestures won't suffice; we need lasting change against global instability. This statement is urgent; it is telling the audience that they need to act now to stop more harm and injustice.

Fear is used in George W. Bush's State of the Union Address (2002) to characterize the terrorist threat as existential. Terrorism, he calls, a 'global battle,' one that the war is always telling us that there are enemy states and non-state societies. Such words as 'unprecedented danger,' 'terrorists,' 'ticking time bomb' evoke a doomsday feeling, which, in turn, leads the public to support unprecedented means such as the War on Terror. Deliberate language, so verbally intense and bullied to create fear and support for a military intervention. Using phrases such as "global battle", "our cause is just, and it continues", Bush uses phrases to emphasize both the severity of the threat and that we must continue to act to avoid becoming vulnerable due to complacency.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's *December 7, 1941, speech* begins with a declarative, emotionally charged statement: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy..." This phrase frames the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as a deliberate, unforgivable act, and the word "infamy" immediately invokes negative emotion, aligning the audience's fear with outrage. Roosevelt's use of the phrase "grave danger" and "our territory... is in danger" creates an emotional context where the fear of national security is transformed into a call for unified action. His statement that "There is no blinking at the fact" uses urgency to ensure that the public understands the critical nature of the threat and the need for immediate response.

Biden, in his *September 1, 2022, speech*, uses fear to frame his political opponents as a "threat to democracy", highlighting the danger of "extremism" and "political violence". By using "MAGA Republicans" as a symbolic threat to the nation's democratic ideals, Biden taps into the fear of societal collapse. His repeated references to the "soul of the nation" amplify the fear of losing something deeply ingrained and valued, creating an emotional resonance that calls the public to action. By framing the political division as an existential threat, he manipulates the collective fear of democratic erosion, urging immediate corrective action.

Persuasion through Emotional and Cognitive Biases: The Strategic Use of Fear

Fear is not only used to emotionally engage the audience but also to persuade them to act through emotional appeals (Pathos) and cognitive biases. Pathos is used strategically by Obama in his speeches to galvanize the public into action. For example, in his eulogy for Reverend Pinckney, Obama refers to the collective grief over the violent loss of life and the emotional toll, saying, "The pain cuts that much deeper because it happened in a church." In this instance, the church, the widest symbol of its people's safety and peace, becomes a tragic focal point of their emotional appeal, and the audience is forced to see how vulnerable they are.

In his State of the Union Address, Obama's use of Pathos is also seen when he says, "We are a strong, tight-knit family who has made it through some very, very hard times." This statement is appealing because it speaks to the shared collective experience of overcoming national hardship and using the fear of decline as a motivational tool to strengthen national resolve. Obama also uses fear of economic collapse to demand immediate reform in the same speech: "The shadow of crisis has passed, but the storm we faced is not over." This is the aftermath of the crisis as a continuing threat that needs to be acted upon.

Pathos is heavily used in Trump's State of the Union speech, where he presents immigrants and foreign powers as existential threats to American safety. His use of "criminals", "dangerous", and "terrorists" is repeated, and it elicits a visceral emotional reaction, making fear the main motivator for his policies. In saying, "We are out of space to hold them" in regards to detained immigrants, he uses Pathos to push the emotional urgency that a system of security is needed to prevent societal collapse.

Loss aversion is also used in Obama's State of the Union Address, where language is used to make the potential loss of national prosperity seem unavoidable if action is not taken. "What will we live in an economy where the bulk of us prosper spectacularly but the rest of us?" he asks. This is a rhetorical question that pushes the audience to join in this pursuit of policies that will serve the country at large.

Similarly, in his *COVID-19 response speech*, Biden manipulates cognitive biases by framing the pandemic as not just a medical crisis, but a moral one. He says, "*This is a battle for the soul of the nation.*" The use of "battle" and "soul" enhances the emotional stakes, turning the fight against the virus into a struggle for national identity and survival. By framing the crisis as urgent and emotional, Biden taps into both the fear of loss (in terms of public health and economy) and the fear of future consequences if immediate action is not taken.

The Rhetoric of Credibility and Logical Reasoning: Constructing Fear with Ethos and Logos

Ethos and Logos are equally crucial in constructing fear-based rhetoric, particularly when the speaker must persuade the audience that their proposed solutions are rational and necessary. Roosevelt, in his *December 7, 1941, speech*, builds *Ethos* by positioning himself as the legitimate leader who can steer the nation through the crisis. His authoritative tone and direct statements, such as "*I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense*", convey that he is already taking action to ensure national security. This reassures the audience that leadership is in place to handle the fear and uncertainty caused by the attack.

In his State of the Union Address, Obama uses *Ethos* by referring to his past accomplishments and positioning himself as a leader who has been able to successfully navigate crises. By mentioning "the worst recession since the Great Depression," he links his administration's policies to recovery and his credibility as a leader who can bring stability back.

In terms of *Logos*, Roosevelt argues that the attack is not an isolated incident but a premeditated act by an enemy that threatens American values. 'We will defend ourselves to the uttermost and make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us,' he says. This logical explanation links the fear of further attacks with the solution of military retaliation and defense.

In his rhetoric, Obama also uses *Logos* by linking the fear of economic collapse with logical solutions. "Removing the flag," he says, "would be an acknowledgement that the cause for which they fought-the cause of slavery – was wrong." By aligning the removal of the Confederate flag as a rational and logical thing to do, Obama connects the factual emotional argument of racial justice with a prudent answer.

Logos is used by Trump to justify his position on immigration, arguing that the construction of the border wall is a necessary step to prevent the fear of illegal immigration and criminal activity. His proposed solution, which is highly contentious, is to say that the wall will also be paid for indirectly by the great new trade deal we have made with Mexico.

Overall, fear is used rhetorically in all these speeches to manipulate emotions, to leverage cognitive biases, and to justify political action. By Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric, these leaders use fear as a strategic tool to frame the public's opinion, bring the people together in the time of crisis, and doing so as means to promote their policy agenda, making their actions appear as being necessary, just, and rational in the face of threat.

Discussion

The analysis of data between speeches of Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden during crisis shows that political discourse is littered with fear appeals. Through this discussion, the research questions are answered by identifying linguistic features, rhetorical devices, and the involvement of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos that construct fear-based narratives. It also explains why these fear appeals successfully change the public perception and the political decision-making.

Linguistic Features and Rhetorical Devices Used in Fear Appeals

The analysis of US presidential speeches is taken to articulate three characteristic linguistic features and rhetorical innovations illustrative of the fear appeal during crisis. Evaluative language, repetition, and vivid metaphors are often used to blow threats up in size. Obama's use of the phrases "terrorize and oppress" in his eulogy for the Reverend Pinckney and the historical and systemic tone they invoke intensifies the sense of racial violence as fear-inducing. Like Bush's 2002 speech, terrorism is described in intense terms such as "unprecedented dangers," "ticking time bombs," and "global battle" as an existential threat in Bush's speech. Such repetition of phrases reinforces the urgency and immediacy of the threat, and it forces the audience to realize the necessity of immediate action (Zhao & Liu, 2020).

In Roosevelt's "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy" speech, the phrase "infamy" immediately generates negative emotions, effectively framing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as an unforgivable act. The repetition of "danger" and "invasion" amplifies the emotional context of national security, guiding the public's perception of the threat. These devices are meant to ensure that the audience not only understands the threat but feels it deeply, emotionally engaging them in a call to action (Alweldi, 2024). Similarly, Biden's references to the "soul of the nation" and "MAGA Republicans" in his September 2022 speech evoke an emotional resonance by using cultural and ideological symbols. These phrases serve to characterize the political divide as an existential threat to democratic values, presenting fear as a motivator for action.

Thus, key linguistic features such as evaluative language, metaphorical framing, and repetition work together to heighten the emotional urgency and gravity of the situation, urging the public to recognize and react to the perceived dangers.

Role of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos in Constructing Persuasive Fear-Based Narratives

The use of *Ethos*, *Pathos*, and *Logos* is pivotal in the construction of fear-based narratives in political discourse, as these rhetorical strategies work together to persuade the public of the legitimacy and urgency of the speaker's actions.

Pathos is central to fear appeals, as it directly targets the audience's emotions. In Obama's speeches, especially the eulogy for Reverend Pinckney and his State of the Union Address (2015), he uses emotional appeals to engage collective grief and fear of racial violence. By stating, "The pain cuts that much deeper because it happened in a church," Obama manipulates Pathos to trigger an empathetic response from the public, motivating them to act against racial injustice (Pandey, 2024). Similarly, in his COVID-19 response speech, Biden appeals to the fear of loss—both of public health and economic stability—by framing the pandemic as "a battle for the soul of the nation," which amplifies the emotional stakes and mobilizes collective action (Zeng, Dong, & Fang, 2024).

Ethos, the appeal to credibility, is also crucial in these fear-based narratives. Leaders like Roosevelt, Obama, and Biden bolster their credibility by positioning themselves as moral guides and capable decision-makers during crises. Roosevelt's phrase, "I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense," not only signals his authority but also reassures the public that leadership is actively responding to the threat (Stewart, 2006). Similarly, Obama's credibility in his State of the Union Address is enhanced by his past successes, such as stabilizing the economy after the Great Recession, which provides a foundation for trust in his leadership during future crises. Biden, in framing himself as a leader for all Americans, uses his connection with the public to build trust, making his appeals to action more effective (Cunningham, 2022).

Logos, or logical reasoning, is often used to link the perceived threats to practical, reasoned solutions. In Roosevelt's speech, the logical progression from the fear of invasion to the need for military action is clear: "We will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us." This rational connection between fear and action reassures the public that the government's response is not only necessary but also logical (Baker & Siegel, 2011). Similarly, Obama employs Logos when he argues for the removal of the Confederate flag as a logical step toward acknowledging racial injustice, connecting the fear of societal division to a clear, rational action for unity.

Thus, the interplay between Pathos, Ethos, and Logos ensures that the fear appeals are not just emotionally resonant but also backed by a sense of credibility and logical reasoning. This combination makes the persuasive rhetoric more effective, as the audience is moved not only emotionally but also intellectually to support the proposed solutions.

Effectiveness of Fear Appeals in Influencing Public Perception and Political Decision-Making

Fear appeals are effective in influencing public perception and political decision-making because they tap into deep-seated cognitive biases and emotional responses. Research has shown that fear, when framed appropriately, can mobilize individuals to take action, often bypassing more rational forms of deliberation (Witte, 1992). One such cognitive bias is *loss aversion*, where individuals are more motivated to avoid potential losses than to achieve gains (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Leaders like Obama and Trump exploit this bias by framing national threats in terms of what could be lost—be it public safety, economic prosperity, or democratic values. In Biden's September 2022 speech, for example, he emphasizes the fear of losing democracy, urging Americans to protect it from extremist forces by saying, "This is a battle for the soul of the nation" (Alweldi, 2024).

Negativity bias, where people give more weight to negative information, is another cognitive tool that political leaders exploit. Bush's 2002 speech frames terrorism as an existential threat using terms like "unprecedented dangers" and "ticking time bombs." This creates an emotional environment where the public focuses on the threat and the potential consequences of inaction (Zhao & Liu, 2020). Similarly, Trump's rhetoric often emphasizes the dangers posed by immigration, describing it in dire terms as a "humanitarian crisis" and a "criminal" threat, which primes the audience to view immigration negatively and supports his proposed policies as necessary for national security.

Furthermore, fear appeals are effective because they create urgency, pushing the public to act swiftly. In Roosevelt's speech, the use of "grave danger" and "no blinking at the fact" accelerates the decision-making process, making it clear that immediate action is required (Stewart, 2006). This urgency is similarly present in Obama's and Biden's speeches, where calls for action are positioned as time-sensitive to prevent further harm or loss.

In conclusion, fear appeals are highly effective in political discourse because they engage the audience emotionally, appeal to cognitive biases like loss aversion and negativity bias, and are supported by credible leadership and logical solutions. Through Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric, these speeches demonstrate how fear can be framed as both a motivating force and a rational response to national crises. The leaders' use of emotional urgency, moral credibility, and logical solutions not only amplifies the threat but also justifies their policy decisions, ensuring public compliance and mobilizing action during times of crisis. These findings underscore the importance of fear in shaping political persuasion, decision-making, and ultimately, national policy.

Limitations

The limitation of this study is that only five US presidents and their speeches during specific national crises are selected. This gives important insight, but not all political leaders or types of political discourse. Furthermore, the study does not examine other influential factors, such as media coverage or public opinion, in relation to the linguistic aspects of fear appeals. Although systematic, manual analysis also restricts the ability to parse all fine linguistic features that are found in the speeches.

Implications of the Study

By integrating Appraisal Theory and Aristotelian Rhetoric, this research gives a significant contribution to the understanding of fear appeals used in US presidential speeches. It shows how fear appeals determine how people think and act in a crisis. The study also contributes to our understanding of political rhetoric in general and ways fear-based strategy affects political decisions and public engagement.

Recommendations

Future research could further enlarge the sample to incorporate speeches from more political leaders and other time periods in order to contrast two or more fear appeals. Furthering the analysis would also involve integrating higher-order linguistic tools in order to provide increased accuracy and depth in language. A study of how long-term superficiality of fear appeals affects public trust and political polarisation would also prove very useful about the broader impact of such rhetoric.

Directions for Future Trends

The use of more advanced computational methods, such as machine learning, used on large datasets of political speeches, is expected in future studies. The amounts of fear appeals and how they affect political polarization

and the outcome of elections remain a major area of research. Moreover, research about the ethical consequences of using fear in political speeches and its influence on participation in democratic activity and public trust toward political institutions can also be further initiated.

Conclusion

Based on a corpus-based linguistic analysis of Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, this study critically intervenes on the use of fear appeals in US presidential speeches. What they find is that fear is just a tool that these leaders are using to serve their interests and implement political action by bringing people together to create fear. The study is an application of Appraisal Theory, Persuasive Rhetoric, and Aristotelian Rhetoric that focuses on the function of emotional appeals, credibility, and logical reasoning in building fear appeals.

It exposes the common rhetorical devices that constitute evaluative language, repetition, and emotional framing, and thus improves fear appeals. It shows how fear-based persuasion takes the form of cognitive biases such as loss aversion and negativity bias as well. Finally, this research makes a contribution to political rhetoric studies since it compares across presidencies. Future research will examine how long these fear appeals endure in affecting democratic engagement, public trust, and political polarization; cultural work will continue in understanding political fear.

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