Rhetorical Persuasion Strategies in Presidential Campaigns: A Comparative Study in Two Countries

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze and compare the rhetorical persuasion strategies in the presidential campaign speeches of Donald Trump in the United States and Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia. The approach employed is descriptive qualitative, using a comparative case study design. Data were collected from the official speech transcripts of both candidates and analyzed through classical rhetorical categories, ethos, pathos, and logos, complemented by framing analysis, agenda-setting and critical discourse analysis. Findings reveal that Donald Trump employed a confrontational and populist rhetorical strategy. He constructed an image of himself as the people's protector against the political elite, evoked collective emotions such as fear and anger, and used hyperbolic logic to reinforce his political arguments. His rhetorical style was dominated by metaphors of battle and national crisis. In contrast, Prabowo Subianto employed a more nationalistic and integrative rhetorical style. He built credibility through narratives of nationalism, conveyed messages of hope and unity, and promoted a development and self-reliance agenda as the logical framework of his campaign. The analysis indicates that campaign speeches are not merely tools of political communication but also practices of meaning-making that reflect power structures, political identities, and issue priorities. This study offers a deeper understanding of the dynamics of political rhetoric within different cultural contexts and contributes to the development of cross-national political communication studies.

INTRODUCTION

In the arena of contemporary democracy, presidential campaigns have grown increasingly complex and strategic, involving not only a competition of visions and programs but also the rhetorical capacity to shape public opinion effectively. Political persuasion plays a central role in this dynamic, as candidates are not merely communicating ideas but are also framing social realities, establishing emotional connections, and constructing powerful self-narratives through linguistic strategies (Tshuma, 2021; Demetrious, 2022; Yuan, 2023; Sᑏftoiu, 2018). Rhetorical approaches used in campaigns are frequently adapted to cultural values and voter

psychology; yet in global practice, many techniques transcend national boundaries. Within the context of globalized political communication, a phenomenon of campaign style convergence has emerged, where communication strategies from developed nations often inspire political practices in developing countries. Common patterns such as populism, candidate personalization, and digital media usage have defined modern presidential campaigns across diverse political landscapes (Bennett, 2018; Maier, 2020; Bracciale, 2021; Kruschinski, 2022). Alongside this development, research on presidential persona construction and the use of strategic narrative has gained prominence, as political identities are increasingly shaped through symbolic and rhetorical construction (Dr□gan, 2024; Elyamany, 2025; Moreira, 2024; Hou, 2023; Bertetti, 2023).

A growing body of literature has shown how emotion, social media, and digital technologies are employed to reinforce political persuasion. For example, Hassell (2022) illustrates how campaign emails in the United States are laden with emotional elements that shape voter perceptions. López-Olano (2022) highlights the role of emotional videos on social media in Spanish election campaigns. In Italy, Martella (2022) analyzes how populist leaders strategically use emotional language on Facebook to attract followers, and Koc-Michalska (2021) reveals how European political parties exploit platform features to enhance citizen engagement. Similar dynamics are observed by Cervi (2023), who tracks the role of TikTok in creating "politainment" or political entertainment, and by Ceccobelli (2018), who compares 18 Facebook election campaigns to emphasize the importance of continuity in digital strategy. Bossetta (2018) further underscores the influence of social media platform architecture, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, on shaping the communication strategies used by candidates during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. While these studies provide significant contributions to understanding modern political communication's emotional and digital landscape, explicit cross-cultural comparisons of rhetorical styles and political persuasion techniques in presidential campaigns, particularly between developed and developing countries, remain relatively underexplored.

This study seeks to analyze the rhetorical persuasion strategies employed by Donald Trump in the United States and Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia, two figures with distinctive and assertive communication styles. Trump is widely known for his provocative, confrontational rhetoric, while Prabowo projects a nationalistic style that emphasizes themes of patriotism and social inequality. This research addresses two principal questions: How do presidential candidates in both countries utilize rhetorical styles and persuasion techniques to influence public opinion? And what common patterns and context-specific features emerge in their political communication strategies that contribute to campaign success? The overarching aim is to identify and compare political persuasion strategies across the two nations and examine the effects of rhetoric on public opinion and electability.

Theoretically, this research draws upon classical rhetoric as articulated by Aristotle, who in On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse (2007) posited that persuasive public communication rests on three core elements: ethos, pathos, and logos. These elements provide a foundational framework for understanding how candidates attempt to shape opinion and gain political legitimacy through discourse. Ethos concerns the speaker's credibility or perceived character, which in presidential campaigns relates to how candidates present themselves as trustworthy, capable leaders. Trump, for instance, constructed his ethos through his image as a successful businessman and anti-establishment figure, while Prabowo emphasized his military background as a symbol of strength and nationalism. Pathos, by contrast, appeals to emotion, with candidates employing strategies designed to evoke feelings such as fear, hope, anger, or

national pride. Trump frequently stirred public emotion through issues such as immigration, sovereignty, and economic threats from abroad, whereas Prabowo focused on themes like social inequality, national wealth leakage, and the call for national resurgence. Both used emotionally charged diction, metaphors of struggle, and crisis framing to amplify their appeals. Logos involves rational or logical argumentation, often relying on data, causal reasoning, or historical comparisons to support campaign messages. While not always central to populist rhetoric, logos serves to present the campaign as grounded in sound policy logic.

Beyond classical rhetoric, this study incorporates perspectives from political communication, especially those relating to populist rhetoric. According to Laclau (2005), populism is not simply an ideology but a form of political articulation that constructs a binary division between "the people" and "the elite." In campaign contexts, populist rhetoric acts as a symbolic strategy that binds various social grievances into a shared, emotionally resonant narrative. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) differentiate between populism as an ideological substance and populism as a communication style. This populist style is characterized by message simplification, informal language, anti-institutional sentiment, and the construction of a collective identity of "us" versus "them." These features are evident in Trump's confrontational, anti-elite rhetoric and Prabowo's emphasis on social injustice and elite neglect of the common people. The success of such rhetoric also depends heavily on how issues are constructed through framing and agenda-setting. Entman (1993) argues that framing involves selecting and emphasizing specific aspects of reality to shape public perception, guide interpretations, and advance particular solutions. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory highlights how political actors and media shape public priorities by selecting which issues are perceived as most pressing. In both Trump's and Prabowo's campaigns, framing was evident in how they spotlighted external threats, such as globalization, China, or foreign powers, portrayed national problems as elite betrayal, and positioned themselves as the only viable solution to "rescue" the nation. Agenda-setting was enacted by persistently raising issues aligned with voter anxieties, such as rising living costs, economic nationalism, and security.

Another key element in political persuasion is the role of identity and narrative in influencing voter perception. Scammell (2007) introduces the idea of political branding, in which candidates do not merely present programs but craft a distinctive, emotionally resonant, and recognizable political brand. This brand is shaped through slogans, symbols, gestures, and consistent messaging that fosters psychological attachment with voters. The concept of narrative persuasion, as developed by Bilandzic and Busselle (2013), further underscores the persuasive power of storytelling. Effective political narratives immerse audiences in storylines involving conflict, resolution, and ideal protagonists, namely, the candidates themselves. When voters are emotionally or cognitively engaged with these narratives, they are more receptive to the embedded messages. In the cases of Trump and Prabowo, overarching narratives such as "restoring greatness" or "saving the nation" served as central themes in their speeches and campaign communications.

By integrating classical rhetoric, populist theory, framing and agenda-setting approaches, and narrative and branding strategies, this study offers a comprehensive explanation of how political persuasion is constructed, delivered, and received in presidential campaigns across two culturally distinct nations. This multidisciplinary framework enables a deeper understanding of the intersection between language, power, and public opinion dynamics in modern electoral contests.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a comparative case study design to analyze rhetorical persuasion strategies in the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump in the United States and Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia. The approach is intended to explore the political communication styles of both figures within their respective social and cultural contexts, while also comparing the rhetorical patterns they utilized in influencing public opinion. Research data were drawn from campaign news excerpts published in national and international media. In addition, content from the candidates' official social media accounts, including Twitter/X, Instagram, and YouTube, was analyzed to trace visual documentation of the campaigns. These sources were selected for their broad reach, high credibility, and ability to capture the dynamics of political communication in a direct and current manner. Data selection was conducted purposively, taking into account the relevance of the content, the intensity of public exposure, and the influence of the message on national political discourse.

Data analysis was conducted using the critical discourse approach developed by Fairclough (2001), which focuses on the relationship between language, power, and the construction of social meaning. The candidates' persuasive strategies were examined through three key categories of Aristotelian classical rhetoric: ethos (speaker credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical argumentation), as described in On Rhetoric (Aristotle, 2007). Additionally, Entman's (1993) framing theory was employed to analyze how campaign issues were packaged and communicated to the public through the media, and McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory was used to investigate how public attention was directed toward specific issues. The analysis also included the identification of political metaphors and the compilation of a classification table of persuasion techniques used during the campaigns.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study involved a review by political communication experts to verify the analytical instruments (content validity) and confirm the alignment of constructs with the theoretical framework used (construct validity). Triangulation was conducted by comparing the two national contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings (external validity). The consistency and stability of the analysis were tested through repeated readings of the data to ensure the reliability of interpretations throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Result

This study analyzes the rhetorical persuasion strategies employed in the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Prabowo Subianto using Aristotelian classical rhetoric, framing theory, and political metaphor analysis. The analysis focused on the content of each candidate's major campaign speech, Trump's rally in Waco, Texas, and Prabowo's address at Gelora Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta. The findings are organized into five key categories that reveal how persuasion techniques were applied and contextualized within cross-cultural political communication.

In terms of *ethos*, both candidates sought to build credibility and authority by crafting narratives that positioned themselves as morally grounded, courageous leaders aligned with the people's interests.

Ethos: Building Credibility and Authority

Donald Trump constructed his political credibility through a narrative of resistance and sacrifice against a corrupt establishment. He portrayed himself not as a conventional politician but as the final barrier between the people and harmful institutional powers. One of his most notable statements,

"They're not coming after me. They're coming after you — and I just happen to be standing in their way,"

This quote creates a persona of a protector, one who is under attack not for personal faults but because he embodies the collective will of the people. Trump also reinforced his ethos by referencing the achievements of his presidency, notably stating,

"We had the strongest economy in the history of our country," to emphasize competence and leadership success.

On the other hand, Prabowo Subianto constructed his *ethos* by emphasizing his track record as a patriot and former military officer. He highlighted his identity as someone who had sacrificed for the country:

"Saya tidak akan ambil uang rakyat. Saya tidak akan korupsi. Saya hanya ingin Indonesia kuat."
By declaring that he would not enrich himself and vowing to serve the nation, Prabowo asserted his moral position as a clean and nationalist leader.

Pathos: Mobilizing Collective Emotion

In terms of *pathos*, Trump consistently stirred public emotion through diction that evoked fear and anger. He articulated existential threats to the nation and traditional values:

"Our enemies are desperate to stop us because they know that we are the only ones who can stop them."

"This campaign is a battle to save our country."

The language used drew the audience into a moral and ideological battle. Additionally, he repeatedly used terms such as "weaponized justice system" and "radical left lunatics" to generate a sense of urgency and to justify political resistance.

In contrast, Prabowo employed an emotional approach that evoked optimism, national pride, and a sense of unity: "Kita harus berdiri di atas kaki kita sendiri! Jangan bangsa lain menginjak-injak bangsa Indonesia!" "Kita harus bangkit! Bangkit, bangsaku! Jangan takut, jangan ragu!" Prabowo's tone was more hopeful than inflammatory. He promoted solidarity and patriotism as the core strength of the people.

Logos: Rationalization and Rhetorical Justification

In terms of *logos*, Trump used cause-and-effect reasoning to support his claims, although often based on generalizations or hyperbole: "Gasoline was $1.87 a gallon under my administration, now it's double, triple." "We had no wars. Now we're on the brink of World War III." He linked energy prices, global threats, and domestic instability to the absence of his leadership. Although his logic was rhetorical and dramatic, the delivery was crafted to convince and channel anger toward the opposition.

Prabowo, on the other hand, employed reasoning based on national facts and long-term needs. He emphasized the importance of food self-sufficiency and national defense: "Kita kaya, tapi kekayaan kita tidak bisa kita nikmati. Kita ekspor bahan mentah, tapi kita impor barang jadi.

Itu harus kita ubah." Prabowo's arguments were nationalistic and technocratic. He urged citizens to think strategically and logically about the nation's economic future and independence.

Framing and Political Metaphors

In the realm of *framing* and political metaphor, Trump consistently framed himself as both victim and hero in a battle against the system. He depicted American politics as a moral battleground: "This is the final battle, they know it, I know it, you know it." "Either the deep state destroys America, or we destroy the deep state." His metaphors were militaristic and apocalyptic, planting the belief that the election was a matter of life and death for the American republic.

By contrast, Prabowo utilized a framing of national struggle rather than internal enmity. He did not refer to opponents personally but instead evoked collective spirit:

"Bangkitlah bangsaku, jangan mau menjadi bangsa yang lemah. Jangan jadi bangsa yang penakut!"

Metaphors of awakening, glory, and independence dominated Prabowo's narrative. He framed the campaign as a moment of national restoration rather than elite confrontation.

Tabel 1. Tabel Ringkasan Temuan

Kategori	Donald Trump (AS)	Prabowo Subianto (Indonesia)
Ethos	"They're not coming after me. They're coming after you."	*"Saya tidak akan ambil uang rakyat. Saya tidak akan korupsi."*
Pathos	"Our enemies are desperate to stop us."	*"Bangkit, bangsaku! Jangan takut, jangan ragu!"*
Logos	"Gasoline was $1.87… now it's triple."	*"Kita ekspor bahan mentah, tapi impor barang jadi."*
Framing	Battle, threat, a system attacking the people	Awakening, self-reliance, nationalism.
Metaphor	Final battle, deep state, war to save America	Rise, stand on our own, a great nation.

Comparative Discussion

The rhetorical and framing strategies employed by Donald Trump and Prabowo Subianto reveal distinct and contrasting patterns in political communication, both in terms of linguistic structure, message content, and ideological context. Within the Aristotelian framework of classical rhetoric, both candidates utilized a combination of ethos, pathos, and logos, albeit with varying intensity and strategic intent. Trump emphasized ethos by portraying himself as a figure "sacrificed" for the people, constructing credibility through a narrative of resistance against a corrupt elite and system:

"They're not coming after me. They're coming after you — and I just happen to be standing in their way."

Meanwhile, Prabowo established ethos by presenting himself as a patriot who would never betray the people:

"Saya tidak akan ambil uang rakyat. Saya tidak akan korupsi. Saya hanya ingin Indonesia kuat."

In terms of pathos, Trump leveraged emotions such as anger, fear, and a sense of threat to generate mass militancy. Words like "final battle," "deep state," and "radical left" created a national crisis atmosphere. In contrast, Prabowo infused his rhetoric with pride, hope, and unity through affirmative expressions like: *"Bangkit, bangsaku! Jangan takut, jangan ragu!"* Trump's logos tended to be rhetorical and hyperbolic, filled with economic and security claims that justified the need for his return to leadership. Prabowo, on the other hand, employed logical and technocratic reasoning concerning national resource management, economic self-sufficiency, and state resilience.

In terms of framing, Trump depicted reality as a conflict between the people and a treacherous elite. His speeches were filled with moral dichotomies (good vs. evil) and battle metaphors. Conversely, Prabowo framed his campaign as a moment of national awakening. He constructed the image of Indonesia as a great nation seeking direction, rather than one facing internal threats. These differences also reflect divergent rhetorical orientations: Trump's style embodied exclusive and confrontational populism, whereas Prabowo emphasized integrative and nationalistic populism. In this sense, rhetoric becomes a mirror of the political and cultural values of each nation.

Viewed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001), the speeches of both figures do more than convey messages that they produce and reproduce power relations. Political discourse is not merely speech, but a social practice that reflects and influences structures of dominance and resistance. Trump used language to construct a social division between the "real people" and "traitors of the nation," creating a discursive space that reinforced opposition to legal and state institutions. When he declared, "This is the final battle," it functioned not merely as a political metaphor but as an articulation of resistance against the formal legitimacy of state power.

In a different context, Prabowo used language as a tool to reinforce social and moral unity. His statement, *"Jangan bangsa lain menginjak-injak bangsa Indonesia,"* serves as a form of nationalist discourse that affirms power relations between larger nations and Indonesia. Within Fairclough's framework, this constitutes a meaning-making practice that portrays power as collective emancipation rather than individual resistance against the system. Hence, the contrasting discursive orientations of Trump and Prabowo reflect their respective positions toward the power structure: Trump as an anti-establishment actor, Prabowo as a restorative actor within the system.

From the perspective of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), campaign speeches play a vital role in determining which issues are perceived as important by the public. Trump consistently elevated issues such as political criminalization, economic decline, and global threats as his core agenda, strategically redirecting public focus away from his own legal challenges. By declaring, "We're on the brink of World War III," Trump shifted the narrative from personal controversy to a national crisis that demands his singular leadership.

Prabowo, by contrast, placed issues like economic independence, food security, and military strengthening at the center of attention, crafting a long-term agenda that reinforced his vision for national development. In this case, agenda-setting not only shaped public focus but also directed the discourse of political and national progress. Both candidates demonstrated that campaign speeches serve not only to present ideas but also to structure issue priorities that are embedded in the collective consciousness of voters. This illustrates that persuasive strategy is inextricably linked with media dynamics, social context, and the broader electoral landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the rhetorical persuasion strategies employed in the campaigns of Donald Trump and Prabowo Subianto reflect distinct political and cultural orientations. Trump adopted a confrontational style through exclusive populism, mobilizing collective emotions such as fear and anger, and framing his campaign as a moral battle against the system. In contrast, Prabowo emphasized an inclusive nationalist narrative, fostering hope through the image of restorative leadership and technocratic solutions. The critical discourse analysis reveals that campaign speeches do not merely convey messages but also construct power relations and socio-political meaning, while agenda-setting illustrates how candidates steer public attention toward strategic issues. These findings contribute to the cross-cultural study of political communication and offer practical implications for political consultants, journalists, and voters in understanding rhetoric as a tool of mobilization and representation in electoral contests.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, future research is recommended to explore rhetorical persuasion strategies in a wider range of political and cultural settings, particularly by examining various campaign formats such as debates, social media posts, and public interviews. This broader scope will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how rhetorical elements function across communication channels. However, potential barriers such as limited access to primary campaign data, language bias in translation, and the subjective nature of discourse interpretation may influence the consistency and generalizability of results. Future studies should also consider integrating audience reception analysis to assess how different voter groups respond to rhetorical appeals, which will deepen insights into the effectiveness of persuasion strategies in diverse electoral contexts.

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