

Rhetorical Appeals and Leadership Style in Trump's Inaugural Speeches

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ABSTRACT

The current president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, has garnered interest in the political discourse mainly for his controversial rhetorical figures of speech. Hence, this study aims to provide a rhetorical assessment of Trump's political communication during his inauguration by employing Aristotle's rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. Aristotle's rhetorical framework offers a helpful analytical foundation for analysing how Trump uses his inauguration speeches to create political legitimacy, rally popular support, and ideological narratives. The findings reveal that inaugural speeches from his first term (2017) and second term (2025) invoked a nationalist sentiment, which contributed to his presidential election. Besides that, his rhetoric reflected themes associated with populist leadership. His leadership style was also examined to provide insight into his ideology and persuasive skills. The findings offer insight and contribute to the body of populist political discourse and rhetorical leadership.

Keywords: Rhetorical Strategies, Populist, Political Discourse

INTRODUCTION

Political discourse is an important canvas that offers a perspective on a president's leadership style and ideology in their ruling political authority. Among the many types of political speeches, inaugural speeches hold a focal and chief significance. This is because they not only mark the genesis of a presidential reign but also provide insight into communicating the president's vision and measurable efforts to sustain the needs of a country and its people (Wodak, 2021).

Trump's background in politics began when he joined the presidential race as a candidate from the Republican Party in 2016. Before politics, he built his career through the family real estate business, expanding them into branding projects under the Trump Organization. His political campaign focused on controversial issues such as control in immigration policies, security at the borders, and resistance towards the established political elites ruling the country. He then won the election and served in office as the 45th President of the United States from year 2017-2021. During this tenure, he implemented stringent immigration measures, reformed the tax system, and renegotiated the international trade agreements. His leadership was described as direct and confrontational.

In the following 2020 presidential election, Trump then lost to Joe Biden, during which he remained in the Republican Party. He then campaigned in the 2024's presidential election and returned to office as the 47th President of the United States in year 2025. Trump's comeback in politics offers an opportunity to analyse how rhetorics of speech and language are employed as persuasive tools to mobilise public support.

The research objectives of this study are to:

- (1) Analyse Trump's persuasive appeals through Aristotle's rhetorical framework.
- (2) Study Trump's leadership style employed in his political discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rhetoric of Speech

Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, though developed in ancient Greece, remains the widely used framework in political discourse studies. According to Tindale (2021), politicians often utilise persuasive language to gain support and shape public opinion. In addition, political discourse and rhetoric are multifaceted and capable of performing a plethora of speech acts, such as protesting, legitimising, intimidating, and persuading. This was further highlighted by Woods (2006), who concluded that these speech acts function to lead a society towards a particular way of viewing the political reality intended and to act consistently with this view. Hence, without argument, persuasive devices in political discourse offer ample choice for politicians to 'influence, guide, and control' their supporters in accordance to their political goal (Ghasemi, F., 2020). Aristotle (2007) stated that persuasion is attained through ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos points to the credibility and character that a leader possesses. Pathos concerns appealing to the audience's emotions, whereas logos is the voice of evidence and logical reasoning in supporting arguments or justifying claims. A significant reason to employ Aristotle's persuasive framework is that it is holistic, which balances logic, emotion, and credibility. It warrants that the message communicated is not only by a reliable source, but also emotionally impactful and factually sound.

Figure 1 illustrates the three-point triangle with the three appeals as explained by Chadha, K., & Verma, H.V. (2023).

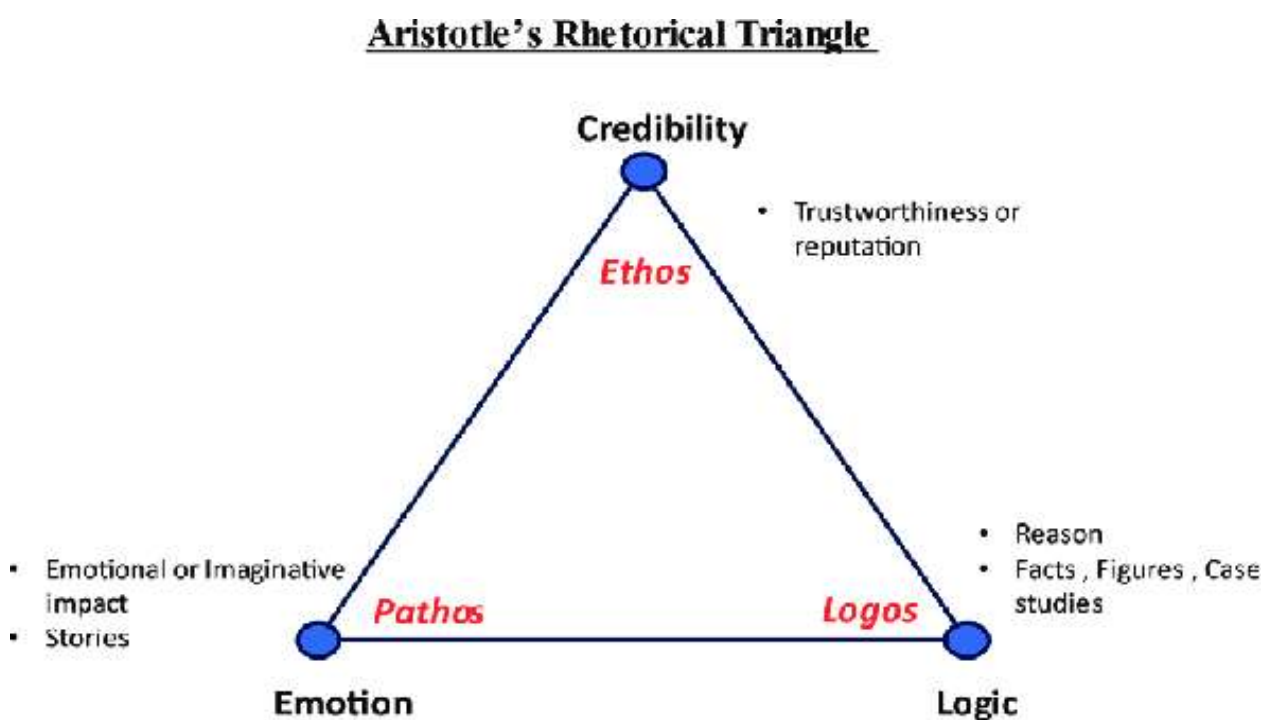


Figure 1. Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle

Table 1. Aristotle's Rhetorical Function's

Rhetoric	Function
Ethos (Character)	It establishes the speaker as a figure of authority and persuades the audience to trust the speaker's information or opinions. Establishes that the speaker is reliable and ethical.

Pathos (Experience)	A persuasive technique that convinces the audience through emotions. It touches the audience's most deeply held values. Its strategies evoke the senses, recollections, sentimentality, and shared experiences.
Logos (Word)	It relies on logical reasoning and rational argument. This strategy uses information and evidence to support the speaker's argument.

While all of these three rhetorical devices play an equal role, it is highlighted that logos substantiates the impact of appealing to pathos and especially ethos. Ghasemi F. (2020) supported the idea that logos directly aids in establishing ethos through the choices of words that build an intended belief system. This shows that each of these devices has not only an individual role but also indirectly aids the function of its other counterparts to deliver a holistic impact.

Political discourse and language

In politics, the language used by a political actor shapes its audience's perspectives. According to Yousfi, A., & Mouhadjer, N. (2024), political discourse is powerful enough to influence the individual's cognitive processes and opinions. It is significant to note that politicians often bring into use their persuasive abilities to shape, manipulate and influence their followers' thoughts and attitudes. In political discourse, the politician's ideology and the power it eludes are intertwined. In discourse studies, a president's words are commonly micro-analysed to extricate their embedded ideologies. According to Yousfi, A., & Mouhadjer, N. (2024), ideology is composed of mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations shared by a social group. It provides a vital significance to establish hegemonic identity narratives by controlling the specific public sphere. Ideology is created to guide its believers in determining right from wrong. It has the power to control its followers' thoughts and manners. Besides that, given the notion that ideology guides a nation, it is also deemed to uphold a nation's self of identity, inspires aspirations, and drives a nation's goals.

Power on the other hand, is the ability to control people and events in different social structures (Susilowati, M. & Ulkhasanah, W., 2020). Language is related to social powers in various ways; language indexes power, expresses power, and challenges power. In other words, language can be utilised to overthrow power, subvert or alter its distribution in both the short and long run. In Trump's political discourse, as reflected in his inaugural speeches, he is comfortable using rhetoric to portray himself with conviction and enmity. His discourse moves from the individual's self-improvement towards the aim of overcoming the common enemy by perceiving it as rightfully 'ours'. Among the language strategies used in his inaugural speeches were simplicity and directness, repetition such as 'America First', contrast and opinion, symbolic representation and emotional language. Most of these strategies are represented through the use of rhetoric.

DISCUSSION

Trump's rhetoric of speech

Trump habitually adopts a populist leadership identity to ascertain his ethos. Ethos carries the core beliefs, spirit, and values that make the character of a person. Trump paints himself as a third-person outsider who resists political elites and advocates for the people rather than as a conventional statesman. Trump, in his 2017 inaugural address, declared that 'the people' will reclaim control of the ruling government. By presenting himself as a spokesperson of society rather than political institutions, this rhetorical device helps to increase his supporters' trust in him.

'We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people.'

'...but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the people..... For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost.'

Trump's use of ethos in the above deliver's emotions of patriotism, nationalism, and determination. The lines

above highlight concerns about unemployment, economic inequality, and the previous ruling government's prioritisation of personal gain. Likewise, by exhibiting his political comeback as confirmation of his commitment to rebuilding the nation's greatness, Trump continued to represent an image of mighty strength and fortitude in his 2025 inaugural speech.

On the other hand, pathos is the term for emotional appeals projected to convert the attitudes and actions of the followers. As it allows leaders to connect with audiences and garner support, emotional language is especially prevalent in political discourse. Similarly, a former political figure, Obama, often mobilised pathos in his speeches to convey themes of optimism, hope, and shared accountability. For instance, his inaugural speeches always accentuated themes of national regeneration, a sense of togetherness, and rich diversity, drawing Americans to cooperate in overcoming social and economic obstacles. It is important to observe that Obama and Trump employ pathos in unlike ways. Emotions like:

'dread, rage, patriotism, and pride in the country'

are often evoked by Trump's statements. He created a sense of urgency and discontent with the current political system in the 2017 inauguration speech by describing:

'a country plagued by crime, economic decline, and political negligence'.

Such rhetoric serves to arouse listeners' emotions and regurgitate the need for political reformation. Following his political comeback, it was anticipated that he would make emotional appeals in his 2025 inauguration speech that would focus on themes of recovery, resiliency, and national restoration. By inspiring followers to include themselves as a part of a group effort to restore the country, these emotional stories help in the formation of nationalist and populist identities. Employing evidence and logical reasoning to persuade listeners is known as logos. To support political judgments and build credibility, political leaders frequently use factual assertions, policy recommendations, and cause-and-effect reasoning. Obama regularly used logos in his speeches by mentioning economic metrics, policy goals, and workable answers to pressing national issues. Policy proposals were always showcased in his discourse as logical solutions to social and economic issues. In a similar vein, Trump uses logos to further his political goal by using employment statistics, trade deficits, economic data, and arguments pertaining to immigration. To illustrate, Trump takes on rational arguments about job losses, unfair trade agreements, and border security issues in his *'America First'* rhetoric.

'But for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.'

These justifications and examples are employed to bolster broader nationalist narratives and to support policy change recommendations. The rhetorical function of logos is significant because it provides audiences with logical reasons and testimonies to pursue a political action. Effective political leaders seldom rely on a single rhetorical device. Rather, they deliberately blend pathos, ethos, and logos to maximise persuasive power (Charteris-Black, 2021). Trump's discourse is more typically defined by populist appeals, nationalist narratives, and an anti-elitist stance, whereas Obama's rhetorical style is frequently linked to unity, hope, and inclusive leadership (Brubaker, 2021; Moffitt, 2022). These variations show how rhetorical appeals can be modified to suit various political situations and ideological goals.

The table below presents some thematic references from Trump's speech alongside the implications they convey.

Table 2: Trump's rhetorical appeals

Rhetorical appeal	Reference from Trump's speech	Function
Ethos	<i>'I was saved by God to make America great again'</i> (2025)	Constructs leadership legitimacy and moral authority

Pathos	References to American decline, lost jobs, and border threats	Evokes fear, pride, patriotism, and anger
Logos	Claims about economic growth, trade deficits, and immigration statistics	Justifies policies through reasoning and evidence

Trump's Populist Leadership Style

A clear observation of Trump's move in both the inaugurals was how he was comfortable in placing himself as an outsider who can restore the prosperity of America (Moffitt, 2022; Brubaker, 2021). In 2017, he introduced the "America First" agenda, followed by the "Golden Age" blueprint in 2024. Both agendas are centered on restoring what America has lost and regaining its power and dominance as a global economic leader. Evidently, both agendas depict a strong nationalist and populist identity. 'America First' was forged to renew America's greatness in terms of political restoration and the 'Golden Age' was focused on anti-establishment sentiments for a political change, both leaning towards national renewal.

The table below conveys the themes intended from his inauguration slogans.

Table 1: Trump's populism theme

Inaugural Year	Slogan	Theme
2017	America First	Political restoration
2024	Golden Age	Political change

Populist leadership carries the style that portrays a society that is divided between two groups, the '*pure people*' who are against the '*corrupt elite*'. This style of leadership requires a charismatic approach whereby the leader uses specific rhetoric and appeals to cast themselves as the sole saviours. While portraying political, economic, or cultural elites as detached from the needs and goals of the populace, populist leaders assert that they speak for the interests, values, and voices of common people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Moffitt, 2022). Moffitt (2022) asserts that populism is more than just an ideology; it is a political style marked by appeals to '*the people*,' criticism of elites, and the portrayal of a crisis, breakdown, or threat. To cultivate a sense of bonding and intimacy with their supporters, political leaders often use emotionally charged language and straightforward language.

Similarly, Wodak (2021) affirms that populist leaders usually create a narrative that depicts an 'us versus them' standpoint, in which the '*us*' represents the layman and '*them*' for anyone in the categories that are presumed to be endangering national interests. Populist leaders often exhibit and express their authority as the true representatives of the people by using such rhetoric. Given that Trump frequently highlights the concerns of '*forgotten Americans*,' criticizes the political establishment, and frames political issues through nationalist and anti-elite narratives, his political communication is often cited as an example of populist leadership (Moffitt, 2022; Wodak, 2021). By presenting themselves as protectors of the public interest against dishonest or disjointed political structures, leaders hope to garner support from their followers through a populist style of leadership.

CONCLUSION

In his rhetoric, it is evident that Trump presents an argument against the established order while simultaneously advocating a transformative vision of the United States (Yousfi, A., & Mouhadjer, N., 2024). Persuasive rhetorical strategies are vital to help us decipher how a persuasive discourse shapes the way people behave, process their thoughts, and move their audiences (Ghasemi, F., 2020). These rhetorical choices, when scrutinised, reveal Trump's leadership style, ideological stance, and persuasive communication appeals. The findings show that political leaders employ language as a tool of persuasion to construct a nation's identity and ideology that resonate in a modern democratic society. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in political rhetoric and populist leadership by integrating Aristotle's principles into the analysis of speeches.

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