**The Rhetoric of Authoritarianism in Donald Trump’s 2016 Presidential Campaign**

Authoritarianism has been back in the news with Donald Trump’s candidacy for the American Presidency. When Trump first entered the race on June 16, 2015, few critics gave him much of a chance. He was too brash, too unpredictable, and too liberal to gain any real traction in a race that was filled with conservative Republican top brass and budding stars. How could Trump ever make it out of a field of sixteen respected conservative candidates? How could he survive a pool that included a Bush, a promising Marco Rubio, a shrewd Ted Cruz, and a relatively moderate Chris Christie? All were candidates with respect from the Republican establishment and all had the ability to fundraise while at the same time winning important endorsements from Republican members of Congress. Surely, most thought, Trump would linger for a few months, generate the publicity he desired, and then bow out respectfully after a state primary or two, perhaps generating the publicity many thought he simply craved. The pundits and the critics could not have been more wrong, and 2015 in America became the year of Donald Trump and a revival of strong-man politics.

From June of 2015, Trump began his presidential candidacy campaign and, in doing so, promised to “make America great again.” He was careful to set the tone and agenda from day one, stating in his first speech on June 16th, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re sending lots of problems. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re bringing rapists” (Lee, Quealy). The vitriol continued throughout the rest of his campaign. A few weeks later, on July 8th, Trump promised to build a wall on the US border and stated that the Mexican government would pay $100,000 for every illegal immigrant apprehended. The next week, Trump widened his scope and insulted John McCain and other former POWs, stating, “I like people who weren’t captured” (Lee, Quealy). August of 2015 brought the first Republican debate, where, in a tiff with Fox News debate moderator Megyn Kelly, Trump remarked Kelly had “blood coming out of her wherever” (Lee, Quealy). A few weeks later, during another debate, Trump attacked Republican presidential candidate Carly Fiorna, saying, “Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president?” (Lee, Quealy). Trump doubled down on many of these remarks over the course of his campaign and three central themes began to emerge in his speeches: illegal immigration, national defense, and trade policies. Of course, Trump’s litany of offensive and insensitive remarks is lengthy and grows longer seemingly by the day. Various newspapers and media outlets have even taken to logging such remarks. For example, a list maintained by *The New York Times*, as of August 2016, had the list of people attacked by Trump at 258 (Lee, Quealy). Yet, throughout the first year of Trump’s campaign and in spite of the growing list of insults, it seemed the more insulting and offensive Trump became, the higher he climbed in the polls, which begs the perplexing question: how could a presidential candidate say so many deplorable and objectively xenophobic and rancorous comments and yet appeal to so many people? How did Donald Trump, the reality television star and former ringmaster of the Miss Universe pageant, defy his critics, shock the world, and become the Republican nominee for president of the United States?

At the same time that Trump began his campaign, I returned from a three year teaching stint in Portugal. After spending only a few weeks in the U.S. during those three weeks, and having spent years living in a peaceful and largely forgotten country that few can find on a map, my encounter with the polarization and the divisiveness in the U.S. took me by surprise and felt more pronounced than it had previously. This feeling was perhaps helped by the fact that my return to the U.S. took me from my home state of Michigan across the country to Texas, where the feelings of polarization seemed to be more palpable and pronounced, perhaps because so many social issues lay at the forefront of the Texan conservative majority.

Meanwhile, while Trump continued campaigning his way across America, I adjusted to life in Texas and began my graduate degree in Rhetoric and Composition. During my first year of graduate school, I had the good fortune of developing an interest in rhetorical history and theory during an election season, where each day’s news provided plenty of fodder for study and actuality to the theory I was encountering within the classroom. By the end of my first year of graduate school, I felt certain I wanted to research political rhetoric, but I wanted to study it in a way that might help me understand the political phenomenon both in my new home in Texas, as well as the markedly different America that I had returned to, but that had, since my return, felt so foreign to me.

In their struggle to understand the Trump phenomenon, pundits and political scientists alike have proposed numerous theories. There have been socioeconomic explanations and interpretations linking Trump’s rise to sensationalism in the media. There have been explanations that suggest the rise was due to the decline of cohesive political parties and the ever-increasing polarization of American politics. Others see the phenomenon through a more global lens, seeing the rise of Trump as a part of a recent global trend towards populism and nationalism. There were other more basic explanations as well: people were angry and tired of political correctness, and perhaps the Republican party had been too soft, not conservative enough. In Trump, some suggested, politically marginalized, blue collar, rust-belt Americans found a candidate with whom they could project their concerns and fears, including those of mass immigration, of national security, and of a global economy that had stripped many Americans in small towns of their livelihood. Although many of these explanations are reasonable and legitimate, what they lack is an academic framework from which to construct a theory that might fully explain Trump’s rise and how each of these explanations might be part of a deeper, more complex conceptualization.

In the past year, there have been countless articles published in major news publications that have sought to understand the rise of Trump by looking at the phenomenon through the eyes of what they call authoritarianism. Tuning into cable news or clicking through news stories online will no doubt result in someone describing Trump as an authoritarian. Yet, while there has been no shortage of discussion about authoritarianism, it is important to note that the commonly used term itself can often elude definition and is often pejoratively laden with conservative connotations. Is Trump himself an authoritarian or is he simply appealing and identifying with authoritarians themselves? How does the more pejoratively used term “authoritarian” compare with its use in academic study?

In May of 2016, I read an article posted on the website “Vox,” entitled “The Rise of American Authoritarianism.” The article explored the findings of Matthew McWilliams, a PhD student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who studies authoritarianism. McWilliams conducted a survey and polled Republican primary voters and discovered that there was a strong correlation between those with authoritarian tendencies, as revealed in the survey, and Trump supporters. In fact, the authoritarianism survey was the strongest indicator in predicting support for Trump. Furthermore, the article provided what would become the foundation for this proposal: a brief overview of studies in authoritarianism in both psychology and political science, as well as the different surveys that are often used to measure authoritarianism.

Yet, what was critically missing from the discussion of authoritarianism within the article was *how* Trump was communicating with his audience in order to appeal to their authoritarian propensities. In other words, how is Trump using rhetoric in order to identify with his authoritarian audience, and how and why are his supporters responding to Trump as an authoritarian leader? As I progressed through my graduate program and began to notice the already strong bond between the fields of psychology, political science, and rhetoric, I realized that rhetoric was uniquely positioned to answer this question and to provide a more thorough understanding of the way in which Trump not only epitomizes the authoritarian leader, but also the way in which he uses rhetoric to appeal to authoritarians.

In the following review, I will first provide an overview of scholarship centered on authoritarianism as understood in the fields of both political science and psychology. Studies of authoritarianism in psychology help to shed light on authoritarian tendencies and social attitudes, while scholarship in the field of political science, helps to explain the effects of authoritarianism as it pertains to societal groups and political movements. After laying a foundation of authoritarianism as studied and defined in psychology and political science, I will then discuss the ways in which rhetoric might help to explain authoritarianism and how studies of authoritarianism in political science and psychology might help inform a new conceptualization of authoritarian rhetoric. While contemporary rhetoric is now used in a broader and seemingly borderless interdisciplinary context, classical rhetoric, from Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment, has long been concerned with the intersect of rhetoric, politics, and civil society. More recently, Sharon Crowley has discussed and somewhat resurrected this connection in her work *Toward a Civil Discourse*. Noted contemporary rhetoricians Kenneth Burke and Lloyd Bitzer both prove helpful in providing a framework for a kind of authoritarian rhetoric, with Burke’s theory of identification being especially useful when defining authoritarianism as a balance between “group authority and uniformity” and “individual autonomy and diversity” (Stenner 2). Finally, Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation provides a lens for understanding the ways in which authoritarian figures, such as Donald Trump, craft situations that provoke authoritarians to act and to often exhibit intolerance and hostility to out-groups. Together, in this review, I hope to construct a strong interdisciplinary study that introduces authoritarianism to the field of rhetoric as an important and timely topic that is worthy of attention and deeper study.

**Literature Review**

The study of Authoritarianism in the fields of political science and psychology is expansive and traces its roots to 1930’s Germany, where researchers sought to understand the particulars that lead to the rise of anti-Semitism and fascism. From its beginnings, scholars studying authoritarianism have been more interested in understanding the psychological profile of voters who, in uncertain or dangerous circumstances, look to powerful and authoritarian figures. In the 1950 landmark study that culminated in the book *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno, et al, developed and conducted a study using Freudian psychodynamics that attempted to explain the psychology behind ethnocentrism and the sudden rise of anti-Semitism (Feldman 41). To this end, researchers identified nine characteristics of authoritarianism. Moreover, included in the study was the F-scale, with the “F” appropriately representing fascism. While the study was largely conducted to understand a specific social phenomenon, namely the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1930’s, it became a seminal work in understanding ethnocentrism and authoritarianism in both psychology and political science.

Although *The Authoritarian Personality* and its accompanying research and survey proved influential in putting theory and explication to events that transpired in Europe, the fields of psychology and sociology quickly seized upon aspects of the theory and the F-scale in seeking to understand a broad range of historical and sociological issues. Yet, several problems and ambiguities soon became clear with the F-scale. Political psychologist John Duckitt argues that at the center of these problems was the fact that within this “classical approach” only authoritarian traits were provided and authoritarianism itself was never clearly defined (64). The result of this deficiency was that the F-scale became an unreliable method of testing authoritarianism in other contexts. This inadequacy is reflected in later reviews of *The Authoritarian Personality*, which disparaged both the conceptualization used by Adorno, et al. as well as the empirical research conducted. Stanley Feldman argues that although subsequent research findings on authoritarianism multiplied, such studies were rarely drawn unequivocally from an actual *“*theory*”* of authoritarianism (42). In light of these challenges and shortcomings, and the lack of any survey to replace the F-scale, the 1970’s saw a decline in the study of authoritarianism across all academic disciplines.

In 1988, Bob Altemeyer responded to the lack of a reliable survey to test for authoritarian tendencies and published his RWA scale (Right-Wing Authoritarianism). The RWA scale was created out of the need to put a more definitive sociological dimension to authoritarianism, which was lacking in the highly politically-driven F-scale. Altemeyer’s intent was to create a scale based on social learning theory with clusters of questions that connected directly to the nine traits listed in the work of Adorno, et al. The result was a conceptualization that understands authoritarianism as a social attitude (Feldman 42). Altemeyer divides the original nine traits from the F-scale into three broad categories of social attitudes: submission, aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer 3). While the RWA scale initially seemed promising and succeeded in being more reliable and less one-dimensional than the F-scale, it’s use ultimately waned because its questions were centered on overly simplistic positions on social issues and not on the personality of the voters themselves. For example, questions included inquiries based on social conservatism such as, “Gays and lesbians are just as healthy and moral as anybody else” and “There is absolutely nothing wrong with nudist camps” (Altemeyer 5). The result, as Feldman and others have pointed out, is that the RWA scale often conflates social conservative positions with authoritarianism (43). Feldman goes on to sum up his skepticism by pointing out three major problems in Altemeyer’s RWA scale: “the relationship of authoritarianism to prejudice and intolerance, the correlation between authoritarianism and conservatism, and the similarity between measures of authoritarianism and the variables we want to explain” (44). Moreover, Feldman points out that the RWA scale, like the F-scale before it has been repeatedly criticized for having, “an explicit ideological bias” and that “many items in the scale have a clear conservative focus, and several look like they could make up a measure of social conservatism” (62).

As a result of the failure of both the F-scale and the RWA scale, psychologists Stanley Feldman and Karen Stenner devised an authoritarianism scale that attempted to divorce authoritarianism from both political positions and social issues. The result is a four-question survey centered on questions pertaining to parental expectations. Stenner and Feldman’s survey is simple, and, unlike Altemeyer’s RWA and the F-scale, it eliminates political questions and questions on social issues entirely. Instead, the survey measures authoritarian tendencies by inviting people to answer questions pertaining to child-rearing preferences (Stenner and Feldman 747). The items in the scale explore people’s preference for children who are obedient, well-behaved, and who exhibit respect for elders and good manners. The four questions included in the survey are as follows:

1. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: independence or respect for elders?
2. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: obedience or self-reliance?
3. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: to be considerate or to be well-behaved?
4. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: curiosity or good manners? (Stenner and Feldman 751)

The purpose in including questions related to parental expectations was to identify those who are predisposed for and exhibit authoritarian tendencies, and to ensure the measure was not conflating traditional conservatism and positions on moral and social issues with actual authoritarian tendencies. The result is a measure that metaphorically equates hierarchical thinking at home with hierarchical thinking in society (Heatherington). At this point, it is also important to note that Feldman and Stenner’s conceptualization of authoritarianism itself is rooted in notions prejudice and intolerance that manifest themselves in response to perceived threats to social cohesion and conformity.

Since 1997, scholars have used this simple four-question scale to explore a wide-range of topics, including voting choices. The results point to the scale being both reliable and strong predictor of intolerance, hawkishness, and a range of other things (Stenner, Heatherington and Weiler, Merolla and Zechmeister). With social issues pertaining to conformity, authority, and order being at the center of much of the polarization in America today, Feldman’s four-question scale proves useful in understanding how authoritarianism contributes to these divides, as well as how authoritarianism, as understood in a hierarchal way using this scale, might inform fields outside of political science and psychology.

**Defining Authoritarianism**

Since the publication of the F-scale in 1950, authoritarianism has proven difficult to define, with psychology and political science differing in the ways in which they most often describe it. Furthermore, scholars in the field of psychology have been unsure if authoritarianism is a personality trait, an attitude, or an ideology. Originally, drawing on its Freudian theoretical origins, psychologist Adorno, et al. put forth a fairly uncomplicated notion of authoritarianism as a personality type or syndrome, namely one that resulted from the “repression of hostility toward parental authority and its displacement on societal outgroups” (Stenner 2). In contrast, and in conjunction with the publication of his RWA scale, Bob Altemeyer classified it as a social attitude. Yet, Karen Stenner argues that the problem with both Adorno’s and Altemeyer’s conceptions is that the measurements used, the F-Scale and the RWA, were both volatile and the resulting theory is largely tautological (3). The resulting solution, and the measurement that has since become increasingly standard, is the authoritarian predisposition. Importantly, the notion of predisposition is a significant paradigm shift from the earlier work of Adorno, et al. and Altemeyer because authoritarians themselves may not realize that they have such tendencies until an existential threat arises that threatens established norms and order, at which time their authoritarian tendencies become “activated.”

Most recently, in her book *The Authoritarian Dynamic* Psychologist Karen Stenner, who along with Stanley Feldman created the four-question measurement of authoritarianism, defines authoritarianism as, “an individual predisposition concerned with the appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity, on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other” (14). Stenner also argues that authoritarianism “tend to produce a characteristic array of stances…which have the effect of glorifying, encouraging, and rewarding uniformity and of disparaging, suppressing, and punishing difference” (16). Perhaps the most important shift between Adorno and Altemeyer’s more traditional conception is that Stenner and Feldman see authoritarianism as a “predisposition” rather than a “disposition.” The effect is the possibility that authoritarians are not necessarily inherently intolerant or straightforward disciplinarians. Instead, authoritarians often express such emotions only when the “normative order” is threatened (Stenner 2, Dunn). Consequently, many people who possess authoritarian tendencies may not exhibit this predisposition until a substantial threat to the “normative order” arises. Importantly, these people, whose authoritarian tendencies have been “activated,” are often prone to seek out authoritarian leaders who embody a kind of authoritarian persona and who promise to maintain order and to institute policies that preserve social norms.

While those in psychology are more likely to understand authoritarianism as either personality type or predisposition, those in the academic field of political science are more likely to define authoritarianism based on existential factors and are usually more concerned with the effects of authoritarianism, such as a desire for order and social uniformity (Heatherington and Weiler 36).

For example, in a 2014 article entitled “Authoritarianism and American Political Behavior from 1952 to 2008,” political scientists Cizmar, et al. define authoritarianism simply as, “a set of personality traits associated with aversion to difference and conformity to authority” (71).

Political scientists Marc Heatherington and Jonathan Weiler posit that those who score high in authoritarianism have the following: “(1) a greater need for order, and conversely less tolerance for confusion or ambiguity, and (2) a propensity to rely on established authorities to provide that order” (34). In addition, Heatherington and Weiler posit that authoritarians tend to see the world in a more dichotomous way, not simply on social and moral issues but in other spheres as well. For example, authoritarians tend to favor the use of military force rather than diplomacy, and are often more willing to cast aside civil liberties in favor of national security, often doing so for “straightforward” and “commonsensical” reasons (28). Furthermore, authoritarians tend to see the world in black and white terms, often with little room ambiguity or nuance. Heatherington and Weiler posit that those scoring low in authoritarianism are more likely to, “favor the abstract, seeing the world in more complex terms” and that “solutions to problems that might be obvious to one side might seem overly simplistic to the less authoritarian” (32). In short, Heatherington and Weiler, both leading scholars in the study of authoritarianism as understood in political science, define authoritarianism as being fundamentally motivated by a “desire for order and a support for authorities seen as best able to secure that order against a variety of threats to social cohesion” (41).

In summation, while providing a simple definition of authoritarianism remains elusive and somewhat puzzling, it is possible to understand how a conceptualization of authoritarianism might combine both the aspects of predisposition as understood in psychology, such as the concern for the “appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity, on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other” (Stenner 14) with those concerns for social norms, order and conformity as discussed in political science. In other words, authoritarians are predisposed to value submission to authority, conventionalism, and a suspicion and often aggression toward change, outsiders or difference (Altemeyer 1996). Furthermore, they value simplistic and non-ambiguous situations and dichotomous arguments, often leaving little room for nuance or difference, both on issues and in their own groupings. In short, authoritarianism is largely defined as a disposition toward conformity and uniformity and a desire to maintain both through the strong leaders and conventional policy (Heatherington, Perez).

**Authoritarianism in Rhetorical Study**

While psychology and political science have worked to understand the social and psychological nature of authoritarians, scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition have remained silent on the issue. Moreover, the topic also remains untouched in the more specific academic field of rhetoric. And while there has been extensive discussion of authoritarianism’s role in Trump’s campaign in numerous news periodicals and other media, what these many of these articles do not address and what we do not know is the way in which Trump uses rhetoric in order to appeal to the authoritarians. Meaning, what are the rhetorical moves at play that have allowed Trump to enjoy such success? What can Trump’s campaign tell us concerning the nature of authoritarian rhetoric? And, what does the existing field of study of authoritarianism, both contemporary and historical, offer in helping us understand Trump’s authoritarian rhetoric and the authoritarians who have supported Trump and contributed to his success?

While the connections between the field of rhetoric and the study of authoritarianism are tenuous, the rhetorical concept of identification, as outlined by Kenneth Burke, provides a parallel concept and a framework from which to understand how authoritarianism might inform rhetorical study and research. Burke, who is perhaps best known for his theory of rhetorical identification and consubstantiality, defines his theory as the following:

Here are the ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, a is “substantially one” with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (21)

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would no need to the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man’s verse essence (23).

Burke’s theory of rhetorical identification and consubstantiality as defined here provides a solid theoretical foundation on which to discuss the intersect between rhetoric and studies in authoritarianism. In an election cycle that has played so heavily to “identity politics,” which is often determined by authoritarian tendencies, Burke’s conceptualization of identification allows for an understanding of authoritarianism as a predisposed response to normative threats. For example, political science scholars Heatherington and Weiler, along with others, argue that authoritarians seek out authoritarian figures during normative threats or when feeling that order might be threatened (Heathrington and Weiler 37). If authoritarians seek out those who most align with their tendencies, then Burke’s conceptualization becomes essential to a framework that might explore a rhetorical notion of the way authoritarians respond in such situations.

Although the rhetorical theory of identification might seem an overused link from which to pivot to rhetoric from psychology, Burke’s understanding of identification as being at the center of rhetoric is helpful when thinking of authoritarianism as a predisposition that values both order and group authority and uniformity rather than individual autonomy. Stanley Feldman often explores similar and parallel concepts rhetorical identification within authoritarianism. Concerning the convergence of authoritarianism, social conformity, and the normative threat, Feldman states the following:

It is easy to see that there should be a close relationship between the social conformity-autonomy dimension and prejudice and intolerance. People who value autonomy over social conformity should reject societal constraints on behavior, including restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and civil liberties in general. They should be unconcerned with defending common social norms and not be troubled by deviation from those norms. Valuing autonomy thus reduces the impulse to restrict civil liberties and the motivation to react negatively toward groups that do no fit nearly into social conventions. The reverse should be true of people who value social conformity over autonomy. Any group—whether it be a “social” or “political” group—that deviates from a narrow view of conventionality is capable of eliciting hostility. (50)

Perhaps most helpful here is Feldman’s discussion of the authoritarian tendency to value social conformity and the way in which groups that might deviate from this order are capable of “eliciting hostility” from authoritarians (50). Combining the work of Feldman and others who have explored the convergence of conformity, intolerance, and authoritarianism with that of Burke should provide a strong framework from which to construct a new conceptualization of what might constitute authoritarian rhetoric.

In using Burke’s theory of identification and consubstantiality to understand how authoritarianism informs rhetoric, I hope to demonstrate that the authoritarian’s desire for “order” and a kind of “group authority” might become what Burke calls the “consubstantial” substance that gives rise to identification and the resulting rhetoric that attempts to preserve order when faced with a normative threat.

The “rhetorical situation” is another well-established rhetorical theory that might prove helpful in seeking to understand the way in which rhetoric might inform studies in authoritarianism. Tracing its roots to a 1968 article written by Lloyd Bitzer, article entitled “The Rhetorical Situation,” where Bitzer explores the then informal term “rhetorical situation” and attempts to shed light on its origins, the rhetorical situation is fundamentally a way of combining multiple rhetorical concepts to analyze and understand the conditions that bring about a rhetorical response. Bitzer’s main focus with the rhetorical situation is to argue that the rhetorical situation deserves equal standing with other more established rhetorical concepts, such as *audience*, *purpose*, *speaker*, and *occasion*. In doing so, Bitzer attempts to lay a theoretical foundation for the term itself by exploring the nature of those contexts in which “speakers or writers speak and create discourse.” To that end, Bitzer provides the following questions pertaining to rhetorical exigencies: “How should they be described? What are their characteristics? Why and how would they result in the creation of rhetoric?” (1).

Bitzer’s notion of the rhetorical situation is comprised of three elements: exigency, audience, and constraints. While exigency and audience are fairly well-established rhetorical concepts, Bitzer explains the *constraints* portion as being made up of the various particulars within the rhetorical situation itself: people, events, objects, relations, emotions, motives, and the like (8). And, like the Sophists, Bitzer argues that rhetoric itself is a mode “altering reality” (4), and that a rhetorical situation is “rhetorical insofar as it needs and invites discourse capable of participating with situation and thereby altering its reality” (6).

The rhetorical situation proves helpful in seeking to understand the way authoritarian figures, such as Trump, attempt to adapt to and often create situations in which authoritarians themselves might respond. And, at the same time, the rhetorical situation might help us in understanding the kinds of rhetorical situations that those with authoritarian tendencies are most likely to respond to as a normative threat to order. Because the rhetorical situation sees the constraints of the speaker being made up of “people, events, objects, emotions, and motives,” it should prove helpful in seeking to analyze situations that bring about authoritarian responses, and conversely, the way authoritarian figures might go about manufacturing such situations in order to exhibit a response from those who harbor authoritarian predispositions.

**Research Questions**

My research questions, drawing from the respective strengths of the study of authoritarianism and rhetoric, are as follows:

* How does Trump use authoritarian rhetoric in order to appeal to the electorate, and what are the qualities of his appeals?
* How might theories of authoritarianism, especially from political science and psychology, help us understand Trump’s rhetoric?
* What constitutes the “authoritarian situation” and how does Trump construct and respond to these situations?
* To what extent does the ethos of Trump’s authoritarian persona affect his perception from the electorate?

To answer these questions, I plan to conduct rhetorical analysis of Trump campaign speeches, the atmosphere and qualities of the campaign rallies themselves, and other sources that constitute Trump’s campaign rhetoric, including interviews, debates, and social media updates.

**Research Design**

First, I want to understand the authoritarianism itself as discussed in the fields of psychology and political science for its potential use to rhetoric. Secondly, I want to draw upon rhetorical theory and scholarship to better understand the rhetorical particulars of Trump’s rhetoric. Third, I want to conduct extensive primary research by examining the campaign rhetoric of Trump and noting the ways in which his rhetorical moves appeal to authoritarians. To this end, I will examine Trump’s campaign speeches, but also the dynamics of the campaign rallies themselves, noting in detail the ways in which these rallies are constructed to specifically appeal to authoritarians. Finally, my hope is to build a strong interdisciplinary study, one that draws from political science, psychology, and rhetoric, while introducing authoritarianism to the field of rhetoric as a topic that is worthy of attention and deeper study. Considering the many links that already exist within the fields of psychology and rhetoric, achieving this research goal should be rather straightforward and, at the same time, promising insofar as it might demonstrate the possibilities for building rhetorical scholarship in related fields.

**Chapters**

Along with an introduction and conclusion, I propose three main chapters to include in my thesis. In the first, entitled “The Authoritarian Situation,” I will examine the kinds of exigencies that are conducive to both the authoritarian leader, in this case Trump, as well as the authoritarian voter. Feldman argues that those who are predisposed to authoritarian tendencies often do not realize it, or that often these tendencies lay latent until confronted with a “normative threat” (50). In short, this chapter will put forth a new conceptualization of what particulars might constitute the ideal authoritarian situation on a rhetorical level. Not only will I draw from the field of psychology for this chapter, but I will also borrow generously from Bitzer’s “rhetorical situation” in order to position this conception within the field of rhetoric. Moreover, I will examine the ways in which Trump has responded to and created these opportune authoritarian situations.

My second chapter entitled “The Authoritarian Rhetorical Style” will examine how Trump’s style of speaking and communication appeals to authoritarian sensibilities. This includes an examination of Trump’s speeches, social media activity, and debate performances. An explicit example of this might be Trump’s diction and sentence structure within his speeches, which is often reflected in short, laconic and repeated phrases that are built on dichotomous arguments. Moreover, Trump’s penchant for constructing strict dichotomies, often at the expense of fallacies that border on self parody, is another rhetorical tactic that Trump often employs. Finally, in this chapter I will also recount an experience I had attending a Trump campaign rally in September of 2016 in Austin, Texas. I will discuss the atmosphere of the rally itself, Trump’s speech at the rally, and the production-like aspects of the rally itself. In short, for this chapter I hope to perform analysis of Trump’s campaign rhetoric and seek to understand the way in which Trump is constructing his rhetoric to appeal to authoritarians.

My final chapter entitled “The Authoritarian Persona” will be focused on the way in which Trump constructs his authoritarian image. While Adorno et al, Altemeyer, Stenner, and Feldman have focused much of their study on the dynamics of authoritarians themselves, less attention has been paid to the “strong man” personalities authoritarians often turn to in moments where social order and the normative is threatened. Psychology has offered some study into what constitutes such figures, but the questions as to how these characters construct their personas to *appeal* to or *persuade* authoritarians is largely unanswered. Trump’s campaign rallies themselves offer an interesting rhetorical space from which to study this facet of authoritarianism. The rallies often are constructed around portraying Trump as either a successful businessman or as a kind paternalistic father figure, both roles and identities that might appeal to authoritarians. In this chapter, I will draw on Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification and consubstantiality to connect the discussion of the authoritarian image to those in rhetoric. In short, Trump embodies the archetypical style of authoritarian image and leadership: simple, brazen, and punitive. Conversely, authoritarians are prone to respond to such figures when feeling threatened or compromised.

Throughout all of these chapters, I hope to show how authoritarianism, as understood in the fields of psychology and political science, can inform an understanding of rhetoric, and, at the same time, explore and conceptualize how rhetoric might inform the study of authoritarianism. At the center of much of the effectiveness of authoritarianism, both from authoritarian leaders and from authoritarian voters, is the communicative features of their interactions. How are authoritarian leaders appealing to their audiences, and how are these audiences responding both to each other and to the leaders themselves? A new conceptualization and understanding of authoritarian rhetoric is at the center of these questions and will help us not only understand the mystery of Trump’s sudden rise, but also the authoritarian strand that runs thick through much of American politics, its history, and its ever-widening polarization.

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