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Rhetoric of the Borders

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Walls, borders, and the rhetoric of fear: A longitudinal study of Trump's campaign addresses

Ściany, granice i retoryka strachu: badanie longitudinalne przemówień kampanijnych Donalda Trumpa

Abstract

Trump's presidential announcement speeches and presidential nomination acceptance addresses were analyzed through the lens of a functional approach to political campaign discourse. In order to present themselves more favorably than their opponents, candidates typically engage in one of three rhetorical strategies: acclaiming, by emphasizing their own strengths; attacking, by diminishing their rivals' appeal; or defending, by responding to criticisms. This analysis focuses specifically on instances of acclaims and attacks in which themes related to immigration and immigrants are foregrounded. The findings indicate a discernible upward trend in the frequency of attacks directed at immigrants and foreign "Others". A recurring metaphor in Trump's rhetoric on immigrants is that of THE COUNTRY/NATION IS A HOUSE. Once established, this metaphor is employed with rhetorical precision, enabling the strategic manipulation of political discourse. Trump's rhetoric thus contributes to a politics of fear and entrenches the binary opposition between "Us" and "Them."

Przemówienia Donalda Trumpa wygłoszone podczas ogłoszenia jego kandydatury na prezydenta oraz przemówienia akceptacyjne przyjmujące nominację prezydencką zostały poddane analizie w oparciu o funkcjonalne podejście do dyskursu kampanii politycznej. Kandydaci, dążąc do zaprezentowania się w korzystniejszym świetle niż ich rywale, zwykle stosują jedną z trzech strategii retorycznych: pochwałę (*acclaiming*), polegającą na podkreśleniu własnych atutów; atak (*attacking*), czyli umniejszanie atrakcyjności przeciwników; lub obronę (*defending*), czyli odpowiadanie na stawiane zarzuty. Niniejsza analiza koncentruje się w szczególności na przykładach pochwał i ataków, w których dominują motywy związane z imigracją i imigrantami. Wyniki badania wskazują na wyraźny wzrost częstotliwości ataków skierowanych przeciwko imigrantom oraz zagranicznym „Innym”. Powracającą metaforą w retoryce Trumpa dotyczącej imigrantów jest metafora *KRAJ/NARÓD JAKO DOM*. Po wprowadzeniu, metafora ta zostaje wykorzystana z dużą precyzją retoryczną, co umożliwia strategiczne kształtowanie dyskursu politycznego. Retoryka Trumpa przyczynia się w ten sposób do budowania polityki strachu oraz utrwalania opozycji binarnej między „Nami” a „Innymi”.

Key words

Donald Trump, presidential campaign announcements, acceptance addresses, immigrants, metaphor

Donald Trump, przemówienia ogłaszające kampanię prezydencką, przemówienia akceptacyjne, imigranci, metafora

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Walls, borders, and the rhetoric of fear: A longitudinal study of Trump’s campaign addresses

“Men build too many walls and not enough bridges.” Joseph Fort Newton

1. Introduction

Politics can be defined as “practices that require the engagement of the public and/or government, such as elections, public spending, public and legislative debate about laws and political principles” (Gastil 1992, 469), though its meaning may vary depending on context and purpose (Chilton 2004). Beyond the view of politics as the art of government, the conduct of public affairs, or a process of compromise and consensus, Heywood (2013) identifies another crucial dimension—namely, power. He asserts that “politics is, in essence, power: the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means” (Heywood 2013, 10).

The notion of power frequently underpins political activity, and being elected President of the United States signifies attaining one of the most powerful positions in global politics (Ash 2008; Meacham 2008), and assuming leadership over one of the foremost world powers (Baughman and Cali 2017). The electoral process begins with candidates announcing their intention to run. Following primary elections and caucuses, each party holds a national convention to formally nominate its presidential candidate. The campaign proceeds through a series of presidential debates and culminates on Election Day (U.S. Government 2024). Presidential election rules impact more than 200 million eligible American voters representing diverse social and demographic backgrounds (Belenky 2012). In contrast to many parliamentary systems, the U.S. presidential election is indirect: citizens vote for electors in each of the 50 states and in Washington, D.C., who then cast direct votes, known as electoral votes, for president and vice president (U.S. Government 2024). Thus, a successful presidential campaign requires securing support from three key constituencies: the party, the electorate, and ultimately, the electors.

In the twenty-first century, garnering this necessary support entails strategic political campaigning, which serves not merely to inform but also to persuade, consolidate identity, and shape ideological alignments.

2. Political discourse and ideology

Political discourse has been approached from various theoretical perspectives, with scholars highlighting its dependency on context, purpose, and setting (Gastil 1992; Fairclough 1989; Minogue 1995; Rheindorf 2020; Selg and Ventsel 2020). Despite definitional variations, a prevailing consensus views political discourse as a mechanism either for asserting power (Bayram 2010; Chilton 2004; Fairclough 1989; Heywood 2013; Rozina and Karapetjana 2009) or for negotiating conflict through communicative cooperation (Chilton 2004).

Van Dijk (2002a, 207) defines political discourse as “a class of genres defined by a social domain, namely that of politics.” The specific form that political discourse takes, he argues, is shaped by the beliefs, attitudes, and values, that is, the ideology, not only of the individual candidate but also of the political party they represent. In the political sphere, two ideologies often coexist within any given political actor: a professional ideology, which informs the politician’s approach to governance, and a socio-political ideology, which aligns the politician with a political party or social group (Van Dijk 2002a). While these ideologies may at times align, they can also come into conflict.

A substantial body of scholarship has emerged since Donald Trump’s entry into the political arena, identifying key ideological features of his rhetoric and persona. Scholars have characterized his discourse as populist (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2017; Weyland and Madrid 2019), sexist in its portrayal of women (Darweesh and Abdullah 2016), and grounded in anti-elitist, ethno-nationalist, and authoritarian narratives (Bonikowski 2019).

Even prior to Trump’s political rise, studies had identified a growing trend among voters to prioritize the individual traits of presidential nominees over party affiliation. Ritter (1996) observed that party identity had begun to matter less than the perceived character of candidates. Jarvis (2001) noted a decline in partisan language and a rise in personal appeals during political campaigns. Similarly, Hoffman and Howard (2009) found that candidates increasingly relied on biographical narratives while downplaying partisan references. Trump constructed a political persona as a self-made businessman who allegedly attained wealth through personal talent, in contrast to corrupt politicians, and employed typically populist language to position himself as belonging to, and uniquely capable of governing for, “the people” rather than “the elite” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, 148). From the beginning of his presidency in 2016, he maintained an

uneasy relationship with the Republican Party (Rovira Kaltwasser 2019), further reinforcing the trend toward candidate-centered politics, i.e. populist individualism over party loyalty.

In light of these developments, it is plausible to suggest that socio-political ideologies may have become secondary to professional or personal ideologies in shaping political discourse. These professional ideologies, often implicitly shaped by broader belief systems, permeate the political actions and rhetorical strategies of individual politicians. Barber and Pope (2018) demonstrated that Trump's policy statements, whether classified as "conservative" or "liberal", were accepted at face value by low-information voters, strong Republicans, Trump supporters, and self-described conservatives. This finding suggests that traditional socio-political ideology no longer serves as the primary lens through which his supporters interpret political messaging. Instead of following ideological principals affiliated with the Republican party, loyalty to the individual politician has become the dominant factor (Barber and Pope 2018).

It is therefore reasonable to anticipate that the central themes of Trump's campaign announcement speeches and nomination acceptance addresses will be based on his ideological orientation.

2.1. Political campaign discourse

Political campaign discourse can be understood as a form of strategic public communication that seeks to influence voter behavior through context-sensitive language, the deployment of persuasive speech acts, and the construction of ideological and affective alignment with audiences (Chilton 2004; Ilie 2010; van Dijk 2002b; Wodak 2015). According to Denton, Trent, and Friedenberg (2020, 183), rhetorical situations in political campaigns are shaped by "1. the need of candidates to announce formally their candidacies to the public 2. the need of candidates to announce publicly the nomination of their party. 3. the need of candidates to seek media coverage of their views, and 4. the need to make public apologies for their statement or behavior." These rhetorical situations give rise to genres such as campaign announcement speeches, nomination acceptance addresses, press conferences, and political apologies.

Among these, the presidential campaign announcement and the presidential nomination acceptance address stand out as pivotal genres. The former signals the candidate's intent to seek the presidency, while the latter marks the conclusion of the primary contest, the unification of the party, and the transition to the general election campaign (Benoit 1999). In these speeches, candidates typically reaffirm their commitment to winning what is arguably the most powerful elected office in the world. These addresses are often rich with the key themes of their campaigns

(Denton, Trent, and Friedenbergr 2020). In the speeches analyzed for this study, it was anticipated that Donald Trump would articulate central themes of his platform. This analysis focuses in particular on discourse concerning immigrants and immigration policies.

2.1.1. Presidential campaign announcements

A campaign announcement is the formal public launch of a political campaign. While in the past such announcements were typically delivered as major public addresses eagerly anticipated by voters, recent years, especially at the presidential level, have seen a trend toward more gradual revelations of intentions (Denton, Trent, and Friedenbergr 2020). A typical campaign announcement seeks to offer voters clear reasons to support the candidate (Denton, Trent, and Friedenbergr 2020). Donald Trump's first presidential campaign announcement took place in the lobby of Trump Tower in New York City on June 16, 2015. "He made his grand and impressive entrance with his wife, riding down the tall escalator. It was as if he were descending from above to the waiting crowd" (Denton, Trent, and Friedenbergr 2020, 188). His second, non-consecutive campaign announcement occurred at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida, on November 15, 2022, a location that, like Trump Tower, is personally owned by Trump and serves as his residence, underscoring the symbolic alignment between personal brand and political image.

2.1.2. Presidential nomination acceptance addresses

The nomination acceptance address holds a central place in contemporary American political rhetoric. Though ceremonial in tone, it is one of the most rhetorically significant speeches a candidate delivers, both for the public and the political establishment. A key function of this genre is to project party unity and articulate "high-minded statements of principle" (Ritter 1980, 154). While Ritter (1980) argued that personal attacks are out of step with the ceremonial context of the acceptance address, subsequent research has shown that such attacks frequently occur in practice (Benoit 1999). Donald Trump delivered his first nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, on July 21, 2016. His second took place at the Republican National Convention in Washington, D.C., on August 27, 2020. His third address was delivered at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on July 18, 2024. Each of these speeches offered insight into the evolving themes and strategies of Trump's political rhetoric across different electoral cycles.

3. A functional approach to political campaigns: acclaims, attacks and defenses

Political campaign discourse is inherently instrumental—it functions as a rhetorical tool for achieving the primary objective of electoral success. This practical orientation justifies analyzing the discourse from a functional rhetorical perspective (Benoit 1999). Electoral decisions are, fundamentally, comparative evaluations: voters select the candidate they perceive to be more favorable, based on personal criteria shaped by their beliefs, values, attitudes, and ideologies. Because the act of voting involves choosing one candidate over another, candidates must strategically differentiate themselves from their opponents. Political campaign messages serve as the primary medium for articulating these distinctions. From a functional perspective, political campaign messages are constructed around three core rhetorical strategies: acclaims, attacks, and defenses (Benoit 1999). *Acclaims* are statements of self-praise; *attacks* take the form of criticisms, accusations or complaints aimed at opponents; and *defenses* are responses to mitigate damage to a candidate’s image or reputation.

Acclaims typically focus on either *policy* (issues) or *character* (image) (Benoit 1999). Acclaims may be based on three aspects of policy, namely past deeds: “We ended catch-and-release, stopped asylum fraud. Took down human traffickers who prey on women and children. And we have deported 20,000 gang members and 500,000 criminal aliens” (Trump 2020); future plans: “I will end the illegal immigration crisis by closing our border and finishing the wall, most of which I’ve already built” (Trump 2024) or general goals: “This election should be about the issues facing our country and how to make America successful, safe, free and great again” (Trump 2024). Character-based acclaims fall into three categories, namely, they either highlight personal qualities: “America was prospering, and our country was on track for an amazing future because I made big promises to the American people, and unlike other presidents, I kept my promises. I kept them” (Trump 2023); leadership ability: “G20, I used to love that, the leaders. I used to make deals for our country like you wouldn’t believe. It was one, give me the next one, give me the next one” (Trump 2023) or ideals: “But here, at our convention, there will be no lies. We will honor the American people with the truth, and nothing else” (Trump 2016). Like acclaims, attacks may be directed at either policy or character (Ryan 1982) and can be further classified into the same subcategories. In contrast, defenses aim to restore a candidate’s image or mitigate reputational harm. These may include strategies such as denial, shifting the blame, differentiation, transcendence, defeasibility, and mortification (Benoit 1999).

Benoit’s (1999) study of U.S. presidential nominating convention speeches from 1960 to 1996 revealed that candidates predominantly engaged in acclaiming

and attacking, with defenses appearing far less frequently. Subsequent research extended this analysis to presidential debates. Benoit and colleagues (Benoit and Harthcock 1999; Benoit and Sheaffer 2006; Benoit et al. 2007) found that presidential debates from 1960 through 2004 were generally more positive than negative in tone. On average, 57% of the candidates' statements were acclaims, 35% were attacks, and only 8% were defenses. These findings suggest that campaign discourse favors self-promotion and opponent critique over self-defense, underscoring the proactive rather than reactive nature of campaign rhetoric.

4. Exclusionary discourse: “us versus them” polarization

The functions employed and key themes adopted in presidential announcement and nomination acceptance speeches depend, among other factors, on their rhetorical purpose, situational context (Benoit 1999), and the professional and socio-political ideologies of the candidate and their party. As noted in Section 2., there appears to be a shift in political campaign discourse whereby candidates increasingly foreground their personal and, consequently, professional ideologies rather than their socio-political affiliations. Beyond ideology, numerous factors influence the presentation of a candidate, their agendas, and what ultimately secures voter support.

According to a Rasmussen poll (Coombs 2016, quoted in Denton 2017, viii), conducted during the 2017 United States presidential election, “62% of voters indicated that the candidates' specific policy proposals are more important than their character.” The same poll reported that “64 percent of voters who thought immigration was the ‘most important issue’ voted for Trump, as did 86 percent of those who want a wall built on the U.S. - Mexico border” (Denton 2017, viii). While these are clearly policy-specific concerns, they are inextricably linked to the ideological positions of voters. Voters' support or opposition to these policies is shaped by their ideological predispositions, which also affect how such policies are interpreted and received.

This is where Trump's political discourse becomes particularly salient. His rhetoric has been widely described as populist, with Trump positioning himself as an “outsider” i.e. Self, who will fight for the people against “two principal Others: a “globalist” establishment and a series of foreign Others” (Wojczewski 2019, 16). As Wojczewski notes, “Trump's racism, xenophobia, or chauvinism, by contrast, are not directly linked to his populism but rather follow a nationalist logic that regards the nation-state as the foundation of societal harmony by relating it to a threatening outside” (Wojczewski 2019, 17).

This notion of external threat is central to Trump's political narrative and is constructed discursively through the “Us” versus “Them” dichotomy (Molek-Kozakowska 2017), which generally involves positive cognitive associations with the former and negative ones with the latter (van Dijk 2002a; Luo, Mei, and Yu 2022). The “Others” are usually described in terms of ““Problem-for-Us” at all social levels: jobs, housing, welfare, crime, attitudes” (Van Dijk 2002a, 219). The polarization intensifies when the “Others” are represented as a direct “Threat-for-Us,” (Van Dijk 2002a, 219), usually coming from abroad (Wodak 2015). Political rhetoric frequently exploits this dichotomy. A prominent example is President George W. Bush’s justification for the war in Iraq, wherein his discourse constructed “two opposing cases of assertions, namely ‘the self’ and ‘the other,’ and the remaining lemmas: ‘free/democratic world’ versus ‘Iraq’ and ‘terrorists’” (Cap 2010, 77). In this narrative, Iraqis were equated with terrorists and, thus, as a threat to the democratic world, namely, the United States.

Similar patterns are evident in the discourse surrounding immigration. Immigrants carry negative connotations and are usually used in negative discourse topics (Khosravini 2010). As van Dijk (2002a, 218) argues, this framing constitutes a “classic topos of anti-immigrant discourse - and probably a dominant category in a socially shared anti-foreigner attitude, which in turn is based on a racist ideology.” Trump’s political language is a vivid manifestation of this topos. His use of overtly aggressive language in reference to immigrants has been well-documented. Scholars have shown that Trump consistently framed migrants as collective threats (Béland 2019), frequently deploying a rhetorical strategy of “Us” versus “Them” to “induce other parties (such as illegal immigrants, refugees, terrorists) as a polarized out-group” (Aswad 2018, 65).

5. Research questions

I aimed to investigate the extent to which the language that permeated Donald Trump’s presidency and political campaigning, particularly regarding immigration, was reflected in his presidential campaign announcement and nomination acceptance speeches. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relative frequency of the rhetorical functions of acclaim, attack, and defense in Trump’s campaign announcement and acceptance speeches, particularly in relation to immigration policy and his language toward immigrants?

RQ2: Has the frequency of attacks on immigrants changed over the course of time in his campaign announcements and acceptance speeches?

RQ3: Who are the targets of Trump's acclaims and attacks in these speeches?

RQ4: What rhetorical strategies are employed in Trump's discourse on immigrants?

6. Methodology

The analysis was based on Benoit's (1999) functional theory of political campaign discourse. I began by closely listening to each speech while simultaneously reading the corresponding transcript, in order to capture not only the linguistic content but also delivery cues (e.g. tone, emphasis, and pauses) which can influence the rhetorical impact of a theme. Next, each speech was segmented into discrete thematic units, defined as the smallest stretch of discourse that conveys a coherent rhetorical function. A thematic unit could consist of a single sentence or a longer utterance, depending on how the idea was developed by the speaker. Each unit was then categorized into one of the three primary rhetorical functions – acclaim, attack, or defense – following Benoit's (1999) framework. In instances of ambiguity, intersubjective justification was employed: I consulted relevant examples from Benoit's work (1999, 2007) and those of him and his collaborators (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Benoit & Sheafer, 2006; Benoit et al., 2007) to guide categorization. For example, statements that portrayed the sponsoring candidate or party in a favorable light were coded as acclaims (e.g., "I've employed tens of thousands of people over my lifetime. That means medical. That means education. That means everything." —Trump, 2015). Statements that depicted the opposing candidate or party negatively were coded as attacks (e.g., "This is the legacy of Hillary Clinton: death, destruction, terrorism, and weakness." —Trump, 2016). Statements that explicitly responded to prior criticism were categorized as defenses:

Much criticism is being placed on the fact that the Republican party should have done better, and frankly, much of this blame is correct, but the citizens of our country have not yet realized the full extent and gravity of the pain our nation is going through and the total effect of the suffering is just starting to take hold. (Trump, 2022)

Next, the target of each rhetorical function was identified, whether the message was directed at a political party, an individual candidate, both, or a foreign or ideological "Other." Following this, each unit was assigned a general theme. Those themes that concern governmental action (past, present or future) and problems connected with governmental actions were considered policy themes. Themes that address characteristics, traits, abilities, or attributes of the candidates (or their parties) were placed into character category. In the case of defenses, further classification was made according to Benoit's typology (e.g., denial, shifting blame, etc. see Section 3). Finally, special attention was given to those rhetorical

units where the themes related to immigrants and immigration policy. This focus was selected due to immigration's status as a politically charged and ideologically divisive issue that often functions as a rhetorical battleground. By isolating this theme, the study seeks to uncover patterns in Trump's rhetorical construction of national identity.

7. Results and discussion

In his presidential campaign announcement and nomination acceptance speeches, Trump primarily relied on acclaims (65%) and attacks (32.8%) (see Table 1). Defenses were rare, comprising only 2.1% of the analyzed discourse segments, with two of the five speeches containing no defensive content at all. This rhetorical pattern aligns with Benoit's (1999, 261) observation that candidates may deliberately minimize attacks in nomination acceptance addresses to avoid appearing "overly negative in their crowning moment during the ritual celebration of their party." However, the increased normalization of attack rhetoric in such speeches since the 1980s, as noted by Ritter (1996), has made their presence more expected and rhetorically permissible. In line with this broader trend, Trump's campaign and nomination addresses included a notable number of attacks alongside his more frequent self-praise.

To assess whether the distribution of rhetorical functions changed over time, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The analysis revealed no statistically significant variation in the frequency of acclaims, attacks, and defenses across the speeches from different years ($p = .48$), suggesting a relatively stable strategic pattern in Trump's campaign discourse.

Table 1. Frequency of acclaims, attacks and defenses in presidential announcement (PCA) and acceptance address (PAA) speeches

Donald Trump	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	Total
PCA, 2015	59	42	4	105
PAA, 2016	44	33	0	77
PAA, 2020	57	21	0	78
PCA, 2022	53	25	3	81
PAA, 2024	73	31	2	106

7.1. Frequency of acclaims and attacks dealing with immigrants and immigration policy

To address the first research question, the number of acclaims and attacks related to immigrants and immigration policy was counted in each speech. In Trump's 2015

campaign announcement, only 1.7% of all acclaims referenced immigration, and these focused on future policy plans. By contrast, attacks were more prominent, with 7.1% of total attacks directed toward immigrants, addressing both the perceived failures of the incumbent government and proposed future measures.

In the 2016 Republican National Convention acceptance address, Trump devoted 18.2% of his acclaims to immigration, predominantly outlining future plans. These included statements such as: “we must immediately suspend immigration from any nation that has been compromised by terrorism” and “By ending catch-and-release on the border, we will stop the cycle of human smuggling and violence. Illegal border crossings will go down.” Similarly, 18.2% of his attacks in this speech were focused on immigration, criticizing the opponent’s leadership and past deeds: “The number of police officers killed in the line of duty has risen by almost 50 percent compared to this point last year. Nearly 180,000 illegal immigrants with criminal records, ordered deported from our country, are tonight roaming free to threaten peaceful citizens.”

In his 2020 acceptance address, 15.7% of acclaims referenced immigration. These praised past deeds (“We have already built 300 miles of border wall”), proposed future plans, such as “We will ban deadly sanctuary cities and ensure that federal healthcare is protected for American citizens, not for illegal aliens.” or general goals: “We will defend America against all threats and protect America against all dangers” where immigrants are framed as a threat, inferred from the specific examples the candidate offered earlier in the speech. Notably, 28.6% of attacks in the 2020 speech focused on immigration, criticizing both the opponent’s policy intentions and leadership: “Joe Biden (...) he was going to give it away, your healthcare dollars to illegal immigrants, which is going to bring massive number of immigrants into our country. Massive numbers will pour into our country in order to get all of the goodies that they want to get...”

In Trump’s 2022 campaign announcement, 13.2% of acclaims addressed immigration, with emphasis on future actions such as border security, deportation of undocumented immigrants, and the prevention of human trafficking. Meanwhile, 28% of attacks centered on the opponent’s leadership and were often framed in connection with immigration policy failures.

The 2024 nomination acceptance speech included 15.1% of acclaims related to immigration. These included both past deeds or future plans (“That’s why, to keep our family safe, the Republican platform promises to launch the largest deportation operation in the history of our country”) or leadership abilities. Immigration was also a dominant theme among attacks, which made up 38.7% of all attacks in that speech. These focused on past deeds or poor leadership abilities: “The greatest invasion in history is taking place right here in our country. They are coming in

from every corner of the earth, not just from South America, but from Africa, Asia, Middle East. They're coming from everywhere. They're coming at levels that we've never seen before. It is an invasion indeed, and this administration does absolutely nothing to stop them.”

To answer the second research question, whether the frequency of attacks on immigrants has changed over time, a linear regression analysis and t-test¹ were conducted across the five speeches spanning nine years. The results indicate an observable upward trend in the frequency of immigration-related attacks, with a relatively strong correlation. Although the increase was not statistically significant ($p = 0.06$), the result approaches the conventional threshold ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that the trend may be emerging and warrants further observation in future campaign discourse.

7.2. Targets of acclaims and attacks

The targets of Trump’s acclaims and attacks were next analyzed. Attacks were categorized by target: the opposing party, the opposing candidate, both, or “Others”, a category that includes foreigners broadly, regardless of whether Trump explicitly referred to immigrants, refugees, or an abstract external threat evoked to provoke fear among Americans.

As shown in Table 2, Trump’s acclaims and attacks were primarily focused on either the opposing candidate or the opposing party. This distribution aligns partially with the findings of Benoit (1999), who observed that the main target of both acclaims and attacks in campaign rhetoric is typically the candidate, followed by the candidate’s party and, less frequently, both together. Hoffman and Howard (2009, 24) similarly note that “attacks which had previously largely been confined to partisan attacks, often became couched in personal tones”. This trend is reflected in Trump’s first three analyzed speeches—those from 2015, 2016, and 2020, where the majority of attacks increasingly focused on the opposing candidate rather than the party. Interestingly, the 2015 announcement speech shows a near-even distribution of attacks between party and candidate, while later speeches (2016 and 2020) reveal a growing emphasis on personal attacks directed at the candidate. This progression might seem counterintuitive. One might reasonably expect a novice politician, particularly in an inaugural campaign speech, to focus attacks on an individual opponent, and to shift toward more explicitly partisan critique as their political identity and affiliations become more entrenched. Indeed, much

1. A linear regression test is a statistical method used to examine the relationship between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables over time. In this case, it assesses whether the frequency of attacks on immigrants shows a statistically significant trend across the nine-year period (Field 2013). A t-test is used to compare the means of two groups—in this context, to determine whether the average frequency of such attacks in earlier years significantly differs from that in later years (Larson-Hall 2009).

of Trump’s early campaign rhetoric in 2015 revolved around the claim that “the ‘professional’ politicians ‘will not and cannot get things done’” (Denton 2020, 190). This line of argument functioned to distinguish Trump from traditional party politics, positioning him as a self-made outsider rather than a partisan insider. However, a shift occurs in the 2022 and 2024 speeches, in which there is a marked increase in partisan attacks. Here, Trump’s rhetoric pivots to focus more heavily on the failings of the ruling government. These attacks often serve a dual function: critiquing the institutional performance of the party in power while implicitly undermining the leadership capabilities of the opposing candidate by association.

Table 2. Targets of Acclaims and Attacks in Presidential Announcement (PCA) and Acceptance Address (PAA) Speeches

	Acclaim				Attack			
	Party	Candidate	Both	Others	Party	Candidate	Both	Others
PCA,2015	1	23	0	2	11	12	1	6
PAA,2016	8	16	1	2	11	20	0	3
PAA,2020	36	15	4	2	11	22	4	3
PCA,2022	26	14	8	3	11	9	3	1
PAA,2024	27	23	5	1	25	3	1	7
Total	98	91	18	10	69	66	9	20

Although “Others” are not targeted as frequently as the opposing candidate or the ruling party in Trump’s speeches, the pervasive rhetorical construction of a generalized “Other” as a threat to American society is a consistent undercurrent throughout all analyzed addresses.

7.3. Trump’s rhetoric on immigrants

7.3.1. *Immigrants and foreigners as “others”*

According to Said (2002, quoted in Molek-Kozakowska 2017, 159), “the patterns of discourse that are used for performing both national and immigrant identities may reinforce existing identity schemas, but also reinterpret or negotiate them.” From the outset of his political career, Donald Trump depicted immigrants by using stereotypical and exclusionary discourse. Just two minutes into his first presidential campaign announcement on June 16, 2015, he delivered a striking illustration of this ideology:

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some,

I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people. (June 16, 2015)

By using the pattern of pronouns (*They*) at the beginning of this attack with "Others" as target, Trump establishes an in-group and an out-group, deliberately directing the audience's allegiances (Aswad 2018). The repetition of "They're not sending you" functions both as anaphora and as a tool of flattery, where this "Us – Them" dichotomy "construes a symbolic distance between the 'good' party and the 'bad' party" (Cap 2010, iv), reinforcing in-group cohesion. Trump's rhetoric continues with an *ad hominem* attack, branding immigrants as rapists, only to soften the claim slightly with a hedged qualification: "some, I *assume*, are good people." This mitigation, featuring the epistemic verb *assume*, serves as an illocutionary force hedge (Fraser 2010, 204), distancing the speaker from full responsibility. He further deflects accountability by attributing information to border guards, thereby invoking a second hedge (Lakoff 1972), which displaces the origin of the claim. He continues:

It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America, and it's coming probably—probably—from the Middle East. But we don't know. Because we have no protection and we have no competence, we don't know what's happening. (Trump, 2015)

In this attack, Trump extends the perceived threat beyond Mexico, generalizing it to encompass immigrants from multiple regions. This attack shifts from targeting "Others" to a broader critique of the leadership abilities of the ruling party (*we have no competence, we don't know what's happening*). Immigrants here are construed as collective threats (Béland 2019), with Trump activating fear as a political strategy and proposing scapegoats (Wodak 2015).

A near-identical rhetorical pattern recurs in his final acceptance address in 2024:

They are coming in from every corner of the earth, not just from South America, but from Africa, Asia, Middle East. They're coming from everywhere. They're coming at levels that we've never seen before. It is an invasion indeed, and this administration does absolutely nothing to stop them. They're coming from prisons. They're coming from jails. They're coming from mental institutions and insane asylums. (Trump, 2024)

The "invasion" metaphor and invocation of "protection" echo throughout Trump's speeches, framing immigrants as threats to national identity and security coming from ethnic minorities and im/migrants (Wodak 2015). By using vivid brief or extended examples (Jaffe, 2016), Trump perpetuates the notion of fear, often drawing on isolated anecdotes to generalize across entire populations. In 2024, this strategy is intensified through inductive reasoning: Trump narrates three specific cases of violent crimes allegedly committed by undocumented

immigrants and concludes by implicitly generalizing that all such individuals (who are inextricably linked with immigrants) are dangerous:

1. Charged with Jocelyn's heinous murder, two illegal aliens from Venezuela who came across our border, were in custody and were then released into the country by this horrible, horrible administration that we have right now. 2. Also met recently with the heartbroken mother and sister of Rachel Morin. Rachel was a 37-year-old mom of five beautiful children who was brutally raped and murdered while out on a run. (...) She was murdered. The monster responsible first killed another woman in El Salvador before he was let into America by the White House. This White House let them in. 3. I've also met with the wonderful family of Laken Riley, the brilliant 22-year-old nursing student. She was so proud of being first in her class, who was out for a run on the campus of the University of Georgia when she was assaulted, beaten and horrifically killed. Yet another American life was stolen by a criminal alien set free by this administration. (Trump, 2024)

These examples raise fundamental questions regarding inductive reasoning: Are the cases cited sufficient in number and representativeness to justify the broader conclusion? Do they reflect the norm or are they statistically exceptional (Jaffe 2016)?

Ultimately, Trump's discourse paints immigrants as a homogenous group synonymous with danger, deviance, and violence. This framing constructs a dichotomous worldview in which a morally superior, unified "we" must defend against the ever-threatening "them", which is a phenomenon called a "politics of fear" (Wodak 2015, 2). It reinforces stereotypical depictions of immigrants, particularly through the topoi of criminality and danger (KhosraviNik 2010), and perpetuates fear-based appeals designed to consolidate political support.

7.3.2. *The wall, borders and the nation as a house*

At the conclusion of his 2015 presidential announcement speech, Trump presented what appeared to be a straightforward policy acclaim concerning future plans: "I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall". In this claim is embedded a rhetorical inconsistency that merits attention. If the wall is inexpensive, the insistence that Mexico pay for it loses some of its rhetorical urgency. On the other hand, if Mexico is to bear the cost, its expense becomes irrelevant to U.S. voters. Such contradictions are characteristic of populist rhetoric, which often prioritizes emotional appeal and performative nationalism over logical coherence. As Wodak (2015) notes, populist discourse frequently involves blatant simplifications, contradictions, and inconsistencies that are strategically employed to create identification and mobilize support.

In his first address accepting the presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention in 2016, Trump extends the wall metaphor, folding it into a larger narrative of safety, violence prevention, and border integrity:

We are going to build a great border wall to stop illegal immigration, to stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities. I have been honored to receive the endorsement of America's Border Patrol Agents, and will work directly with them to protect the integrity of our lawful, lawful, lawful immigration system.

The triple repetition of lawful functions almost as incantation, anchoring immigration discourse within a moral and legal framework. But equally important is the figurative work of the wall itself. Molek-Kozakowska (2014, 150) notes that figurative representations “facilitate the building and management of collectively shared mental models.” In this case, figurative (and literal) representation of safety is the wall, because for most people the wall represents physical boundary which serves as some sort of territorial marker. The wall becomes a metonymy for safety, a cognitive anchor within a shared symbolic landscape. This fits into a long-standing metaphorical tradition: the country conceptualized as a house. Chilton and Ilyin (1993, 9) describe that “the concept of ‘security’ seems in English to be understood by accessing base concepts of fixedness and being inside an enclosing space or container. This basic cognitive schema is also an important component of the ‘house’ metaphor”. The metaphor in Trump’s rhetoric can be represented as THE COUNTRY/NATION IS A HOUSE. Charteris-Black (2006) demonstrated how the metaphor BRITAIN AS A CONTAINER, i.e. the nation as a container, legitimizes exclusionary and anti-immigrant policies. Once the conceptual domain of a CONTAINER has been established, all kinds of entailments are possible, because at that point all parts of the house can systematically and figuratively be reflected to various aspects of a nation/country. The metaphor’s entailments are clear: INHABITANTS are CITIZENS, WALLS are BORDERS, IMMIGRANTS become TRESPASSERS.

Trump’s rhetoric consistently draws on this collectively shared mental model of security, reinforcing the metaphor through repetition: walls must be built, borders restored, and “We” protected. As Wodak (2021, 61) observes, such discourse responds to the fear of strangers and is “related to vehement nativist nationalism built on the populist myth of a quasi-homogenous nation state which has to be preserved and protected against (usually fictive) external or internal dangers”. Trumps’ rhetoric caters to these imagined homogenous people living *inside* a nation state (Wodak 2015). Therefore, to stay safe “We” need borders, and borders are kept and protected by walls. “Real walls of stone, brick and cement are also being construed to keep the ‘Others’ out, who are defined as different and deviant.

Body politics are therefore integrated with border politics” (Wodak 2015, 2). Trump returns to the theme of borders, immigrants’ crossings of these borders, and protection of borders throughout his 2020, 2022, and 2024 campaign speeches:

We will have strong borders. And I've said for years, without borders we don't have a country. Don't have a country. Strike down terrorists who threaten our people, and keep America out of endless and costly foreign wars. (Trump, 2020)

Our southern border has been erased and our country is being invaded by millions and millions of unknown people, many of whom are entering for a very bad and sinister reason, and you know what that reason is. (...) Hundreds of thousands of pounds of deadly drugs, including very lethal fentanyl, are flooding across the now open and totally porous southern border. (Trump, 2022)

That's why, to keep our family safe, the Republican platform promises to launch the largest deportation operation in the history of our country. Even larger than that of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, from many years ago. You know, he was a moderate but he believed very strongly in borders. (Trump, 2024)

Through these reiterations, the wall becomes more than policy; it is a symbolic boundary between order and chaos, “Us” and “Them”, citizen and criminal. Once this metaphor has been established its skillful manipulation can lead to manipulation of a political discourse, “providing new conceptual premises for the development and justification of policies” Chilton and Ilyin (1993, 10).

8. Conclusion

This article has examined two of Donald Trump’s presidential announcement speeches and three Republican National Convention nomination acceptance addresses, spanning a nine-year period from 2015 to 2024. The analysis, grounded in the functional theory of political campaign discourse and critical discourse studies, reveals a striking consistency in rhetorical structure and strategic positioning. The distribution of rhetorical functions, acclaims, attacks, and defenses, remains relatively balanced across the examined corpus, with a notably higher number of acclaims. This aligns with Benoit’s (1999) assertion that candidates typically seek to project a more positive image than a negative one, particularly in high-stakes, introductory campaign speeches.

Targets of acclaims and attacks are primarily directed towards opposing parties and rival candidates. While foreign “Others” are not always the explicit focus of these speeches, which is understandable given the variety of themes addressed in major campaign events, the “rhetoric of exclusion” (Wodak 2015, 21) is unmistakably present. Across the speeches, there is an observable dichotomy between “Us” and “Them.” This polarization, a hallmark of populist discourse, does not exhibit any evolution or moderation over time. On the contrary, the later

speeches, particularly those from 2020 onward, exhibit a recurring pattern of portraying immigrants and foreign Others as existential threats to national identity and domestic safety.

Trump's rhetoric about immigrants consistently mobilizes the politics of fear, which, as Wodak (2015, 5) argues, serves "to legitimize politicians and parties' policy proposals (usually related to restricting immigration) with and appeal to the necessities of security". This fear is narrativized and made tangible through vivid examples, "Us" and "Them" polarization, and strategic metaphor. Chief among these is the metaphorical construction of the nation as a house, a bounded, enclosed space under siege. The metaphor of containment permits a wide range of entailments: citizens as inhabitants, borders as walls, immigrants as intruders. In Trump's discourse, the recurring use of the WALL functions both as a literal infrastructure and as a symbolic demarcation of the nation's external boundaries of the "house", i.e. the United States.

Ultimately, the analysis confirms a notable continuity in rhetorical and thematic schema with regard to immigrants and foreign "Others". It consistently mobilizes exclusionary metaphors and populist appeals to "protect" the nation, reinforcing a rhetoric of fear and division that serves both to construct political legitimacy and to activate a collective "We" in opposition to the imagined "Other." As such, it exemplifies how political rhetoric functions not only to persuade, but to construct and continually reproduce social and symbolic boundaries.

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