

Rhetoric as a Way of Limiting the Range of Acceptable Policy Positions

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Abstract

Understanding how political actors not only set the terms of policy debates but limit the range of acceptable policy positions is critical to understanding the political process. Beyond their most preferred policies, politicians and special interests have sets of policies that they would find acceptable, though not ideal. In addition to advocating for their policy ideals, political actors attempt to limit debate to those policies that are within their preferred set. This rhetorical strategy has implications for how to identify, assess, and discuss policy debates and likely outcomes.

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I. Introduction

Political rhetoric is used to shape debate, convey legitimacy, clarify intentions, and ultimately affect the speaker's popularity with the people and likelihood of achieving their desired outcome.¹ Interestingly, while research on the key role played by rhetoric in politics does exist, discussions of how rhetoric is used to manipulate the feasible set of policy outcomes or the acceptable content of policies are less common in the literature. For instance, there is an emphasis on how rhetoric can be used to stir emotions, such as fear and anger, in order to gain public support for the politician's desired policies (see Jerit 2004; Higgs 2006, 2007; Krebs and Jackson 2007), but not necessarily how those emotional appeals constrain the set of policy outcomes. Likewise, agenda setting explains why certain issues

¹ Riker (1986) coined the term "heresthetic," as a companion to "rhetoric," to describe the art of using political speech to strategically manipulate hearers into supporting the speaker's policy preferences.

are discussed more than others during a political campaign (see Petrocik 1996; Damore 2004, 2005; Sides 2006), but not why political opponents choose to discuss those issues in the way that they do. Similarly, discussions of framing effects are about how characterizing a policy choice in one way over another can change which policy prevails (see Iyengar 1990; Koch 1998; Althaus and Kim 2005; Jerit 2009), but not how framing a policy choice in a particular way will in turn affect the policies advocated by opponents.

In real-world policy debates, however, there are often disagreements over the content of policy, and rhetoric is employed to define the range of policy positions that seem actionable or practicable. Politicians and special interests do not only want their preferred policy positions to prevail, but, as a second-best outcome, want policy positions that do not differ significantly from their preferred positions. When politicians describe their policy positions as “reasonable,” “responsive,” “evidence based,” “guided by the experts,” or “consistent with our values,” they are not only defending their own positions but also effectively and often quite deliberately limiting the range of positions that their opponents can advance.

Focusing on the use of strategic rhetoric to limit the range of acceptable policy positions, we argue, matters a great deal for understanding the policy process. First, it complements and extends the concepts of agenda setting and framing effects. Rhetoric is not only used to select the policy topics that will be debated and to ultimately win the policy debate, but also to define the feasible set of outcomes. Second, it complements public choice economics. We can, using public choice, assess the costs and benefits of particular policy outcomes, identify the incentives of collective action, and highlight the privileges of the elite and other special interests. A focus on the rhetorical strategy of political actors adds another layer to why certain policies are deemed acceptable, even when their costs outweigh their benefits or when politicians and special interests seem particularly divided.²

In section 2, we explore the literature related to the use of political rhetoric. Then in section 3, we present a simple model of strategic political rhetoric. If politicians employ this strategy to frame

² In some cases, we can identify unlikely partners (such as bootleggers and Baptists during prohibition) in policy debates (see Smith and Yandle 2014). Strategic rhetoric can also explain how all sides of the debate may settle on a set of feasible outcomes that they all agree to (not just the bootleggers and Baptists but also the drinkers who agree to limited access but not complete prohibition).

the debate, they can limit the set of politically feasible policy positions to include their preferred positions, or at least positions similar to their own. Further, if politicians refuse to utilize rhetoric in this way, they often fail to limit the set of acceptable policy positions and will likely lose the debate. Two historical examples—the debates over the US Constitutional ratification through the writings of the Federalists and Anti-Federalists and the debate on the role of government in responding to the Great Depression through the campaign speeches of Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover—are used to highlight aspects of the model.³ Section 4 concludes and provides implications.

II. Theoretical Considerations on the Power of Political Rhetoric

Several studies have explored how politicians can use rhetoric to their advantage. The president of the United States, for instance, has been shown to be in a unique position to frame policy debates and to prime the general public and other politicians in a way conducive to advancing the administration's position. Whether conveying legitimacy to the presidential office (Anderson 1988), influencing economic activity (Wood, Owens, and Durham 2005), or communicating greatness and charisma (Emrich et al. 2001), presidential rhetoric can be highly effective.

Additionally, the literature on agenda setting describes which issues come to be discussed by candidates during a campaign.⁴ Issue ownership theories suggest that politicians discuss issues typically viewed as important platforms for their political party. Stated another way, candidates emphasize those issues that their parties own, and candidates win when the issues that their party owns are salient with voters (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003/2004). Not all empirical tests of issue ownership, however, have supported the theory. Instead, they find that candidates focus on the issues voters believe are more important regardless of the perceived ability of the candidate's party to handle the issue, such as when candidates engage

³ We employ these cases not in the hope of revealing something previously unknown by historians or students of these periods but to illustrate the theory being proposed.

⁴ Rhetorical strategies may differ during political campaigns and everyday governing, when in one instance, politicians are competing for the chance to govern, and in another, they are debating policies and how best to implement them. However, the same tools can often be used in both instances. When campaigning focuses on policies and issues, there may be similarities to policy debates.

in wave riding or issue trespassing, and that elections tend to focus on issues that are salient to current voters, also known as issue convergence (Sides 2006; Damore 2004, 2005; van der Brug 2003).⁵

Several studies have concluded that when issue trespassing and other tactics do occur, political candidates employ various strategies for framing and priming the debate (see, for instance, Sides 2006). Indeed, much of the literature on how politicians use strategic political rhetoric to sway the populace on policy issues employs the concepts of framing and priming (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Chong and Druckman 2007). Framing, while arguably distinct from persuasion, is instrumental to a successful rhetorical strategy. As described by Austen-Smith (1992, p. 47), “Rational speakers choose their words to attempt to convince audiences to make one set of choices rather than another.”

Framing describes how concepts and terms are used to present choices and influence the listener’s response (Iyengar 1990; Jacoby 2000). It relies on influencing listeners using information they already possess by manipulating the weights the audience assigns to the conflicting considerations. Persuasion works by presenting previously unknown information to the listeners to give them a more complete picture, thereby altering their decision process (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). Persuasion, according to Charteris-Black (2011), requires various strategies, such as humor, metaphor, and myth. Politicians use these tools to craft their narratives and inspire action.

Successful framing requires the politician to effectively use rhetoric to highlight certain features of a policy while minimizing others. Framing thus restricts what listeners consider when deciding between policies (Koch 1998). As an example, the politician may be debating whether a nuclear arms reduction treaty should be adopted. If they support the reduction, they will likely present it in the context of “advancing the goal of a nuclear-free world,” whereas a detractor of the treaty would argue that “it reduces our defenses against hostile enemies.” While the essence of a treaty and its consequences is the same under both scenarios, voters will consider the issue in a different light depending on the frame within which the politician presents the issue.

Perhaps not surprisingly, much literature on rhetoric describes political debate as zero-sum; one side succeeds in getting the policy

⁵ Sides (2006, p. 412) defines wave riding as when “instead of focusing on different issues based on their respective reputations, the parties may instead focus on a common set of issues that are highly salient to the public.”

they prefer, and the other side loses. While continued dialogue and engagement can also be effective during debate (Jerit 2008), the party that sets the agenda or successfully frames the debate is more likely to win the debate, and rhetoric is key to their success. It is through framing that politicians seek to redefine public policies in such a way “as to prime certain considerations” and “move public opinion in the direction elites desire,” thereby making it easier to persuade the public or possibly even opponents to step away from their old positions and accept the new policy proposal (Koch 1998, p. 211).

Arguably, politicians are better able to frame topics appropriately and prime voters to adopt their rhetorical position by focusing on the policy areas in which the candidate has a comparative advantage. As Jacobs and Shapiro (1994, p. 14) write, elites will seek to “decisively exercise their superior skill and knowledge in order to refine and enlarge their constituents’ wishes and to mobilize the public behind their policies.” Yet, Druckman (2001b) has noted that while elites may seek to manipulate the populace, they are constrained by the credibility of the source. Thus, he proposes that citizens may be seeking guidance from credible elites as much as elites are seeking to frame the debate. Further, the media can shift or influence the effectiveness of rhetorical framing or succeed in framing the debate themselves when politicians cannot (Callaghan and Schnell 2001).

There are two general categories of framing effects: the emphasis framing effect and the equivalency framing effect (Druckman 2001a). An equivalency framing effect describes how the public may be manipulated to take one position over another through the presentation of different, albeit logically equivalent, aspects of the policy issue under consideration. An emphasis framing effect describes how the public can be guided toward considering a position in light of the frame the speaker sets up by increasing the relative importance of a particular facet of the discussion. While both framing effects “focus on certain aspects or characterizations of an issue or problem instead of others,” emphasis framing effects do not focus on logically equivalent aspects of the issue but rather “different potentially relevant considerations” (Druckman 2001a, p. 230).

To successfully frame a debate, in an attempt to gain support for particular policies or political actions, politicians employ rhetorical strategies to play on the public’s emotions, including fear and anger. For instance, Higgs (2006, 2007) argues that politicians use fear to push for government expansion during crises and Mitchell (2000)

explains that politicians use rhetoric to gain public support for military expenditures and projects, even when they are not effective.

The literature on framing effects focuses on how characterizing a policy choice in a particular way can increase the likelihood that the politicians' preferred policy is adopted. It also has a secondary, but nonetheless important, function of limiting the policy choices that listeners allow themselves to consider. Although not often discussed in the existing literature, an important implication is that a politician who succeeds in framing a debate ensures that the policy that does prevail, even if their preferred policy option fails, will at least come from a range of policy options that they find acceptable.

In the following section, we provide a model that extends and complements the literature on political rhetoric to show how politicians utilize emphasis framing effects to limit the set of feasible policy outcomes to their preferred position and second-best positions. Our model builds on an insight from Krebs and Jackson (2007), who describe how rhetoric cannot only persuade and motivate the public but constrain the opponent's position. As they note (p. 36), "While claimants may deploy arguments in the hope that they will eventually persuade, their more immediate task is, through skillful framing, to leave their opponents without access to the rhetorical materials needed to craft a socially sustainable rebuttal. Rhetorical coercion occurs when this strategy proves successful: when the claimant's opponents have been talked into a corner, compelled to endorse a stance they would otherwise reject."

III. A Simple Model on the Strategic Use of Rhetoric

Consider a policy disagreement between two candidates—or between representative agents of two political parties—over how best to respond to a policy challenge. Both agents (A and B) have an ideal policy that they would like to prevail, which can be described as A^* and B^* . Each agent, however, also has a set of policies (baskets A and B) which include A^* and B^* but also include other acceptable options.⁶ Both agents can attempt to frame the issue in a way that increases the likelihood that their ideal policy will prevail (either by capturing an issue space that has not yet been framed or by rejecting the frame of their opponent and offering a different one). For instance, if Agent A successfully frames the debate and Agent B

⁶ Acceptability here could mean acceptable ideologically or, simply, that the outcome would not turn off the candidate's core voters.

rejects the frame, then the likelihood of A^* being chosen increases. However, even if their preferred policy is not chosen, it is worth trying to frame the debate to increase the likelihood of policies relatively close to A^* being chosen instead. Political discourse in this sense is not an all-or-nothing debate, but an attempt to narrow the feasible set of policy outcomes to those their party (and constituents) deems acceptable.

A historical example illustrates how refusing to adopt the prevailing frame lowers the likelihood of restricting the feasible policy set in one's favor. The 1932 presidential campaign between Franklin Roosevelt (Agent A) and incumbent Herbert Hoover (Agent B) focused on the proper role of government in responding to the Great Depression. As the incumbent, Hoover faced the daunting challenge of defending his record in the midst of the Great Depression while concurrently decrying the policies of his opponent. Contending that the campaign was a contest between two philosophies of government, Hoover appealed to the public's love of the American tradition. For instance, during a campaign speech in New York on October 31, Hoover (1932c) stated, "They are proposing changes and so-called new deals which would destroy the very foundations of the American system of life."⁷

Roosevelt, on the other hand, insisted that the debate was about how and to what extent the government should respond to economic crises, and that a change was necessary if America was to overcome the economic challenges it was facing. In a radio address on April 17, for instance, Roosevelt (1932a) explained that "the nation faces today a more grave emergency than in 1917," and that "it is high time to admit with courage that we are in the midst of an emergency at least equal to that of war. Let us mobilize to meet it."⁸ Such calls for immediate and drastic change in government policies were supported in the official Democratic platform as well.

In hindsight, it is clear that Roosevelt had successfully framed the debate. Hoover, however, never adopted Roosevelt's frame that drastic change and immediate action were necessary, despite himself having engaged in policies that attempted to reduce the effects of the Depression. Hoover, for instance, did discuss some particular policies aimed at promoting economic development and job creation, including the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, during the

⁷ For additional examples, see Hoover (1932a, 1932b).

⁸ For additional examples, see Roosevelt (1932b, 1932c).

campaign. Rather than casting these efforts as the swift action that was needed to address the economic crisis of the day, Hoover's rhetorical strategy consistently emphasized that the proper role for government ought to be minimal. He lost the debate as well as the 1932 election by a wide margin. Had Hoover adopted Roosevelt's frame, and rebranded his action as "mobilizing" the government to meet the moment, he might have won more votes during the election and/or altered the policies that eventually prevailed to include some of his preferred options.⁹

Alternatively, an agent can adopt their opponent's frame and advance a policy that is within the intersection of their sets of acceptable policies (i.e., $A \cap B$), assuming that this intersection is not an empty set.¹⁰ Another historical example shows how adopting the prevailing frame restricts the feasible policy set. From 1787 through 1789, the Federalists and Anti-Federalists debated the necessity (and then the necessary components) of a US Constitution. The Federalists (Agent A), through the Federalist Papers, argued that America would face dire consequences if the constitution was not ratified (Hamilton 1787a, 1787b; Jay 1787a; Madison 1787). For instance, in Federalist No. 4, John Jay (1787a) argued that if the constitution were not ratified, foreign powers would "find us either destitute of an effectual government (each State doing right or wrong, as to its rulers may seem convenient), or split into three or four independent and probably discordant republics or confederacies."¹¹ By Federalist No. 14, James Madison (1787) was arguing as if the case for union had been firmly established; that ratification was the only prudent option.

At first, the Anti-Federalists (Agent B) attempted to counter the Federalists' rhetoric. For instance, the Centinel No. 1, often attributed to Samuel Bryan but signed by the "Centinel" (1787; emphasis in the original), stated that "Our situation is represented to

⁹ In this instance, the political campaign was driven primarily by the debate on the Great Depression. For that reason, Hoover may have not found it feasible to engage in a debate about the level of government involvement. He may have thought that, by adopting the frame, he was selling out and would lose more votes than he would gain from independents and the opposition's party.

¹⁰ It is rational for both agents to attempt to frame the debate, and once one agent's frame prevails, it is also rational for the other agent to adopt the frame. In other words, it makes sense for the agent who was not able to frame the debate to quickly adopt the winning frame and increase the likelihood of a more moderate policy outcome.

¹¹ Also see Jay (1787b).

be so *critically* dreadful that, however reprehensible and exceptionable the proposed plan of government may be, there is no alternative, between the adoption of it and absolute ruin. My fellow citizens, things are not at that crisis, it is the argument of tyrants.” However, the Anti-Federalists soon shifted to focusing on specific defects of the particular constitution being proposed.¹² Based on the shift in rhetoric, we can conclude that the Federalists succeeded in framing the debate by purporting the necessity of a US Constitution. Recognizing that the Federalists had successfully restricted the feasible policy set (to $A \cap B$), the Anti-Federalists adopted the frame advanced by the Federalists and argued to amend the constitution by adopting the Bill of Rights (see “Brutus” 1787, commonly attributed to Robert Yates).

As a result of their efforts, constitutional delegates in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Virginia formally recommended that the new Congress consider several amendments that would protect individual rights. This example shows how both Agents A and B attempted to frame the debate, that Agent A’s (the Federalists’) frame prevailed, and that by adopting the frame, Agent B (the Anti-Federalists) was able to further restrict the feasible policy set to include options within their bundle. The outcome, a US Constitution with a Bill of Rights, was within both agents’ preferred bundles ($A \cap B$).

Admittedly, it is not always clear whether a political debate has been framed by a political opponent, and attempts to frame a political debate are costly and not always successful. Under these circumstances of imperfect information, a political actor’s decision on how to proceed will depend on an assessment of resources as well as their rhetorical abilities to frame or reframe the debate. Likewise, political actors can study public opinion polls, assess how the media is discussing the issue, or use other tools to gain more information about the state of the debate and which frame is succeeding. To assess the expected value of attempting to frame the debate when the dominant frame is not yet known, a political agent must ascribe some probability (which is a factor of available financial and other resources) to their ability to successfully frame the debate.

Additionally, the intersection of policy options that both agents find acceptable may in fact be an empty set ($A \cap B = \emptyset$), so neither

¹² Even “Centinel No. 1” is largely a critique of specific aspects of the proposed constitution, highlighting that the Anti-Federalists realized they would not win framing the debate. See also Federal Farmer (1787).

agent may be able to, nor necessarily want to, adopt their opponent's frame. Under this scenario, the potential benefits associated with Agent B adopting Agent A's prevailing frame will be low. There are also some conceivable situations where adopting an opponent's frame will negatively impact an agent's reputation and political position (i.e., if adopting the opponent's frame is considered a betrayal of values or "selling out").¹³

While simple, this logic can shed light on the process and strategy of many political debates. In most instances, it is in both agents' interest to attempt to frame the debate, and if Agent A successfully frames the debate, it is beneficial for Agent B to adopt that frame so that the feasible policy option set ($A \cap B$) includes options they both find agreeable. Thus, we should expect to see politicians adopting the prevailing frame. When they do not, it is likely that their basket of preferred policies does not overlap or that adopting their opponent's frame is considered politically infeasible. Importantly, the rhetorical strategy discussed here does not speak to compromise during the debate, though it might appear as such, but rather shows how both agents can actively constrain and influence the policy set to include some policies they prefer.

Our discussion here of the potential importance of political rhetoric in shaping the range of legitimate or acceptable policy choices is related to the literature on spatial and directional voting models, which utilize a distribution of positions on policy issues. The feasible option set, a finite set of preferred policy positions by voters and candidates, may coincide with the intersection of both agents' preferred policies in our strategy (Macdonald and Rabinowitz 1998; Adams, Merrill III, and Grofman 2005). According to the proximity model of voting, voters prefer candidates that are closest to them on some salient dimension. This model would predict the convergence of political parties in a two-party system as they each attempt to attract the attention of the median voter. However, there has not been convergence in real-life politics. Consequently, Macdonald and Rabinowitz (1989, 1998) propose a directional model that highlights the dichotomous stances taken by political parties or "us versus

¹³ Is adopting an opponent's successful frame politically feasible? While it may look like "selling out," there are times when adopting the winning frame can be beneficial at signaling nonpartisanship or giving the impression that finding reasonable policy solutions is more important than party loyalty. In other instances, it may be more important to defend more extreme positions. The rise of identity politics is an example of the need to hold the party line.

them” party alignment observed in some countries. This model allows for the inclusion of “valence” issues that the public has varying opinions on and often “link” to a particular party that is more likely to advance that stance (Rabinowitz 1989, 1998).

While these models are helpful for understanding voting behavior and how politicians attempt to court voters, they do not necessarily account for how seeming compromises sometimes occur even when addressing valence issues. For instance, gun control is a controversial topic with a wide array of opinions among the public in the United States. While citizens may link pro-gun stances to the Republican party and gun reform to the Democratic party, politicians have sometimes settled for minor reforms (e.g., background checks or banning of high-capacity magazines) rather than pushing for their ideal stances.

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all regions of the world, infecting over 83 million people and resulting in over 1.8 million deaths worldwide—with over 20 million cases and almost 350,000 deaths in the United States alone as of January 3, 2021.¹⁴ As the pandemic spread across the globe in early 2020, public health officials and politicians quickly framed the debate around a swift response to slow the spread of the disease, or “flatten the curve,” so as not to overwhelm the healthcare system. This approach led to a series of lockdowns, curfews, and stay-at-home orders encouraging citizens to practice physical distancing, wear masks, and restrict activity to that deemed essential. While these orders have evolved over the course of the pandemic, they are still the primary policy remedy when cases rise in any given state, despite contributing to an economic downturn. This successful framing has narrowed the feasible option set, leaving out other public health strategies for dealing with a prolonged pandemic, and has had social consequences in addition to the economic ones (see Boettke and Powell forthcoming; Coyne, Duncan, and Hall forthcoming; Storr et al. forthcoming).

Our approach may help explain how such reforms are within the overlapping set of acceptable options, even though they do not represent the preferred policy positions of the party’s main supporters. Moreover, if special interests are effective in narrowing the option set by adopting certain rhetorical strategies, our approach

¹⁴ Data obtained from the “WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard,” and the CDC’s “United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State” dashboard.

may also explain why competing political parties might advocate similar policies on certain issues even though this overlap does not necessarily signal convergence among political parties. Indeed, certain policy positions may come to be supported by unlikely bedfellows, like Yandle's observation of the prevalence of bootleggers and Baptists both advocating for temperance (see Smith and Yandle 2014), as political actors strategically narrow the debate down in ways that limit policy options to the range of options that they support.

IV. Implications and Conclusion

The use of strategic rhetoric can effectively frame political debates, swaying the public into adopting a position they may previously have been disinclined toward (Riker 1995). The model proposed here shows how politicians can strategically use rhetoric to ensure that policies within their preferred basket of policy positions prevail even if their ideal policy preferences are not adopted. This approach complements the existing literature on agenda setting and framing effects as well as the economic assessment of policies. We believe this way of examining policy debates is helpful in understanding political discourse and the actions of politicians during debates.¹⁵

¹⁵ Importantly for this journal, focusing on the use of strategic rhetoric to limit the range of acceptable policy positions also matters for teaching students about the policy process. Consider, for instance, the challenge of teaching courses in economic policy analysis at the graduate level. These classes would necessarily seek to give students the tools to engage in policy debates by applying the insights of economics to evaluate the nature of particular policy challenges as well as the effectiveness and efficacy of existing or proposed policies. A particular challenge in these sorts of classes is that they often begin discussions of policy debates after the range of acceptable policy positions has already been established. By examining policy debates in the classroom through the lens of strategic rhetoric, we can show how political strategy not only shapes what policy topics are discussed in a certain political campaign or term but how it defines the feasible set of outcomes within those policy debates. This helps identify which outcomes to assess using economic analysis as well as why feasible sets sometimes exclude options that are economically feasible.

Students who seek to become policy analysts or politicians can also better understand how to frame their arguments for particular policy outcomes so they do not appear to be outside of the prevailing set of outcomes. For example, many policy outcomes that are preferred from an economic standpoint (such as free trade or open borders) are not politically feasible. Finding ways to frame these outcomes (or similar ones) as within the feasible set increases their likelihood of being debated (and possibly adopted).

Additionally, a focus on the use of strategic rhetoric to limit the range of acceptable positions when teaching about policy areas and past political debates can

A stylized version of a political debate might go as follows. At first, the political actors engaged in the debate take principled stances on the issue and attempt to counter their opponent's views and justifications. Viewed through the model, these agents are both attempting to frame the debate so that their preferred outcomes are more likely to be adopted. However, once one frame prevails, opponents begin talking about common ground, recast their preferred policy positions so that they are in line with the prevailing frame, and start proposing compromises.

Viewed through the model, for instance, Agent B recognizes that not adopting the prevailing frame advanced by Agent A will decrease their chances of getting any of their preferred reforms. While this scenario is often viewed as one party defeating the other, and the other accepting that defeat, the adoption of a prevailing frame is actually a rhetorical strategy that might further constrain the feasible option set. By adopting the prevailing frame rather than continuing to reject Agent A's framing, Agent B is more likely to restrict the outcome to policies in both agents' preferred sets ($A \cap B$). Outcomes are, thus, not necessarily about compromise but about constraining options to policies that both agents agree on. Stated another way, by adopting the prevailing frame, one party does not win while the other loses nor does one party compromise to the other. Rather, both parties can constrain the reforms to ones that they both find reasonable. That does not mean that either party gets their most preferred outcome, but rather an outcome within their preferred bundle of options.

Thinking about political rhetoric and policy debates in this way may further our understanding of why politicians frequently use fear and similar rhetorical strategies to characterize policies outside of their range of acceptable policies as being beyond the pale. Indeed, emotional rhetoric and appeals have been found to be effective campaign strategies (see Gross and D'Ambrosio 2004; Jerit 2004). Inculcating a sense of fear to motivate the adoption or rejection of a policy can be a powerful means of not only defeating the specific policy advocated by a political opponent but of shaping the range of perceived policies that voters view as acceptable. For instance,

help teachers guard against and correct for their own political biases. Rather than talking of compromise and one side winning the debate, this approach allows for a more nuanced approach that is less likely to alienate or promote particular viewpoints.

politicians often opine that “doing nothing” will result in dire consequences. Higgs (2006, 2007), for example, shows how the use of fear not only legitimizes the need to act but also enables the expansion of government activities and concludes that fear is the primary foundation of government power. Similarly, Coyne and Hall (2021) discuss how the US government used propaganda in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in order to create a culture of fear and militarism, and to inflate the necessity of and the support for a proactive military response to the terrorist threat. Framing the debate to emphasize that taking no action will lead to dire consequences guarantees an affirmative policy response.

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