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Research Article

Constructing ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’ in the 2024 US Presidential Campaign: An Analysis of Persuasive Targeting and Van Dijk’s Ideological Square in Democratic and Republican Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the strategic construction of ‘Us vs. Them’ narratives in the 2024 US presidential election, analyzing how Democratic (Biden/Harris) and Republican (Trump) campaigns employed persuasive political targeting (PPT) to operationalize Teun A. van Dijk’s ideological square. A corpus of eight key rally speeches and two pivotal debate transcripts was analyzed using qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Findings reveal distinct approaches. The Republican campaign predominantly used explicit, emotionally charged messages matching a core base, constructing ‘Us’ as “patriots” against a demonized ‘Them’ (e.g., “incompetent” opponents, “invader” immigrants). Conversely, the Democratic campaign aimed for a broader, inclusive ‘Us’ united by democratic values, framing ‘Them’ (Trump and “MAGA extremists”) as a threat to democratic institutions. The methodology integrated Van Dijk’s ideological square with Druckman’s PPT framework to systematically code persuasive techniques linked to recipient characteristics. The study demonstrates that both campaigns strategically utilized sophisticated ‘Us vs. Them’ constructions, intertwining advanced targeting with fundamental ideological positioning. This research illuminates the polarized dynamics of contemporary American political discourse and contributes to understanding the discursive struggle for power by linking targeting techniques with ideological strategies.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideological Square, Persuasive Political Targeting (PPT), 2024 US Presidential Election, Political Discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic and often contentious arena of electoral politics, political speeches serve as critical sites where candidates endeavor to build consensus, mobilize supporters, and differentiate themselves from opponents (Charteris-Black, 2018). The 2024 United States presidential election provides a compelling context, unfolding against a backdrop of significant political polarization where candidates leveraged sophisticated rhetorical strategies to define the boundaries between “Us” (the ingroup) and “Them” (the outgroup). This demarcation is a fundamental aspect of political persuasion, shaping voter perceptions and allegiances.

While existing research has examined elements of political rhetoric, often in isolation, a crucial gap remains in understanding how specific, sophisticated persuasive targeting techniques are employed to operationalize fundamental discursive strategies of ideological positioning. Little is known about how campaigns systematically align their messages with recipient characteristics to animate the classic ‘Us vs. Them’ framework, particularly in the high-stakes context of a deeply polarized US presidential election. This research aims to fill this gap by examining how Persuasive Political Targeting (PPT) and Van Dijk’s ideological square intersect in the campaign discourse of the 2024 election. The following research questions addressed in the present study:

1. How do the 2024 Democratic (Biden/Harris) and Republican (Trump) presidential campaigns employ persuasive political targeting strategies (message, source, and setting matching) to enact the four dimensions of Van Dijk’s ideological square in their rally speeches and debate performances?
2. In what ways do the specific recipient characteristics targeted (e.g., social identities, values, issue priorities) and the nature of the appeals (explicit vs. implicit) differentiate the Democratic and Republican campaigns’ operationalization of positive self-presentations and negative other-presentations?

This research enriches political linguistics and communication studies through empirical analysis of high-stakes political discourse. By integrating CDA with the PPT framework, it moves beyond anecdotal critique to a more systematic, data-driven explanation of contemporary persuasive practices. The findings will be valuable for researchers of political communication, discourse analysis, and electoral strategy, offering a nuanced understanding of how ideological battles are fought through targeted language.

2. LITRATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study was based on two primary theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically Teun A. van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model, and James Druckman’s (2023) framework of Persuasive Political Targeting (PPT). As noted by Fairclough (2013) and Wodak and Chilton (2005), CDA investigates the relationships between discourse, power, and ideology. Van Dijk’s (2006, 2015) approach is particularly salient, as it focuses on how ideologies are produced and reproduced through text and talk. Central to his work is the concept of the “ideological square” (Van Dijk, 1991, 2000), a model outlining four key discursive strategies: (1) emphasize Our good things, (2) emphasize Their bad things, (3) de-emphasize Our bad things, and (4) de-emphasize Their good things. This provides a structured mechanism for analyzing how political actors construct favorable self-presentations while derogating adversaries.

Complementing CDA, Druckman’s (2023) PPT framework offers a model for understanding the strategic precision of political communication. PPT involves the deliberate alignment of messages, sources, or settings with specific characteristics of the intended audience (e.g., identity, values, issue priorities) to maximize persuasive impact. The combination of CDA and PPT creates a balanced framework to explore detailed linguistic choices in conjunction with the strategic, targeted nature of modern campaign rhetoric.

2.2. The Interplay of Targeting, Ideology, and “Us vs. Them” Constructions

Persuasive targeting is the vehicle through which ideological messages, including “Us vs. Them” framings, are often conveyed most effectively. When campaigns match messages to the specific identities or values of a target group (Druckman, 2023), they simultaneously reinforce an ingroup identity while defining an outgroup. For instance, a campaign might target voters concerned about “law and order” by emphasizing their own strength (“Positive Us”) while portraying opponents as “soft on crime” (“Negative Them”) (Supadhiroke, 2015). This process of framing is a key discursive strategy identified by Van Dijk (1993) and is central to how political arguments are tailored for maximum impact on specific audiences (Finlayson, 2012).

2.3. Emotional Appeals and Identity in Political Persuasion

The construction of “Us vs. Them” narratives is frequently suffused with emotional appeals. Campaigns often leverage emotions like fear, anger, and hope to mobilize supporters and delegitimize opponents (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Caiani & Cocco, 2023). Appeals to anger, for instance, have been linked to populist support (Rico et al., 2017), while fear can be a powerful motivator in political messaging (Weeks, 2015). The evocation of these emotions is often tied to identity construction, where populist discourse uses memories and symbols to create narratives that reinforce a nativist or nationalist “Us” against a perceived “Them” (Kinnvall, 2019), demonstrating how negative outgroup portrayals can have profound political consequences (Bartels, 2020).

2.4. Empirical Studies

Several empirical works have explored campaign strategies and targeting. For example, Chen and Reeves (2011) observed distinct targeting strategies in the 2008 election, with one ticket pursuing a “base” strategy and the other a “peripheral” strategy. Rogers and Nickerson (2013) found that targeted information campaigns on a single issue could significantly shift vote share, underscoring the power of strategic communication. Adegoju and Oyebode (2015) demonstrated the utility of Van Dijk’s ideological square in revealing identity construction in Nigerian election discourse. These works note that systematic analysis can lend empirical evidence to the identification of trends in campaign rhetoric, especially in politically polarized environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Design of the Study

This research applied a qualitative research design, rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to examine the construction of ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’ narratives in the 2024 US presidential election. A qualitative approach was chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the nuanced linguistic and rhetorical strategies used by the campaigns, moving beyond simple quantification to uncover the meanings, ideologies, and power dynamics embedded within their discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2. Corpus of the Study

The corpus for this research includes a purposively chosen sample of ten significant discursive events: eight rally speeches (four from the Republican campaign, four from the Democratic) and two key presidential debate transcripts. The events were selected for their strategic importance and potential for showcasing targeted persuasive rhetoric, spanning from early 2023 to late October 2024. Rally locations included politically significant areas (e.g., Waco, TX; Butler, PA; Blue Bell, PA), and the debates were the nationally televised Trump vs. Biden (June 2024) and Harris vs. Trump (September 2024) encounters.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data collection was conducted by gathering verbatim transcripts of the selected speeches and debates from official campaign websites and reputable news organizations. The documents were arranged for comparative analysis. Data were qualitatively analyzed employing an integrated

framework combining Van Dijk's (1991, 2000) ideological square and Druckman's (2023) PPT model. All source texts were analyzed to identify instances where the four dimensions of the ideological square were enacted. Each instance was then coded for the type of persuasive targeting used (message, source, or setting matching) and the specific recipient characteristic being targeted (e.g., identity, values, issue priorities). The political implication of each strategy was interpreted based on CDA principles (Van Dijk, 2006). Thematic coding was employed to identify recurring patterns in the construction of 'Us' and 'Them' for each campaign. To ensure credibility, a subset of the data was independently coded by a second researcher to establish inter-coder reliability, and a reflexive journal was maintained.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Result of the First Research Question

The initial research question aimed to identify how both campaigns employed PPT strategies to enact Van Dijk's ideological square. The analysis found that both campaigns extensively used message, source, and setting matching to animate all four dimensions. The Republican campaign, via Trump, emphasized positive aspects of 'Us' by using message matching to a shared patriotic identity ("proud, hardworking American patriots") and values ("make America great again"). Negative aspects of 'Them' were emphasized by targeting audience fears and issue priorities, framing immigration as an "invasion" and political opponents as sources of "gross incompetence and failure." The Democratic campaign emphasized a positive 'Us' through message matching to inclusive, democratic values, framing their coalition as defenders of a "sacred cause." Negative aspects of 'Them' were constructed by targeting Donald Trump and "MAGA extremists" as a direct threat to democratic norms and freedoms, aligning with message matching to issue priorities like the preservation of democracy.

4.2. Result of the Second Research Question

The second question compared how the targeting of specific recipient characteristics and the nature of appeals differentiated the campaigns. The findings showed a clear distinction. The Republican campaign primarily targeted a core base, appealing to characteristics like a strong cultural conservative identity, a sense of grievance, and concerns about border security. The appeals were highly explicit, direct, and laden with emotionally charged language (e.g., "She is a very low-IQ individual"). The "Them" was broadly defined to include political opponents, the media, and immigrants. In contrast, the Democratic campaign targeted a broader coalition, including independents, suburban voters, and minority groups. They appealed to shared democratic values, social justice concerns, and economic fairness. The "Them" was more narrowly defined as Trump and his allies. The appeals were generally more policy-oriented and focused on perceived threats to institutions, often using more implicit or character-based critiques (e.g., "unstable, obsessed with revenge").

The patterns in high-stakes campaign discourse reflect both ideological positioning and strategic persuasive choices. The Republican campaign's heavy reliance on explicit, emotional appeals to a narrow base aligns with populist communication strategies that leverage fear and anger to energize core supporters (Caiani & Cocco, 2023; Rico et al., 2017). This intense application of the ideological square, amplified by targeted messaging, sought to create a stark Manichean worldview, reinforcing ingroup loyalty and outgroup hostility (Adegoju & Oyebode, 2015). The Democratic campaign's approach of using broader, value-based messaging reflects a strategy aimed at building a wider coalition (Druckman, 2023). Their operationalization of the ideological square, while still potent, often framed the conflict around principles (democracy vs. authoritarianism) rather than solely identity, a finding that resonates with research on "democratic persuasion" (Wuttke & Foos, 2025). The findings confirm that understanding modern political persuasion requires analyzing not only *what* ideological messages are conveyed but *how* they are strategically targeted for maximum effect.

5. CONCLUSION

This research analyzed the persuasive strategies used in the 2024 US presidential election, utilizing Van Dijk's ideological square and Druckman's PPT framework. The analysis of campaign rallies and debates revealed that both Republican and Democratic campaigns strategically constructed 'Us vs. Them' narratives, but with notable differences in targeting and tone. The Republican campaign employed explicit, emotionally charged appeals to mobilize a core base, defining 'Us' through a patriotic, anti-establishment identity and 'Them' through broad, demonized categories. The Democratic campaign sought to build a wider coalition by constructing an inclusive 'Us' based on shared democratic values, defining 'Them' more specifically as a threat to those principles. The study's conclusions have significant implications for understanding political communication. It demonstrates how sophisticated targeting techniques are now integral to the deployment of fundamental ideological strategies, highlighting the polarized and calculated nature of contemporary discourse. The findings contribute empirical evidence to the study of political rhetoric and underscore the importance of analyzing the intersection of ideology and persuasion. However, this study was limited to speeches and debates; future research could expand the corpus to include social media and advertising to provide a more holistic view of campaign messaging. Further comparative analyses and audience reception studies would also enrich our understanding of the effects of these persuasive strategies in a deeply divided electorate.

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