

Introduction: “Just Words”

In February of 2008, Barack Obama’s concession speech in the New Hampshire primary was set to music. A cast of celebrities recited it along with him (“It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can . . .”), shot in tasteful black-and-white, backed by acoustic guitar. I was a Democratic speechwriter on Capitol Hill in those days, and only a little bit envious. If a colleague happened to catch me watching that video on my work computer, I’m sure I could have passed it off as research. If that video enticed me to visit the candidate’s website from my work computer, I probably could have passed that off as research, too. And, for much of that election year, the image that met me or any other visitor to the site was itself the result of research – though of a considerably more sophisticated kind.

It was a black-and-white photo of Obama and his family, above a button labeled “LEARN MORE.” And it was, as it turned out, the outcome of an experiment conducted several months earlier.

The previous December, visitors to Obama’s campaign website were met by a “splash page” composed of two elements – the “media,” an image of the candidate, and a button that enabled a one-click subscription to the campaign’s email list – which were randomly assembled from a set of twenty-four permutations. Each page featured one of six media variations (three photos and three videos) and one of four buttons (“SIGN UP”, “SIGN UP NOW”, “LEARN MORE”, and “JOIN US NOW”). Over the course of the experiment, some 13,000 visitors were exposed to each combination. The winner was “Combination 11,” the family photo and the relatively noncommittal “LEARN MORE” which outperformed its competitors by generating a sign-up rate of 11.6 percent. By contrast, the campaign’s initial choice – a color image of Obama in a sea of signs, above the “SIGN UP” button – had generated a sign-up rate of 8.26 percent. In other words, the optimized splash page, which remained in place for the rest of the campaign, translated into a 40.6 percent

improvement in sign-ups. Extrapolating the difference over the course of the election, Dan Siroker, the campaign's Director of Analytics, claims that the experiment harvested an additional 2,880,000 email addresses. In turn, he writes, "each email address that was submitted through our splash page ended up donating an average of \$21 during the length of the campaign. The additional 2,880,000 email addresses on our email list translated into an additional \$60 million in donations."¹

When I mention that I'm writing on the topic of political eloquence, I'm often asked for my opinion on President Obama, just as I was in my days as a speechwriter. My opinion is the wholly conventional one that he is the best orator of his generation. But I am also convinced that his campaigns' advances in analytics, as exemplified by that splash page, are the far more pivotal contribution to the long story of political persuasion.

By 2012, those analytic techniques had purportedly grown even more sophisticated. By mining sources including public records, web browsing histories, social networks, and credit reports, both the Obama and Mitt Romney campaigns collected "thousands of data points" on individual voters.² Those data points were marshalled in an attempt to predict "which types of people would be persuaded by certain kinds of appeals" – with much of Obama's success ultimately attributed to his campaign's considerably higher investment in data analytics and microtargeting.³ Of course, there is no partisan monopoly on these tools of persuasion. In the 2016 Republican presidential primary, for instance, the Ted Cruz campaign used data mining to construct personality profiles of likely voters. The campaign's communications staff explained how those profiles would shape advertising directed at members of the National Rifle Association:

Personalities that have received high scores for "neuroticism" are believed to be generally fearful, so a pro-gun pitch to them would emphasize the use of firearms for personal safety and might include a picture of a burglar breaking in to a home.

¹ Dan Siroker, "How Obama Raised \$60 Million by Running a Simple Experiment," *Optimizely*, November 29, 2010, blog.optimizely.com/2010/11/29/how-obama-raised-60-million-by-running-a-simple-experiment. See Brian Christian, "The A/B Test: Inside the Technology That's Changing the Rules of Business," *Wired*, April 25, 2012, www.wired.com/2012/04/ff-abtesting.

² Ed Pilkington and Amanda Michel, "Mitt Romney's Campaign Closing Gap on Obama in Digital Election Race," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2012, www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/14/romney-campaign-digital-data-obama.

³ Michael Scherer, "Inside the Secret World of the Data Crunchers Who Helped Obama Win," *Time*, November 7, 2012, swampland.time.com/2012/11/07/inside-the-secret-world-of-quants-and-data-crunchers-who-helped-obama-win/. See also Sasha Issenberg, *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013); and John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney, *Dollarocracy* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

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But those who score high for “openness” or traditional values are more likely to receive a message that promotes hunting as a family activity, perhaps accompanied by an image of a father taking his son duck hunting.⁴

Two years later, it emerged that the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica had harvested personal information from more than eighty-seven million Facebook users in order to build “psychographic profiles” of voters for sale to candidates, including Donald Trump. By the 2020 presidential election, candidates’ campaign apps were firmly “part of a larger system of surveillance capitalism”: Joe Biden’s app cross-referenced users’ contact lists with party voter records, and Trump’s app, in addition to scraping contacts, collected targeting data by tracking users’ physical locations through GPS and Bluetooth.⁵

When Sheldon Wolin decried the “technologization of politics” in 2006, none of these developments were yet in evidence; over the subsequent decade and a half, that “technologization” accelerated by any measure.⁶ More recently, Mark Thompson, former director-general of the BBC and chief executive of the *New York Times*, observed that “the art of persuasion, once the grandest of the humanities and accessible at its highest level only to those of genius – a Demosthenes or a Cicero, a Lincoln or a Churchill – is acquiring many of the attributes of a computational science.” This is “rhetoric not as art but as algorithm.”⁷

But should the development of “algorithmic” rhetoric trouble us as democratic citizens? Many of the criticisms of data-driven rhetoric are familiar ones: it is founded on serial invasion of privacy; it seeks to bypass citizens’ considered judgment of policies and leaders; its narrowly tailored messages dismantle the shared public sphere and contribute to partisan polarization; it enables a form

⁴ Tom Hamburger, “Cruz Campaign Credits Psychological Data and Analytics for Its Rising Success,” *Washington Post*, December 13, 2015. www.washingtonpost.com/politics/cruz-campaign-credits-psychological-data-and-analytics-for-its-rising-success/2015/12/13/4cbobaf8-9dc5-11e5-bce4-708fe33e3288_story.html. In fact, the effectiveness of campaign analytics is highly disputed. But as I argue later, such tools’ effects on voters are not as troubling as the aspiration for a risk-free rhetoric that these tools’ widespread adoption suggests. See Felix Simon, “The Big Data Panic,” *Medium*, March 25, 2018, medium.com/viewpoints/cambridge-analytica-and-the-big-data-panic-5029f12e1bcb.10f/.

⁵ Jacob Gursky and Samuel Woolley, “The Trump 2020 App Is a Voter Surveillance Tool of Extraordinary Power,” *MIT Technology Review*, June 21, 2020, www.technologyreview.com/2020/06/21/1004228/trumps-data-hungry-invasive-app-is-a-voter-surveillance-tool-of-extraordinary-scope. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

⁶ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 565.

⁷ Mark Thompson, *Enough Said: What’s Gone Wrong with the Language of Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2016), 171.

of political “redlining,” in which the disengaged and disillusioned are simply not targeted for persuasion at all.⁸

On the other hand, these critiques might overstate the novelty of the tools of “quantified persuasion”: haven’t politicians always sought the best available means of knowing their audiences?⁹ It is certainly easy to exaggerate their reach, power, and dangers.¹⁰ Rather than staking a critique of these methods on an inflated idea of their efficacy, it would be more helpful to think of them in terms of their aspirations. What do they promise to the politicians who invest in them? What relationship between speaker and audience do they presume, and help to bring into being? Several generations of discomfort still cling to the notion that political speech and consumer marketing might be close neighbors, or might even be two names for the same activity – not because marketing is invariably effective or inherently manipulative, but because the relationship of product to consumer is a bad model for the relationship of speaker to audience. In the words of Adlai Stevenson, the patron saint of high-minded ineffectualness, “the idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal . . . is the ultimate indignity to the democratic process.”¹¹

If the techniques of marketing made political candidates into aspiring breakfast cereals, what are the techniques of algorithmic rhetoric making them? “Indignity to the democratic process” is a difficult concept to parse. I do want to suggest, though, that the routinization of rhetoric makes rhetoric itself increasingly difficult to justify in democratic terms.

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“Democratic rhetoric” is not an oxymoron, but it is a challenge. Rhetoric, construed broadly enough, might be any form of persuasive communication. But in practice, it is, among other things, persuasive communication marked by asymmetry. “From the structural point of view,” writes Simone Chambers, rhetoric “implies an asymmetrical relationship between speaker and hearer or

⁸ See, e.g., Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Philip N. Howard, *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 132; Daniel Kreiss, “Yes We Can (Profile You),” *Stanford Law Review* 64 (2012), www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/privacy-paradox-yes-we-can-profile-you; William A. Gorton, “Manipulating Citizens: How Political Campaigns’ Use of Behavioral Social Science Harms Democracy,” *New Political Science* 36(1) (2016): 61–80.

⁹ Daniel Kreiss, “Micro-Targeting, the Quantified Persuasion,” *Internet Policy Review* 6(4) (2017).

¹⁰ On the “information fallacy” of assuming that campaigns “have accurate, detailed information” about individual voters, see Eitan D. Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.

¹¹ Quoted in Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: Pocket Books, 1957), 172.

between the orator and her audience.”¹² In the rhetorical relationship, speakers and hearers perform different roles and, of course, hearers outnumber speakers – with all the troubling connotations about “the many” and “the few” that the fact implies. But to flatten out this distinction would mean negating rhetoric itself as a mode of communication. In Gary Remer’s words, “the distinction between speaker and audience cannot be made to vanish” – not, at least, without transforming rhetoric into the contrasting mode of conversation.¹³ A kind of inequality is built into the structure of rhetoric, and so to the extent that democracy is conceived as a regime of political equality, rhetoric will always come in for democratic suspicion.

Of course, such suspicion may or may not be justified. As Chambers points out, it is a mistake to assume that speech “is inherently undeliberative” simply because it is asymmetrical.¹⁴ Similarly, rhetorical relationships may be more or less equitable – and an important part of rhetorical theory consists in thinking about how to mitigate these asymmetries. In fact, the rhetorical tradition descending from the classical world developed a number of resources to render rhetorical relationships more equitable – resources that are not necessarily democratic in their origins, but which may prove valuable to democratic theory in the present.

For instance, Bernard Yack discusses the Aristotelian view of the rhetorical situation as a kind of mutual vulnerability of speaker and audience. For the audience’s part, “if public reasoning requires that we open ourselves to being persuaded by something that we hear, then it requires that even the most public-spirited among us make ourselves vulnerable to the possibility of being carried away against our interests and better judgment by the eloquence of public speakers.” On the other hand, public reasoning requires “a group of public speakers who are willing to take no for an answer to their efforts.”¹⁵ In this rhetorical bargain, the audience assumes the risk of having its convictions called into question or transformed, and even of being moved to act against what it had once considered its better judgment; the speaker assumes the risk of public rejection or even, in the extreme case, of humiliation. In this way, we could conceive of rhetoric as a mutual exposure to risk – one in which the preeminence of elite speakers is balanced by a comparatively higher risk exposure. The view described by Yack and others sees rhetoric not only as a form of public reasoning but as a negotiation of tensions between mass and elite.¹⁶

¹² Simone Chambers, “Rhetoric and the Public Sphere: Has Deliberative Democracy Abandoned Mass Democracy?” *Political Theory* 37(3) (2009): 326.

¹³ Gary Remer, “Political Oratory and Conversation: Cicero versus Deliberative Democracy,” *Political Theory* 27(1) (1999): 57.

¹⁴ Chambers, “Rhetoric and the Public Sphere,” 334.

¹⁵ Bernard Yack, “Rhetoric and Public Reasoning: An Aristotelian Understanding of Political Deliberation,” *Political Theory* 34(4) (2006): 427–8.

¹⁶ For another source of “vulnerability” – in this case, a speaker’s willingness to use generalizable principles that might be held against her in the future – see Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to*

The rhetorical bargain takes as its starting point the asymmetry of rhetoric. Nevertheless, it insists that some asymmetries are worse than others: rhetoric that is done *to* an audience is less desirable than rhetoric that is done *with* it or even, as in Cicero's agonistic vision, *against* it. And the notion of a rhetorical bargain provides a distinctive way to identify harmful rhetoric. Most existing models attempt to set the boundaries of harmful rhetoric in terms of its *content*, whether such content is described as manipulative, pandering, plebiscitary, "bonding,"¹⁷ or serving to elevate passion over reason. But such models run into a number of difficulties. For one, they tend to undemocratically hamper deliberation by ruling certain arguments invalid *a priori*. Conceptually speaking, manipulative, pandering, and other undesirable arguments certainly exist. But because these categories are always contested, it is difficult or impossible to describe them on a general level in a way that both reliably identifies instances of harmful rhetoric and respects deliberators' autonomy. As Steven Gormley puts it, "empirically distinguishing a rhetorician from a sophist will be a matter of judgement. While there will be paradigm cases of manipulation, we will mostly face difficult cases. Such cases will not be decided by the disengaged theorising of the deliberative theorist; they will be first-order questions for deliberators."¹⁸ Invoking bright but difficult-to-maintain lines between reason and passion is equally fraught.¹⁹ By contrast, the model that I propose here for evaluating rhetoric does not inquire into the content of rhetorical arguments, but into the structure of rhetorical relationships – specifically, into the presence of shared burdens. Rhetoric is done *to* an audience when it combines public vulnerability to persuasion with elite safety from risk. By contrast, rhetoric becomes a shared activity when both speaker and audience put something important at stake in the encounter. It is this burden-sharing that turns speech

Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 147.

¹⁷ See, respectively, Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Chambers, "Rhetoric and the Public Sphere"; John S. Dryzek, "Rhetoric in Democracy: A Systemic Appreciation," *Political Theory* 38(3) (2010): 319–39.

¹⁸ Steven Gormley, "Deliberation, Unjust Exclusion, and the Rhetorical Turn," *Contemporary Political Theory* 18(2) (2019): 216.

¹⁹ On the difficulty of maintaining this distinction, see Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994); Barbara Koziak, *Retrieving Political Emotion: Thumos, Aristotle and Gender* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael Mackuen, eds., *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Cheryl Hall, "'Passions and Constraint': The Marginalization of Passion in Liberal Political Theory," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28(6) (2002): 727–48; Sharon Krause, *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Gary Remer, *Ethics and the Orator: The Ciceronian Tradition of Political Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 39.

from a potential activity of domination into action in a common civic space. Before such an action aims to persuade listeners of anything in particular, it must demonstrate regard for them as co-citizens.

The rhetorical bargain is a *modus vivendi* for unequal societies, a rough and ready way of living and speaking together in a world in which the means of persuasion are distributed unevenly. It calls to mind what Pierre Bourdieu has described as “the special lucidity of the dominated . . . the attentiveness and vigilance needed to anticipate desires or avoid unpleasantness.”²⁰ The rhetorical bargain – insufficiently and incompletely, to be sure – tends to lay some of the burden of this vigilance on those who are otherwise least likely to bear it. When Cicero portrays a republican orator “who with keen scent can track down the thoughts, the feelings, the opinions, and the hopes of his fellow citizens,” he is describing the tense lucidity that rhetoric can impose on the dominant – a tax on, and a mitigation of, their dominance, and a state of mind that is qualitatively different from the lucidity offered by contemporary forms of political knowing.²¹ Like surveillance, these more recent forms enable one to learn “the thoughts, the feelings, the opinions” of the public from a position of concealment and safety, separating knowing from speaking. Cicero, by contrast, describes a relationship that is far more reciprocal: the orator’s most reliable way of learning the public *is* speaking – watching the effects of his own words and bearing the consequences of getting the public wrong.

With this in mind, we are in a better position to understand why the modern routinization of rhetoric is normatively troubling. It breaks the rhetorical bargain. It amounts to a sort of “risk shift,” in which elite speakers and their organizations take self-protective steps to minimize their own exposure to rejection or contradiction.²² From the perspective of privacy, the Obama campaign’s experimental optimization of its website was less troubling than its data-mining practices. But from the perspective of the rhetorical bargain, both practices – along with the focus-grouping and poll-testing of political language – are problematic in the same way: they embody the aspiration of “the few” to communicate with “the many” with a high degree of pre-assurance that their message will be received favorably. Such practices are troubling even if, in point of fact, their effects on voters are far less robust than advertised. The trouble is not that such tools invariably work; the trouble is that politicians across the breadth of the ideological spectrum want them to work and believe sincerely enough in their promise to pay handsomely for

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 31.

²¹ Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator [De oratore]*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.223.

²² I borrow this term – with a hope of capturing some of its ominously inegalitarian flavor – from Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

them. They represent a dispiriting desire for rhetorical relationships in which all of the vulnerability is on one side – vulnerability to persuasion, without vulnerability to rejection.

One common critique of algorithmic rhetoric sees it as tending toward a state of affairs in which “a politician could secretly whisper a personalized message to every voter”;²³ but we could also see it as aspiring toward a state of affairs in which each message is certain to be approved before it is uttered. If the classical notion of a rhetorical bargain could be described with metaphors of vulnerability and exposure, we could see algorithmic rhetoric as embodying a relationship in which audiences are as exposed as ever, while the few speak in armor or from behind a wall. He “never exposed his reputation or his person to any unnecessary danger,” wrote Edward Gibbon of the emperor Diocletian.²⁴ For an emperor, practicing that aversion to reputational danger, just like employing a strong bodyguard, is no more than prudence. But democratic speech ought to invite danger in. Exposing one’s reputation ought to be the price of our attention.

I propose that we cannot fully understand the pervasive suspicion of “elites” that is such a marked feature of Western democracies’ current politics without understanding the rhetorical risk shift and its consequences. In fact, I would argue that one of the most dangerous of those consequences is its tendency to provoke a sort of overcorrection into the demagogic rhetoric of “unfiltered” spontaneity – the kind that paints any political language other than seemingly unaffected and uncalculated speech as “just words.”

As a way of understanding the force of this demagogic claim, it’s worth quoting the exchange – from the second 2016 presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump – which most recently reintroduced the phrase “just words” into the American political lexicon:

CLINTON: I want to send a message – we all should – to every boy and girl and, indeed, to the entire world that America already is great, but we are great because we are good, and we will respect one another, and we will work with one another, and we will celebrate our diversity. These are very important values to me, because this is the America that I know and love. And I can pledge to you tonight that this is the America that I will serve if I’m so fortunate enough to become your president.

TRUMP: Am I allowed to respond to that? I assume I am.

MODERATOR: Yes, you can respond to that.

TRUMP: It’s just words, folks. It’s just words.²⁵

²³ Jon Peha, “Making Political Ads Personal,” *Politico*, September 11, 2012.

²⁴ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1 (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776), 367.

²⁵ Aaron Blake, “Everything That Was Said at the Second Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Debate, Highlighted,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/09/everything-that-was-said-at-the-second-donald-trump-vs-hillary-clinton-debate-highlighted.

News coverage suggested that Trump used the phrase “just words” to dismiss his own egregious comments in the “Access Hollywood” tape, which was the immediate context of the exchange. But the transcript makes clear that he was dismissing Clinton’s words, rather than his own. Everything that she says is “just words,” or an empty artifice; but his own words, by implication, are something else.

How could some words – but only some – be something other than words? Perhaps because they appear to be so uncalculated that they leave the realm of appearances altogether – because, unlike the artifice with which they are contrasted, they seem to reveal the speaker for who he really is, even (and especially) when what is revealed is ugly. Consider this typical Trumpian statement:

Look, having nuclear – my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, OK, very smart, the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart. You know, if you’re a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, OK, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I’m one of the smartest people anywhere in the world. It’s true! But when you’re a conservative Republican they try – oh, do they do a number – that’s why I always start off: Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune . . .

As Lane Greene observes, “the unscripted and personal way he said nearly everything he said was mesmerizing to many voters who had never heard a politician talk like this.”²⁶ Yet Greene’s choice of passage was a fairly innocuous one. At a time when a great deal of political speech is characterized by risk aversion, Trump’s persona is not just “unscripted,” but fantastically spontaneous to the point of recklessness – an impression to which every gaffe, every demonstrable lie, and every misspelled tweet contributes. Even Trump’s more traditionally “presidential” utterances added to that impression, given how ostentatiously Trump denied ownership of them. Trump tweets a photo of himself “writing” his inaugural address; he is posed in a hallway at a receptionist’s desk, holding a Sharpie over what appears to be a blank legal pad.²⁷ “On record,” his deputy press secretary tells a reporter, “when President Trump communicates with the American people, his words are his own and come directly from his heart”; that evening, he reads a State of the Union speech transparently written for him by others.²⁸

²⁶ Lane Greene, *Talk on the Wild Side: The Untameable Nature of Language* (London: Economist Books, 2018), 203.

²⁷ Ryan Bort, “Decoding Trump’s Staged Inaugural Speechwriting Photo,” *Newsweek*, January 18, 2017, www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-inaugural-speech-tweet-544314.

²⁸ Olivia Nuzzi, “Who Really Writes Trump’s Speeches? The White House Won’t Say,” *New York*, January 30, 2018, nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/01/who-really-writes-trumps-speeches-white-house-wont-say.html.

Of course, spontaneity and the disavowal of artifice can be as calculated as any performance. And, in fact, much of the riskiness of Trump's speech evaporates on closer inspection. His rally monologues were not so different from microtargeted ads: they addressed an audience specifically selected for the purpose of agreeing with him. In this context, his shamelessness registers not so much as a moral failing as a structural feature of his rhetoric, a way of excluding from the relevant audience those who are inclined to shame him. One way of avoiding rhetorical risk is to pursue cautious speech; another way is to refuse to be bound by the consequences of incautious speech. Trump's serial retreats into a posture of irony, joking, or just-asking-questions conspiracy talk serve the same purpose. Of course, he also operates in a rhetorical culture in which the risks of immoderate rhetoric, from anger to tears – and therefore, the pressure to present in ways that read as “scripted” and “inauthentic” – already fall with disproportionate weight on women and people of color. In this context, the excesses that appeared spectacularly risky to Trump's standing were, in reality, only minimally so: a rollercoaster with the safety bar locked firmly in place.

So President Trump's displays of relatively cost-free recklessness relied for their impact on, were parasitic on, the “just words” of his opponents. Like technocracy and populism, algorithmic and demagogic rhetoric are interdependent.²⁹ The difficulty lies in finding a way to criticize each tendency without falling into the other. Can we object to the self-protective qualities of “establishment” speech without endorsing the demagogic premise of a leader unafraid to “tell it like it is”? Can we object to the speech of such a leader without endorsing the claim that public deliberation ought to be safer, more sedate, and more predictable? Or are we bound for the foreseeable future to variations on that Clinton–Trump exchange – bromides like “we are great because we are good” alternating with the angry assurance that words we object to are unreal?

That dilemma motivates my turn to the long history of rhetoric – in particular, to the conceptions of eloquence (or “skilled speech”)³⁰ developed by the classical orators and rhetoricians, and to their modern resilience. Studying the classical tradition can help us recover an older notion of eloquence, an alternative to both of the dispiriting tendencies in recent political rhetoric, which we might call “spontaneous *decorum*.” We could consider it to be an emergent property, or the aesthetic counterpart, of the healthy rhetorical relationships I described earlier: the audible sign, as it were, of a relationship's underlying soundness. It reorients us from the question “Is this or that an instance of eloquent speech?” to the question “Is this the kind of speaker–audience

²⁹ See Sheri Berman, “Against the Technocrats,” *Dissent* 65(1) (Winter 2018): 32–41.

³⁰ Christopher S. van den Berg, *The World of Tacitus' Dialogus de Oratoribus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), ix.