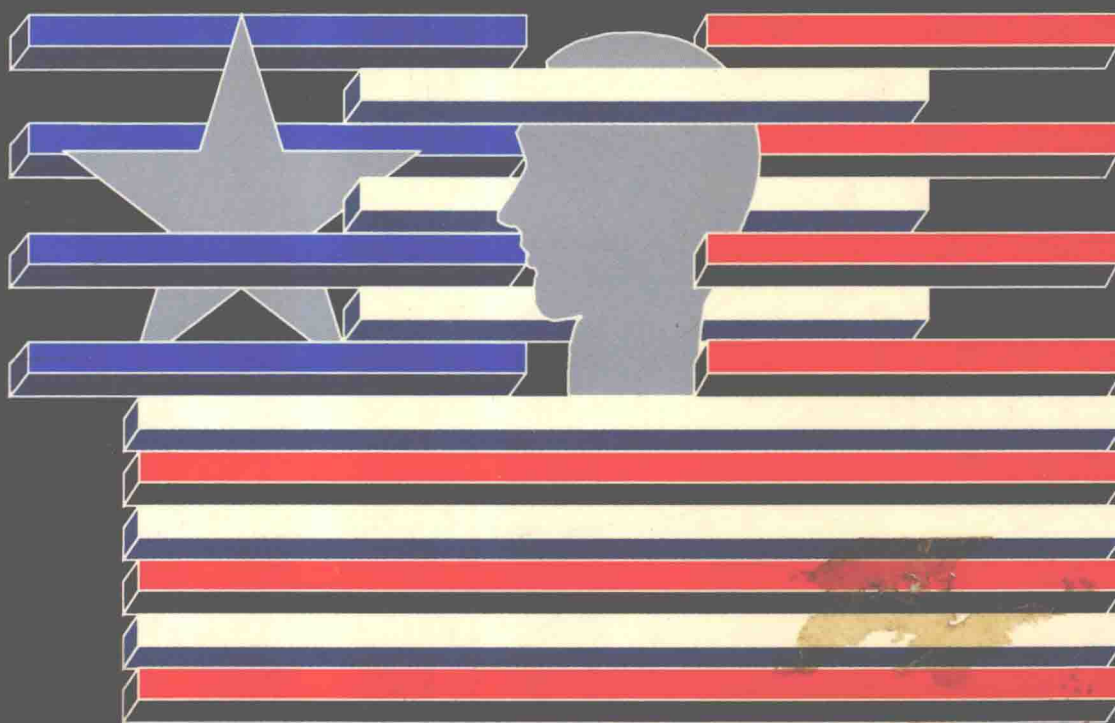


Craig Allen Smith

Political Communication



POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Craig Allen Smith

*The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill*



Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

San Diego New York Chicago Austin Washington, D.C.
London Sydney Tokyo Toronto

Copyright © 1990 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Requests for permission to make copies of any part of the work should be mailed to: Copyrights and Permissions Department, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, Orlando, Florida 32887.

ISBN: 0-15-570709-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 89-84242

Printed in the United States of America

*To Stephie,
my most vocal constituent,
as she heads
for kindergarten.*

PREFACE

“Politics is talk,” they say, and “they” are largely correct. Somewhere along the way our ancestors discovered how to resolve their disagreements through the use of words rather than with clubs. Gradually these ancestors moved from head-bashing to club-waving, then to verbal threats that evoked memories of the club, and, in just the last few centuries, to verbal agreements.

Without communication, politics would have no legitimate authorities, no laws, no collective identities, no legislative deliberations, no judicial interpretations, no sense of historic precedent, no diplomacy, no projected budgets, no bureaucracies, no political advertising, no speeches, no nominating conventions, no news, no public affairs programs, no press conferences, no promises, and no deceptions. Otherwise, politics would be largely the same.

How then shall we define politics, communication, and political communication? *Politics* is the process of orienting a community by reconciling diverse interests and power relationships. *Communication* is the process of negotiating understanding through interpretation and characterization of the symbolic world. *Political communication* is the process of negotiating a community orientation through the interpretation and characterization of interests, of power relationships, and of the community's role in the world. *Things get done through politics, and politics gets done through communication.*

As a field of study, political communication is a sapling; but the sapling has deep roots. Aristotle thought it necessary to write both the *Politics* and the *Rhetoric* to explain the nature of community. Centuries later, Machiavelli advised *The Prince* about power and communication. In this century, political scientist Harold Lasswell defined the study of “politics” and “communication” as necessarily interdependent: the political question “Who gets what, when, and

how" implicitly demands consideration of "Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?" (Lasswell 1948, 1958)

This book offers a framework for understanding political communication. The framework is illustrated with historical examples; but, it is not a survey of "Great Moments in Political Talk" for reasons that will become clear. A theory of political communication is advanced in Part One and subsequently employed in Part Two to explain such political phenomena as political journalism, social movements, election campaigns, congressional deliberation, the presidency, the judiciary, and foreign policy rhetoric. An Appendix covers quantitative and qualitative research methods appropriate for studying political communication so that serious students can undertake term projects that go beyond the usual library searches.

The theoretical framework advanced here emphasizes the interpretive processes through which each of us makes sense of the political world and the political communities we create to help enlighten ourselves and everyone else. It is not a book about political oratory, commercials, or debates, or about elites manipulating the minds of the helpless masses. Rather, it is a book about people who, in the course of their otherwise busy lives try to govern one of the most powerful and influential nations the world has ever seen.

Our political leaders are chosen by us and their records reflect our priorities. They try to deliver what we say we want, even if we do not really like it when we get it; and they justify what they do in terms of our requests. Only when political officials believe that their constituents can both judge complex policy questions and see through smokescreens will the quality of political communication improve. The framers of the Constitution created a system of separate national institutions with shared powers. This system is balanced against an assortment of state governments whose powers are similarly shared. And, all of this is bound together with the notion of popular sovereignty. This book was written to improve the nature of political communication in America by sharpening our faculties for understanding it.

There are four underlying theoretical propositions to this book:

1. Each of us understands the world through our *personal interpretive processes*, which include motivating, symbolizing, preferencing, and reasoning.
2. Our appraisals of the world lead us toward relationships with others. Among these relationships are political communities built on *social interpretive structures*. These social structures evolve as a result of the following: shared motivating processes

produce power, shared symbolizing produces language, shared preferencing produces ideology, and shared reasoning produces logic.

3. Each political community struggles for the right to define the world for others, and that temporarily dominant groups define and distribute resources and sanctions.
4. Clues to the evolutionary political processes, their communities, and their progress can be found in political messages and in the differential reactions of audiences.

These theoretical propositions are grounded in twentieth-century American social science literature. There will be time to synthesize individual research reports later. The pressing need right now, I believe, is for a theoretical framework that synthesizes the ideas of pioneers like Abraham Maslow, Milton Rokeach, Kenneth Burke, Paul Lazarsfeld, William Schutz, James MacGregor Burns, Victor Turner, Marshall McLuhan, and Richard Neustadt with those of people like Ernest Bormann, Charles Stewart, Dan Nimmo, David Zarefsky, Roderick Hart, Theodore Windt, Jeffrey Tulis, Kathleen Jamieson, and many others.

The book's orientation toward interpreted reality means that it will draw upon the political lessons of our culture. This includes, of course, both purposefully political acts like the Civil War, the Nixon-Kennedy Debates, and the 1988 presidential campaign, as well as unintentionally political acts like the Three Mile Island nuclear accident. But it also includes political lessons from the popular culture at large, including fictional depictions of history, heroes, values, political processes, and our adversaries. This is critically important in contemporary America when our accepted realities are a composite of real and fictional depictions, as when viewers watched "real" Democratic presidential candidate Bruce Babbitt and a "fictional" HBO candidate called Tanner stroll through a Washington park comparing their 1988 presidential campaigns. Politics is talk, but is talk communication? That will be the subject of Part One.

References

- Lasswell, Harold Dwight. 1948. The act of communication. In *The communication of ideas*, ed. by Lyman Bryson. New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, pp. 37-51.
- . 1958. *Politics: Who gets what, when, how*. New York: Meridian Books.

Machiavelli, Niccolo. 1935. *The Prince*, trans. by Luigi Ricci. New York: World Literature, New American Library.

Acknowledgments

Someone once said that many of Jimmy Carter's troubles as president stemmed from his tendency to thank the people whose advice he actually took. Undaunted by his example, I will do the same.

First, there were the professors whose thinking and teaching influenced the mind behind this book: Roderick Hart, Charles Redding, Hank Ewbank and, most particularly, Charles J. Stewart. The positions developed in this book could not have been developed without the influence of these people.

Second, there were the students and faculty who comprised the Department of Speech-Communication at the University of North Carolina during the 1980s. It has been an honor and a privilege to work side by side with the likes of Lawrence Rosenfeld, Beverly Whitaker Long and all the rest. Students like Amy Kittner, JoLee Credle, Angela Watkins, Darren Carrino, Wayne Goodwin, and Stephanie Sedberry have made teaching fun and exciting on the good days and better than it might have been on the others.

Third, there were the people who worked to bring this particular project to fruition. Ted Windt of the University of Pittsburgh, and Kathie Turner of Tulane University provided the kind of helpful criticism that requires and enhances enduring friendships and mutual respect. Robert Ivie of Texas A&M University and Cathy Hennen of Auburn University contributed important suggestions. Ron Grant compiled the index quickly and thoroughly. Most important, though, is Marlane Agriesti Miriello who materialized on my office doorstep one morning, ready to talk about this project. Without her interest and professionalism, this book would not have been written.

Finally, I would like to thank my patient family. Stephie and Debbie put up with postponed activities, some abridged book readings, and an unnecessarily terse rebuke or two. And Kathy, though she need not have done so, curtailed her other activities to provide me with writing time. She also pretended that my daily assurance that "the next chapter will be quicker" was a reasonable fantasy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
References	ix
Part One	
A THEORY OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION	1
Paradigms in Communication	1
References	5
Chapter 1	
PERSONAL INTERPRETIVE PROCESSES	6
The Motivating Process	6
Basic Needs	6
The Functions of Political Views	7
Social Judgment and Ego Involvement	8
The Symbolizing Process	9
Using Symbols	9
Constructivism	10
Beliefs and Perceptions	12
The Preferencing Process	12
Values	12
Authorities	13
Derivations	15
The Reasoning Process	15
Making Sense	16
Narrative Rationality	17
Summary	20
References	20
Chapter 2	
POLITICAL COMMUNITY AND SHARED INTERPRETIVE STRUCTURES	22
Power	23
Relationships: Needs versus Risks	24
From Individual Needs to Group Membership	25

Language	26
Ideology	29
Ideological Conviction	29
Components of Ideology	30
Types of Ideologies	32
Logic	34
Rhetorical Visions	34
Conclusions	38
References	38
Chapter 3	
INCONGRUENT COMMUNITIES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LEADERSHIP	40
The Sources of Dominance	40
Power	40
Legitimacy	44
Procedures	46
Competing Groups and the "Wishbone Model"	49
Leadership as Relational Orientation	51
Styles of Leadership	51
Conclusions	58
References	59
Chapter 4	
RHETORIC IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION	
What is "Rhetoric"?	60
The Governmental Functions of Rhetoric	61
Functional Rhetoric as Situational	62
Political Relationships and Rhetorical Situations	65
Adherence	65
Identification and Polarization	68
Conclusions	75
References	76
Part 2	
ARENAS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION	79
Chapter 5	
MASS COMMUNICATION AND INTERPRETIVE POLITICS	80
Mass Communication as a Social System	80
Technological Influences on Mass Communication	83
Cultural Influences on Mass Communication	84
Cultural Approaches to Mass Communication	85
Cultural Preferences in News	86
Organizational Influences on Mass Communication	89
Interpretive Influences on Mass Communication	91
Graber's Interpretive Schema	91
Fungible Narratives and the News	94
The Nature of News	97

The Question of Bias	100
The Political Effects of Mass Communication	102
The Political Functions of Mass Communication	104
Conclusions	104
References	105
Chapter 6	
ELECTION CAMPAIGNS	107
Understanding Election Campaigns	108
Rules	108
Candidates	109
The Electorate	111
Issues	112
Resources	113
Campaign Strategies	114
Media for Campaign Persuasion	119
Mingling	119
Printed Matter	120
Rallies	121
Speeches	122
Radio and Television Spots	123
Joint Forums or Debates	124
Conclusions	128
References	129
Chapter 7	
CONGRESSIONAL DELIBERATION	130
The Founders and Planned Inefficiency	130
The House and Senate Compared	136
Deliberation	139
Interpersonal Conversation	139
Committees	141
Floor Debate	145
Legislative-Executive Relations	147
Conclusions	150
References	151
Chapter 8	
PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP	152
Presidential Character versus Presidential Role	152
Presidential Character	153
The Presidential Experience	154
The Evolution of the Rhetorical Presidency	156
The Constitutional Presidency	156
The Rhetorical Presidency: Initial Phase	156
The Rhetorical Presidency: Modern Phase	157
The Rhetorical Presidency: Contemporary Phase	158
Characteristics of Presidential Rhetoric	159
Genres of Presidential Rhetoric	161

Inaugural Addresses	162
Crisis Addresses	163
Presidential Defenses	164
The Rhetorical Legacy of the Reagan Presidency	166
Conclusions	169
References	169
Chapter 9	
COMMUNICATION AND THE COURTS	171
Political Communication and the Courts	171
Communicative Functions of the Courts	171
Written Opinions and Legal Language	173
Adjudicative Judgments	174
Trials and Narratives	176
The U.S. Supreme Court's Communication Process	178
Stages of the Court's Communication Process	179
The Oral Argument Stage	179
The Deliberation Stage	181
Opinion Stage	182
Politics and the Courts	183
Roosevelt's Court-Packing Scheme	183
Nominees and Presidential Prerogative	184
Conclusions	188
References	188
Chapter 10	
FOREIGN POLICY RHETORIC AND NATIONAL ORIENTATION	190
Major Themes	190
Phase I: Isolation and Moralism, 1787–1918	192
President Washington's Farewell Advice	192
Monroe's Doctrine of Hemispheric Neighborhood	193
Imperialism and Manifest Destiny	193
Phase II: Making the World Safe for Isolation, 1918–1947	196
Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations	197
The Good Neighbor Gets Involved	197
World War II as Rhetoric	198
Phase III: Cold War Rhetoric, 1947–1989	200
Three Foreign Policy Rhetorics	200
The Truman Doctrine: Containment	202
Superpower Confrontation, 1953–1962	204
Third World Brushfires, 1962–1972	205
Détente, 1972–1980	209
Standing Tall and Sitting Down, 1981–1989	211
Conclusions	214
References	214

Chapter 11**POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE 218**

Movements Defined	218
Causes of Movements	221
Relative Deprivation	221
Low Institutional Credibility	222
Disaffection	223
Studying Movement Communication Systemically	224
Which Individuals?	225
What "People"?	225
What Environment?	227
What Relational Patterns?	229
What Adaptive Strategies?	231
What Evolutionary Results?	237
Conclusions	239
References	239

CONCLUSIONS 241

Reference	242
-----------	-----

Appendix**METHODS FOR STUDYING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION 243**

Characteristics of Good Research	244
The Research Process	244
Qualitative Research Methods	245
Historical Research	246
Rhetorical Criticism	248
Quantitative Research Methods	250
Experimentation	251
Survey Research	254
Content Analysis	256
Conclusions	257
References	258

INDEX 259

Part 1

A THEORY OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

You communicate to cope with the world. Through communication you establish your personal identity, establish relationships, influence behavior, and interpret things and actions. In a world of people, you could neither manage nor monitor influence in your social relationships without communication.

Politicians spend so much time “talking” rather than “acting,” precisely because *talk is action*. Especially in the political realm, we communicate with others to cope better with them, with our differences, and with the world around us. Murray Edelman suggested that politics is essentially a spectator sport in which you root for “your side” even if you lack a direct interest in the contest or a clear grasp of the teams (1964). In a similar vein, Dan Nimmo and James Combs noted the melodramatic quality of political news as continuing episodes of moral conflict (1983).

Political communication is not only government communication. When you watch the news, read a political bumper sticker, laugh at a political wisecrack, reflect on conflicting political arguments, or denounce something as unfair, you engage in political communication. To understand why this is so, you first need to understand the nature of human communication. Only then can you knowledgeably turn to the uses of communication in political activity.

Paradigms in Communication

People have been trying to understand human communication for centuries, with varying results. We have used, and largely discarded,

three views of communication. Each view, or paradigm, framed theorizing and research for many years and, therefore, influenced conceptions of political communication (Kuhn 1970).

Many people assumed that human communication worked like a machine. This mechanistic paradigm relied on a simple stimulus-response notion of cause. It assumed that when A spoke, B understood and agreed (Fisher 1978). This paradigm was sometimes called the "bullet model" (or "hypodermic model") because it assumed that speakers shot messages at targets or injected information into their listeners' minds. This paradigm provided a warehouse of misleading metaphors: sender, receiver, encoding and decoding, channel, communication breakdowns, the "same wavelength," feedback, target audience, and message. Although this paradigm works intuitively, it could never adequately explain why different individuals respond differently to the same message. *Change/condition to respond*

Theorists first modified the mechanistic paradigm to account for *individual differences*, such as personality, beliefs, values, and attitudes. If we could psychoanalyze an audience, they theorized, communication could still be studied mechanistically. This revision produced both an escape clause for mechanistic theory (experiments failed because of undiscovered differences among listeners) and an avalanche of psychological attitude-change studies.

Indeed, the psychological research led some theorists to conclude that the mechanistic assumptions were unnecessary. If mechanistic theory required knowledge of countless psychological variables, they reasoned, it would be better to conceive of communication as individuals creating meaning from the available stimuli. The intrapersonal paradigm held that communication was an intrapersonal process; whether people heard news from source A, B, or C, or experienced it firsthand, they would filter it through their personality type, values, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes to render it meaningful (Fisher 1978). *Sign ↔ internal interpretation*

The intrapersonal paradigm required the development of attitude surveys and statistical techniques to measure people's thoughts. But it assumed that (1) questionnaire responses accurately reflect thoughts and feelings and that (2) thoughts and feelings are consistent across time, situations, and relationships. Communication studies employing these techniques therefore proved problematic.

One problem with both the mechanistic and intrapersonal paradigms surfaced in a 1940 election survey in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Columbia University researchers found midway through the campaign that people conversed with their neighbors and coworkers. *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948) sug-

gested that information might pass from the mass media to opinion leaders and from them to other citizens. This two-step flow of communication undercut the mechanistic sender/receiver paradigm apart from intrapersonal factors. The mechanistic and intrapersonal paradigms were challenged by a ³social paradigm, in which group affiliation and patterns of association seemed to affect communication. Unfortunately, research testing the two-step flow proved inconclusive, and researchers were compelled to suggest a four-step flow and later an “n-step flow” (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). They had discovered that group affiliation is related to communication, but they were able neither to predict nor to control those influences.

In short, these three paradigms contributed significantly but imperfectly to our understanding of communication. The mechanistic paradigm saw interdependent humans, but it underestimated individual differences and reference groups. The intrapersonal paradigm highlighted the role of individuality, but it underestimated both group affiliation and the interdependence of communicators. Finally, the social paradigm emphasized the role of group norms and aspirations, but it undervalued the factors leading individuals to create and sustain those groups in the first place.

Note that each paradigm reflected the state of available knowledge and research tools and stimulated the very research that eventually undermined its own assumptions. That is the nature of scientific inquiry (Kuhn 1970). Without these early studies, communication theory and research could not have advanced. The need to test our ideas should highlight the importance of conducting theoretically based research. Two related paradigms currently in vogue enable us to pull together the more useful elements of the three early paradigms.

The Symbolic interactionist paradigm—traced to George Herbert Mead’s lectures at the University of Chicago (1934)—assumes that your behavior depends on your interpretation of your environment. That interpretation need not be “correct,” it need only seem reasonable to you at the moment of action. Your interpretation of the environment evolves through communication in accordance with your access to depictions of the environment and your perception of related experiences. Throughout this process, *communication simultaneously guides, and is guided by, your interpretations of self, role, situation, other, and culture* (Wood 1984).

Because interdependent individuals anticipate and influence one another, messages are merely tokens in the negotiation of understanding. Indeed, communication simultaneously conveys relational information along with substance. Their interactions lead people to

behave differently in different situations and relationships. In short, symbolic interaction holds that you use symbols and relationships to comprehend the world and your roles in it.

Systems theory is more than most people infer from the everyday use of the word "system." *Systems* are goal-seeking entities comprised of interdependent components engaging in *processes* that transform inputs into outputs. The existence and behavior of any system is profoundly influenced by its *subsystems'* performance of assigned *functions* and by its own functional role in the *suprasystem* of which it is a part. But input does not equal output because the processes actively transform their inputs. Systems are governed by the natural tendency toward disorder, known as *entropy*, and they require maintenance. As the system fights entropy and pursues its goals, it evolves into new phases; but it can evolve in any direction at any pace (a principle called *equifinality*).

Relationships are the systemic structures that shape, and are shaped by, communication processes. Unlike machines, persons are ever-changing. You establish relationships to meet your needs and, when the resulting process changes your needs, you adapt your processes and relationships. Buckminster Fuller spoke for each of us when he said, "I seem to be a verb."

Symbolic interaction and systems theory mesh rather nicely. Taken together, they suggest that goal-seeking individuals use cognitive and relational processes to interpret the world and to cope with it. Symbols, relationships, culture, role, and communication are functional necessities if the individual is to transform environmental stimuli into behavioral responses, and groups of people develop shared symbolic patterns even as shared symbolic patterns define social groups. It is only through the process of human interaction that we can form the relationships and associations that create systems. And it is in relational contexts that we engage in the process of communication to fulfill our personal and social needs. Let us now try to synthesize what we know of human communication into a theoretical framework.

Chapter 1 will explain the personal interpretive processes of motivating, symbolizing, preferencing, and reasoning. Chapter 2 will examine the process by which diverse interpreting persons create political communities and shared interpretive structures, while Chapter 3 will describe the process by which these communities compete for the right to interpret life for the others. Chapter 4 will elaborate the important adaptive function performed by rhetoric.