

Research Synopsis
**Rhetorical Traditions, Emotion
and Modern Discourse**¹



An examination of classical scholarship on the use of rhetoric makes clear that there is today a **common misconception that the art of rhetoric condones and encourages persuasion by any means necessary**. Politics involves passionate commitments and arguments, as well as fundamental disagreements. Rhetoric – persuasive communication – can be employed in ethical or unethical ways, and classical theoreticians reveal an imperative to promote ethical solutions to public discourse. Of most concern to them were audience manipulation and exploitation, especially through appeals to emotions such as anger and fear. These concerns will resonate with observers of modern political discourse.

QUESTIONS Must ethical civil discourse rely on rhetoric that limits appeals to the emotions? What are feasible and desirable ways to limit *and* at times invoke emotions in service to reasoned debate about political issues and policies?

SEEKING ANSWERS From classical thought, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian all suggested that **appeals to the emotions inevitably are part of persuasion**. Nonetheless, all were apprehensive about possible systematic exploitation of audience emotions by opportunistic or self-serving speakers. Quintilian’s arguments suggest that a well-educated and well-informed speaker could persuade an audience without resorting to deceit or other unscrupulous methods.

Emotions – negative and positive As Aristotle recognized, political appeals can evoke a wide variety of both negative and positive emotions including anger, fear, guilt, shame, anxiety, contempt, disgust, dislike, resentment, envy, hope, optimism, empathy, compassion, satisfaction, happiness, liking and pride.

Current scientific work, from cognitive neuroscience to social and cognitive psychology, sociology and political science is consistent with the classics in suggesting that various kinds of emotional appeals are persuasive.² However, consistent with advances in neuroscience, research on emotion and politics now emphasizes that **emotional politics should *not* be seen as a stark contrast to a rational politics**.³

From the research:

- Emotional cues have “considerable influence on voter judgment.”⁴
- Not only political candidates, but also political institutions (such as Congress), issues, and positions generate emotional responses.⁵
- Emotionally resonant messages “prime” individuals’ responses to a broad range of economic and social policies and issues.⁶
- The persuasiveness and motivational capacity of symbols such as national flags and war memorials comes at least in part from their emotional component.⁷
- Political attitudes are based both in emotion (“affect”) and cognition; however, emotion-based persuasion is more influential than cognition-based persuasion in changing an attitude that is emotion-based. (But cognition-based persuasion is *not* more influential than emotion-based persuasion in changing an attitude that is cognitively based.)⁸

IMPLICATIONS Emotion-based appeals are common and often effective in political life. But emotion and cognition are deeply intertwined, and **emotion need not detract from, but rather may be a prerequisite for, “reasoned” deliberation.**

Perhaps we can harness our emotions to help create an ethic, culture and set of institutional incentives for civil discourse. These could at least dramatically *reduce* purposive or careless deception, falsehood and “misinformation,” exaggerated claims, verbal abuse and intimidation, emotional attacks and personal vitriol, while enhancing issue-focused discussion, empathy, mutual respect, willingness to debate in good faith, explaining the reasoning behind one’s point of view, considering the evidence, remaining open to ideas and evidence suggesting our established opinions could be wrong, and listening as much as we speak, so that we can hear and consider seriously the reasons of those with whom we disagree.

¹ This synopsis is based on National Institute for Civil Discourse Research Issue Brief No. 4: Classical Rhetoric, Contemporary Science and Modern Civil Discourse, prepared by Jerry W. Lee, Department of English, The University of Arizona, and Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology, The University of Arizona, dated August 3, 2011.

² George E. Marcus, “Emotions in Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, 2000, pp. 21-50; Richard R. Lau and Ivy Brown Rovner, “Negative Campaigning,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, 2009, pp. 285-306; Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta, ed. *Passionate Politics: Emotion and Social Movements*, University of Chicago Press, 2001; N. L. Klein and Verta Taylor, “Emotions and Social Movements,” Presented at annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, 2007.

³ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Harper-Collins, 1995; Marcus 2000; Goodwin et al. 2001, *supra* n. 2; Ron Aminzade and Doug McAdam, “Emotions and Contentious Politics,” In *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, ed. R. Aminzade et al, pp. 14-51, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁴ Marcus 2000, *supra* n. 2, p. 231, citations omitted.

⁵ Marcus 2000, *supra* n. 2.

⁶ Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*, University of Chicago Press, 1996; Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages and the Norm of Equality*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁷ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Urbana, IL, 1964; Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, Chicago, IL, 1988.

⁸ Leandre R. Fabrigar and Richard E. Petty 1999, “The Role of the Affective and Cognitive Bases of Attitudes in Susceptibility to Affectively and Cognitively Based Persuasion,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25(3), 1999, pp. 363-381.