

Shame vs. Precarity: Mailbox Rhetoric in the 2016 Presidential Election

By Matthew Overstreet

In the wake of Donald Trump's election as U.S. president there will undoubtedly be a flood of scholarly work seeking to identify the why and the how. Rhetoricians will play a key role in this effort. Much of our field's analysis will speak in broad terms, tracing the ways in which figures, themes and tropes were mobilized across an array of media. This project takes a different approach. The rise of Donald Trump, I want to argue, is too big to understand in the abstract. Given the hyper-fragmented state of the contemporary media environment, it's impossible to get anything like a global or "God's-eye" view. Instead, we need to engage in close analysis of specific artifacts that make up specific rhetorical encounters. Any conclusions derived from such analyses will be limited, local. Taken together though, they can trace an outline of the rhetorical ecology which allowed Donald Trump to become president.

With the above methodology in mind, the following examines the campaign mail received at my apartment in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania between October 1 and November 8, 2016. This archive includes mailings directed to both my roommate (an independent voter) and myself (a registered Democrat).

In a digital age, "snail mail" may be considered a dying art. It seems to have played an important role in this election though. Despite running a "notoriously frugal" operation, the Trump campaign spent over \$29 million on printing and postage (McGlawn). This comes to 37 cents out of every dollar spent.¹

As a rhetorical tool, mail certainly has its advantages. Compared to email or TV ads (where the Clinton campaign directed the majority of its resources), physical mailings are difficult to ignore. As we'll see, both campaigns utilized large, glossy flyers. Even if carried directly to the recycling bin, the materiality of these objects means that they must be engaged with, at least for a moment, at least by the person who sorts a household's mail.

So, overall, direct mail is an important medium. Pennsylvania is also an important state. It was among a handful of Rust Belt swing states that swung Republican, giving Trump the White House. Campaigning in the state was intense, and Trump won by less than thirty thousand votes. Considering this, it is not unreasonable to claim that the archive to be examined helped determine the outcome of the election. It offers a unique glimpse into how the campaign addressed swing-state voters. By studying it, we can begin to understand why those voters chose Donald Trump.



Before we turn to the archive, some background on the state of political communication is needed. In general terms, we can say that such communication is more crazy targeted and narrowly focused than ever before. Whatever the medium, political actors now seek to tailor their rhetoric directly to specific constituencies based on perceived wants and needs. This means that identifying wants and needs, through demographic data, for example, is integral. We live in an age of “narrowcasting,” Lance Bennett and Jarol Manheim write, in which political rhetoric is “designed to bypass the critical faculties of the audience member and to preselect and link the message with some desired set of perceptions or values” (225). The result is a decline in the diversity of information a voter will receive. Instead of a variety of messages, a voter is likely to be targeted repeatedly with a single message. Contemporary political rhetoric, Bennett and Manheim note, also discourages the audience from placing ideas in any larger context—from seeking outside information about a topic, for example. This is necessary because contextualization (or any effort at deeper understanding) would risk undermining, or at the least, complicating, a finely tuned message.

With the above background in place, we can now turn to the archive. Overall, my apartment received sixteen pieces of election mail: eight from each campaign.² Every piece of pro-Clinton mail was directed to me (the registered Democrat). Every piece of pro-Trump mail, with one notable exception, was directed to my roommate (the independent voter).³ The mailings

varied in size, with the Clinton pieces being, on average, 8 by 11 inches, and the Trump pieces 5 by 11 inches. Interestingly, they almost always arrived in tandem: either we'd receive no election mail or a mailer from both campaigns.

So what messages did the campaigns push? Emily McGlawn captures the conventional wisdom when, in attempting to explain Trump's victory, she writes that his campaign focused on "simple ideas," which "were exciting and created an emotional following." Clinton, on the other hand, "had long, complex ideas, that didn't induce excitement." While this description may apply to the campaigns in general, it does not apply to the archive examined. As we'll see, the Clinton mailers contain very few ideas, complex or otherwise. Instead, they attempt to mobilize voters through the repetition of a single, highly focused emotional appeal. The Trump mailers, while also utilizing simple language and emotional appeals, cover a much wider array of issues; they feature both attacks on Clinton and specific policy proposals.

Hillary Clinton's Rhetoric of Shame

The first mailer received from Clinton sets the template for those that follow. It features a concerned-looking, middle-aged white woman, declaring "I'm in a tough position... I can't tell my kids to treat others with respect and then tell them I voted for Trump." Here, we have the three figures that define the Clinton mailers: the child, the concerned parent, and Trump. "If you're uncomfortable letting your kids watch Donald Trump on TV," another mailer asks, as a disembodied Trump hovers over a young girl, "Would you really put him in the White House?" In a third, a concerned father states, "I can't look my daughter in the eye and vote for Trump." Overall, four out of the eight Clinton mailers feature a juxtaposition of these three figures.⁴ Clinton herself is completely absent. As is any discussion of her proposed policies. Trump's proposed policies are mentioned only once.

Notably, Trump is engaged solely as a *discursive* entity. His image rarely appears and his actions (or proposed actions) are never discussed; instead, the Clinton mailers focus on his words. Next to an image of a teenaged girl, for example: "Her teen years are hard enough without a president who calls women names like 'disgusting,' 'fat pigs,' 'dogs,' and 'slobs.'" In another, Trump's statements are compared to "Your Crazy Uncle." Overall, six out of the eight Clinton flyers feature Trump's own statements. His reference to a woman as a "dog," tellingly, appears on five of those.



Judging by these mailers, what can we determine about the Clinton campaign’s rhetorical strategy? First, it seems that their targeting mechanisms were not as sophisticated as many believed.⁵ While the above messaging is narrow, in that it hits upon the same theme repeatedly, that theme does not seem to be specifically chosen for the recipient. I am thirty-six, unmarried, and live with another man. Given these demographic variables, one might assume that I do not have children, and would therefore not be optimally receptive to a child-centric message. The Clinton campaign either did not make this connection, or if they did, were unable or unwilling to craft a message specifically tailored for someone in my position.

As the above suggests, I believe that the parent-child-Trump triad is key to understanding Clinton’s pitch to Pennsylvania voters. In particular, I see this juxtaposition as an attempt to weaponize shame. Shame is a unique affect, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes, following Silvan Tompkins, because it “speaks to a desire to connect in the face of contempt and self-loathing” (155). The shamed person is one who desires intersubjectivity, but from whom, for whatever reason, the intersubjective relationship is withheld. Integrally, in order to be shamed, the possibility of that relationship must exist. As Tompkins puts it, the one invoking shame must be “concerned positively as well as negatively” with the welfare of the one shamed (qtd. in Chun 157). To invoke shame, in short, one must care. By allowing a group to demonstrate that the individual members all care—that they all have similar values, similar interests—shame can be a powerful community building tool.

The main rhetorical thrust of Clinton’s rhetoric, it seems to me, involves an attempt to induce community through shame. This becomes clear when the parent-child-Trump triad is viewed in light of the phenomenon known as “slut shaming.” In slut shaming, Chun writes, a

community is founded upon the slut's inability to enable "empathetic identification" (157). Integrally though, this lack within the slut only emerges when she is contrasted with another figure: that of the "dead girl," the subject shamed to the point of suicide. The dead girl is inevitably celebrated as "beautiful" and "an angel." The group wants to connect with the slut as they do the dead girl, this logic goes, but cannot because of some flaw within her. In their shared loathing, a new community is formed.

The Clinton mailers, through the use of the parent-child-Trump triad, enact a similar rhetorical motion. The audience is positioned as the concerned parent; the child figure is the angelic center of the triad, the element of shared concern. And Trump is the slut, the abject other, who by violating the norms of discourse must be denied the intersubjective relationship. In the child, we see what Trump lacks. And in our care for the child—and our hatred of Trump—communal bonds are strengthened.

So, overall, in this archive we see the Clinton campaign enacting a sophisticated, yet very narrowly focused, rhetorical strategy. Instead of engaging the audience's "critical facilities," these mailings use shame to heighten preexisting emotional inclinations. The campaign has apparently determined that the audience, all registered Democrats, are predisposed to dislike Trump. By presenting him in juxtaposition with the figure of the child, this dislike can be increased. For a voter not predisposed to Trump-hatred though (or in my case, not particularly moved by family scenes), this rhetoric offers very little.

It is also important to note the extent to which Clinton's rhetoric operates almost exclusively on the symbolic level. Remember, in these mailers there is no discussion of future events or plans of action (and no claim that Trump represents any real threat to the child figure). Instead, the election, Clinton seems to indicate, comes down to words, symbols. "A Donald Trump presidency means..." one mailer informs the reader. This aptly sums up Clinton's rhetorical appeal: vote because of what your vote means.

Donald Trump's Rhetoric of Precarity

As to be expected, the Trump campaign takes a different approach. First, unlike Clinton, Trump targets independent voters.⁶ Perhaps as a result of this audience selection, the topics discussed are more diverse. Trump's messaging is also much more policy-focused, replacing talk of values and meaning with objectives to be obtained.

The Trump mailers discuss, among other issues, “the needs of the modern workforce,” the Supreme Court and corporate lobbying. They are information-heavy documents, often featuring bullet-pointed claims, along with evidence in the form of numbers and statistics. “Donald Trump knows jobs,” one declares, “He’s created tens of thousands of them [and] built a massively successful, billion-dollar company.” This mailer then states that Trump will “make our tax climate competitive” and “renegotiate bad trade deals, like NAFTA.” Other documents promise a “Trump plan” that offers “tax credits for childcare” and an administration in which “corporate lobbyists are out.”

A focus on action runs throughout Trump’s mailers. His rhetoric also seeks to tie Clinton with the idea of failure. “Hillary Clinton admits a lot of mistakes,” a representative mailer states, “Nearly everything she’s done has been an epic failure.” The figure of the Islamic State, or ISIS, is key to making this connection. “Hillary Clinton’s bad judgement has jeopardized our national security,” one declares, over a picture of ski mask-clad ISIS fighters. Another mailer pictures four notorious American terror suspects, underscored by the caption, “Hillary Clinton hasn’t kept us safe from ISIS.”



Overall, the idea of failure, resulting in a lack of safety, represents the core of Trump’s message. These elements appear on five out of eight Trump mailers. Each time, they are juxtaposed with an image of Trump, along with a bullet-pointed list of future actions: “Donald Trump will strengthen communities... defeat ISIS... make American secure again.” In this regard, though his rhetoric covers a broad range of issues, Trump’s messaging, like Clinton’s, directly targets a certain type of voter. In particular, it seems designed to appeal to those who feel “something is wrong.” This something is ill-defined; in all cases though, it is a problem that calls forth Donald Trump.

Unlike Trump, Hillary Clinton is largely absent from her own campaign mailings. Why? The answer lies, I'd argue, in Clinton's privileging of the symbolic over the realm of action. Within Clinton's rhetorical world, remember, the problem is Trump (what he says, what he means). The problem is symbolic, therefore the solution is also symbolic: the rejection of Trump. Clinton is incidental to this outcome, a mere means to a (symbolic) end. We can say that Clinton's mailers, on the level of form, de-center Clinton as the campaign's prime variable. The voter, assuming the position of the concerned parent—the one who protects the child from Trump—is empowered to act in her stead.

The world presented by Trump's mailers is very different. Here, the problem is not Clinton as a symbol, but Clinton's actions in the world (what she has done and will do). The solution is what Trump will do. In this regard, Trump's rhetoric is both less empowering and more ambitious than Clinton's. It doesn't seek merely the rejection of his opponent, but the wholehearted embrace of (submission to?) Trump. This explains Trump's heavy presence on his own mailers. In essence, Pennsylvania voters need him.

The above has sought to highlight some of the rhetorical logic at play in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. What conclusions can we draw? Does this archive explain why Donald Trump won? I will leave that up to the reader. I do believe though that my analysis reveals the fundamentally conservative nature of the Clinton campaign's direct mail efforts. As noted, Clinton ignored independent voters, instead trying to drive up participation rates among registered Democrats. This was attempted through a sophisticated, yet narrowly tailored emotional appeal, the effect of which was to obscure Clinton's personality, life history and policy vision. Perhaps given her long track record, and relatively low favorability ratings, this was a wise choice. At the same time though, one must wonder what the outcome would have been if Clinton, like Trump, had emphasized action instead of symbols. Such a strategy, at its core, involves explaining what a candidate could do for voters, rather than what voters should do for themselves. It presents information and asks voters to make a self-interested choice. As we've seen, such a strategy goes against recent trends in political rhetoric. In Trump's case though, it seems to have been effective.⁷

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¹ The Clinton campaign spent 21 cents per dollar on printing and postage.

² It should be noted that no piece of mail was sent directly by either campaign. The Clinton mailers were "signed" by the Pennsylvania Democratic Party. Of the Trump mailers, two came from the New York State Republican committee; six came from the Republican National Committee.

³ A Trump mailer declaring "Our cities are crumbling... Hillary won't change a thing" apparently went to registered Democrats all over Pennsylvania. This (mis?)targeting was unusual enough to warrant a newspaper article (see Potter). In said article, a political consultant refers to the event as "a massive screw-up."

⁴ Of the eight Clinton mailers, two are clear outliers. One (the only one featuring Clinton's image) focuses on preserving "President Obama's legacy." Another accuses Trump of outsourcing jobs to China.

⁵ See Halper, in which he notes the massive tech disparity between the two campaigns.

⁶ It is possible that the Clinton campaign did in fact target independent voters, but simply did not do so in regard to my roommate (perhaps because his address was already receiving campaign material).

⁷ In short, I'm claiming that Clinton tried to be too clever. A flyer that simply states "Vote for Clinton, get free college tuition," or something similar, would have had maximum appeal for both me and my roommate.