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THE RHETORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE: IDEAS, PERSUASION, AND ARGUMENT

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Abstract. This paper reinterprets the role of ideas in political science through the lens of rhetorical political analysis. It argues that political science has often treated ideas as secondary to material or institutional factors, overlooking their persuasive and performative functions in political practice. Drawing upon rhetorical theory, discourse analysis, and constructivist perspectives, the study emphasizes that political ideas are not merely cognitive entities but *rhetorical acts*—forms of argumentation, justification, and persuasion embedded in communicative processes. Through a critical review of ideational approaches in political science and linguistic methodologies, this paper proposes a rhetorical framework that views political ideas as strategic, dynamic, and creative. Such an approach repositions rhetoric from a peripheral discipline to a central analytical tool for understanding how political actors construct meanings, mobilize support, and shape governance through language and persuasion.

Keywords: political rhetoric, rhetorical political analysis, ideational turn, persuasion, political discourse, argumentation, language and power, political ideas, discourse analysis, rhetorical theory, constructivism, creativity in politics

Introduction

The study of politics has long been preoccupied with institutions, behavior, and power structures. However, the **role of ideas**—as sources of meaning, persuasion, and creative political action—has remained underdeveloped in mainstream political science (Finlayson, 2004). Although the late twentieth century saw the so-called *"ideational turn"* in social science, this shift rarely penetrated the methodological core of political analysis. Political science often treats ideas as background variables—secondary to material interests or institutional dynamics—rather than as **constitutive forces** that shape political action, discourse, and belief.

The **rhetorical turn**, which emerged across the humanities and social sciences during the 1980s and 1990s, offers an opportunity to redress this imbalance. This movement—associated with scholars such as McCloskey (1994), Billig (1987), and Shotter (1989)—challenged positivist assumptions about objectivity and demonstrated that scientific and political argument alike are deeply rhetorical. The rhetorical turn posits that knowledge and persuasion are socially constructed through the strategic use of language, metaphor, and narrative. Yet, as Finlayson (2004) observes, political science has remained resistant to this intellectual development.

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A **rhetorical political analysis (RPA)** aims to fill this gap. It insists that political ideas cannot be separated from their communicative form: they exist only as statements, arguments, and performances (Barker, 2000). The significance of a political idea, therefore, lies not merely in what it represents but in *how it persuades*—how it is articulated, circulated, and contested within political debate. In this sense, rhetoric is not a superficial ornament of politics but one of its fundamental modes of existence.

This article reconsiders the ideational and rhetorical turns within political science, arguing that the two must be integrated into a unified framework of **rhetorical political analysis**. By adopting this perspective, political science can recover its classical roots in rhetorical theory—found in Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian—and reestablish the study of politics as an inquiry into public argument, persuasion, and creative reasoning.

2. Methods: Theoretical and Analytical Framework
2.1. The Rhetorical Turn and Its Relevance to Political Science

The *rhetorical turn* in the social sciences was part of a broader intellectual shift away from positivism toward interpretive and constructivist approaches. This movement emphasized the constitutive power of language in shaping knowledge and social reality (Billig, 1989; McCloskey, 1994). Rhetoric came to be understood not merely as the art of persuasion but as a fundamental mode of reasoning—a way through which humans negotiate meaning, disagreement, and power.

In disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and economics, scholars like Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey (1991) examined how rhetorical strategies underpin claims to truth and authority. Yet political science largely ignored this shift, continuing to privilege quantitative modeling and behavioral explanation over interpretive analysis. Finlayson (2004) attributes this neglect to political science's enduring aspiration to scientific neutrality and its discomfort with the contingency and creativity implied by rhetorical theory.

A rhetorical approach, however, does not dismiss rigor or causality. Rather, it **reframes explanation**: it treats political arguments as situated performances aimed at persuading audiences under conditions of uncertainty. This approach aligns with classical rhetorical theory, which conceives rhetoric as *the art of discovering the available means of persuasion in any situation* (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II.1). Political actors—whether legislators, activists, or administrators—must continually construct convincing arguments to justify their actions, define problems, and mobilize support. Thus, rhetoric is not a supplement to politics but its very medium.

2.2. The Ideational Turn: Limitations and Gaps

During the 1990s, scholars such as Goldstein and Keohane (1993) and Hall (1993) introduced the "ideational turn," arguing that ideas influence political outcomes by shaping actors' perceptions, preferences, and strategies. However, most of this literature conceptualized ideas as **static cognitive frameworks**—paradigms, norms, or belief systems—rather than as *interactive communicative acts*.

For example, Hall's (1993) analysis of the shift from Keynesianism to monetarism identified policy paradigms as guiding principles embedded in institutional structures. Yet, as Finlayson (2004) notes, such approaches rarely examine how ideas are articulated, contested, and made persuasive through language. Ideas appear as pre-formed entities that actors *use* rather than as **discursive creations** that emerge through rhetorical interaction.

Similarly, constructivist approaches in international relations—such as Haas's (1992) concept of epistemic communities—recognize the influence of experts in shaping policy but often overlook the **linguistic performance** through which authority is constructed. By treating ideas as abstract causal variables, these studies miss their most political dimension: their **persuasive enactment** in concrete contexts of argumentation. Thus, the ideational turn, while valuable, remains incomplete. It invites political scientists to take ideas seriously but stops short of analyzing their rhetorical life—their movement, adaptation, and transformation within political communication.

2.3. Toward a Rhetorical Political Analysis

Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) builds on this critique by proposing a methodological synthesis of rhetoric, discourse analysis, and interpretive political science (Finlayson, 2004; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003). It views political ideas as *speech acts*—performances that do things in the world rather than merely describe it (Austin, 1962; Skinner, 2002). Every political statement simultaneously asserts a claim, constructs an identity, and seeks to persuade.

At the core of RPA lies the assumption that politics is **agonistic** and dialogical rather than deterministic or technocratic. Political actors must justify their positions in contested arenas, using language creatively to redefine issues and reframe debates. From this perspective, rhetoric is not a distortion of truth but a constitutive condition of political reasoning (Billig, 1987; Mouffe, 1993).

RPA entails several analytical dimensions:

1. **Contextualization:** Ideas must be examined within their institutional and situational context. The persuasive force of an argument depends on the audience, medium, and timing of its delivery.

2. **Argumentative Form:** Analysts should attend to the structure of reasoning—metaphors, analogies, and tropes—that make an idea compelling (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

3. **Discursive Dynamics:** Ideas evolve through debate and reinterpretation. RPA studies how concepts are stabilized, contested, and rearticulated within political discourse.

4. **Performative Dimension:** Political speech involves ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (reason). Understanding how these appeals operate reveals why some arguments succeed while others fail.

Unlike traditional discourse analysis, RPA integrates the **strategic and normative** dimensions of rhetoric—it examines not only *how* persuasion occurs but also *what it accomplishes* in shaping political order.

2.4. Methodological Sources and Analytical Tools

RPA draws methodological inspiration from several existing traditions:

- **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Particularly the work of Fairclough (1995, 2010), CDA exposes how language reproduces ideology and power. However, RPA moves beyond CDA's tendency to treat rhetoric as concealment; instead, it treats persuasion as *constitutive* of politics.

- **Discursive Psychology:** Scholars like Billig (1991, 1995) analyze how everyday argumentation constructs social reality. RPA adapts these insights to institutional and elite political discourse, focusing on how deliberation produces consensus or division.

- **Discourse Theory:** The works of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) emphasize the contingency of meaning and the centrality of political struggle. RPA shares their view of politics as a contest over signification but focuses more concretely on rhetorical practice rather than abstract social logics.

- **Classical Rhetoric:** From Aristotle to Cicero, classical theorists emphasized the moral and civic dimensions of persuasion. RPA reclaims these insights, seeing rhetoric as both analytic method and civic virtue—a way to sustain pluralism through argument.

Together, these traditions provide a toolkit for analyzing how political actors create meaning and legitimacy through rhetorical performance. For instance, the use of metaphors like "war on poverty" or "crisis of democracy" exemplifies how rhetorical framing organizes public reasoning (Schon, 1979; Black, 1962). By identifying such tropes, RPA connects linguistic form to ideological function.

2.5. Rhetoric as a Mode of Political Creativity

Finally, RPA views rhetoric as a **creative force** in politics. Far from being merely manipulative, rhetoric enables innovation in political thought by allowing actors to redescribe reality (Skinner, 2002; Finlayson, 2004). Through rhetorical invention, political language generates new possibilities for collective action—transforming metaphors into programs and values into institutions.

In this sense, rhetoric bridges analysis and praxis: it is both an object of study and a mode of political engagement. Scholars who practice RPA therefore adopt a reflexive stance, acknowledging that their own analyses participate in rhetorical contests over meaning. As Finlayson (2004) contends, political science cannot stand outside rhetoric; it must recognize its own discursive and persuasive dimensions.

3. Results: The Rhetorical Character of Political Ideas

3.1. From Ideas to Statements: Politics as Argumentation

Political science often regards ideas as pre-existing variables that shape decisions or institutions, yet as Finlayson (2004) and Barker (2000) emphasize, political ideas exist only as **statements and arguments**. They emerge and gain effect through communication, persuasion, and contestation. A policy principle or ideological belief does not influence politics because of its abstract truth but because it is rhetorically effective—convincing, repeatable, and adaptable within public debate.

When political scientists study "the influence of ideas," they often abstract from the **strategic and dialogical context** in which those ideas are expressed. A rhetorical approach reverses this logic: it treats persuasion as the mechanism through which ideas acquire political agency. For example, rather than asking how neoliberal ideas shaped economic policy, rhetorical analysis asks how metaphors such as *"market freedom"* or *"lean government"* structured political argument and moral reasoning (Hall, 1993; Fairclough, 2000).

This reframing highlights the **performative** nature of political language. Words such as "freedom," "security," or "reform" do not merely describe policies—they *do things*: they evoke values, position opponents, and mobilize publics. Political analysis must therefore examine the rhetorical life of such terms, tracing how they are articulated and rearticulated across speeches, debates, and media.

3.2. Rhetoric and the Creative Dimension of Politics

Rhetorical political analysis foregrounds the **creative** and **agonistic** aspects of politics. Ideas are not fixed objects of cognition but evolving instruments of contestation and imagination. Following Billig (1987), politics is a realm of "endless argumentation," where disagreement is not a pathology but a constitutive feature of democratic life. Political actors must constantly persuade others to accept their definitions of reality and their proposed solutions.

Through rhetorical action, ideas are *invented*, *modified*, and *transmitted*. For instance, metaphors and narratives help reframe political problems. The phrase *"war on drugs"* does not simply describe a policy—it redefines crime as an existential battle and legitimizes certain state actions (Schon, 1979). Similarly, the invocation of *"globalization"* as an inevitable force justifies market-oriented reforms while concealing political choices (Hay, 2002).

RPA thus exposes the **strategic creativity** behind political reasoning. Every claim about truth or necessity is itself rhetorical, seeking to make certain interpretations appear natural or inevitable. Yet rhetorical action also opens space for innovation: new ideas can emerge by reconfiguring old ones. As Skinner (2002) and Finlayson (2004) argue, rhetorical invention allows actors to *rename*, *reframe*, and *reimagine* political realities.

3.3. Integrating Language, Power, and Persuasion

By analyzing political ideas rhetorically, scholars can better understand how **language and power** intertwine. Rhetoric is a form of symbolic power—it legitimizes authority and frames consent (Fairclough, 2010; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). However, unlike deterministic theories of ideology, RPA treats this power as contingent and reversible. Since persuasion relies on shared meanings, rhetoric is inherently open to contestation.

For example, populist leaders employ inclusive pronouns ("we," "our people") and moral binaries ("us vs. them") to construct collective identity and emotional resonance. At the same time, opponents can appropriate these same rhetorical tools to resist or reframe dominant narratives (Kampf & Wodak, 2020). The study of rhetoric therefore illuminates

the **fluid dynamics of hegemony**, showing how authority depends on sustained communicative performance rather than on stable ideology.

Empirical research applying RPA can analyze texts such as parliamentary debates, manifestos, and press releases, tracing how recurring rhetorical patterns construct legitimacy and crisis. By linking argument structure to institutional settings, scholars can reveal how discourse shapes not only what policies are adopted but what is considered *thinkable* within politics.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Rhetorical Political Analysis as a Corrective

Rhetorical Political Analysis provides a corrective to the technocratic and behaviorist tendencies of modern political science. Where traditional models seek causal regularities, RPA foregrounds **interpretation, creativity, and persuasion**. It brings the discipline closer to its classical roots, when political thought was inseparable from rhetoric, deliberation, and civic reasoning (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*; Cicero, *De Oratore*).

The insights of RPA are both **analytic** and **normative**. Analytically, it allows scholars to examine the *form* and *force* of political ideas: how they gain traction, how they evolve through contestation, and how they influence institutional change. Normatively, it revitalizes the democratic ideal of politics as argument rather than technocratic management. As Finlayson (2004) suggests, rhetoric should not be dismissed as mere manipulation but valued as the medium through which citizens and leaders negotiate collective meanings.

4.2. Methodological Implications

Applying RPA requires political scientists to expand their methodological repertoire. Textual, linguistic, and interpretive tools—such as metaphor analysis, frame analysis, and argument mapping—can be combined with qualitative fieldwork and institutional study. The aim is not to predict outcomes but to **explain how persuasion works** in concrete contexts.

Moreover, RPA encourages reflexivity: political scientists themselves use rhetoric when they theorize, categorize, or critique. Recognizing this self-referential dimension deepens methodological awareness and challenges the illusion of neutral observation (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003).

4.3. The Creative and Democratic Value of Rhetoric

Rhetoric, when properly understood, sustains democracy by legitimizing disagreement and encouraging public reasoning (Billig, 1987; Mouffe, 1993). Rather than viewing rhetoric as deceptive, RPA reclaims it as the condition of democratic vitality. Political argumentation makes pluralism possible by transforming conflict into discourse.

Rhetorical political analysis therefore performs a dual task: it **explains** how persuasion shapes political reality and **defends** rhetoric as a civic art. As contemporary politics becomes increasingly mediated, emotional, and performative, the need to study rhetoric intensifies. By understanding the language of persuasion, scholars can reveal how power operates symbolically and how it may be contested through words and ideas.

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4.4. Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that political ideas are best understood not as static entities but as **rhetorical practices**—as arguments, narratives, and metaphors that construct political reality. Rhetorical Political Analysis integrates insights from discourse theory, classical rhetoric, and interpretive political science to illuminate how meaning, persuasion, and creativity operate in political life.

By recognizing rhetoric as the essence rather than the embellishment of politics, political science can recover its humanistic and dialogical dimensions. Politics, at its core, is not the management of structures but the **art of argument**, where language both reflects and transforms the world.

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