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ABSTRACT

In the 1968 political campaign, George Wallace consistently attracted auditors of diverse and highly polarized views, people who were negatively closed-minded and people who were positively closed-minded. He exploited this polarization to heighten the impact of his speaking and to rally and solidify the closed-positive auditors. For example, when members of the audience indulged in vocal heckling, Wallace handled the protests effectively, using the heckling both to point out the need for law and order and to build the emotional intensity of his message. This message attacked the federal government for intruding into public education (desegregation), union seniority, voter qualifications, reapportionment, civil rights, and property ownership. In the end, Wallace carried only five states, a number far short of his optimistic predictions. (JM)

# THE RHETORIC OF POLARIZATION: GEORGE C. WALLACE'S 1968 CAMPAIGN SPEAKING

by Willard A. Underwood
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The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationships between diversely polarized audiences and George C. Wallace's speaking in assessing impacts of the 1968 presidential campaign.

The rhetorical situation of George C. Wallace in the 1968 presidential campaign was unique among recent major candidates in that he consistently attracted highly and diversely polarized auditors. With Nixon and Humphrey, it might be observed that most auditors were neutral to slightly-positive or slightly-negative. Yet neither of these national party candidates evoked the emotionally-charged acceptance or rejection which characterized the responses to Wallace. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Wallace's campaign speaking as a series of messages directed toward auditors holding polarized views.

In this effort we have chosen to utilize Rokeach's classification of open and closed-mindedness to characterize the immediate auditors of Wallace's campaign speaking. An auditor is characterized as "closed" if he refuses to recognize the validity of a statement on its own merits; the auditor is characterized as "open" when he is willing to do so.[1] It should be noted that the typical Wallace audience contained both closed-positive and closed-negative auditors.

Wallace's standard speech during the campaign was designed to achieve maximum acceptability through expression of the sentiments of a large segment of the population. This segment, which was the largest group during most of his speeches in the South and northern "backlash" areas, may be characterized as "closed-positive" auditors who tended to strongly accept Wallace's statements because of his source credibility. Typical reactions from this group were "Whatever George says is good enough for me" and "You tell 'em, George." A second group was a "closed-negative" group which tended to reject statements because of the low credibility they ascribed

to the source. In some speeches, particularly before northern co llege audiences, this group was a large segment of the audience. Included were the hecklers, blacks and liberal whites who viewed Wallace's candidacy as a threat to liberalism. The third group at most speeches, frequently the smallest in number, consisted of "open" neutral or slightly biased (frequently negatively-biased) observers.

I.

In 1968 Wallace's name was on the ballot in every state. With a legitimate third-party candidacy, the major thrust of the early Wallace campaign was to preclude any other candidate from receiving a majority of the electoral vote, thus forcing the House of Representatives to decide the contest. Wallace's plan was to support whomever endorsed "Southern" programs, which meant "presumably taking a very hard line on law and order, and agreeing to make the federal government stop desegregation in schools, labor unions, and so on."[2]

But as the campaign progressed, Wallace presented himself more and more as a viable contender for the Presidency itself. National Observer noted in September that:

> Mr. Wallace doesn't talk these days about throwing the election into the House of Representatives. Nor does he consider himself a power broker in the Electoral College, where a dead-locked election could be settled without ever going to the House. He believes that he can be President, and his voice rang with conviction when he told his Texas followers here last week: "We not only have a good chance, we have the best chance, to win the Presidency."[3]

One reason for this optimism was that "a lot of old-line Democrats are switching to me because they feel Humphrey can't win, and they can't bring themselves to support a Republican." A Harris poll revealed that his largest penetration was among independent voters. In the North, he was attracting one in six independent votes, and half of those in the South.[4]

The campaign was succeeding largely because the major parties, which Wallace denounced by asserting "there's not a dime's worth of difference between the two," had failed to provide satisfactory answers for substantial segments of the public. National Observer warned that Democratic and Republican avoidance of strong stands

on the VietNam conflict could backfire, for "he already has the corner on the gut issue of race. The major parties, unless one of them adopts a clear stand on Vietnam, risk giving him the game on that gut issue, too."[5]

Meanwhile Wallace was making rhetorical appeals, using one "standard" speech. Robert Hey observed that "he makes the same point at each stop, using nearly identical language. The contents of all Wallace speeches is virtually identical; most of the phrases are, too."[6] In Houston on August 6th Wallace defended this practice, charging that "news media people complain that we always give the same speech. I do say the same things in Texas that I say in Massachusetts. Some people are tired of folks who say one thing in the South and another in the North."[7] But some audience adaptation was apparent, for when speaking in the South Wallace appealed strongly to sectional pride; in the North and West he claimed that his movement was national rather than sectional. In Salem, Virginia, he charged that "Nixon said the other day that I wasn't fit to be president. Do you know what he was saying? He was saying no Southerner is fit to be president. That's what he was saying. And both national parties have used Virginia . . . and the South as the doormat [of the nation.]"[8]

II.

The largest segment of most Wallace audiences, particularly in the South, included listeners who tended to accept everything stated as highly credible. These auditors provided the largest group of financial and political supporters. A Christian Science Monitor editorial examined the Wallace appeal, observing that:

> Few people are neutral about former Governor Wallace. He has performed a useful service in articulating, in bringing to the surface, the deep apprehensions which the "silent Americans"—and some not so silent—feel and fear. He has proved that millions are profoundly disgusted with the disrupting militants in university or ghetto, with the unwashed among the hippies, with coddled criminals, and with Washington when it is in its "beauracracy knows best" mood.
>
> But those who criticize and indeed fear the Wallace phenomenon argue that his remedies are too brutally simple, that they suggest physical retributions too often, that they breed hate and suspicion when America needs, above all, conciliation and compassion. And that, though Mr. Wallace denies racism, he would move very slowly to correct those age-old injustices on which black militancy feeds. The critics maintain that not all intellectuals are leftists,

> that most courts do jail criminals, that black militants are a small minority, and that there are other crucial issues besides "law and order."

In appearance the Wallace supporters were less sophisticated than the audiences which heard most political candidates. The National Observer reported that "crowds who heard Wallace were nearly all-white. They were not well-dressed; T-shirts outnumbered ties by far." Wallace supporters carried signs bearing such slogans as "We love America, Wallace and apple pie" and "True Americans love Wallace." Another characteristic of Wallace audiences was their zeal:

> The crowds also exhibit a quality that must be seen and felt to be fathomed, and that quality is the zeal with which they receive and applaud the Wallace message. They've heard or read it before; he gives the same speech wherever he goes, rarely varying it appreciably; and the dutiful crowd waits to applaud the punch lines that it knows is coming.[10]

This readiness to applaud is another indication that these auditors already had closed their minds prior to the speaking situation. Louis Harris provided additional demographic information when he described the attributes of the typical Wallace supporter. According to Harris, most supporters came from the middle $5,000-$10,000 income group and high-school educated groups; 99 per cent were white, over 80 per cent were Protestant.[11] In July, Harris predicted that Wallace would capture about fifteen per cent of the popular vote, and provided more detailed information about his reception, particularly that he had a generally negative profile among all voters, though 77 per cent admired him for "having the courage to say what he really thinks."[12] This poll concluded that Wallace was taking away more votes from the Republicans than from the Democrats, and "with Wallace out of the race, the GOP would be at least 3 points stronger."[13]

Several political analysts attributed Wallace's success as "the plum of political demagoguery in a period of national turmoil,"[14] or similar ideology. The Christian Science Monitor dismissed the third-party platform as "a combination of Populist appeals, white supremacy, new assistance to the elderly, and a special address to the concerns of the lower middle class."[15] Rowland Evans and Robert Novak predicted that Wallace could surprise predictors because "no one is more skilled than Wallace at exploiting the fears and anti-black hostilities of whites frightened at the

Negro revolution."[16] Robert Hey reported the effects of racial tensions on the audiences Wallace addressed, noting:

> In part it is economic—fear that the black man will take away the white man's blue-collar job. And that he will move into a white man's neighborhood and cause property value to plummet.
> It is also fear of physical violence. Fear that the black man is inherently more violent than the white, and that when present he will cause violence to whites on city streets and in public schools.[17]

Throughout the campaign Wallace denied he was a racist, but the Christian Science Monitor recorded "cues" in his messages which emphasized the anti-black appeal and provided for immediate audience responses:

> He says he would see that "not one dime of federal money" is spent to bus students, to achieve racial integration of schools. His supporters stomp and cheer.
> But the most thunderous ovation comes when he promises to repeal the 1968 open-housing law, which he repeatedly charges "would tell you who to sell your house to."[18]

Wallace was optimistic, predicting he would carry all seventeen states in the Southern Governor's Conference. In his speeches, this prediction was phrased, "Do you know why we're going to come out with a 176-vote base in the South? It's because Southerners have for too long been called pea-pickers and peckerwoods and crackers by the two major parties, and they're sick and tired of it."[19] This line, according to National Observer, "invariably brings his audience to its feet, yelling 'Yah-hoo,' and 'You tell 'em, George,' and 'Give 'em hell, George.'"[20] The ideas presented by Wallace were thus designed primarily for immediate effect. In a July speech in Columbus, Ohio, he promised to "shake the eye teeth of liberals in both parties,"[21] which became a standard comment in his later speeches. Another standard line was the hypothetical illustration, "if you get knocked on the head when you walk out of here, the person who knocked you on the head is out of jail before you are out of the hospital. And on Monday they'll try a policeman about it."[22]

While it is undeniable that Wallace built his political power in the South upon defense of segregation, during the 1968 campaign it became evident that his platform had extended to other domestic issues and to United States foreign policy as well. The National Observer commented that:

> To dismiss George Wallace as a racist or a demagog is to seriously underestimate his allure. His appeal is broader, far broader, than racism, and his themes too vital to be contained within mere demagogery. He speaks to the gut, not the brain. And in the political and social unrest of 1968 it is the gut issues—principally race and Vietnam but also student revolts, Communism at home, and Federal intervention in local affairs—that divide the nation.[23]

While the Wallace appeal expanded far beyond racism, his supporters tried carefully to avoid accentuating racial bias as a campaign issue whenever possible. But even with the sublimation of race as an issue, the residual effect was sufficient to remain a major uniting factor for favorable auditors. Probably the second most important factor in the North was unionism. Harris observed that:

> Since there are more union members in the North than in the South, the unions represent Wallace's main area of penetration above the Mason-Dixon line. . . .
> The common band that sews together his unusual assortment of political allies is dominantly race. Seventy-three per cent of all Wallace supporters want progress for Negroes to be halted. Almost as many, 67 per cent, say they "feel uneasy personally due to the prospect of race riots in their own community."[24]

Thus the Wallace platform articulated underlying frustrations common among many lower/middle-income white Americans. It indicted the federal government for intrusions into public education union seniority and apprenticeship lists, voter qualifications, reapportionment, civil rights and property ownership.[25]

## III.

In almost every speaking situation Wallace faced a diversely polarized audience containing closed-positive and closed-negative auditors. Among the closed-negative segment were hecklers whom Wallace faced throughout the campaign. In the South, this element was less obvious but almost always present. Throughout the early stages of the campaign Wallace was heckled; not only did he handle these protests effectively, he thrived on them. Vocal heckling was used to raise the anger of his followers and to demonstrate to all who would listen the problems of America—the breakdown of law and order, anarchy in the streets, and irresponsible dissent over Vietnam.[26] Utilizing hecklers for "demonstration by example" became an integral part of the campaign speech, reflecting the Wallace style and adding immediacy to build the emotional intensity of his message. The Christian Science Monitor reported that:

> In any one speech these sallies comprise only five minutes or so. Typically the Wallace speech lasts half an hour. After having established his view that both Republicans and Democrats are responsible for failing to solve the problems that now plague the nation, he elaborated on the problems, and in general terms discusses his approach to solving them.[27]

Richard Strout described the handling of hecklers more graphically in reporting on a Philadelphia speech:

> George Wallace's high voice comes over the loudspeaker, a firebrand dropping sparks into inflammable material. If you have been traveling with him you have heard it all before—his taunts, gibes, and effective sallies. But they are new to the audience. It roars in exultation. Jeer now, he tells the hecklers. "You won't be able to do it after November 5."[28]

The National Observer suggested the rationale for this tactic: that as a lawyer himself, Wallace was merely exercising an old adage of the legal profession—if the facts are against you, argue the law; if the law is against you, argue the facts; if both are against you, give the opposing attorney hell. Moreover, Wallace's adaptations to hecklers were highly effective in enhancing the impact of his presentation to the "closed-negative" portion of his audience and emphasizing the polarization between his groups of auditors.

Eventually, protestors used the "silent protest" to negate Wallace's stylistic manouver. A silent protest was effective in Salem, Virginia; students scattered among the audience of 8,500 held up signs reading "Silent Protest." Without verbal heckling, "Mr. Wallace stumbled through his speech, got little response from the packed house, and the whole rally was stale."[29] Another countermanouver was employed at San Francisco State College in October when hecklers actually cheered the speaker. The "horrible example" technique failed miserably in this setting, and the situation bothered Wallace noticeably.[30] In Beaumont, Texas, Wallace attacked the press and news media in general when students pursued a similar tactic.

But usually vocal protestors provided the necessary ammunition for Wallace's "horrible example." Toward the end of the campaign, heckling became more physical. In Youngstown, Ohio, Wallace was hit by a penny, but an egg and a small metal reel of electrician's tape missed. On October 22nd he was struck by an apple core in Oshkosh, Wisconsin; a penny and an egg missed. In Denver a love medallion was thrown.

Thus just as George Wallace served a useful function for America by articulating the feelings of another segment of the population, it might be argued that this group of closed-negative auditors also performed a useful function—articulating a counter-reaction, particularly through the self-controlled types of protest which emerged during the final stages of the campaign. As a message formulator, Wallace was able to effectively use the group which remained closed-negative as a means of reinforcing closed-positive auditors, reassuring them that their negative reactions toward youthful dissenters were justified and that the threat was real.

IV.

When the votes were tallied, George Wallace carried only five southern states, with a combined total of 45 electoral votes. He came close in a few other southern and border states, but far short of his more optimistic predictions. While the presidency was decided by the electoral college rather than by the House of Representatives, denying Wallace the power he had hoped to exert, he felt his campaign had forced acceptance by the Nixon Administration of a "Southern strategy" more favorable to Wallace supporters.[31]

Whatever it did not do, the third-party effort forced both Democrats and Republicans to more critically evaluate their programs to win voters back into their parties. Perhaps the most positive value of the Wallace candidacy was the articulation of minority views which might otherwise have been ignored, and the identification of attitudes not previously recognized for serious consideration. Perhaps the most serious disadvantage of the third-party effort was the strong polarization encouraged by reinforcing closed attitudes—both closed-positive and closed-negative. George Wallace proved that through devoting himself to the identification and articulation of suppressed and ignored fears and goals that he could gain a measure of power. Through speaking in terms acceptable to the closed-positive and barely "open" auditor, he also limited his candidacy as acceptable only to those auditors. Moreover, part of the rhetorical potency of Wallace's 1968 campaign is attributable to the

exploitation of the polarization evident in his audiences. Wallace used this polarization to heighten the immediate impact of his speaking and to rally and solidify closed-positive auditors.

## REFERENCES

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[2]Christian Science Monitor (November 7, 1968), p. 5.

[3]National Observer (September 23, 1968), p. 1.

[4]Ibid, p. 1.

[5]Columbus Citizen-Journal (July 22, 1968), p. 24.

[6]Christian Science Monitor (October 26, 1968), p. 5.

[7]National Observer (September 23, 1968), p. 1.

[8]Ibid, p. 1.

[9]Ibid, p. 9.

[10]Christian Science Monitor (October 8, 1968), p. 3.

[11]Columbus Dispatch (August 7, 1968), p. 44A.

[12]Christian Science Monitor (November 1, 1968), p. 3.

[13]Christian Science Monitor (September 25, 1968), p. 16.

[14]National Observer (September 23, 1968), p. 9.

[15]Ibid, p. 9.

[16]Columbus Citizen-Journal (July 15, 1968), p. 21.

[17]Ibid, p. 21.

[18]Christian Science Monitor (September 18, 1968), p. 11.

[19]Christian Science Monitor (October 16, 1968), p. 14.

[20]Christian Science Monitor (August 1, 1968), p. 4.

[21]Christian Science Monitor (October 19, 1968), p. 12.

[22]Ibid, p. 12.

[23]National Observer (September 23, 1968), p. 9.

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[25]Wallace For President Committee, Wallace Campaign Kit (Birmingham, Alabama, 1968).

[26]National Observer (October 28, 1968), p. 1.

[27] Christian Science Monitor (October 8, 1968), p. 3.

[28] Christian Science Monitor (November 1, 1968), p. 13.

[29] National Observer (October 28, 1968), p. 9.

[30] Christian Science Monitor (October 19, 1968), p. 12.

[31] National Observer (November 11, 1968), p. 4.