

# 1

## The Political Speech

Denver. November 1994.

The motorcade heads downtown past snowbanks while police cars with flashers on hold back traffic. Al Gore, then vice president of the United States, is on his way to speak to the Council of Jewish Federations. The speech is one of four on his schedule that day, all written by both Bob and Eric, calculated to get the Clinton administration out of trouble. Republicans won control of Congress in the disastrous elections two weeks earlier, prompting speculation that Bill Clinton would abandon principle and move to the right.

The other day in Jakarta, Indonesia, someone asked Clinton about a Republican proposal for a constitutional amendment allowing prayer in schools. The president said he would “not rule anything out.”<sup>1</sup> The *Washington Post* reported this response on its front page, outraging Jewish groups, and we’ve hastily scheduled this speech to reassure them. Much of the speech will do that, but right now Bob worries about the opening.

A heel injury has forced Gore to limp toward the podium before speeches, supporting himself with a flamboyantly orange cane. Since the accident, he likes to start speeches with a string of heel jokes. We wanted to find a Jewish one, but nothing seemed appropriate until our intern, Julie Fanburg, came down from the library with a brilliant discovery.

That week’s Torah portion was about Jacob, who was born grasping the heel of his twin brother, Esau. Jacob—*Ya’akov*, in Hebrew—actually means “heel”! Perfect! Eric writes an opening.

Now in Denver, Bob’s not sure. These are mostly secular Jews. Will they find it too arcane? Inside the auditorium, Gore asks if the crowd will get it. Bob decides to take a chance. They should, he says. Gore gives him the wordless stare that means he’d better be right.

At the podium, though, Gore starts out tentatively. “This may be a stretch,” he says. Uh-oh.

But now he’s locked into the joke. “I’m told there’s a special biblical significance to my appearance this morning, given my heel injury,” he says, overexplaining because he’s unsure. “The Torah—.”

The audience explodes with laughter. Bob is startled. So is Gore. But he isn’t too taken aback to improvise. “I hadn’t *realized*,” he says, pretending absolute incredulity, “so many of you *read* the— . . .”

More laughter. “Jacob was born grasping—I say this for those *few* who have not read— . . .”

Now everybody’s roaring. Staffers are high-fiving Bob. *You guys wrote that? Great!* Finally, he’s relaxed.

Can one, somewhat serendipitous remark really matter as much as Gore’s policy points? Of course not; but for politicians, speeches are about both policy *and* personality. Is the politician smart? Funny? Compassionate? Voters care about these questions, so politicians must. A joke can mean a lot.

Gore’s four speeches that day took him from Washington to Denver, where in addition to the Jewish Council he talked to a Native American convention. Then he flew down to Orlando for a meeting of Florida Democratic Party chairs, then to New York for another Democratic group meeting before heading back to Andrews Air Force Base. Not many people other than those in the White House—or running for it—go racing around the country to speak, living large chunks of their lives at thirty thousand feet.

Beyond the high-flying life and the national profile, though, Gore’s speaking needs mirrored the needs of every candidate and public servant from Congress to state legislatures to local school boards. In fact, those needs make political speech unique.

## **POLITICIANS MUST SPEAK MORE**

In national politics, four speeches in a day constitute a moderate load. Even first-term House members often speak more: at a prayer breakfast, at the caucus, on the floor, on the steps of the Capitol for off-the-cuff remarks to visiting school groups—and, after adjournment, maybe at a meeting of shop stewards or in a nearby restaurant for a fundraiser.

It is a routine both authors have lived, and it’s unique to politics. We know because while we specialize in political speech, we have also worked full time for and consulted with some of the biggest corporations in the world—among them, General Electric, Google, Pfizer, Texaco, American Express, Marriott, and Airbus. Many corporate CEOs believe speaking

once a week is a lot. While writing this chapter, we looked back at the White House index covering our years together. In two years, Al Gore spoke 556 times, largely from texts that we'd written. And those were just the prepared texts; politicians often speak using only a few talking points, or nothing at all.

Their lives weren't always like this. In his book *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffrey K. Tulis calculates that from George Washington through William McKinley, American presidents spoke in public about ten times a year—and almost never about policy.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, especially during campaigns, even a state senator might talk ten times a day.

Speaking so often creates special needs. First, politicians need material they can recycle. Everybody knows that's true during a campaign, but these are the days of perpetual campaigns. Senators and their writers cannot possibly generate enough speech drafts to cover every appearance. They wouldn't want to even if they could. What politician with half a brain would have a formal text folded inside a jacket pocket for an intimate audience of a dozen well-heeled supporters at a fundraiser? The solution: a "stump," a set of remarks politicians deliver so often they can perform them without notes.

Sometimes politicians resent that option. In 2008, a reporter asked Michelle Obama if she got bored giving the same speech over and over again.<sup>3</sup> "Yeah, absolutely," she said.

But she did it. Most politicians eventually see that the sheer amount of day-in, day-out speaking makes recycling necessary.

This is true even at the highest levels, with politicians who have not just a speechwriter but a speechwriting team. So, for example, on July 14, 2017, Vice President Mike Pence opened a speech to the Retail Advocates Summit this way:

And I bring greetings this morning from a friend of mine, who's a businessman who knows just a little bit about retail, who's fighting every single day to unleash a new era of American opportunity and prosperity. I bring greetings from the forty-fifth president of the United States of America, President Donald Trump.

Later that day, he opened this way, talking to the National Governors Association:

And I bring greetings today from my friend, a champion of federalism who is fighting every single day to restore power to the states and to the people, the forty-fifth president of the United States of America, President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

In the same speech, Pence mentioned the major issue for that week: health care.

Every day Obamacare survives is another day the American economy and American families struggle. We all remember the broken promises that made it possible for Obamacare to get passed. You remember them? They said if you like your doctor you could keep them—not true. They said if you like your health insurance you could keep it—not true. We were told that health insurance costs would go down. That one wasn't true either.

Three days later, he talked at a Healthcare Roundtable. Here's what he said:

We all remember the broken promises of Obamacare. I have Dr. Price here. He and I were both members of Congress when the debate over Obamacare happened in the Congress seven years ago. I can still hear those promises ringing in my ears, can't you? If you like your doctor, you can keep them—not true. If you like your health insurance, you can keep it—not true. The cost of health insurance would go down if Obamacare passed—not true.

Does this kind of repetition seem unimaginative? Lazy? It's not. It allows speakers to use an effective bit more than once and, like actors in a play, to become fluent at it. Recycling material is smart.

That heavy, never-ending speech load leads to a second necessity: Politicians must rely on material prepared by others. Clearly, people delivering hundreds of speeches a year can't write them all. That's true even for skillful writers, like Gore. That day in Denver and Orlando, how could he have mastered the nuances of Middle East issues, biblical names, church and state questions, Native American concerns, and the volatile disputes of Democratic Party politics?

He couldn't. He had to rely on two speeches and on talking points from staffers like us who had the time to think about them.

"Politicians should write their own speeches," a reporter once told one of us. Often they wish they could. When Barack Obama made Jon Favreau his chief speechwriter, Favreau asked Obama's communications director, "Why? He's a great writer."

"He also has to be president," Robert Gibbs said.

Obama generally had a staff of senior writers. During his two terms, they churned out about four thousand speeches, all with the one overarching goal we discuss next.

## POLITICIANS MUST PERSUADE

During our years of corporate writing, neither of us produced a speech in which the speaker sounded angry, raised a voice, or pounded a lectern. In politics, all these things happen regularly. They help make political speech-writing fun. Luckily, emotions don't often reach the level they did in 1849, when a speech by Massachusetts abolitionist congressman Charles Sumner, so incensed a Southern colleague that he attacked Sumner at his desk, beating him unconscious with his gutta-percha cane. But when politicians sound furious, it's usually not an act.

That's not surprising. We argue at home about what's for dinner, or whether the kids can play video games before finishing their homework. Why shouldn't politicians get mad when they disagree about how to pay for cancer treatments, a company closing a factory or outsourcing jobs, or a president declaring war?

The contentiousness of political life means politicians need little of something that takes up a lot of space in public speaking textbooks: *informative speech*, the speech that should, as one text puts it, "convey knowledge or understanding."<sup>4</sup> There's room for informative speech in politics; just listen to a campaign organizer explaining a phone canvass to volunteers. But speeches by elected politicians almost always involve *persuasion*, the "process of creating, reinforcing, or changing people's actions."<sup>5</sup>

On the stump, politicians persuade people to vote for them. On the floor, they persuade people to support or oppose a bill. At a funeral, they persuade mourners that a dead friend lived a worthwhile life. Persuasive speeches, all. Moreover, they mostly use one kind. In Chapter 2, we examine three different types of questions central to persuasion: questions of fact (*Does North Korea have nuclear weapons?*), value (*Is that good or bad?*), and policy (*How should we handle it?*). In politics, politicians deal with the first two mostly to help answer the third.

Voters want politicians to solve problems. The solutions may be political (*Change the president!*) or based on issues (*Cut more taxes!*). Either way, speakers are urging—advocating—action, or *policy*.

Realizing that fact, values, and policy are *what* we argue about leaves open the question of *how* we argue. Aristotle identified the answer to how with his three modes of persuasion: *logos* (reasoning), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (the speaker's character).

Persuasion is vital in political life; after all, politicians run for office because they have strong beliefs. To further those beliefs, it only makes sense to use every persuasive tool, even when you might think they have no reason to do so. Floor speeches rarely change a single vote, but reporters—and thus their readers

and listeners—would look askance at a party that abandoned the effort to make a case for its position. Politicians take floor speeches seriously.

They persuade even when speaking to the friendly audiences that make up the bulk of their speaking schedule. Even friends need to hear evidence reinforcing their own beliefs. That's what makes them walk a precinct, write a check, or turn out on Election Day.

But in no way does this mean that persuasion alone is enough. Politicians have other needs.

## **POLITICIANS MUST BE LIKED**

Late in September 2012, Mitt Romney felt hopeful about his chances in November. One thing worried longtime Republican strategist Stuart Spencer.

"It's the likability factor," Spencer said. "Many people think that Obama hasn't delivered, but they still like him. I'd rather have a beer with him than Romney. Wouldn't you?"<sup>6</sup>

At a time when politicians argue about health care, war in Syria, and investigations into whether Russia "hacked" American elections, do voters really care about who passes the beer test? Yes. Politicians measure likability by what pollsters call "favorability" ratings. Gallup's favorability ratings that month showed Obama ahead of Romney 53–45.

These days, when people see video of a damning mistake online even before the speaker has finished, speeches can instantly win or lose votes. And while political races principally turn on issues, *personality* influences voters, too. Voters usually want their politicians likable: humble, appreciative, energetic, moral, exciting, witty, and compassionate.

Being liked doesn't necessarily mean saying only what the audience wants to hear. It does, however, often mean downplaying the views a particular audience isn't likely to favor and highlighting those it likes. And there are other factors, as well.

Four years after Romney's loss, it was Hillary Clinton's turn to worry about likability.

"Presidential politics tends to be dominated by personality," wrote a *Washington Post* reporter, saying Clinton "may be hard pressed to win a traditional presidential election in which likability matters most."<sup>7</sup> Other reporters said something similar, sometimes quoting the beer test. And in her case, they mentioned the "mountain of evidence" making her unique. Much of that evidence was about one indisputable fact. Hillary Clinton is a woman.

Colleen Ammerman, director of Harvard Business School's Gender Initiative, saw here an old frustrating story. Women with strong ambitions and opinions "typically take a likability hit," she told *HuffPost*, which reported that

“most people” expect women to be “feminine—quiet, supportive, nurturing and definitely not ambitious.”<sup>8</sup>

Neither the beer test nor gender alone usually decides an election. But it can. It is still a fact that in the United States, about 8 percent of Republicans, 6 percent of Independents, and 3 percent of Democrats tell pollsters they would not vote for a qualified woman from their own party for president. In January 2019, no sooner had Elizabeth Warren declared her intention to run for president than reporters focused on this issue. “I’ll say it,” wrote defiant *Daily Beast* columnist Matt Lewis, “Elizabeth Warren isn’t likeable.”<sup>9</sup> Influencing likability—unfortunately—is one quality vital to effective political speech.

Now we look at one more political need.

## **POLITICIANS MUST STAY UPBEAT**

In 1979, Jimmy Carter used an energy speech to deliver a sermon. His pollster, Pat Caddell, had persuaded Carter that Americans needed not optimism but candor.

Speaking from the Oval Office, Carter warned Americans that their “erosion of confidence in the future” was “threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.” He not only blamed voters for their problems but promised no solution.

The result: Historians call it Carter’s “malaise” speech, using a word that the president never spoke but did appear in Caddell’s original memo. Patrick Anderson, Carter’s campaign speechwriter, later wrote that the president had “embraced Pat Caddell’s mumbo jumbo about a national crisis of spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

“No one ever took his speeches seriously again,” Anderson wrote.<sup>11</sup>

Really, the speech wasn’t so bleak, and of course many voters continued to trust Carter. But the controversy that speech inspired shows how unusual *any* measure of pessimism is in politics. Voters find it hard to hear that they are at fault, or that there may be no solutions. Partisans want to know they *can* win the election, though the polls say no; that government *can* and *will* help; that a bill *will* pass.

In a sense, they want speeches to resemble a well-made Hollywood feature, raising serious issues, like corruption, but providing a happy ending by the closing credits. “We chose hope over fear,” Barack Obama said in his inaugural address, echoing his campaign theme. There are ways to be optimistic without sounding mindless. But the relentless need to promise success imposes sharp limits on the complexity of political debate.

Here again, we do not argue from anecdotal evidence alone. The classic research on this issue comes from two University of Pennsylvania professors, Harold Zullo and Martin Seligman. Beginning with the 1900 election

(McKinley v. Bryan), they analyzed the nomination acceptance speeches for every race through 1984.<sup>12</sup> Their question: Was there a correlation between optimism and outcome?

Candidates whose speeches were “sunnier” won eighteen of twenty-two elections. Three of the four exceptions involved Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which might mean that Americans will listen to pessimists if the situation is dire. But even FDR leavened his message with hope. “We have nothing to fear,” he argued, “but fear itself.” Similarly, Donald Trump appealed to the anger and frustration of the forgotten American. But he also told Americans they could be great again.

If the need for optimism can limit a speech’s complexity, so too can another reality of political life.

## POLITICIANS MUST SPEAK TO AVERAGE FOLKS

In 2008, Professor Elvin Lim, mentioned in the Introduction and who expresses his views in more detail later, analyzed every single American presidential inaugural speech, using one gauge of complex language: the Flesch-Kincaid reading level assessment.<sup>13</sup> The results distressed him. He found that in the nineteenth century, inaugural speeches were written for college graduates and averaged sixty-word sentences—three times longer than the average today.

### BOX 1.1

#### THE FLESCH-KINCAID READABILITY TEST

He created it in 1948. Except for a little revision from John Kincaid, nobody has needed to change much about educator Rudolf Flesch’s invention. Now called the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test, its simple yet effective formula can tell you how many Americans are likely to understand what you’ve written.

For those of you using Microsoft Word, it’s the little box that pops up after Spelling and Grammar Check. It looks like the image on the right. Note the elements besides grade level. Checking sentence length and percentage of passive verbs can really help speechwriters.

Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	8022
Characters	39486
Paragraphs	256
Sentences	185
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.2
Words per Sentence	39.4
Characters per Word	4.7
Readability	
Passive Sentences	29%
Flesch Reading Ease	43.4
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	13.9
OK	

For most people in politics, the change makes perfect sense. Rhetoric has become simpler as the country has become more democratic. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, wrote his inaugural for a tiny educated elite—not backwoods farmers in Virginia, or most women, or slaves forbidden to learn reading. Modern presidents draw a television audience on Inauguration Day almost ten times the entire population in Jefferson’s America.

In 2017, Americans averaged a seventh-grade reading level. Forty percent of Americans struggled with language written for fourth graders. Op-eds can confuse even skillful readers. They can start over. Those listening to a speech don’t have that option.

Luckily, writers can express a lot with short sentences and simple words—like the one who thought up, “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.” Because power in speech depends so much on concrete detail and repetition, simplicity precludes neither profundity nor power. We see this in one of 1988 presidential candidate Jesse Jackson’s most effective moments from that year’s “Keep Hope Alive” Democratic National Convention speech:

Most poor people are not on welfare. They work hard every day. . . . They catch the early bus. They work every day. They raise other people’s children. They work every day. They clean the streets. They work every day. They drive vans and cabs. They work every day. They change the beds you slept in at these hotels last night and can’t get a union contract. They work every day.

Why is this passage so effective after almost three decades? The reasons include Jackson’s use of repetition and his ability to pick examples that create a shock of recognition in the audience, both elements we will examine later in the book.

But look, too, at how easy his language is for average Americans to understand. Jackson uses fifty-six one-syllable words out of seventy-one, and of the fifteen words that have two syllables, the word *every* accounts for six. Naturally, simple doesn’t mean simple-minded. Though the Flesch-Kincaid test measures Jackson’s excerpt at a little below fourth-grade level, it made people with doctorates weep.

In order to write so that voters understand, speechwriters should be comfortable using sentence fragments and other modes of expression that wouldn’t work in a formal essay or grant application. In speaking, it’s fine to begin a sentence with “But” or “And.” To be more conversational, you will have to ignore the wavy lines underneath your words indicating you need a spelling check. But you can do it.

We also suggest keeping most speeches short. Politicians often get requests to speak for a half-hour. Surveys show, however, that after twenty minutes, the

attention of an audience is virtually zero. Even the authors have a hard time staying riveted during a State of the Union speech without a trip to raid the refrigerator.

Of course, the live audience is not the politician's only concern. Unlike most speakers, politicians have at least two sets of listeners: the people sitting in front of them and the secondary audiences reading news stories or watching snips on TV or YouTube. Speeches can influence listeners long after they end, which leads to a final point.

## POLITICIANS MUST GET QUOTED

*Sound bite.* The term appears as early as 1980 in a *Washington Post* piece quoting former White House aide Bill Rhatigan. "Any editor watching needs a concise 30-second sound bite. Any more than that, you're losing them."<sup>14</sup>

Now in the Twitter age, we count the number of characters, not just seconds. But the concept of a *sound bite* remains the same—a brief phrase memorably summing up an important idea or the point in a speech.

To some, that represents everything wrong with politics. Only about eight seconds of the average speech now make news. That's not much time to capture the complexity of an issue. But those are eight important seconds. Politicians need memorable lines. Reporters may not quote more. TV producers may not run much more. Still, sound bites uttered by a politician that run on even one TV talk show can reach millions of people. Moreover, they are neither new nor meaningless. Take these:

Give me liberty or give me death.

It's morning in America.

Yes we can.

Make America great again.

All four implied significant messages, easily understood by those who heard them. Despite their denials, speechwriters do work to provide sound bites. We know because we have. While later we write more about how to use them, right now we want readers at least to imagine that there might be some justification for phrases that sum up an idea in a way hard to forget. For if you can't make your point succinct and interesting, how can you be sure you have one?

Let's sum up. Usually, politicians must speak a lot. Their speeches need to accomplish five things. They must help the speaker be

- persuasive—about problems and solutions,
- likable,
- upbeat,
- understood by average folks, and
- quotable.

## FINAL WORDS

This chapter has described what politicians need, not what we—or they—hope. Political speech has many flaws. We believe politicians should move and inspire listeners while they build a substantive case for ideas. They should be frank about the uncertainties surrounding proposals, seek out chances to debate in public with those on the other side, and seize every opportunity to promote candor.

These qualities are not absent from politics. The need for them has changed as America has changed. We hear them in committee meetings, in small groups, and in other ways when the cameras are not on.

In 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson came before Congress and asked it to declare war on Germany, not a single American heard him other than those in the hall. There was no YouTube, television, or radio. While newspapers widely reprinted Wilson's speech, relatively few Americans read it. The speech would have been way too hard for them anyway. It was written at a college junior's level when fewer than one out of ten Americans had gotten past eighth grade.

But one thing did make it through to most Americans: a quote. They knew Wilson wanted to “make the world safe for democracy.” That one sentence was enough to help galvanize much of the country.

In the hundred years since Wilson's speech, radio, television, cable, and the internet have combined with the rise in the ability of Americans to read. In fact, getting quoted these days is almost too easy.

Whether it be Hillary Clinton's “basket of deplorables” in 2016, or Donald Trump's “there is blame on both sides” after the Charlottesville rally a year later, each found a home online. The two-edged sword of such permanence is not lost on politicians. They need to speak vividly. But even the most outspoken politicians must think twice about candor.

Perhaps as a result, Americans see less of an institution they saw regularly during much of the last fifty years: presidential press conferences. John F. Kennedy held about two a month. Trump held only one in his entire first year in office. Instead, presidents send press secretaries out to brief reporters. While they travel around the country, they play favorites—either states where they are popular or the battleground states.

“In his first term,” reports Stanford University’s Shanto Iyengar in his book, *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, “more than half of [Barack Obama’s] domestic travel went to the thirteen battleground states.”<sup>15</sup> This practice is not likely to change.

Technology has dramatically increased Americans’ ability to get informed—or misinformed. Websites offer substantive discussions of virtually any issue with policy implications, and listeners need sophistication to recognize bias. Yet speeches remain vitally important.

They remain the staple not just for presidents but for any politician, because they satisfy the special needs politicians have. Through those speeches they discuss policy, pay tribute, comment on national events, or urge action. They communicate views, characterize themselves, and persuade listeners. And they do that in real time, in front of an audience, “eyeball to eyeball.” No other form of communication can do all of that.

Wouldn’t it be nice, then, if one format existed that could work to meet all those needs? Actually, it does. Surprisingly, you can learn a single structure that’s appropriate for almost every political occasion, especially when enlivened with what we have called the LAWS of persuasive speechwriting: language, anecdote, wit, and support.

Before you learn that structure, let’s set the stage. How will you go about persuading, whom will you persuade, and where will you find what you need to get the job done? We explore answers to those questions in the next three chapters.