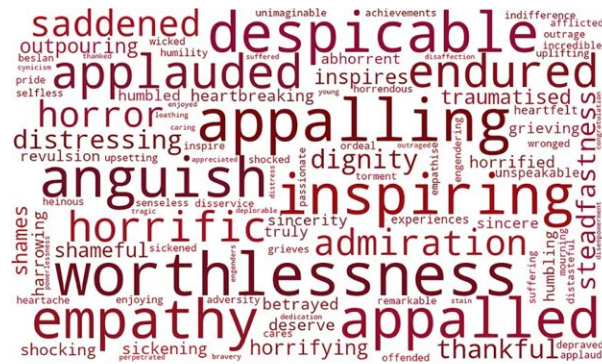
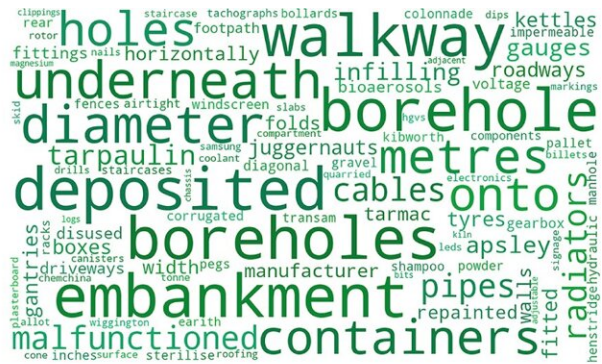


When and why do politicians use emotive rhetoric in parliamentary speeches?

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(a) Emotive



(b) Neutral

Word Clouds of Emotive and Neutral Words. Credit: Universitat Pompeu Fabra - Barcelona

Politicians use emotional resources in their speeches in parliament depending on the type of debate and use emotive rhetoric strategically and selectively, mainly to attract voters. This is one of the main conclusions of a study published in the journal *American Political Science Review* (APSR) involving Toni Rodon, a professor with the UPF Department of Political and Social Sciences and member of the Research Group on Institutions and Political Actors, together with Moritz Osnabrügge (Durham University, as first author) and Sara B. Hobolt (London School of Economics and Political Science).

"Our research provides evidence that incentives to attract voters differ systematically depending on the type of debate"

In recent years, much research has been done showing that emotions are important in politics and that the use of emotive rhetoric, based on positive or negative language, is common during election campaigns. Research has also been conducted within political parties regarding the stance adopted and the dissent expressed in parliamentary debates, but when and why politicians use emotive rhetoric in their legislative speeches has been studied less, and is now elaborated on by the authors in their work.

Emotive language usually refers to a style of communication that arouses an emotional response from the listener, thus evoking positive or negative reactions that go beyond the specific meaning of the word or phrase used. So, it can be a powerful tool to convince people of the validity of a particular message, and from the point of view of electoral competition, there is evidence linking emotion-eliciting appeals with the electoral success of certain political formations.

Analysis of two million speeches in the House of Commons and in the Dáil Éireann

The analysis included in article covers two million speeches delivered in the House of Commons and in the Dáil Éireann, the lower houses of parliament of Great Britain and Ireland, respectively. Specifically, a million parliamentary speeches, i.e., all those that were delivered in the House of Commons between 2001 and 2019, and a further one million speeches delivered in the Dáil Éireann between 2002 and 2013.

The authors chose the British Parliament because it is one of the oldest

in the world, an ideal institutional environment for studying these kinds of speeches. "We focused on the House of Commons because it is the more powerful of the two legislative chambers in the UK and the debates held there differ in terms of their profile and the size of the audience, which has allowed us to compare emotive rhetoric across different types of debate," the authors assert. In a second stage, the study of the speeches delivered in the lower house of the Irish parliament has allowed confirming and generalizing their findings.

High and low profile legislative debates: Two different styles of discourse

The article which, based on an analysis of how politicians use emotive rhetoric in parliament, contributes to the understanding of political competition and legislative behavior, underlines differences with regard to incentives that legislators have according to the type of debate. "Our research provides evidence that incentives to attract voters differ systematically depending on the type of debate," the authors suggest. Thus, in high-profile legislative debates, parliamentarians have more incentives to use emotive rhetoric to attract the attention of a wider audience, which they capture by using more emotive political content and language.

It could be said that PMQs is the debate to which citizens are most exposed, and this gives incentives for MPs to use more emotive language.

In the House of Commons, this is the case of Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), a debate held weekly. It is a convention during which the prime minister answers questions from MPs, especially the leader of the opposition. It is the parliamentary highlight of the week, broadcast live and covered extensively by the media.

It could be said that PMQs is the debate to which citizens are most exposed, and this gives incentives for MPs to use more emotive language. Other high-profile debates are the Queen's Speech, which take place annually at the start of each new year of parliament (at which the Queen reads the government's main priorities, and which also involves the prime minister and the opposition leader) or the Dáil Leaders' Questions, which are put to the Irish prime minister.

Conversely, in low-profile legislative debates, which are not so avidly followed and generate less expectation, politicians mostly address their colleagues in parliament, and therefore emotional rhetoric is less pronounced.

A new application to measure emotive rhetoric

The study presents a new methodological application to measure emotive rhetoric, and it does so by combining the Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW) dictionary, with word-embedding techniques that enables creating a dictionary specific to the field. Thus, the new tool categorizes emotional and neutral words via ANEW and also identifies new words used in parliamentary speeches to broaden these two categories.

Word Clouds of Emotive and Neutral Words

For example, some of the neutral words incorporated by the authors are "walkway," "diameter," "meters" and "radiators" and some of the emotional words, "appalling," "empathy," "horrific" and "admiration." With regard to areas where we find a higher average level of emotive rhetoric there is "fabric of society," "social groups" and "welfare and quality of life," and the areas where we find a lower level of emotive rhetoric, "political system" and "economy." "Our measurement

technique more accurately captures the emotive use of language in a political environment," the researchers assert.

The authors conclude their work with a reminder: although emotive parliamentary speeches may have positive implications, with increased public interest in the activities of their representatives and in politics in general, there is the risk of negative consequences: "Emotive [rhetoric](#) may also increase polarization and may favor politicians who prioritize emotional appeals over competent, coherent policy, and can harm the quality of deliberation and at the same time the quality of democratic representation," they warn.

More information: Moritz Osnabrügge et al, Playing to the Gallery: Emotive Rhetoric in Parliaments, *American Political Science Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055421000356](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000356)

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