

LANGUAGE OF HATE AND DISCRIMINATION IN POLITICS: DOES IT MATTER WHO WE ARE TO CARE

Medea Despotashvili

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Tbilisi State University (Georgia)

Abstract

This study investigates voters' evaluation of politicians' speeches containing hate language, compared with the ones stressing equality or maintaining neutral attitude. The research was conducted in two stages ten years apart. Using correlation analysis and intergroup comparisons, the study examines the relationship between age, education level, and speech ratings. Our findings reveal no significant gender differences in speech evaluation. The results shed light on the complex interplay between demographic factors and speech evaluation. Comparison between two sets of data collected ten years apart also reveals different pattern of attitudes towards hate language between age groups.

Keywords: *Hate language, equality, perception, political behavior.*

1. Introduction

Hate language, defined as the use of derogatory or inflammatory speech targeting individuals or groups based on their characteristics (Cervone et.al, 2021), has become increasingly prevalent in media and political discourse. This article presents an attempt to contribute the understanding of the phenomenon of hate language through the lenses of social psychology and political psychology, focusing on its impact on individuals, groups, and society as a whole.

Hate speech and its evaluation in political discourse have garnered increasing attention in recent years. This study aims to address the relationship between age, education level, and speech evaluation, with a specific focus on hate speech and neutral speech in political contexts. The study also attempts to compare the attitudes towards hate language in ten years interval.

1.1. Social psychology perspective

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals derive their self-concept from their group memberships and engage in ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation to enhance their self-esteem. Hate language often serves as a tool for reinforcing ingroup solidarity by vilifying outgroups, thereby exacerbating intergroup conflict and prejudice (Leach et al., 2007). From the perspective of social cognitive theory of prejudice, cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and illusory correlation contribute to the selective processing of information that confirms existing stereotypes and prejudices (Devine, 1989). Media representations of marginalized groups often perpetuate negative stereotypes through sensationalized reporting and selective framing, fueling the proliferation of hate speech and discriminatory attitudes (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Furthermore, the contact hypothesis suggests that positive interactions between members of different groups can reduce prejudice and intergroup hostility (Allport, 1954). However, hate language in media and politics can create a hostile environment that inhibits intergroup contact, perpetuating stereotypes and increasing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

1.2. Political psychology perspective

Group polarization Theory analyses the process, where exposure to extreme viewpoints, facilitated by hate language in political discourse, can intensify existing attitudes and contribute to the polarization of society (Sunstein, 2002). The use of hate speech by political leaders and media figures can galvanize supporters, foster loyalty, and mobilize collective action, thereby influencing electoral outcomes and policy decisions (Bruneau & Kteily, 2017). From another perspective, moral disengagement enables individuals to justify and rationalize hate speech by dehumanizing and delegitimizing outgroups (Bandura, 1999). By distancing themselves from the moral implications of their

actions, individuals can engage in hate speech without experiencing guilt or remorse, perpetuating discrimination and hostility (Menzel & Fischer, 2013). In addition, individuals predisposed to authoritarian attitudes are more likely to endorse hate speech and support authoritarian leaders who espouse discriminatory rhetoric (Altemeyer, 1998). Authoritarian leaders often use hate language to scapegoat marginalized groups, mobilize support, and consolidate power, undermining democratic norms and values (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009).

The Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1984) posits that individuals are reluctant to express opinions that deviate from perceived societal norms, fearing social isolation or reprisal. Hate language, when normalized within a political context, can create an atmosphere of intimidation, suppressing dissenting voices and perpetuating discriminatory attitudes (Moy & Gastil, 2006). Consequently, voters may conform to dominant narratives, even if they personally disapprove of hate speech, leading to polarization and the marginalization of vulnerable populations.

Research has shown that exposure to hate speech can significantly influence electoral behavior. A study by Miller and Prentice (2016) found that voters exposed to xenophobic rhetoric were more likely to endorse anti-immigrant policies and candidates, irrespective of their prior attitudes. Similarly, a longitudinal analysis by Green et al. (2018) demonstrated a positive correlation between exposure to hate speech on social media and support for authoritarian political leaders. These findings underscore the potential for hate language to shape voters' perceptions and preferences, with implications for democratic decision-making.

Several factors may moderate the relationship between hate language and voters' attitudes. For instance, research by Mutz (2006) suggests that individual differences in media literacy and cognitive processing can mitigate the impact of hate speech, particularly among educated voters. Additionally, contextual factors such as the presence of counter-narratives or institutional responses to hate speech may attenuate its effects on public opinion (Davenport & Oliver, 2019). Understanding these moderating influences is essential for developing effective interventions to combat the proliferation of hate speech in political discourse.

2. Method and design

Participants: The research was conducted in two stages: the first stage took place in 2013 and the second – in 2023. The sample comprised 210 individuals at the first stage, and 245 individuals at the second stage recruited from diverse demographic backgrounds, including varying age cohorts ranging from 18 to 70 years.

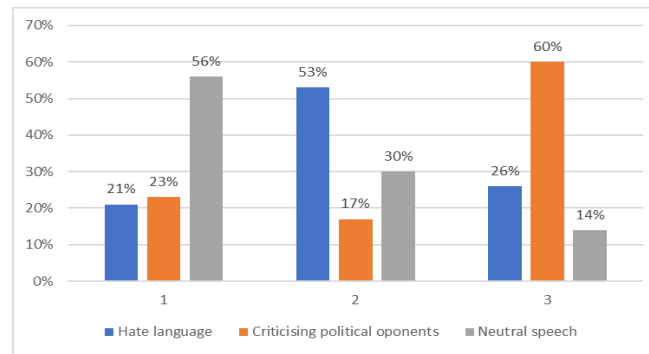
Procedure: Participants were given three texts as examples of political candidate's public speech. Candidate one used hate language against political opponents. Candidate two focused their speech on the achievement of the speaker and also criticized the opponents. Candidate three used neutral language only speaking about the politician's own accomplishments and goals. After reading three texts, the respondents were asked: "If there would be elections tomorrow, which of the candidates would you vote for in the first place, in the second place and in the third place."

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests to examine attitudes towards hate language across different age groups. Comparison between genders and education levels of the respondents were also analyzed.

2.1. The first stage of the research

In general, the first choice for voting for the majority (53%) of the respondents was a speech where political candidate criticized their opponents; the second choice for 60% of the respondents was a speech where political candidate used neutral language, and hate speech was put in the third place in rating (56%).

Figure 1. Ratings of politicians' speeches, 2013.



We grouped age into three subgroups: 18-35, 36-50, 51 and above. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to look more in detail into correlation of age with the evaluation of speeches. Grouping age into three subgroups revealed significant differences in attitudes towards hate language ($F=6.255$, $df=2$, $p<.05$) and neutral speech ($F=9.625$, $df=2$, $p<.001$) among different age groups. Post hoc analysis using Tukey HSD test indicated that respondents aged 18-35 found hate speech in politicians' discourse more acceptable ($M=2.1$) compared to those aged 51 and above ($M=2.64$), lower number means higher rating of the speech.

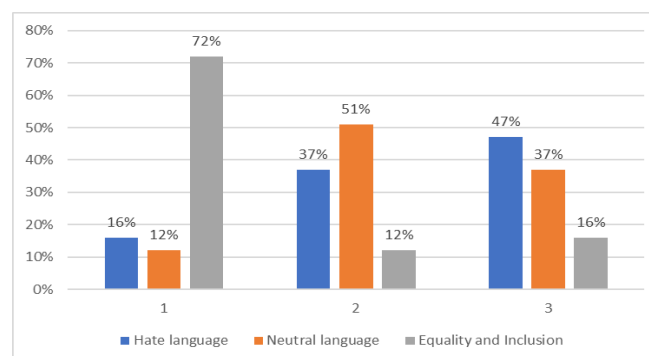
Analysis of variance demonstrated significant differences in attitudes towards hate speech based on education level. Attitudes towards politician's choice of language was significantly different amongst different education levels ($F=4.441$, $df=3$, $p<.005$). Post hoc analysis revealed that respondents with a university degree perceived hate speech as more unacceptable compared to high school graduates. The first found hate language as more unacceptable ($M=2.4$) than the second group ($M=1.5$).

2.2. The second stage of the study

The study was repeated ten years later, in 2023, with modifications to the procedure. Participants were again presented with three texts containing examples of politicians' public speeches. Text one employed hate language towards specific target groups - gender, age, or ethnicity; text two remained neutral and focused on the political views of the candidate; and text three expressed values of equality and inclusion for different groups.

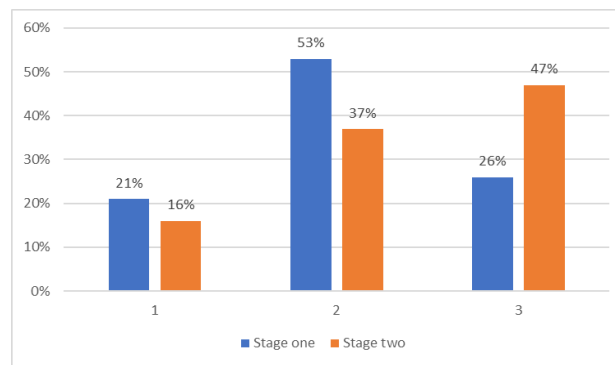
The majority of respondents (47%) chose a speech where the political candidate expressed values of equality and inclusion as their first choice. The second choice for 51% of respondents was a speech using neutral language, while hate speech was again rated the lowest, with 72% of respondents placing it in the third position.

Figure 2. Ratings of politicians' speeches, 2023.



Independence Chi-Square analysis was conducted to compare ratings of hate language between the 2013 and 2023 data. The analysis revealed statistically significant differences in the rating of political speeches containing hate language (Chi Square= 32.232 , $df=2$, $p<0.001$). Ten years later, a smaller percentage of the sample evaluated hate language as more preferred or even as the second choice. Conversely, a larger percentage of the sample rated hate language as least preferred.

Figure 3. Change of preferences between 2013 and 2023.



Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized to explore correlations between age and the evaluation of speeches in more detail. Grouping age into three subgroups revealed significant differences in attitudes towards hate language ($F=9$, $df=2$, $p<.001$) and language promoting equality and inclusion ($F=6.7$, $df=2$, $p<.001$) among different age groups. Post hoc analysis using Tukey HSD test indicated significant differences in evaluations of both types of speeches among all three age groups. Hate speech was least preferred by respondents in the 18-35 age group ($M=2.8$), followed by the 36-51 age group ($M=2.4$), and was more preferred by respondents aged 51 and above ($M=2.3$).

Language promoting inclusion and equality was most preferred by respondents in the 18-35 age group ($M=1.5$), followed by the 36-51 age group ($M=1.8$), and least preferred by respondents aged 51 and above ($M=1.9$). These findings differ from those of the first stage of our research, wherein younger respondents rated hate language more favorably than older individuals.

3. Discussion

This study delves into the nuanced dynamics of speech evaluation in political contexts, particularly focusing on hate speech and its intersection with demographic variables such as age and education level. Our findings contribute valuable insights into the complex interplay between these factors and attitudes towards political discourse.

The results reveal a notable shift in preferences over the ten-year period between 2013 and 2023. Initially, speeches criticizing opponents were favored, followed by those using neutral language, with hate speech rated the least preferred. However, in 2023, there was a remarkable change, with speeches promoting equality and inclusion garnering the highest preference among respondents. This shift underscores evolving societal norms and values, indicating a growing emphasis on inclusive and respectful discourse in political communication.

Age emerged as a significant determinant of speech evaluation, with younger respondents displaying greater tolerance towards hate speech compared to older individuals in the first stage of the study. This finding contradicts the conventional notion that younger generations are more progressive in their attitudes. Instead, it suggests a potential generational divide in perceptions of acceptable political discourse. Furthermore, older individuals showed a stronger preference for neutral language, reflecting a desire for less contentious rhetoric in political communication. This picture was reversed in the second stage of the research, where younger respondents had less tolerance towards hate speech and more preference of the language of equality, compared to the older respondents.

Education level also played a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards hate speech. Respondents with higher education levels were more likely to perceive hate speech as unacceptable, emphasizing the role of education in fostering critical thinking and tolerance. Additionally, higher education correlated with a preference for neutral language, indicating a desire for rational and constructive political discourse.

4. Conclusion

Hate language in media and politics has profound implications for social cohesion, intergroup relations, and political behavior. Future research should continue to explore the complex interplay between individual attitudes, group dynamics, and institutional factors in shaping the prevalence and impact of hate language. Moreover, efforts to mitigate the spread of hate speech should focus on promoting empathy, critical thinking, and inclusive discourse to foster a more tolerant and equitable society.

In conclusion, this study highlights the intricate interplay between demographic factors and speech evaluation in political contexts. The findings underscore the importance of considering age and education level in understanding attitudes towards hate speech and political discourse. The observed shift towards inclusive speech in 2023 reflects evolving societal values, emphasizing the need for politicians to adapt their communication strategies to resonate with changing public sentiments. Moving forward, continued research in this area is essential to inform efforts aimed at promoting respectful and inclusive political discourse in democratic societies.

Future research should further explore the mechanisms underlying these relationships and investigate additional factors that may influence speech evaluation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for promoting inclusive and respectful communication in political contexts.

References

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Altemeyer, B. (1998). The other “authoritarian personality”. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 30, 47-92.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(3), 193-209.
- Bruneau, E., & Kteily, N. (2017). The enemy as animal: Symmetric dehumanization during asymmetric warfare. *PLoS ONE*, 12(9), e0181422.
- Cervone, C., Augoustinos, M., & Maass, A. (2021). The Language of Derogation and Hate: Functions, Consequences, and Reappropriation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 40(1), 80-101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X20967394>
- Davenport, L. D., & Oliver, E. (2019). Hate Speech, Institutional Responses, and Countermobilization. *American Politics Research*, 47(2), 335-360.
- Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(1), 5-18.
- Dixon, T. L., & Linz, D. (2000). Overrepresentation and underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as lawbreakers on television news. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 131-154.
- Green, J., Edgerton, J., Naftel, D., Shoub, K., & Cranmer, S. J. (2018). Elusive Consensus: Polarization in Elite Communication on the Environment. *Science Advances*, 4(10), eaat8680.
- Hetherington, M. J., & Weiler, J. D. (2009). *Authoritarianism and polarization in American politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leach, C. W., et al. (2007). Group-level self-definition and self-investment: A hierarchical (multicomponent) model of in-group identification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(5), 144-165.
- Menzel, C. R., & Fischer, P. (2013). Moral disengagement in the legitimation and realization of aggressive behavior in soccer and ice hockey. *Aggressive Behavior*, 39(1), 193-202.
- Miller, J. M., & Prentice, N. M. (2016). Immigration, Xenophobia, and Political Decision Making: Testing the Role of Perceived Group Threat. *Political Psychology*, 37(6), 835-851.
- Moy, P., & Gastil, J. (2006). Predicting Deliberative Conversation: The Impact of Discussion Networks, Media Use, and Political Cynicism on Civic Knowledge and Engagement. *Journal of Communication*, 56(3), 381-403.
- Mutz, D. C. (2006). *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2002). The law of group polarization. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10(2), 175-195.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-47). Brooks/Cole.