

Read the Room: The Effect of Campaign Event Format on the Use of Emotional Language

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Abstract: A growing political psychology literature shows the profound effects of emotions on political behavior and public opinion. Yet we know little on how and why political elites harness emotional language in their rhetoric despite the powerful influence such cues can have. This study investigates the topic by examining how the format of a campaign event affects candidates' ability to use emotional language. I argue that event formats should matter because they change the rhetorical circumstance which alters how persuasive emotional appeals are. I collected a corpus of transcripts from presidential primary campaign events for all candidates for major party nominations from 2000-2020. I measured the use of emotional language in these transcripts using the EmoLex emotional sentiment dictionaries. I show that there are large differences in patterns of emotional rhetoric across campaign event formats. Events where candidates do not have autonomy over their rhetoric feature less emotional rhetoric on average. Events where the audience does not support the candidate also feature fewer emotional cues. Events where the audience has significant potential to support a candidate feature more negatively valenced emotions and more trust language. The findings have significant implications for the organization and structuring of presidential primaries.

*“I’m f***ing moving to Iowa” – Kamala Harris¹*

When politicians (and, more recently, politically inspired amateurs) decide that they want to campaign for a major party’s presidential nomination, they are signing up for a lot of time talking to a lot of people. They will be attending the Iowa State Fair. They will attend a Politics & Eggs event at Saint Anselm College. The Democrats will speak at the newly renamed Eleanor Roosevelt Dinner and attend Jim Clyburn’s Fish Fry. The Republicans have their Lincoln-Reagan Dinner and often make it a point to speak at CPAC. In between are countless rallies, town halls, fundraisers, press events, meet and greets, and house parties.

All of these individual events coalesce into a campaign that is heavily focused on the ground game, at least until the surviving candidates make it to Super Tuesday. This emphasis on in-person campaigning is effectively dictated by the structure of the races, which puts early emphasis on small states with political cultures that demand candidate-voter interactions, and the nature of the electorate, which is deprived of easy heuristics like partisanship or large ideological differences to simplify decision processes. The result is that candidates spend hour upon hour, month after month pleading their case to voters in the early states and beyond.

As they traipse around attempting to motivate, persuade, and engage, candidates find a powerful weapon in their arsenals in the form of emotional appeals. Since at least Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* the importance of emotionality or pathos has been appreciated. And a growing political psychology literature (e.g. Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Banks, 2014; Brader, 2006; Groenendyk & Banks, 2014; Marcus, 2000; Phoenix, 2019; Valentino et al., 2011) gives us a better understanding of the nature and magnitude of influence that emotional appeals possess.

Yet we know comparatively little about the practical ways candidates use emotions. Studies documenting the use of emotional cues and language in campaign communication are

¹ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/9/19/20873953/kamala-harris-iowa-south-carolina-primary>

few (Borah, 2016; Brader, 2006; Phoenix, 2019; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Scott & McDonald, 2020). Most of these studies do not consider primaries, yet the distinctive conditions of the race described above show why they stand as a unique campaign communication environment. Furthermore, the studies looking at campaign emotionality are overwhelmingly focused on a narrow view of campaign strategy as a driving factor: Do candidates use emotions in situations where the elicited behavioral change should be advantageous? We know little about what alternative constraints might also be at work.

The implication is that we have a party nomination system that pushes candidates into ground-game events like rallies, town halls, and candidate forums but we have little notion of how these in-person event formats affect candidates' abilities to use emotional rhetoric despite the clear and powerful effect such rhetoric has on public opinion and political behavior.

I investigate this topic in this paper. I introduce two theoretical constructs to capture attributes of in-person campaign events: the candidates' autonomy over the rhetoric and the loyalty of the audience at the event. I conceptualize autonomy as the level of control the candidates possess over their rhetorical environment. For example, some campaign events involve candidates responding to questions from an audience. The candidates' responses are constrained by the need to abide by the give-and-take of the exchanges in a way they are not when speaking unilaterally to an assembled crowd. The candidates' autonomy is lower under such circumstances. I argue that events with low candidate autonomy will feature less emotional rhetoric on average because candidates must minimize explicit emotional appeals to maintain an interactive communication environment.

I conceptualize audience loyalty as the attachment the audience has to the candidate prior to the candidate's formal engagement with the crowd at this specific event. Some audiences meet

specifically to see a candidate and so the candidate can reasonably infer an established loyalty exists. Other audiences meet because of an attachment to another cause and so the candidates must assume that – while the crowd could be persuaded into support – there is no established loyalty. And sometimes the candidates speak in front of audiences that are ambivalent to their political ambitions and will never become loyal supporters. I argue that candidates will avoid emotionality at events with such weak audience loyalty as there is little reason to try and persuade the crowd if they are not inclined to be supportive.

In contrast, events with the potential for loyalty will feature high levels of negative emotions as candidates attempt to conjure a mutual outgroup threat, which prior literature suggests is an effective means of building a shared identity (Jardina, 2019), as well as high levels of trust as the candidate posits themselves as the guardian against this threat. This will be the case because such an emotional messaging strategy will be *rhetorically persuasive*, not because such a cocktail of emotional appeals induces receptivity to new information (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Finally, I argue that events with strong audience loyalty will use more positive emotions to make voters think that they have made a good choice. As a bond already exists between the candidate and the members of the audience, one does not need to be invented through a shared outgroup threat, freeing the candidate to embrace language meant to induce revelry in the shared connection that already exists. Such events will also most closely hew to the inference of the political psychology literature by featuring high levels of approach emotions like anger and joy and low levels of persuasion emotions like fear and surprise. Taken together, these arguments form a theory on the ways event format effects rhetorical strategy, a category of incentives that works outside the existing behavioral strategy theory derived from the political psychology literature on the induced effects of emotional appeals.

I test these hypotheses using an original dataset of speeches and remarks made by declared presidential primary candidates from 2000-2020 gathered primarily from the C-SPAN Video Library. I measure the amount of emotional rhetoric in each transcript using the EmoLex emotional sentiment dictionaries (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). I regress these measures of the use of different emotional cues on indicator variables of the type of campaign event while controlling for notable candidate- and campaign-level features.

The results largely confirm my hypotheses. Events with low candidate autonomy feature less emotional rhetoric across the board. The same is true of events with weak audience loyalty. Events with high potential loyalty feature high levels of negative emotions and trust language. And events with strong loyalty feature more positive emotional language. I find that hypotheses reflecting the behavioral strategy theory find the least support. Taken together, the results point to the powerful role that event format has on the amount of emotional rhetoric candidates use, a role that appears to be conditional on how the format affects rhetorical strategy incentives. The findings have significant implications for how we organize our ground game-centric primaries.

Why Emotions Matter

Popular discussion of politics tends to gravitate toward emotionality. President Trump's rhetoric, from his "American carnage" inauguration speech² to how he has discussed the COVID-19 pandemic,³ is often framed by the media in reference to anger. President Obama's rhetoric, on the other hand, was often discussed from an emotional lens of hope.⁴ Coverage of debates similarly highlights who appeared "fiery" or "reserved." The emotional nature of

² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/opinion/presidential-inauguration-2017/trump-gives-us-american-carnage>

³ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/campaign-chronicles/the-trump-campaign-brings-its-angry-tone-to-the-coronavirus-era>

⁴ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/deepdive/obama-legacy-promise-hope-44597110>

political speech is often among the first elements that journalists and pundits pick up on when trying to convey meaning to their audiences.

Recent political psychology and behavior studies suggest that this focus on emotionality is well placed. Emotions play a large role in politics (Marcus, 2000). Anger operates as an approach emotion, leading to activation of political attitudes which can boost political participation (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014; Phoenix, 2019; Valentino et al., 2011). The connection between anger and symbolic racist attitudes also leads to higher rates of opposition to redistributive policies (Banks, 2014). Fear and anxiety, on the other hand, prompt people to search out new information and put more trust in experts (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Disgust can lead to the activation of Jim Crow racist attitudes (Banks, 2014). Enthusiasm plays a similar role as anger, leading people to greater levels of political activity based on their existing attitudes (Brader, 2006). This robust and growing empirical literature is coupled with a growing realization in normative theory that emotionality serves as a powerful compliment, rather than antagonist, to rationality (Morrell, 2010).

Given that the importance of emotions is a mainstay of conventional wisdom and that the powerful role emotions play is defended by a robust literature documenting effects on political behavior, public opinion, and political psychology it is peculiar that scholars of political communication and campaigns have paid the topic so little attention. Scholars have studied candidate tone (Geer, 2006; Payne & Baukus, 1998; West, 2010), but the literature makes clear that this is insufficient to appreciating the diverse effects of emotional cues. Anger and fear are both negatively valenced. The former prompts action and boosts turnout, the latter prompts reconsideration and introspection. Treating both as equivalent because of their mutual negative charge therefore overlooks an important distinction in the psychological processing they elicit.

The number of studies examining elite emotionality is small (Borah, 2016; Brader, 2006; Phoenix, 2019; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Scott & McDonald, 2020) and does not, as of yet, provide a robust theoretical accounting on why candidates use emotionality outside of the role of behavioral strategy considerations. Brader (2006) shows that challengers tend to use more fear in campaign ads while incumbents use more enthusiasm and that competitive races feature more fear and less enthusiasm. Similarly, Ridout & Searles (2011) find that frontrunners tend to use more enthusiasm and pride language while trailing candidate use more fear.⁵ These findings point toward campaigns evaluating their electoral situation and employing emotional cues strategically based on the type of behavioral response from the electorate would be most advantageous.

But more recent studies have begun noting important factors other than campaign strategy. Borah (2016) shows that the Republican presidential candidates in 2008 and 2012 used more fear rhetoric in their Facebook posts than Obama, who instead used enthusiasm as a defining emotional frame. It is unclear if this stems from a partisan difference or the fact that Obama was favored in both elections. Phoenix (2019) uses a discourse analysis to show that Black candidates generally avoid anger, although he does suggest that recent Black politicians like Nina Turner and Stacey Abrams may be pushing back on that trend. Scott & McDonald (2020) incorporate theories on gender and the emotional foundation of partisanship and find Republicans use more fear rhetoric and women candidates to use positively valenced emotional cues, most specifically joy.⁶ A secondary finding from Ridout & Searles (2011) is that

⁵ Counter to a strategic theory, however, they also find that trailing candidates use more anger, an emotion that should prompt further commitment to a disadvantageous electoral situation.

⁶ They also find that candidates performing well in the polls use more fear language while those performing worse use more anger, a pattern of results that runs counter to strategic theories on the use of emotions.

Republican Senate candidates used more fear and anger language than their Democratic counterparts.

What these studies suggest is that strategy matters for the use of emotions in campaigns but that it is far from the only salient consideration. The incorporation of theories on partisanship, gender, and race constraints is a welcome addition. But there are still other constraints that may very well exist and are worth deeper consideration. Given the powerful role emotions play in electoral politics, a more thorough understanding of when candidates can and cannot use emotionality as a rhetoric tool is important.

Campaign Event Format and Emotional Rhetoric

I pay special attention to the format in which a candidate communicates and how that may constrain the capacity to invoke emotional language. In the Aristotelian conception, emotional rhetoric is primarily valuable as a means of persuasion for its ability to influence the manner with which the audience perceives the message. Event formats present fundamentally distinct relationships between the rhetor and the audience. This may therefore affect both the rhetor's options and likelihood of success when employing emotional rhetoric. Additionally, scholars of rhetoric have long theorized that situational factors play a strong role in structuring the availability of rhetorical options (Blitzer, 1968; Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). Even if event format does not fundamentally alter the effectiveness of emotional rhetoric as a means of altering audience mindsets, it does vary the rhetorical situation to which rhetors respond.

Notably, what makes emotions an effective rhetorical tactic is not the same as what makes them an effective tool of altering political behavior. In the latter, emotional appeals are effective because they induce a desired behavioral response. But effectiveness from a rhetorical perspective is tied to how an emotion changes the audience's perception of an argument. It is the

argument itself that is meant to elicit a behavioral response; the emotionality's role is making that outcome more likely.

This distinction may seem minute, but even this minor difference can create conflicting scenarios. Consider an unpopular incumbent politician who is trailing in the polls. Their electoral situation would be best rectified by moving those who are undecided or voting for the competitor to reconsider their options. The political psychologist would thus prescribe a healthy dose of fear and anxiety appeals. But this candidate is also an incumbent, and so perhaps invoking fear and anxiety will make the candidate's argument that they are worthy of another term in office unpersuasive. A conflict between rhetorical strategy and behavioral strategy can create conflicting incentives that have, as of yet, not been adequately recognized by scholars examining the use of emotional appeals by candidates.

The importance of this is further amplified when we consider the reinforcement mechanism by which candidates learn what messages are effective. As described above, we are continuously learning about how emotional appeals affect voters. This naturally raises the question whether campaigns are aware of the effects. The most common response is that they are in the business of knowing what messages do and do not work. Campaigns that cannot effectively message will lose and so they invest great resources in honing their craft. Much of this occurs through trial and error. But when a candidate delivers remarks in front of a live audience, the responses they get – cheers, applause, laughter, silence, boos – will be primarily tied to the persuasiveness of their argument rather than the success at eliciting particular behavioral responses. This means what candidates learn from this trial-and-error process is primarily *rhetorical* effectiveness, not behavioral effectiveness. If event format is related to the

effectiveness of emotional rhetoric, as the above discussion suggests, then precisely how those event formats create distinct rhetorical circumstances is of utmost concern.

Many studies that look at rhetorical patterns in primaries struggle with the distinction of event format for a very simple reason: it requires a significant broadening of scope conditions (Bostdorff, 2009; Savoy, 2018, but see Schroedel et al., 2013). A similar problem affects the studies of emotionality in campaign communication (Borah, 2016; Brader, 2006; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Scott & McDonald, 2020). Whether it is campaign ads or social media posts or speeches, all of these studies examine messages as a singular entity without considering the important ways the format may interact with the ability to invoke emotional rhetoric.

There are two features of an event format that I specifically consider. The first is the degree of autonomy the candidate has over their message. In some contexts, candidates can speak directly to their audience in precisely the manner they wish. In others, candidates are engaging in dialogues with others – a voter, a journalist, another candidate – and do not have complete control over what is being communicated. In this latter situation they do not have full autonomy. The second feature is the candidate’s evaluation of the loyalty of the audience. At certain times, candidates may find themselves speaking primarily to true believers in their cause. At other times the audience may not be so decidedly in their corner.

Both format attributes should affect candidates’ ability to invoke emotional language. To explain why, consider the example of teaching a class. Anyone who has instructed both a large lecture and a smaller seminar knows that the method of presentation of material changes drastically across those two environments. Similarly, picture a class where the students are clearly disinterested in what you have to say compared to one in which they are highly engaged with the material and at the edges of their seats waiting for more. Once again, such conditions

tend to create different rhetorical impulses. The same basic logic, I argue, works in incentivizing or constraining the use of emotional rhetoric in campaign communication.

Starting with autonomy, we should expect that candidates will want to use emotional appeals in their rhetoric given how effective such cues are (Brader, 2006). When they have autonomy over their rhetoric, they can follow this impulse. When their autonomy wanes, however, they will have to refrain from prominent emotional cues. This is because the decline in autonomy means their rhetoric necessarily becomes more interactive. Direct appeals to emotionality are less effective in such a scenario. Emanuel, Rodrigues, & Martins (2015) provide an instructive example as to why. They analyze three cases of websites attempting to make emotional appeals via interactive forms of communication. In all three, appeals to emotions are subtle. This is because a direct reference to emotionality disrupts the interactivity; it becomes one party telling the other how to feel instead of letting the other party determine their feelings for themselves as would be befitting an equal in an interactive communication process.

When autonomy is low, candidates will therefore find themselves less able to tap into explicit emotional appeals out of restraint imposed by the interactivity of the dialogue. This, of course, does not imply that their communication partners are uninterested in emotional rhetoric. The media craves emotionality as it resonates with their desire for conflict and drama (Cook, 1998; Scott, n.d.). Voters, who generally struggle with more cognitively demanding rhetoric given their low political knowledge and weak ideology (Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017), should also find emotionality appealing. As such, it is not necessarily the case that low autonomy should lead to low emotionality because the candidates' dialogue partners wish to avoid emotion, but rather because the format prevents them from invoking emotional responses unilaterally.

H1 (Autonomy Hypothesis): Events with low candidate autonomy will feature less emotional rhetoric.

The second attribute of an event format I consider is the loyalty of the audience. Importantly, loyalty is more complicated than a binary on the campaign trail. There are situations in which the candidate must assume the audience will never support them. Other times the audience may be sympathetic but not, as of yet, committed to the candidate's cause. On other occasions, the audience will be comprised of the candidate's base. This creates a three-category conceptualization of loyalty: weak loyalty, potential loyalty, and strong loyalty. From a rhetorical perspective, an audience with weak loyalty is one that will not be persuaded by appealing to different emotions. They are not eligible for persuasion in the first place. As such, candidates should avoid emotional rhetoric when facing such an audience as their ineligibility for rhetorical persuasion removes the impetus for such a tactic.

H2 (Weak Loyalty Hypothesis): Events with weak loyalty will feature less emotional rhetoric.

In formats where the audience exhibits potential loyalty, the need for rhetorical persuasion is at its highest. Candidates will therefore want to employ emotions that create a bond of commonality with the audience. Nothing creates common ground like the perceptions of an outgroup (Jardina, 2019; Tajfel, 1979). And so emotional cues that are tied to attitudes of outgroup threats (Banks, 2014) will be especially effective. Prompting emotional reactions to perceived outgroup threats should be particularly effective in primaries as the intraparty nature of the race means candidates need to establish connections to the various interest groups and activists who comprise the party whose nomination they seek (Bawn et al., 2012). As such, if a candidate is at a campaign event in which they do not perceive the audience as directly loyal to them but think that they can win the audience over, they should invoke negatively valenced

emotions as a means of conjuring a common enemy that threatens those in the audience, reminding those in attendance that participation in the party coalition is a means of self-preservation.

H3 (Threat Conjuring Hypothesis): Events with potential loyalty will feature more negative emotional rhetoric.

Once this bogeyman has been called forth, the candidates then need to position themselves as the one who can protect the audience from this threat. They need the audience to trust that they can guard them. As such, candidates should supplement high negative emotions with high trust language when speaking in front of an audience who is not immediately loyal to them but could become loyal in the future.

H4 (Guardian Hypothesis): Events with potential loyalty will feature more trust rhetoric.

As a practical example, imagine a Republican candidate speaking at an NRA forum. The candidate assumes that the audience is not there because they are loyal to them; instead they must assume they are there because they care about protecting their Second Amendment rights. As long as the candidate is a vocal supporter of the Second Amendment, however, then they can probably also assume that many in attendance are sympathetic to their candidacy. To pull them toward their camp, they should conjure the threat of Democrats taking your guns away using cues of anger, fear, and disgust but then say that they can be trusted to prevent that from happening. This is, of course, not a partisan thing. Democrats should behave similarly when discussing reproductive freedom at a Planned Parenthood campaign forum.

Finally, in strong loyalty situations a connection has already been forged between the candidate and the audience, removing the dire need to use emotions as a rhetorical form of persuasion. The persuasion has already occurred. This, I argue, should create an environment

where the behavioral strategy incentives inferred from the political psychology literature should be strongest. If the crowd is already on your side, the primary goal of the rhetor has been accomplished. What remains is to provide the emotional cues that will create the preferred behavioral response.

As such, I hypothesize that these events will most closely approximate the expectation of behavioral strategy. They will feature high levels of approach emotions meant to activate support and low levels of emotions meant to invoke persuasion.

H5 (Motivation Hypothesis): Events with strong loyalty will feature more anger and joy rhetoric.

H6 (Persuasion Avoidance Hypothesis): Events with strong loyalty will feature less fear and surprise rhetoric.

This comes with one exception rooted in the fluid nature of primaries. Given how rapidly the races can shift – a function of the intraparty, multicandidate, and serial format – primaries feature complex messaging environments. As such, candidates should not solely rest on their laurels, assuming that rhetorical persuasion is completely unnecessary, when speaking to a loyal audience. Instead, they should engage in positive emotional rhetoric to assure the audience that they have chosen right.

H7 (Good Choice Hypothesis): Events with strong loyalty will feature more positive emotional rhetoric.

Taken together, these hypotheses establish a broad expectation that the format of events creates rhetorical constraints that affect candidates' propensity to use emotional appeals. Given the powerful effects emotional cues have on political behavior, the existence and strength of these constraints is of significant concern.

Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, I first need to construct a corpus of candidate rhetoric where the candidate's autonomy over messaging and loyalty of the audience vary. I use the C-SPAN Video Library to do so. The C-SPAN Video Library include videos of campaign events throughout the primary. Most of these videos are accompanied by transcripts of the event, typically from closed captioning. I searched through the archive for each presidential primary candidate from 2000-2020 from the time they announced their candidacy through the end of their campaigns and retrieved a transcript for each campaign event. This forms the bulk of the speech portion of the Presidential Primary Communication Corpus (Scott, 2021) that I use for this analysis with each individual transcript of an event representing a unit of analysis.⁷

I then measured the amount of emotional language used in each transcript by applying the EmoLex emotional sentiment dictionaries (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). EmoLex includes dictionaries for four positively valenced (Joy, Trust, Anticipation, and Surprise) and four negatively valenced (Anger, Fear, Disgust, and Sadness) emotions. I applied each dictionary to the corpus to get a count of the number of words in each transcript that matched with each emotion. I divided each count by the total number of words in the transcript to calculate the percentage of words in a transcript that match with each of the eight emotions. To make testing hypotheses related to overall emotionality simpler, I also created aggregate measures of the proportions of negatively and positively valenced words. The percentage of words in the transcript for an event that are coded as each of the eight discrete emotions, as the sum of all negatively valenced emotions, and as the sum of all the positively valenced emotions serve as the ten dependent variables in the analysis. All are continuous variables with Gaussian distributions.

⁷ The American Presidency Project (Wooley & Peters, 2020) served as a supplementary resource for a small number of additional transcripts. When both the C-SPAN Video Library and the American Presidency Project provided transcripts for the same event, I deferred to the C-SPAN Video Library.

For my primary independent variables, I use a four-category typology assessing the format of the campaign event. First are rallies ($n = 1383$), which are high in candidate autonomy and feature strong audience loyalty. Rallies typically feature candidates giving largely prepared and uninterrupted speeches to a crowd that has chosen to be there for a reason. Second are town halls ($n = 508$) which are generally exchanges between the candidate and audience members (low autonomy) who, like rallies, have chosen to be in attendance (strong loyalty). Third are press events ($n = 368$) where the audience is made up primarily of reporters who are asking questions of the candidate. These events are low in candidate autonomy as they are dialogues with journalists. The candidates are also aware that the reporters are not an existing base of political support and they are unlikely to be won over to their cause given their commitment to professional independence, meaning the events feature weak audience loyalty as well. Finally, there are externally organized events ($n = 1105$). These include major political events like the Eleanor Roosevelt dinner (formerly the Jefferson-Jackson dinner), CPAC, state party meetings, and candidate forums hosted by interest groups. The audiences are not purely loyal to any one candidate; if anything they are drawn there by loyalty to a state party organization, particular political figure, or organized interest. As such, there is significant potential for future loyalty but little reason to think there is strong loyalty in the moment. These events also feature high candidate autonomy.⁸ In summary, indicator variables for whether the event is a rally, town hall, press event, or an externally organized event serve as the four independent variables in the analysis.⁹

⁸ This is not universal: Sometimes the events feature hosts who will engage in a Q&A with the candidates after giving them a chance for a prepared opening statement. But, in general, the events give candidates more autonomy than they do at events specifically designed to be exchanges like press events and town halls.

⁹ Classification of event type was primarily done using the description of the event provided by the C-SPAN Video Library. In cases where there was no or only a vague description, I instead coded event type by either watching the event and noting the characteristics of the format or by checking contemporary media accounts. A breakdown of event type by partisanship and by election year is available in the supplementary appendix.

I also include a number of control variables to account for other factors that might influence candidates' use of emotional rhetoric and which, if excluded, might introduce omitted variable bias. First are several candidate-level controls including the candidate's party, race, and gender. I also control for the candidates' position in the polls, which is important given the strategic incentives the political psychology literature on emotions in politics implies.

Because attachments to the status quo political order may prevent some candidates from appealing to certain emotions, I control for whether the candidate is running for the nomination of a party that controls the White House and whether the candidate worked in the incumbent administration.

The contours of the race itself must be accounted for as they may also affect the ability to engage in emotional rhetoric. Candidate messaging tends to change between the invisible primary and the start of the real electoral season (Haynes & Rhine, 1998), so I control for the phrase of the campaign. Candidates may also vary their emotional rhetoric based on the competitiveness of the race (Ridout & Searles, 2011). Assessing competitiveness in primaries is complicated given the multicandidate field. I attempt to do so using a modified Hirschman-Herfindahl index (Steger, Hickman, & Yohn, 2002) which uses the distribution of shares of a resource, in this case poll standing, to calculate how concentrated that resource is. For my purposes, this measure approximates the number of "effective" candidates in the race. More "effective" candidates implies a more wide-open competition.¹⁰

Finally, the data involve several hierarchical levels that may create meaningful variation. I account for this via election year fixed effects and candidate mixed effects. The dependent variables are all continuous warranting OLS.

Results

¹⁰ Descriptive statistics for all variables are available in the supplementary appendix.

Table 1 presents the regression models for the four negative emotions and an aggregate measure of negatively valenced emotions. Table 2 presents a similar table for positive emotions. To make comparisons of substantive magnitude easier, Figures 1 and 2 plot the coefficients grouped by event type. In all models, rallies are treated as the excluded category, meaning all regression coefficients for the three independent variables are in reference to the campaign rally event format.

The Autonomy hypothesis (H1) stated that events with low candidate autonomy, townhalls and press events, should feature less emotional language overall as candidates are not in full control over the emotional narrative. The aggregate emotional measures are most useful for testing this hypothesis. The results provide strong evidence in support of this hypothesis. Both townhalls and press events use less negative and less positive emotion words than the baseline (rallies) or externally organized events. The candidate's autonomy over the rhetoric appears to strongly influence their ability to invoke emotional appeals, which lines up well with my theory that interactive dialogues constrain explicit emotional appeals

The remaining six hypotheses all dealt with differences based on the loyalty of the audience. The typology posits media events as featuring weak audience loyalty. H2 predicts that such events will be the least emotional. Media events rank as the second least negatively and, by a wide margin, the least positively emotional type of event. The summation of these two patterns is that they are indeed the least emotional type of event, which supports H2.¹¹

¹¹ That the pattern is not consistent across both positive and negative emotions raises an alternative possibility. Perhaps the negativity bias of the media (Soroka, 2014) leads to an asymmetry. Such a theory cannot fully explain why press events are so low in emotionality overall; the media are often understood as seeking out emotionality to satisfy a need for dramatic content. But in concert with the confirmed autonomy hypothesis it could explain why press events use less emotions overall with some of that difference offset for negative emotions. Given the findings discussed below, however, I find this alternative explanation a less effective theoretical accounting of the results.

Table 1: Effect of Event Type on Negative Emotional Cue Usage in Speeches

	Anger	Fear	Disgust	Sadness	Total Negative Emotions
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Externally Organized Event	0.001* (0.0002)	0.001* (0.0003)	0.0004* (0.0001)	0.001* (0.0002)	0.003* (0.001)
Townhall	-0.002* (0.0003)	-0.003* (0.0004)	-0.001* (0.0002)	-0.001* (0.0003)	-0.007* (0.001)
Press Event	-0.001* (0.0003)	-0.002* (0.0004)	0.0001 (0.0002)	-0.001* (0.0003)	-0.003* (0.001)
GOP	0.0003 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.001 (0.0004)	0.0002 (0.001)	0.003 (0.002)
Woman	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.0001 (0.0005)	0.0002 (0.001)	0.003 (0.003)
Nonwhite	0.0003 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.001)	-0.0002 (0.0004)	0.001 (0.001)	0.0005 (0.002)
Poll Standing	-0.00001 (0.00001)	0.00001 (0.00001)	0.00001 (0.00000)	0.00001* (0.00001)	0.00002 (0.00002)
Incumbent Party	-0.0002 (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.001* (0.0003)	-0.00002 (0.001)	-0.003* (0.002)
Previous Administration	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.001* (0.001)	-0.0005 (0.001)	0.003 (0.003)
Post Iowa	-0.0004* (0.0002)	-0.002* (0.0003)	-0.0004* (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0002)	-0.003* (0.001)
# of Effective Candidates	-0.0002* (0.0001)	-0.0004* (0.0001)	-0.00004 (0.0001)	-0.00001 (0.0001)	-0.001* (0.0003)
Constant	0.012* (0.001)	0.015* (0.001)	0.005* (0.0005)	0.011* (0.001)	0.044* (0.003)
Observations	3,353	3,353	3,353	3,353	3,353
Log Likelihood	12,764.670	11,705.580	14,555.220	12,707.630	8,806.560
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-25,491.340	-23,373.150	-29,072.450	-25,377.260	-17,575.120
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	-25,375.110	-23,256.920	-28,956.210	-25,261.020	-17,458.880

Notes: *denotes $p < 0.05$, one tailed. All models include candidate mixed effects and election year fixed effects not presented to preserve space.

Hypotheses 3-4 dealt with event types with significant potential for future loyalty. In externally organized events, the audience is gathered primarily due to a commitment to some sort of other organization: an interest group, a state party, a notable state political figure, etc. Often, multiple candidates will be speaking at the event. As such, the candidate cannot assume that the audience supports them and should instead develop a rhetorical strategy meant to persuade. This should mean using a combination of negative emotions meant to invoke a reaction to a threatening outgroup and particular positive emotions meant to assure that the candidate can help protect from the threat. Take, for example, candidate forums hosted by the NRA and Planned Parenthood. In such contexts, candidates should mention threats to shared beliefs (“they” will take away your guns/bodily sovereignty) tied to emotions such as fear and anger. Once such an outgroup has been summoned and vested with the proper negative emotional charge, candidates should then posit themselves as guardians against that threat (you can trust “they’ll” only do it over my dead body). Taken together, this pattern predicts that events with high potential loyalty will feature more negatively valenced emotional rhetoric and more trust rhetoric than other types of events.

The results once again strongly support these hypotheses. Externally organized events feature the most negative emotional language overall. This is also true of all the individual negative emotions, although the differences are most pronounced for anger and fear, two emotions that are particularly useful for cuing outgroup threats (Banks, 2014; MacWilliams, 2016). When we turn to positive emotions, however, we see that the high emotionality of externally organized events is particular to negativity. Such events feature less positively valenced emotional rhetoric than rallies and less joy, anticipation, and surprise specifically.

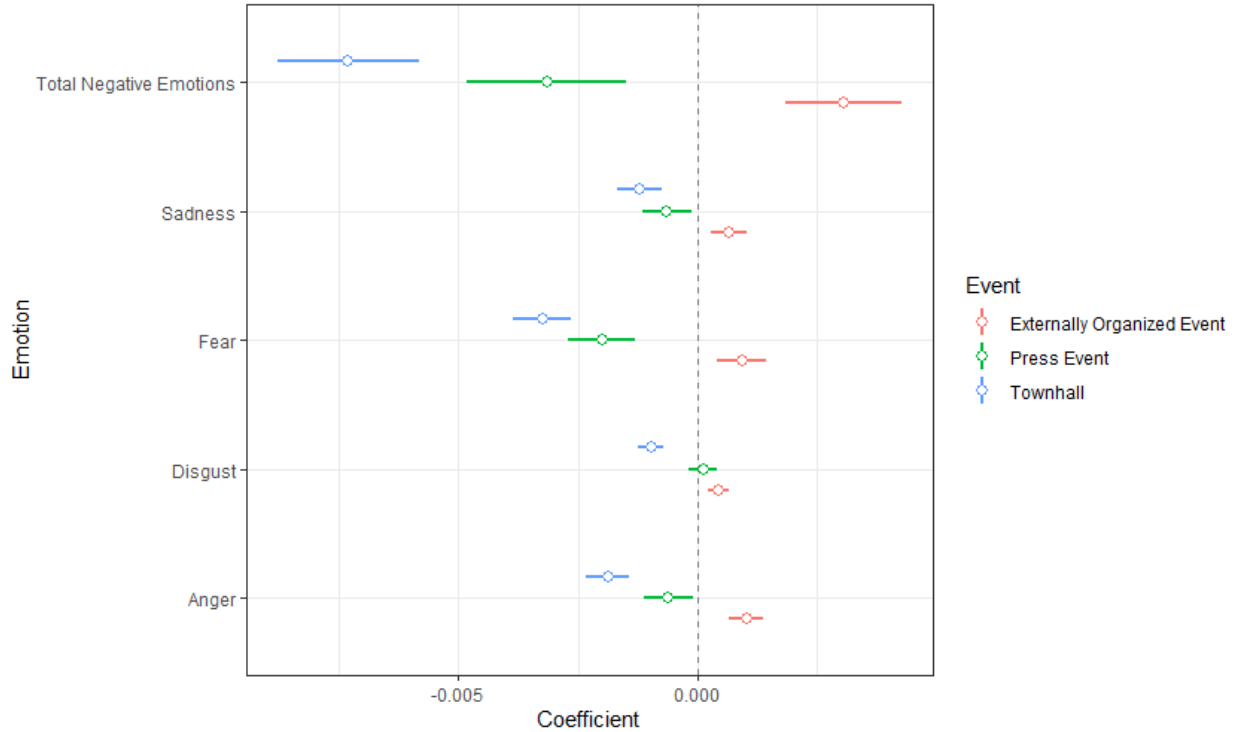
There is one exception, however: trust. Externally organized events are the event format with the most trust language on average. This means that H3 and H4 are both supported by the results.

Table 2: Effect of Event Type on Positive Emotional Cue Usage in Speeches

	Joy (1)	Trust (2)	Anticipation (3)	Surprise (4)	Total Positive Emotions (5)
Externally Organized Event	-0.002* (0.0004)	0.001* (0.0004)	-0.001* (0.0002)	-0.001* (0.0003)	-0.002* (0.001)
Townhall	-0.002* (0.0004)	-0.004* (0.0005)	-0.0004 (0.0003)	0.00001 (0.0003)	-0.006* (0.001)
Press Event	-0.006* (0.0005)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.002* (0.0003)	-0.003* (0.0003)	-0.013* (0.001)
GOP	0.001 (0.001)	-0.0002 (0.001)	0.0001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.003)
Woman	0.002* (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.007* (0.003)
Nonwhite	0.001 (0.001)	-0.0003 (0.001)	0.0001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.00004 (0.003)
Poll Standing	-0.00003* (0.00001)	-0.00000 (0.00001)	0.00000 (0.00001)	-0.00003* (0.00001)	-0.0001* (0.00003)
Incumbent Party	-0.0001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)
Previous Administration	0.001 (0.001)	0.0003 (0.002)	-0.0005 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.003 (0.004)
Post Iowa	0.002* (0.0004)	0.001* (0.0004)	0.0001 (0.0003)	0.002* (0.0003)	0.006* (0.001)
# of Effective Candidates	-0.00004 (0.0001)	-0.0002 (0.0002)	-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0003 (0.0004)
Constant	0.023* (0.001)	0.048* (0.001)	0.025* (0.001)	0.012* (0.001)	0.108* (0.003)
Observations	3,353	3,353	3,353	3,353	3,353
Log Likelihood	11,266.320	10,830.600	12,397.500	12,367.280	7,806.318
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-22,494.640	-21,623.210	-24,756.990	-24,696.560	-15,574.640
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	-22,378.400	-21,506.970	-24,640.760	-24,580.320	-15,458.400

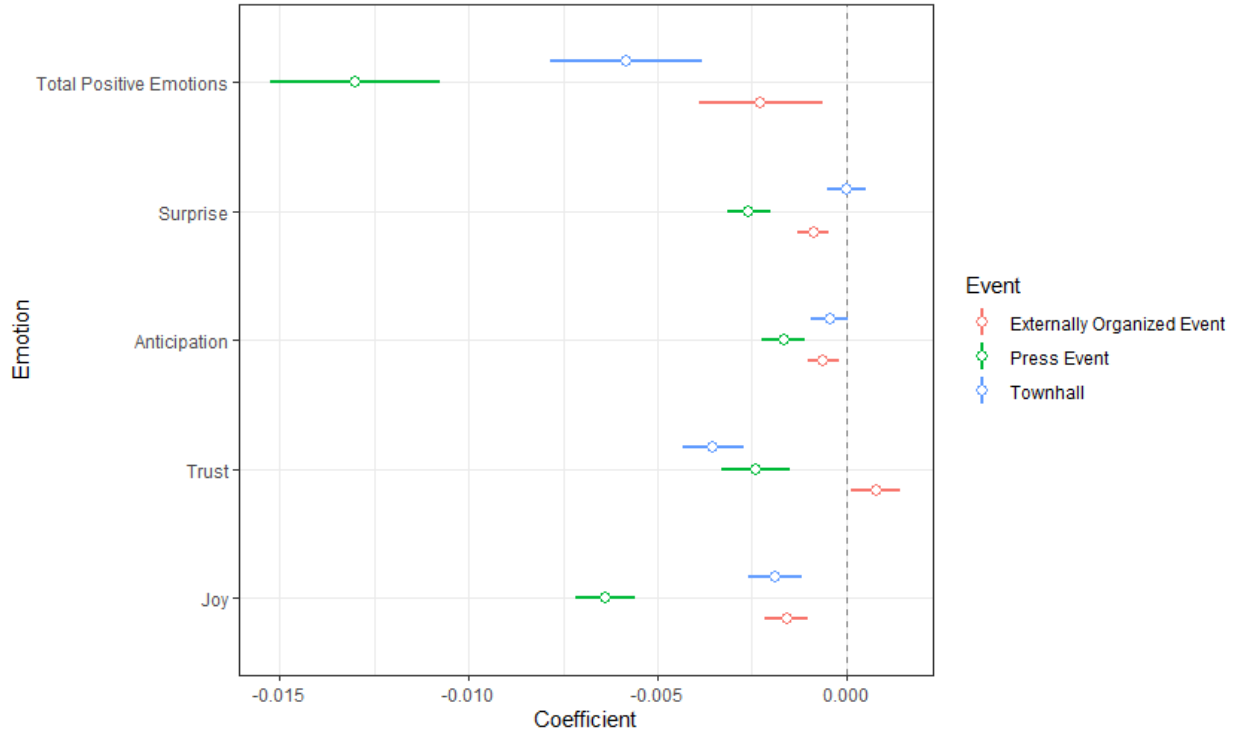
Notes: *denotes $p < 0.05$, one tailed. All models include candidate mixed effects and election year fixed effects not presented to preserve space.

Figure 1: Coefficient Plot of Effect of Event Type on Negative Emotional Language



The final three hypotheses applied to events with strong loyalty. At these events, the candidate can presume that many of those gathered are already in their camp. This includes both campaign rallies and town halls. Given that loyalty is already established, there is little need to conjure a threatening boogeyman to win over new supporters. Instead, the candidate can make the audience feel good about their choices via positive emotional cues. And, given the strategic incentives that the political psychology literature implies, they can try to motivate audience members to act on their support by invoking approach emotions and avoiding emotions that elicit reconsideration and reappraisal. This suggests that candidates should use more anger and joy (H5), less fear and surprise (H6), and more aggregate positive emotions (H7) at such events.

Figure 2: Coefficient Plot of Effect of Event Type on Positive Emotional Language



The results here are more equivocal than for the other hypotheses. Campaign rallies do use the most amount of positive emotional language that is supportive. Town halls use less positive emotional rhetoric than rallies, to be expected given their low autonomy, but the magnitude is still unexpectedly steep. That the gap between them and press events is so big is encouraging, however.

Rallies use the most joy language and are only behind externally organized events in terms of anger. Town halls are also relatively high in joy, at least in comparison to the other event format with low candidate autonomy, but feature the least anger rhetoric that runs counter to expectations. That said, perhaps the media's preference for anger in connection with its conflict newsworthiness value (Scott n.d.) can partially explain this finding. In some, the evidence is broadly supportive of H5 albeit not as consistent as for the previous hypotheses.

The evidence for the Persuasion Avoidance hypothesis is weaker still. Given the Autonomy and Threat Conjuring hypotheses, it is no surprise to find rallies in the middle of other event formats in terms of fear rhetoric. Town halls feature the least amount of fear rhetoric on average, which is also consistent with the hypothesis, although the substantive difference with press events is small. But rallies and town halls are the event formats highest in surprise rhetoric, which is contrary to expectations. The substantive magnitudes are sufficiently weak that little should be gleaned from that insight, however..

Several of the controls display statistically significant relationships with candidates' use of emotional language. Notably, it appears that attributes of the race itself, more than the attributes of the candidates, affect candidates' propensity of using emotional rhetoric. Several notable results found in another study (Scott & McDonald, 2020) are still present once the format of the event is taken into account.

As a final note, the intercept terms suggest that candidate rhetoric is, on the whole, more positively than negatively emotional. Such a difference is also borne out when looking at the simple mean percentages, presented in the supplementary appendix. In general, I am hesitant to make too much of this difference. The EmoLex dictionaries are not designed to measure comparative magnitudes across emotions. But the EmoLex dictionaries actually contain more words coded as negatively emotionally valenced making these dictionaries, functionally, a conservative assessment of the level of negativity. While no firm conclusions should be drawn in this regard as to an absolute difference, it appears that worries about how negative primaries are, as with other electoral contests (Geer, 2006), are overblown.

Discussion

To summarize, events where candidates do not have full autonomy over their rhetoric feature less emotional language than events where the candidates have greater control. Candidates also use fewer emotional cues when speaking to an audience that does not (and will not) support them. In contrast, candidates use a great deal of negative emotions, and most prominently anger and fear, as well as trust when speaking to an audience that could potentially support them in the future. Finally, candidates tend to use more positive emotions, and specifically joy, when speaking to an audience that is already supportive. Taken holistically, these results provide strong evidence in support of Hypotheses 1-4 as well as the Good Choice hypothesis. The results for Hypotheses 5-6 are suggestive but equivocal.

This study makes three primary contributions. First, it demonstrates the limitations of relying solely on inferences from the political psychology literature in studying patterns of campaign communication. This paradigm goes as follows: Approach emotions like anger and joy/enthusiasm lead to the activation of existing attitudes, boosting turnout among supporters. Emotions like fear and surprise instead lead people to slow down and reconsider their options. So frontrunners should use anger and joy while those trailing should prefer fear and surprise. Yet the results do not paint such a neat picture. Poll standing, the best measure of candidates' strategic incentives, displays either statistically insignificant or counterintuitive relationships with emotional rhetoric. While better performance in the polls is correlated with less surprise language, it is also correlated with less joy language and displays no relationship at all with anger or fear. Event format, with its ties primarily to rhetorical incentives, is a more substantively notable correlate.

The second primary contribution reflects the locus of this research. There are very few studies of the use of emotional cues in campaign communication. This extends that small, but

hopefully growing, literature to the electoral context of presidential primaries and the communication format of campaign events. Neither of these domains have been commonly studied in the past.

Finally, it draws our attention to the normative consequences of campaign event formats. None of the results presented here undermine the existing political psychology literature on the behavioral ramifications of emotions, even as they suggest that putting the lessons learned from that literature into practice is a more complicated process than previously thought. The implication is that event formats, by incentivizing the use of some emotional appeals, manifest repercussions on the attitudes and actions of the electorate.

Deriving normative conclusions from these results is complicated by the oft-nuanced nature of the political psychology literature on this subject. Take a single emotion: anger. Anger can prompt greater political activity and participation (Valentino et al., 2011), which is often seen as normatively desirable. Anger also primes people to be more reliant on their racial resentment attitudes when making political decisions (Banks, 2014), which is normatively undesirable. That candidates struggle to elicit anger in town hall settings means that candidates should struggle to motivate those in the audience to turnout and support them. The political culture of New Hampshire, which emphasizes the town hall, may therefore limit candidates' abilities to excite their supporters. By the same token, however, the political culture of New Hampshire may push candidates to avoid emotional rhetoric that would prime voters to rely on their racial resentment when casting their ballots. Similar barter can be articulated for the other emotional cues or for more-or-less emotionality in general.

This makes evaluating tradeoffs a complicated calculus. Emotions are crucial for helping people make sense of and engage with the political world, but their effects are complicated. This

makes it difficult to proclaim that any one type of campaign event format leads to preferable emotional rhetoric output. But while such a definitive claim will not be made here, that does not mean that the repercussions of emotional rhetoric vanish. Different event formats appear to facilitate different emotional appeals. These different emotional appeals likely affect the electorate who consumes them, which in turn affects the electoral fortunes of the candidates in the race. The consequences are significant and need to be considered.

This study is not without limitations. As is often the case with observational research, there is ample reason to be skeptical of causality. I am not able to randomly assign an event format to a speech writer and measure what rhetoric they produce. Future research might benefit from qualitative interviews with the specialists who prepare campaign communication to unpack why they use emotions as they do. It is also fair to question if similar rules would apply to other campaign formats or electoral contexts. The PPCC does not include debate transcripts, but would candidates' emotional rhetoric follow what would be expected from a low autonomy, high potential loyalty event in such a format?

Likewise, presidential general election candidates also hold rallies and townhalls, engage with the press, and speak at forums organized by organizations outside the campaign. Intuitively, many of the same hypotheses should apply. The mechanisms underpinning the hypotheses are largely the same. A key difference may lie in the changes in the electorate, however, especially in the context of externally organized events. Because the average persuadable voter goes from being a partisan who is confronted with a bevy of intraparty options to a person whose commitment to a party camp is weaker, there may not be as singular an outgroup that be vested with negatively valenced emotions. This may weaken the efficacy of this rhetorical tactic. Future studies should investigate if the results are replicated in other electoral contexts.

That said, this study stands with only a handful of other works dipping toes into questions of the constraints on the use of emotional rhetoric outside of campaign strategy. And it is one that demonstrates clear evidence that those other constraints do indeed matter.

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Supplementary Appendix

Appendix Table A: Descriptive Statistics on Emotional Rhetoric in Candidate Speeches

	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>St. Dev</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i># of Words in EmoLex dictionary</i>
<i>Anger</i>	.012	.012	.006	.000	.083	1247
<i>Fear</i>	.016	.017	.008	.000	.083	1476
<i>Disgust</i>	.006	.006	.003	.000	.031	1058
<i>Sadness</i>	.012	.013	.005	.000	.139	1191
<i>Total Negative Emotions</i>	.046	.048	.018	.000	.333	2732 unique words
<i>Joy</i>	.022	.024	.009	.000	.089	689
<i>Trust</i>	.043	.044	.010	.000	.100	1231
<i>Anticipation</i>	.024	.025	.006	.000	.066	839
<i>Surprise</i>	.012	.014	.006	.000	.061	539
<i>Total Positive Emotions</i>	.103	.106	.024	.000	.299	2194 unique words

Appendix Table B: Descriptive Statistics of Independent and Control Variables

	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>St. Dev</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
<i>Rallies</i>	.000	.411	.492	0	1
<i>Town Halls</i>	.000	.151	.358	0	1
<i>Press Events</i>	.000	.110	.312	0	1
<i>Externally Organized Events</i>	.000	.329	.470	0	1
<i>GOP</i>	.000	.447	.497	0	1
<i>Woman</i>	.000	.155	.362	0	1
<i>Nonwhite</i>	.000	.166	.372	0	1
<i>Poll Standing</i>	13.500	22.470	25.410	0	100
<i>Incumbent</i>	.000	.216	.411	0	1
<i>Previous Administration</i>	.000	.059	.237	0	1
<i>Post Iowa</i>	.000	.358	.479	0	1
<i># of Effective Candidates</i>	4.346	4.037	1.913	1	10.354

Appendix Table C: Event Type by Candidate Partisanship

	<i>Rallies</i>	<i>Town Halls</i>	<i>Press Events</i>	<i>Externally Organized Events</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Democrats</i>	770 (41.40%)	250 (13.44%)	159 (8.55%)	681 (36.61%)	1860 (100%)
<i>Republicans</i>	613 (40.09%)	258 (17.15%)	209 (13.90%)	424 (28.19%)	1504 (100%)
<i>Total</i>	1383 (41.11%)	508 (15.10%)	368 (10.94%)	1105 (32.85%)	3364 (100%)

Appendix Table D: Event Type by Election Year

	<i>Rallies</i>	<i>Town Halls</i>	<i>Press Events</i>	<i>Externally Organized Events</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>2000</i>	144 (43.11%)	40 (11.98%)	64 (19.16%)	86 (25.75%)	334 (100%)
<i>2004</i>	158 (46.06%)	48 (13.99%)	31 (9.04%)	106 (30.90%)	343 (100%)
<i>2008</i>	403 (44.68%)	145 (16.08%)	87 (9.65%)	267 (29.60%)	902 (100%)
<i>2012</i>	187 (46.17%)	64 (15.80%)	50 (12.35%)	104 (25.68%)	405 (100%)
<i>2016</i>	312 (46.15%)	114 (16.86%)	68 (10.06%)	193 (28.55%)	676 (100%)
<i>2020</i>	179 (25.83%)	97 (14.00%)	68 (9.81%)	349 (50.36%)	693 (100%)
<i>Total</i>	1383 (41.11%)	508 (15.10%)	368 (10.94%)	1105 (32.85%)	3364 (100%)