The Impact of Rhetorical Situation on Realism as Measured by the Lexical Content of Governors' State-of-the-State Speeches

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This study uses Roderick Hart's method of measuring rhetorical "realism," defined as language that indicates concern with "tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives, in two sets of gubernatorial state-of-the-state speeches. The party affiliation of the governor, economic growth and the per capita income of the state, the level of extremism in public opinion and the combination of divided government and the governor's lack of political experience did not have a consistent impact on the level of realism in the governors' speeches. However, the governors' speeches exhibited higher levels of realism in states with liberal public opinion. A variety of possible explanations for this finding are proposed.

When governors present their agendas, they can express concerns that are concrete or abstract, immediate or long-range, and close to the everyday experiences of their constituents or far from them. Roderick Hart defines texts that employ language referring to "tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives" as texts that are high in "realism" (1997, 49). Knowing the levels of realism in governors' speeches can suggest intellectually fertile questions about their goals, intended audiences, and rhetorical strategies. For example, governors whose agenda-setting speeches have high levels of realism could be attempting to communicate directly with the voters, rather than just the legislators, by using everyday words to discuss widely shared concerns. Governors exhibiting low levels of realism could be trying to educate the voters or legislators about some relatively arcane topic or they could be "true believers," highly committed to an ideological doctrine that they share with their audience (Hart 1971, 253-254).

The complex of influences that shape the style and substance of a speaker's rhetoric includes the audience capable of acting in the manner that the speaker intends, the exigency or necessity to persuade the audience to act, and the constraints that foreclose some rhetorical options while leaving others open (see Bitzer 1968). The purpose of this study is to specify the types of rhetorical situations, as defined by complexes of audiences, exigencies, and constraints that are most likely to induce governors to employ realistic rhetoric when they propose their agendas.

In most states, governors present their formal agendas in a speech before the legislature at the start of the session in a highly ceremonial setting generally called a "state-of-the-state address." Because these speeches are records of the governors' agendas, studies have made use of them to estimate the impact of audiences (Van Assendelft 1997, Ferguson 1996), exigencies (Gosling 1991), and constraints (DiLeo 1997) on the substance of governors' agendas.

It is reasonable to assume that to a considerable extent the content and style of gubernatorial rhetoric will depend on the personal concerns, choices of speechwriters, and idiosyncrasies of particular governors. If we look at a set of speeches delivered in a single year, it is very possible that rhetorical variation associated with theoretically interesting macro-level variables such as party, political culture, public attitudes, or socio-economic characteristics of states is really coincidental to variation among individual governors. However, if we find that rhetorical variation associated with one or more of these large-bore variables is replicated in a set of speeches given in a different year by an entirely different set of governors, then we can be much more confident that we have found identifiable and quantifiable features of the rhetorical situation that shape the style and substance of the state-of-the-state speeches. Therefore, this study analyzes two sets of speeches: a set delivered in 1998 and a set delivered by an entirely different group of governors in 1991.

Budget speeches provided the agendas of the governors of Connecticut, Maine, Nebraska, and Vermont in 1991. The budget speech that Governor Miller of Georgia gave in 1998 was examined because he used that speech rather than his state-of-the-state speech to present his agenda that year.

Methods

The content-analysis program, *Diction*, uses several lists of words ("dictionaries") and a measure of word length to profile a text's "lexical content," that is, the types of words that the author tends to use. *Diction* calculates a score for "realism" for 500-word segments of text by adding occurrences of words belonging to dictionaries that indicate concern with practical, everyday, immediate concern and accounting for the complexity and variety of the words in each text segment (Hart 1997, 49). The Appendix provides a more detailed explanation of *Diction's* measurement of "realism."

Each of the speeches in the data set was composed of more than two 500-word segments of text. A realism score was calculated for each speech

by computing the mean of the realism scores for the segments of the speech. None of the speeches contained a number of words that was evenly divisible by 500. Therefore, in computing the mean realism score for each speech, the remainder segment at the end of the speech received a weight proportional to its length.

After obtaining realism scores for the speeches in the data set, a pair of 500-word passages of text from speeches delivered in 1998 was closely examined. One was the passage with the highest realism score from the speech with the highest realism score that year. The other was the passage with the lowest realism score from the speech with the lowest realism score in 1998. Inspection of these passages provided a sense of what *Diction's* realism score is measuring.

Next, the levels of realism in the state-of-the-state speeches were accounted for by examining features of the rhetorical situations that surrounded the speeches and stimulated the governors to propose certain agenda items in certain ways. The primary audiences for the speeches were the state legislatures, which may or may not have been of the same party as the governor. Research on the impact of divided government on gubernatorial agendas as presented in state-of-the state speeches indicates that governors without prior experience in elective office tend to become less willing to compromise with legislatures and more interested in appealing directly to the public when one or both houses of the legislature is controlled by the opposing party (Van Assendelft 1997). When this occurs, governors may move away from discussions of specialized technical issues and governmental processes and toward a more realistic discourse rooted in the day-to-day experiences of the voters. In order to account for this type of situation, a dummy variable was used, scored one when the governor had not held prior elective office and faced a legislature with one or both houses controlled by the opposing party.

The religious traditions of the groups that have settled in each of the states have given rise to distinctive patterns of orientation to political action, or political culture, that influence the expectations and behavior of governors, legislators, and other political actors (Elazar 1994, 230-234). Realism should be highest in states with individualistic political cultures, where politics revolve around an open competition for particularized material benefits rather than for the abstract ideals that animate the moralistic political culture or the values that undergird the hierarchical social order of the traditionalistic political culture. Political culture was operationalized with dummy variables with scores of one for states that are predominantly moralistic and traditionalistic according to Elazar's map.

The voters are also part of the intended audience. They may be more liberal or more conservative than the voters in other states. The Erikson-Wright-McIver measure of public opinion was used to indicate the

public's liberalism (1993, 16). It is difficult to predict how public attitudes may affect the degree of realism that the governor exhibits, but in light of the profound effect that they have on the views and behavior of political elites (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993, 78-89), they could well have an impact on gubernatorial realism. It is more logical to expect the extremism of a state's electorate to affect gubernatorial realism. A public extremism variable was computed from the squared deviation of the difference between the liberalism of a state's electorate and the mean public liberalism of the states in each data set. Governors of states with large scores on this variable should be less realistic than other governors.

To a considerable extent, economic contraction and expansion define the exigencies that confront governors when they propose their agendas (Beyle 1992, Gosling 1991). Change in each state's total personal income during the year preceding the speech was used to measure economic growth (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998, 459; 1992, 438; 1991, 441). The wealth or poverty of a state compared to that of other states also presents governors with a variety of needs to which they may choose to respond. State per capita income in the year preceding the speech served as a measure for this variable (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998, 460; 1992, 439).

Party affiliation of political elites is a good predictor of their political views and the policies they support (Erikson et al. 1993, 96-105). It could be that during the 1990s, governors of one party were more realistic than governors of the other party. Therefore, a dummy variable scored 1 for Democrats and 0 for Independents and Republicans was included.

Findings

Governor George Pataki, Republican of New York, gave the speech with the 500-word segments that had the highest mean realism score in the 1998 data set. The following segment had the highest realism score of the fourteen segments in Governor Pataki's speech. Its high score was primarily due to the very high frequencies of words belonging to the "temporal" dictionary, which indicates concern with time, and the "concreteness" dictionary, which indicates a preference for discussing specific objects, people, and actions rather than abstract, general ideas. The words belonging to the temporal dictionary are in italics. The words belonging to the concreteness dictionary are underlined.

> ...New Yorkers that smaller, smarter government. And in doing so, we have given them that tax cut.

> The vast majority of New Yorkers pay state income taxes at rates at least 25% lower *today* than they did in 1994. And yes, 450,000 lower income, working New Yorkers *now* pay no state income taxes at all.

But we didn't just cut income taxes. We cut taxes that most New Yorkers had never even heard of — consumer taxes that weren't even called taxes, and today even subway and bus fares are going down for the *first time* in state *history.*

We've cut so many different taxes — in so many different ways —so many *times* — it would take me 10 *minutes* just to read you the list.

Before we arrived here three *years ago*, New York led the nation in raising taxes. Every *year* since *then*, New York has led the nation in cutting taxes.

In 1996, we cut taxes by more than the other 49 states combined. And in 1997, we cut taxes by five *times* more than Illinois, Texas, and California combined.

By cutting taxes, we have taken a giant step in returning economic power to the people.

But we didn't just cut taxes; we cut spending, by creating that smaller, smarter government. Because of our fiscal restraint, we *ended* our *first* two *years* with historic budget surpluses. And this *year*— through our fiscal conservatism and strong economic policies — we will *end* the *year* with a surplus even larger than last *year's* $1.4 billion surplus.

So let's cut taxes above and beyond the $500 million I've *already* signed into law for this *year*. In the budget I send you in two *weeks*, I will propose more than doubling this *year's* tax cuts to $1.2 billion.

Last *year* we knew it was *time* to build on the tax cuts of the *first* two *years*. From this podium, I told you that it was *time* to cut taxes again. Different taxes. Oppressive taxes. Property taxes.

For the *first time* in State *history*, we have a law — not an idea, not a plan, not a suggestion, but a law — that will cut school property taxes for every homeowner in every community of New York State.

Under this law, taxpayers in New York will *begin* to see their property taxes drop by an average of 27%.

That's a big tax cut, and our people deserve it.

But knowing, as we do, that school property taxes hurt the *elderly* especially hard, we wrote the law so our *seniors* would get an even bigger tax cut, phased in over four *years*.

It's a great law. I want to thank you for passing it. I also want you to change it.

This *year*, I will propose amending the law so our *seniors* get the entire tax cut this *year*.

Which means that by the *end* of this *year*, the average *senior* citizen in New York will get a school property tax cut of AT LEAST 45%.

This passage has a very high realism score, 2.4 standard deviations above the mean for 20,000 segments of political texts in *Diction*'s data bank. The passage deals with the practical, immediate consequences of taxes and tax cuts, and the governor's very concrete plan for reducing tax burdens on particular people. There is very little reference to abstract concepts or technical topics. There is nothing in this passage that is beyond the immediate experience of a relatively disengaged voter.

The speech with the segments having the lowest realism score in the 1998 data set was delivered by Governor Fob James, Republican of Alabama. The following segment of the speech had the lowest realism score of the six text segments in the speech. It was 1.99 standard deviations below the mean for the 20,000 segments of political texts in *Diction*'s data bank. The principal reason for this segment's low realism score is the length of the words that comprise it. *Diction* uses the average word length in a segment of a text as a measure of "complexity." The average word in this passage was 5.17 letters long, 1.85 standard deviations more than the length of the average word in the segments in *Diction's* data bank. All words of eight letters or more are underlined.

...business, health, and labor will be established to ensure wise use of funds.

Secondly, because agri-business is a cornerstone of our economy and industries such as Charoen Pokphand, a new poultry processing operation employing 1,500 people in Barbour and surrounding counties, need research support, I propose $52 million to provide animal and poultry diagnostic laboratories, agricultural and forestry research, and instructional and research facilities for veterinary medicine.

Thirdly, $10 million to provide adequate facilities for education, training, and research in the forensic sciences, a major component in solving criminal cases.

Finally, $300 million to provide capital improvements for public institutions of higher education.

Education is more than an ideal. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The

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ultimate result of the whole scheme of education would be the teaching of all children of the state reading, writing, and common arithmetic." Together, as parents, grandparents, educators and lawmakers, let us now take the necessary steps to make Alabama's public education system second to none.

Jefferson also founded the University of Virginia and said it would be "based on the unlimited freedom of the human mind, to explore and to expose every subject susceptible of its contemplation." We would do well to adopt his vision for our very own.

In my General Fund proposal, I again emphasize children's services. Last year as part of our Children's Initiative, I requested an additional $5 million for Foster Family Enhancements, but you appropriated only $1 million. I again ask you to support a $5 million appropriation for foster children.

I propose a $10 million appropriation to fund the Children's Health Insurance Program to provide coverage for an estimated 50,000 children, and an $8 million increase to Youth Services for additional private placements. In total, I am requesting over 30 million new dollars for children's initiatives.

We have increased the ranks of Public Safety by over 200 troopers.

We have increased our prison capacity by over 3,000 inmates to ensure no criminal who should be locked up will be set free.

For three years we have run state government and increased funding for children, for prisons, for law enforcement, and for Medicaid – but with no new taxes and very little growth in General Fund revenue. We did this primarily with a freeze on hiring that through attrition reduced the number of state employees from 39,000 in December of 1994 to 35,000 in December of 1997, reducing payroll costs by approximately $100 million.

Cabinet members and state employees have worked hard to cut expenses in purchasing, contracting, communications, and travel and I thank them for making state government more efficient, and for saving the taxpayer millions of dollars. (Mr. Main - Mr. Baker- Cabinet)

I propose an 8% pay raise for state employees funded from savings created by two early retirement plans. Therefore, the pay raise and early retirement legislation should be tied together.

I have said before and I say again, honest government begins with honest elections. You passed our absentee ballot law last year,

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In this segment, the governor is providing a fairly detailed discussion of his policy agenda. It mentions specific programs, such as Foster Family Enhancements, that may be of great interest to certain legislators and a small number of citizens but are of very low general salience. A few of the long words in this segment, such as "susceptible" are highly abstract, and might be used by governors who wished to place their agendas in an ideological context.

Table 1 presents the realism scores for the 41 speeches in the 1998 data set. A quick inspection of this table suggests that there are two distinct types of rhetoric coming from Republican governors. Republicans from the Northeast had the four highest realism scores. Republicans from the South and West had the five lowest realism scores.

Table 1

Realism Scores, 1998 Speeches

State	Governor, Party	Realism Score
New York	Pataki, R	53.6
Rhode Island	Almond, R	53.5
New Jersey	Whitman, R	53.1
Pennsylvania	Ridge, R	52.7
New Hampshire	Shaheen, D	52.5
Massachusetts	Cellucci, R	52.4
Florida	Chiles, D	52.2
South Carolina	Beasley, R	52.0
Minnesota	Carlson, R	52.0
Washington	Lowry, D	51.8
Colorado	Roemer, D	51.6
New Mexico	Johnson, R	51.6
Vermont	Dean, D	51.5
Wisconsin	Thompson, R	51.5
West Virgnina	Underwood, R	51.5
Mississippi	Fordice, R	51.5
Georgia	Miller, D	51.5
Missouri	Carnahan, D	51.5

Table 1 – Continued

State	Governor, Party	Realism Score
Oregon	Kitzhaber, D	51.5
Utah	Leavitt, R	51.4
Indiana	O'Bannon, D	51.4
Virginia	Gilmore, R	51.3
South Dakota	Janklow, R	51.3
Kentucky	Patton, D	51.2
Connecticut	Rowland, R	51.2
Maine	King, I	51.1
Iowa	Branstad, R	51.0
Delaware	Carper, D	50.7
Hawaii	Cayetano, D	50.6
Illinois	Edgar, R	50.5
Michigan	Engler, R	50.1
Tennessee	Sundquist, R	49.9
Oklahoma	Keating, R	49.7
California	Wilson, R	49.7
North Dakota	Schafer, R	49.6
Alaska	Knowles, D	49.5
Ohio	Voinovich, R	49.5
Maryland	Glendening, D	49.4
Kansas	Graves, R	48.5
Arizona	Hull, R	48.5
Wyoming	Geringer, R	47.7
Idaho	Batt, R	47.7
Alabama	James, R	47.5

Table 2 presents the realism scores for the speeches in the 1991 data set. Except for Governor Symington, Republican of Arizona, the five most realistic as well as the four least realistic governors were Democrats. There was no clear regional pattern.

Table 2

Realism Scores, 1991 Speeches

State	Governor, Party	Realism Score
Arizona	Symington, R	54.4
Washington	Gardner, D	53.7
Arkansas	Clinton, D	53.6
Kentucky	Wilkinson, D	53.0
West Virginia	Caperton, D	52.9
New York	Cuomo, D	52.7
Alaska	Hickel, I	52.2
Oregon	Roberts, D	51.6
Maryland	Schaefer, D	51.1
Pennsylvania	Casey, D	51.0
Mississippi	Mabus, D	51.0
Texas	Richards, D	51.0
New Mexico	King, D	50.9
Tennessee	McWherter, D	50.8
South Carolina	Campbell, R	50.5
Rhode Island	Sundlum, D	50.4
Oklahoma	Walters, D	50.3
Connecticut	Weicker, I	50.1
Maine	McKernan, R	50.0
South Dakota	Mickelson, R	50.0
Hawaii	Waihee, D	49.9
Delaware	Castle, R	49.8
Alabama	Hunt, R	49.6
Utah	Bangerter, R	49.5
Indiana	Bayh, D	49.3
New Hampshire	Gregg, R	49.2
Kansas	Finney, D	49.2
North Carolina	Martin, R	48.8
Missouri	Ashcroft, R	48.7
Virginia	Wilder, D	48.0
Vermont	Dean, D	47.5
North Dakota	Sinner, D	47.4
Wyoming	Sullivan, D	47.3

Table 3 presents the estimate of OLS regression equations for the 1991 and 1998 data sets. The negative findings are worth noting. Realism is not systematically related to political party, economic growth, per capita income, public extremism, or the interaction of gubernatorial political inexperience and divided government. Contrary to expectations, governors of states with individualistic political cultures used rhetoric that had consistently (although not always significantly) less realism than that of governors of moralistic and traditionalistic states.

Table 3

Predicting Realism in 1991 and 1998 State-of-the-State Speeches from Situational Variables (beta weights)

Variable	1991	1998
Change in total state personal income, previous year	.107	-.122
Democratic governor	-.103	.220
Per capita income, previous year	-.319	.231
Traditionalistic political culture	.635**	.168
Moralistic political culture	.127	.087
Public's liberalism	.853**	.419*
Public's extremism	.228	.124
Governors without political inexperience, divided government	.053	.271
R^2, adj R^2	.482, .294	.337, .171
F; df; p	2.56; 8, 22; .038	2.03; 8, 32; .074

$p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Only one explanatory variable had a large and statistically significant effect in both data sets: public liberalism. The more liberal the public of a governor's state is, the more realistic the governor's rhetoric is. Unlike traditionalistic political culture, which had a statistically significant effect in 1991 but not in 1998, the effect of public liberalism held for two entirely different sets of governors.

There are several possible explanations for this finding. It could be that governors of liberal states are more interested in mobilizing voters

with low levels of education than are governors of conservative states. On the other hand, it could be that the public's conservatism is the active influence. Perhaps conservative public attitudes influence gubernatorial rhetoric by making it less concerned with "tangible, immediate, everyday matters that affect people's everyday lives." The public in conservative states could be holding out against what Francis Fukuyama (1992) calls "the end of history," which replaces the complex, abstract political discourse of ideological struggles with the practical political discourse of tax cuts, jobs, and day care. Another possibility is that conservative governors of conservative states are discussing policy issues at a fairly technical level in the public setting of a state-of-the-state speech in order to wrest control of policymaking away from specialists who comprise state agencies. Conservative governors may perceive these individuals to be generally opposed to their agendas.

A more detailed assessment of the messages conveyed when gubernatorial realism is high along with a deeper probing of the content of conservative attitudes and the paths through which they influence elite rhetoric would help us to understand the links at work between rhetorical situations and the rhetorical/political strategies that governors adopt in response to them.

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Appendix

Computation of Realism Scores by *Diction*

The following is a summary of the explanation provided in the user's manual for *Diction*, entitled *Diction 4.0: The Text Analysis Program* by Roderick P. Hart, 1997. The full explanation appears on pages 49-50.

Realism is defined as the used of words indicating concern with tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect the everyday lives of most people. The score is calculated by summing z-scores of frequencies of words belonging to six different lists of words, or dictionaries, then subtracting the normalized frequency of words belonging to an eighth dictionary and subtracting a normalized statistic based on the average length of the words in a text segment.

The scores that *Diction* sums up in calculating realism belong to the following six dictionaries:

1. Familiarity: a list of very common words, including prepositions such as *in*
2. Spatial Awareness: words referring to location, specific places, types of places, distances. Some examples are *abroad, over, Ceylon, county, east, latitude, map, kilometer, migrated.*
3. Temporal Awareness: words that can place an event in time or related to the significance of time in some way, such as *century, mid-morning, postpone.*
4. Present Concern: composed from a list of present-tense verbs that relate to physical activity (*cough, taste*), social operations (*touch, govern*), and task performance (*make, cook*).
5. Human Interest: includes personal pronouns, family members, generic terms for people, such as *friend, baby.*
6. Concreteness: a very large dictionary, referring to tangible objects or persons, such as *peasants, African-Americans, carpenter, congressman, courthouse, store, television, wages, bicycle, eyes, insects, grain, oil, silk.*

Diction then subtracts a number that is a function of the average number of letters in the words in the text segment and a number based on the frequency of words belonging to a dictionary called "Past Concern." This dictionary consists of the past tense forms of the verbs belonging to the Present Concern dictionary.

Diction places this composite of z-scores for each text segment on scale with a mean of 50 and a specified standard deviation that it computes from the realism scores of over 20,000 text segments from "political speeches, press conferences, patriotic ceremonies, diplomatic engagements," and other public affairs texts (Hart 1997, 23).