

Ravi Thakral, Amy Pason, University of Nevada, Reno, “The Circumvention Problem for Norms of Political Discourse”

Our research project is a collaboration between Philosophy, Communication Studies, and a policy research center focusing on issues in our state. We combine theoretical tools from the philosophy of language and the study of rhetoric and persuasion to investigate the ways in which politicians convey divisive messages, with the goals of: (1) raising public awareness about the ways norms of political discourse vary according to messaging platforms and (2) developing interdisciplinary research addressing theoretical problems concerning the norms of political discourse.

In our talk, we propose measuring division in political discourse through the concept of dignity, especially as a way to promote new norms, and address the issue of how overt appeals to dignity can also be used to circumvent the norms of political dialogue. Dignity is sometimes used to denote a basic, non-gradable status of individuals but also a gradable status requiring realization. We have been working with an 8-point measurement scale using the concept of dignity to track ‘us vs. them’ division in real political speech (mostly focused on state assembly candidates), with extreme contempt at the bottom of the scale and full affirmation of the dignity of the opposing side at the top of the scale. A scalar model of dignity may imply one of two possible norms: one is that there ought to be both a prohibition against contempt and the maximization of dignity and the other possibility is that adhering to the dignity norms only require meeting the prohibition against contempt.

However, we might conceive of dignity as governing political discourse in a different, more Aristotelian sense in which it is the middle between two extremes, with the lower extreme being contempt and the upper extreme being needlessly deferential. This implies a different norm of discourse where there is a pro-attitude toward the midpoint between the extremes, and a prohibition against the extremes. Adversarial environments may require discourse that is not affirming of dignity, and thus we also argue that the norms of political discourse should dynamically adjust, in ways that are familiar from how rules of accommodation govern conversation (on the model due to David Lewis 1979).

The major conceptual challenge that we address concerns how it is possible to use covert linguistic mechanisms that allow division to fly under the radar beneath our proposed norms. Adhering to norms of dignity (and perhaps even civility) require making overt appeals to unifying ideals yet the broader norms governing discourse may undergo some deterioration. To take an example from Jason Stanley (2015), the sentence ‘There are Jews among us’ seemingly conveys the banal assertion that there are Jews in the United States (and this may be read as unifying on the surface) yet the covert message is plausibly very disturbing, particularly that Jews are distinct from ‘us’ the polity and so is not as unifying as it appears on the surface. Part of our answer is that we should not use ‘local’ norms of dignity, ones that allow us to assess features of utterances within a context, to determine whether political discourse meets an appropriate standard.