



# SAVING PERSUASION

*A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*

BRYAN GARSTEN

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**SAVING PERSUASION**

The Board of Syndics of Harvard University Press has awarded this book the thirty-fifth annual Thomas J. Wilson Prize, honoring the late director of the Press. The prize is awarded to the book chosen by the Syndics as the best first book accepted by the Press during the calendar year.



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Bryan Garsten

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*To my parents*



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“It looks to me, Socrates, as if you two are hurrying to get away to Athens,”  
said Polemarchus.

“That’s not a bad guess,” I said.

“Well,” he said, “do you see how many of us there are?”

“Of course.”

“Well, then,” he said, “either prove stronger than these men or stay here.”

“Isn’t there another possibility?” I said. “That we persuade you to let us go?”

“Could you really persuade,” he said, “if we don’t listen?”

“There’s no way,” said Glaucon.

“Well, then, think it over, bearing in mind we won’t listen.”

—Plato, *Republic*



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**SAVING PERSUASION**



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## Introduction: Persuasion

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In democracies, quiet people rarely enter politics. Democratic political life is dominated for the most part by people who like to talk. Of course, there are exceptions, a few politicians who defy this expectation and build a reputation for quiet efficiency or inconspicuous integrity. But the quintessential democratic politician is a smooth talker, winning and inspirational in front of crowds and irresistibly persuasive behind closed doors. Democratic politicians are often good storytellers, adept with compliments and able to charm even some of their critics. On the strength of these talents, they enjoy the popularity of a successful general without having mastered the art of war. They have mastered a different art, a certain way of speaking to their fellow citizens. While they may seem to talk for many reasons—to amuse, to inspire, often just to pass the time—they usually have an additional purpose. They talk to bring people to their side. In democracies we are ruled more often by speech than by force, and a democratic politician is one who knows how to use speech as a means of influence and a technique of rule. If quiet people rarely enter democratic politics, that is because they know that no matter what virtues of mind or character they might bring to the job, their shyness is itself a liability. The practiced, persuasive talk that marks a true democratic politician is not a superfluous talent but one central to his or her success.

To find the source of political power in a society, it is always helpful to notice what ambitious people want. In democracies they want to be heard. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America, he noticed that legislators clamored above all for their chance to speak; he saw that they chafed at rules of procedure requiring their silence and jumped at opportunities to voice their views.<sup>1</sup> Today there are still few powers in a legislature greater than the power to set the agenda—to determine who can talk, what can be

discussed, and for how long. It may be true that in Washington “money talks,” but campaign strategists and lobbyists often value money for its ability to buy speaking time and a large audience. In general, if people want to wield political power in a democracy, they must look for opportunities to talk to their fellow citizens, to impress them, and to persuade them. Persuasive talk is the currency of the democratic realm.

What are we to make of this feature of democratic politics? In ancient Athens the rhetorician Gorgias defended the prominence of persuasive speech by asserting that it brought freedom to the people and rule to those who could persuade them.<sup>2</sup> But how could it do both at once, unless freedom meant being subjected to the rule of persuasive speakers? In the seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes offered such a danger as reason to be suspicious of democratic government, which he thought tended to devolve into an “aristocracy of orators.”<sup>3</sup> Along with Hobbes we may ask, why should the best speakers be allowed the upper hand in a society of equals? Is persuasion anything other than a form of manipulation?<sup>4</sup>

This anxiety must be balanced, however, against an opposing consideration. If persuasion is a technique of rule, it is a technique so indirect as to often undermine its own power. The word “persuade” arises etymologically from the same root as the words “suave” and “sweet,” which reminds us that democratic persuasion requires insinuating oneself into the good graces of one’s audience. Persuasive talk aims to sway people by learning their tastes and offering them what they crave. For this reason democratic politicians have always risked becoming servants rather than rulers, catering to their audience’s sweet tooth.<sup>5</sup> Politicians have always been accused of pandering, and, while few plead guilty to the charge, many will admit at least to having felt the temptation.

Thus the practice of persuasion seems prone to two forms of corruption. In trying to persuade, democratic politicians may end up manipulating their audiences, or they may end up pandering to them. These twin dangers reveal something about the nature of persuasion as an activity. When we persuade, we want to change our listeners’ minds by linking our position to their existing opinions and emotions. In our desire to change their minds lies the danger of manipulating, and in the effort to attend to their existing opinions lies the risk of pandering. The two vices thus arise from the dual character of persuasion itself, which consists partly in ruling and partly in following. In this way persuasion shares more generally in the character of democratic citizenship, which requires citizens to both rule and be ruled.<sup>6</sup> Persuasion is one of the characteristic activities of democratic politics.

The study of persuasion, or the art of rhetoric, was for this reason thought to be a fundamental part of a democratic citizen's education throughout much of Western history. In ancient Athens and Rome, in medieval schools and Renaissance cities, in early modern Europe and nineteenth-century America, both scholars and statesmen taught their students that a well-functioning republican polity required citizens who could articulate arguments on either side of a controversy, link those arguments to the particular opinions and prejudices of their fellow citizens, and thereby facilitate the arguing and deliberating that constituted a healthy political life. Politics naturally gives rise to controversy, and rhetoricians taught citizens how to engage in controversy through speech rather than force. While there have been critics of rhetoric since Socrates, for much of Western history their attacks failed to unseat the study of rhetoric from its central place in education.

Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, this view about the importance of rhetoric has come under renewed and distinctive attack, and the full fruition of that attack can be seen in our contemporary suspicions of rhetoric. Today schools and universities rarely teach the art of persuasion, and when they do, they more often give the topic to literature scholars than to professors of politics. Political theorists tend to focus on reasonable dialogues of justification rather than passionate exchanges of rhetoric. While actual politicians have not abandoned persuasion (how could they?), they prefer not to acknowledge their art. They understand that when they hear an argument described as "rhetorical," it is being either decried as manipulative or dismissed as superficial. In both theory and practice today, the reigning view of rhetorical speech is that it is a disruptive force in politics and a threat to democratic deliberation.

This book aims to challenge that conventional wisdom. Its guiding motivation is the thought that a politics of persuasion—in which people try to change one another's minds by appealing not only to reason but also to passions and sometimes even to prejudices—is a mode of politics that is worth defending. Persuasion is worthwhile because it requires us to pay attention to our fellow citizens and to display a certain respect for their points of view and their judgments. The effort to persuade requires us to engage with others wherever they stand and to begin our argument there, as opposed to simply asserting that they would adopt our opinion if they were more reasonable. This way of proceeding can be contrasted to the sort of argumentation described in many recent theories of deliberation, which can seem insensitive to the particularities of people's lives and leave them feeling alienated from the results of public discussions.

Because a number of factors conspire against it, we cannot take the practice of persuasion in politics for granted. Relatively few people are interested in listening to arguments, much less in having their minds changed. Politics, when it does not descend into violence, is more often a realm of interests than of arguments, more often a marketplace than a forum.<sup>7</sup> When political controversy does proceed through public discourse, it often decays quickly into the sort of exchange that allows room for neither persuasion nor deliberation, the sort of exchange in which ideologues voice increasingly radicalized versions of their positions to audiences who already agree with them. In today's increasingly polarized political landscape, public debate often devolves into groups of like-minded individuals talking to one another, leaving other citizens increasingly alienated.<sup>8</sup> In addition, various features of modern politics—such as the prominence of bureaucracies with their rule-governed decision-procedures, the dominance of mass media with its emphasis on visual images, the weakening of parties relative to special-interest groups, and the slow but inexorable drift toward more plebiscitary forms of democratic decision-making—conspire to close off spaces in which persuasion might occur. The very possibility of persuasion needs to be protected.

This book aims to make the case for a politics of persuasion by examining the intellectual roots of the modern suspicion of persuasive rhetoric and then challenging them, pointing the way toward an understanding of deliberation in which rhetoric plays a central role. The book aims to show how deeply the early modern attack on classical rhetoric influenced the social contract tradition in political thought and how it continues to influence contemporary theories of public reasoning indebted to that tradition. The modern suspicion of rhetoric arose, I suggest, from a crisis of confidence about citizens' capacity to exercise practical judgment in public deliberations. This crisis was fueled by observation of the especially dogmatic religious character of public debate in early modern England, where a prophetic rhetoric of conscience put on display the most dangerous tendencies of rhetorical speech.

While democratic citizens will always have reason to be on the lookout for demagogues and to adopt institutions designed to avoid the effects of demagoguery, we go too far when we aim to eliminate rhetoric from deliberation altogether. Even if we hope to draw citizens into deliberating reasonably with one another, we cannot help but begin by appealing to them as we find them—opinionated, self-interested, sentimental, partial to their

friends and family, and often unreasonable. The moment in which politicians face citizens' everyday opinions, the rhetorical moment, cannot be avoided in democratic politics. In the final chapter of the book I suggest that attention to this moment yields an understanding of deliberation that challenges recent theories of deliberative democracy.<sup>9</sup> The rhetorical approach to deliberation differs from these recent theories in that it appeals to no concept of public reason, accepts that publicity and transparency are not always best, and suggests that partiality, passion, and even prejudice have a legitimate and often productive role to play in democratic deliberations.

### Persuasion and Judgment

Before we go further, it may be helpful to explain more precisely the way in which this book uses certain key words: *rhetoric*, *persuasion*, and *judgment*. The term *rhetoric* has acquired a variety of meanings. Some scholars use it to refer to the characteristics of a particular community's discourse, such as that of economists, while others use it to refer to particular tropes and styles of poetry or literature; for others still, the term encompasses all of human communication. For the purposes of this project, I will follow a long tradition of understanding rhetoric as speech designed to persuade. If this definition seems to leave out a whole host of familiar rhetorical practices, including certain techniques of manipulation and deception that regularly earn the name "rhetoric" in ordinary conversation, that is because I do not aim to defend those practices here—or at least, I aim to defend them only insofar as they can be viewed as necessary to the politics of persuasion.

When we try to persuade, we use the arguments, images, and emotions most likely to appeal to the particular audience in front of us. Rhetoricians who teach the art of persuasion have always instructed their students to treat different audiences differently, to study their distinctive and peculiar passions and their particular commitments, sentiments, and beliefs.

Persuasion can thus be distinguished from the mode of discourse that has been identified as central to much liberal political theory, that of justification.<sup>10</sup> Justification treats different audiences similarly, in deference to the ideal of equality. When we justify a course of action, we argue that it is just, legitimate, or reasonable. We ask for our listeners' consent insofar as they take on the role of impartial or reasonable judges and adopt the shared public perspective that John Rawls and others have called the standpoint of "public reason," but we do not ask for more than that. We stop short of

what persuasion might require. We show why any reasonable person should accept our view but not necessarily why these particular people listening here and now should do so. Instead, we ask our listeners to join us on a different plane, a place where “questions of political justice can be discussed on the same basis by all citizens, whatever their social position, or more particular aims and interests, or their religious, philosophical, or moral views.”<sup>11</sup> We treat every citizen as being equally capable of giving and receiving public reasons. Of course, we acknowledge that many, perhaps most, of us are not fully reasonable in our actual opinions and judgments. But we do presume that our listeners could be reasonable, that they could step into the role of someone exercising public reason as a standard. In this way we respect their equality, for it is when citizens step into that role that they become most equal and most alike. And it is because they can become alike in this way that we assume they can agree on basic standards of justification. In presuming this sort of equality, theories of justificatory liberalism tend to assume the possibility of universal agreement even if they do not call upon us to always reach consensus.<sup>12</sup> Though these theories can permit a great deal of “reasonable disagreement,” they can do so only because they presume that we can agree, for the most part, about what sort of disagreement is reasonable. In contrast to the classical-humanist tradition of rhetoric, which assumed that people disagreed and asked how they could engage in controversy through speech rather than force, the modern liberal tradition of justification assumes that people can find some shared point of agreement and asks how they can engage in deliberation within the boundaries set by that underlying agreement.

Persuasion does not rest upon a commitment to any underlying agreement. Rhetorical appeals need not and, in fact, must not take the intention to think reasonably for granted. They frequently start from premises or attitudes shared only by members of the present audience. Often they rely on premises that are not even made explicit; these premises are supplied by the audience itself. In trying to bring an audience from the conventional wisdom to thoughts or intentions they might not otherwise have adopted, rhetoric intends to wield influence over them. In this sense rhetoric is a form of rule. Rhetorical speech is therefore political even when its explicit subject matter seems to lie far from the realm of policies and justice. The political aspect of persuasive speech suggests why its conditions and techniques should fall within the realm of political theory. It also suggests why liberal thought, in its broadest sense, is suspicious of rhetoric. Liberalism’s aversion to persuasion is a symptom of its more general aversion to rule.<sup>13</sup>

The way in which persuasion aims to rule, however, is distinctive. While the word “rhetoric” as used today often refers to one of the vices of democratic speech, the term changes its valence when defined as an effort to persuade. *Persuasion* in the strict sense identifies a way of influencing that is neither manipulation nor pandering. The speaker who manipulates his audience so as to bring them to a belief or action without their consent, as Kant thought orators moved men “like machines,” has not persuaded but coerced.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the speaker who merely finds out where his audience itches and then scratches there, as Plato thought pandering Athenian orators did, has not managed to change his listeners’ minds at all.<sup>15</sup> To truly persuade people is to induce them to change their own beliefs and desires in light of what has been said. Though we speak of “being persuaded” in the passive voice, we recognize the difference between being persuaded and being indoctrinated or brainwashed; the difference lies in the active independence that is preserved when we are persuaded. Though overbrazen orators and their enemies have long compared persuasion to a drug or a magical capacity that does the work of coercion without the need for physical force, such metaphors exaggerate an orator’s power and pervert the meaning of persuasion.<sup>16</sup> An orator does not coerce; he merely puts words into the air. In the brief moments of conscious or unconscious reflection that occur while we listen to a sales pitch or a campaign speech, an active process of evaluation and assimilation occurs in our minds. We cannot make use of the energy of food simply by coming into contact with it; our bodies must actively digest it. An analogous process of digestion must occur before our mind internalizes the suggestions of any speaker. Unlike actual digestion, however, mental digestion is a process over which we can exercise some control. We reject arguments that seem far-fetched or suspicious. Being persuaded is not the same as learning, but it is related. When someone sits back and decides, “All right, you have persuaded me,” he is not merely describing something that has happened to him. In spite of the grammar, he is describing something he has done. That, at least, is the presumption in the very idea that there is such a thing as persuasion that lies between manipulation and pandering. It is the presumption of democratic politics.

This concept of persuasion points, in turn, to the human capacity for practical judgment. By *judgment* I mean the mental activity of responding to particular situations in a way that draws upon our sensations, beliefs, and emotions without being dictated by them in any way reducible to a simple rule. This kind of judgment may involve integrating new information into

existing patterns of thought, readjusting those patterns to make room for a new perspective, or both. There are several sorts of judgment—logical, aesthetic, moral, political, and perhaps others—but the concept I have in mind is linked most closely to what Aristotle called practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, and what Aquinas discussed as prudence, and it is also linked to our idea of common sense.<sup>17</sup> When speaking of prudence and common sense, we may notice that while judgment is a general human capacity, some people are better at using it than others. People with good judgment are adept at evaluating and responding to difficult and ambiguous situations. They have a certain instinctive sensitivity and appreciation for nuance that allows them somehow to focus on appropriate similarities and differences, noticing how a particular situation is similar to previous ones in their experience and how it is different. We can imitate such people by trying to follow their example, but we cannot come up with a set of rules that will, if followed, assure us of being able to replicate their good judgment. Still, we each have judgment to some degree, and often it improves with use.

Practical judgment understood in this way is closely linked to the activity of deliberation. We only deliberate about how to respond in situations where there is no clear or definite answer, where we can control our response to some extent, and where certain responses seem to be better than others. As Aristotle noted, people do not deliberate about things they cannot control, such as the orbits of the stars or the coming of the rains; nor do we deliberate about matters that are wholly in the hands of others, such as what policy citizens of a neighboring state should adopt.<sup>18</sup> We deliberate about what we can do ourselves. People who have good judgment are skilled at this sort of deliberation. Their skill consists not only in having the requisite intellectual quickness and cleverness but also in having the right dispositions or habits of affective responses. They will not often be overwhelmed by their passions or by fear, hunger, or lust; nor will they fall prey to the distorting influences of insecurity or vanity. They will feel such emotions but they will feel them, more often than not, in ways that contribute to their ability to judge well rather than in ways that distort that capacity. Partly from nature and partly by education, they will have gained certain dispositions that allow them a measure of self-possession; from that relatively steady perspective they will be able to imagine accurately and empathetically what it would be like to take various courses of action. They will also be able to examine the various options available to them with some measure of detachment. Thus they will view the objects of their judgment

with a mixture of sympathy and detachment, and they will be able to do so because they have certain traits of character, a keen perceptivity and relatively steady habits of emotional response. When people have all these traits, they find that they can draw upon their various perceptions, feelings, and opinions to respond in a relatively deliberate way to whatever particular situation confronts them.<sup>19</sup>

When speakers or writers try to persuade us of something, they are confronting us with a particular situation in speech. If they are neither indoctrinating us nor simply repeating what we already think, they are appealing to our capacity to respond to what they are saying by drawing upon and reorganizing our existing patterns of thought and emotion—they are appealing to our capacity for judgment. Since judgment is so closely linked with deliberation, so too is the practice of persuasion. While we might be tempted to say that the persuasive speaker trying to engage us in deliberative judgment appeals ultimately to our capacity for reason, this is not always so. It is possible to appeal to judgment through speech that is not wholly reasonable—indeed it is often necessary to do so. This follows from the character of judgment. Since judgment emerges from and draws upon a whole complex of emotions, dispositions, and tacit knowledge, a persuasive speaker often engages judgment by appealing to passions and images as well as reasons.

While judgment is spoken of less frequently than reason and emotion in discussions of political psychology, it should be a familiar idea nonetheless. Judgment is at least as natural and intuitive a concept as “reason” or “desire” and is probably closer to experience than either of those abstract terms. To speak of desire without an object seems appropriate only for the most basic impulses of hunger and lust; to speak of reason in the abstract rather than of particular reasons or arguments seems equally vague. Yet political theorists recognize both reason and desire as important human capacities without objection. Judgment may be difficult to analyze, but neither its existence nor its importance can plausibly be questioned.

Because of the link between persuasive rhetoric and judgment, an argument for saving the possibility of persuasion in democratic politics is an argument for protecting the practice of judgment. It seems to me that this is a crucial project. Today we are more than ever governed by rules that eliminate space for even the smallest exercises of judgment. These rules are created by both private and public authorities, by legislators, bureaucrats, and corporate managers, all interested in minimizing the uncertainty associated

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