What Democrats Can Learn about Rhetoric from Sanders and Buttigieg

By Richard Cherwitz

Longtime scholar Dan Nimmo, whose research has contributed to the disciplines of political science, journalism and communication, was one of the first to define and analyze the various audiences to whom political candidates might address.

These audiences ranged from true believers (the base who must be motivated to work for the campaign), to those open to persuasion (voters who may not have
made up their minds and/or don’t follow the campaign closely), to those who are weakly supportive and must be motivated to vote, to those firmly committed to the opposition candidate and beyond persuasive reach.

For Nimmo, the key question faced by all candidates is: Strategically, to which audiences do you want to allocate a finite amount of money and devote limited rhetorical resources? What has become clear since Donald Trump became president is that politicians seem more inclined than ever before to communicate primarily to their own tribe; there is a reticence to target the opposition’s audience.

Two notable exceptions to this trend are Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg. To be clear, I am not endorsing or recommending either as the choice of the Democrats for president of the United States.

Nevertheless, as someone who has spent his 40-plus year career studying and teaching communication, I applaud both Sanders and Buttigieg for the ways they are answering Nimmo’s question about audiences, and hence teaching other presidential hopefuleps important rhetorical lessons.

First, consider Sanders. We must applaud his decision to do a town hall inside the Fox News bubble on Monday evening — a place one would guess is unfriendly to his policy proposals. It should be noted that Sanders is one of only a small number of Democrats thus far to enter this den.

A key principle in political communication emerging from Nimmo’s research is that candidates for public office may not be successful by exclusively preaching to the choir. Sanders’ decision to talk with Fox News shows that he and his handlers understand this principle. Moreover, moving outside his comfort zone — to speak to an audience comprised of many who do not share his political beliefs — appears to have been successful.

To the surprise if not chagrin of the Fox hosts, Sanders received enthusiastic applause from the town hall audience on several important issues. Most notably, the audience expressed a clear willingness to give up their current health-care insurance plan for a single-payer provider.
The rhetorical lesson Sanders may be teaching his fellow Democratic presidential aspiring is obvious: To defeat Donald Trump will require going well beyond their political base; it will necessitate getting outside the echo chamber that already embraces their candidacy.

With Buttigieg, a second rhetorical lesson is emerging — one quite distinct from Sanders. Recent polling and campaign donation data reveals that with each day, every new speech and additional interview, Americans are becoming increasingly impressed by Pete Buttigieg.

Why? Perhaps it is because his rhetorical message is unique.

First, Buttigieg’s discourse underscores his sharp intellect, compassion, clear vision and hope for America, impeccable understanding of history, ability to talk directly to voters, and thorough grounding in the issues facing our nation — all of which are nothing less than striking.

Second, and more significant, Buttigieg has chosen — deliberately, I suspect — rarely to invoke Trump’s name or attack him explicitly and directly. From a rhetorical perspective, this is important. Buttigieg appears to have decided not to alienate Trump voters, giving them additional reasons and motivation to vote for the incumbent president.

This rhetorical choice could prove that Buttigieg is that once in a lifetime presidential candidate who comes on the scene at precisely the right time with a potentially persuasive, positive and bipartisan message — a message avoiding attack and calling for genuine change (where “change” is more than a cliché and tired rhetorical trope) to extricate the country from a dangerous time in history.

In short, whoever the Democrats nominate, it would behoove them to take note of the rhetorical lessons being taught by Sanders and Buttigieg.

Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin.