“O'Rourke, Cruz Are Speaking to Two Different Audiences”

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By Richard Cherwitz

As a teacher and scholar of communication for more than 40 years, I have followed closely the Texas senatorial race between Democrat challenger Beto O’Rourke and Republican incumbent Ted Cruz. While I am politically biased, I watched Tuesday night’s debate from the perspective not of a partisan, but of someone who studies argumentation and rhetoric.

Several things became clear:

► O'Rourke assumed the rhetorical posture of a candidate who is behind in the polls, with fewer than three weeks remaining until the election. Unlike the previous debate, he came out swinging, feeling the urgency of the moment and thus more aggressively attacking Cruz and his record.

► Cruz again appeared to be the more polished and experienced "debater," armed with data and arguments — whether accurate or not — to respond to O'Rourke's attacks about his accomplishments in the Senate.

► Perhaps my most important rhetorical take away is that the debate was a microcosm of the entire race, demonstrating how Cruz is effective at convincingly tapping into the traditional conservative beliefs and values of Texas' likely voters — the voters who have made Texas a red state for many years.
Even so, this does not mean that O'Rourke is doomed come midterms. It is possible that the election will not pivot on likely voters — what some see as the gold standard of polling used to predict election outcomes and where Cruz has a comfortable lead. Results on Nov. 6 could come down to people classified as unlikely voters. The latter includes a large number of young people who are the staple of O’Rourke’s campaign in the field. Texans have registered to vote in record numbers.

Bottom line: While it’s hard to count on people who historically haven’t voted, it won’t be surprising if O’Rourke pulls off an upset. Like so many races across the country in 2018, Cruz and O’Rourke are speaking to two different audiences — and the key is which audience is more energized.

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