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Commentary | Why concession speeches are important and necessary political ritual

RICHARD CHERWITZ

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Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams makes remarks during a press conference at the Abrams Headquarters in Atlanta, Friday, Nov. 16. (Associated Press photo)

In the aftermath of the 2018 elections, where many races were full of heated rhetoric and ended in unusually close outcomes, it is refreshing to witness some outstanding examples of eloquent and gracious concession speeches — speeches that historically have served as an important and symbolic ritual in American political rhetoric.

Arizona Republican Senate candidate [Martha McSally](#)'s speech immediately comes to mind. In a YouTube video where she appeared at home with her dog, McSally offered a heartfelt concession, graciously congratulating her opponent Krysten Sinema. The tone of her remarks stood in stark contrast to her campaign discourse; not only was this speech sincere and authentic, but McSally conceded despite pressure not to do so from many angry Republicans.

As a Texan, I found especially noteworthy Democrat Rep. Beto O'Rourke's concession. In addition to sincerely congratulating Sen. [Ted Cruz](#), O'Rourke energized his disappointed supporters by reaffirming the larger principles anchoring his campaign. Days later, O'Rourke, who was traveling on the same airplane as Cruz, went out of his way to shake his opponent's hand — a photograph of which then went viral. Like McSally's concession, this represents the best angels of American politics.

There may be other archetypal examples of effective speeches in 2018. However, it is worth focusing on a less orthodox yet nonetheless effective concession.

Following a race full of accusations, vitriol and legal challenges, Democrat [Stacey Abrams](#) on Friday Nov. 16 acknowledged that Republican Brian Kemp would be certified as the next governor of Georgia. Abrams made clear that she was ending her bid to become the first African-American woman elected to lead a state. However, she noted: "So let's be clear — this is not a speech of concession, because concession means to acknowledge an action is right, true or proper. As a woman of conscience and faith, I cannot concede that. But, my assessment is the law currently allows no further viable remedy."

No doubt many will offer — and have offered — knee-jerk political responses, casting Abrams' remarks as sour grapes and accusing her of not actually conceding. A colleague of mine even wondered if Abrams' remarks, rather than constituting concession, echoed Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" soliloquy "I come to bury Caesar not to praise him" speech.

I do not believe this is the case. As someone who has spent 40-plus years studying public discourse, often agreeing with those not sharing my partisan views and disagreeing with those who do, Abrams' speech was on the mark and sounded the right note.

Given the unusual circumstances surrounding the Georgia election, "concession" was not an appropriate rhetorical response. Consonant with the ritual of concession, Abrams brought closure to the contest, admitting that there is no remedy to change the outcome. Nevertheless, she underscored why her principles — the driving force of her campaign — did not permit a traditional concession.

Like so many speeches in America's history, Abrams' concession provides a teachable moment for those of us who study rhetoric. It reminds us that rhetorical criticism is not about and should not reflect the state of our political glands. Rather, analyzing rhetoric requires us to stand back and assess the purpose and effect of speeches — even when those speeches are delivered by politicians whose opinions we do not share and may not respect.

In my case, I shall tell students that, regardless of their partisan views, Abrams' speech should be read carefully and studied. Like speeches made by those of diametrically different political perspectives (including Ronald Reagan, John F. Kennedy, George H. Bush, and Barack Obama), Abrams' concession might be considered a model of effective rhetoric.

I will also use this speech as a tool to help students better understand the motivation of politicians — even when they do not share their political point of view. If we ever are to transcend our current hyperpolarization in politics and create more civil discourse, engaging in this type of rhetorical criticism may be necessary. After all, as research in communication suggests, understanding is a first step toward creating tolerance.

Cherwitz, Ph.D., Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial professor, Moody College of Communication, is founding director, Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), [University of Texas, Austin](#).