

The Lost Electorate: A Content Analysis of 2022 Democratic Senatorial Candidates' Video Commercials and Their Appeals to the White Working-Class

By: Kay Wetmore

Advised by: Dr. Bostdorff and Dr. Wrobel

RESEARCH QUESTION

- The purpose of this study was to answer the question: How are Democratic candidates trying to win back the white working-class?
- This study explored two 2022 Democratic senatorial candidates' TV commercials: Tim Ryan (OH) and John Fetterman (PA).

METHODOLOGY

- Hand-coded content analysis of ten TV commercials (five per candidate).
- Coded for both words & visuals for six topics including: the economy, dog whistle politics, populism, the elite, symbolic group appeals, and policy-oriented appeals.
- Created a code-book based on previous literature but added on during the coding process.
- Coded by sentence for words & by full video for visuals.
- Calculated total number & average of words per topic.
- Marked down the common visuals and symbols that appeared for each topic.

RESULTS

- Both Ryan & Fetterman used economic appeals, but no dog whistle appeals.
- Fetterman used both populist words & visuals, while Ryan only used populist visuals.
- Both candidates positioned their opponent as a member of "the elite."
- Both candidates featured symbolic group appeals, but Ryan used more policy-buzzwords.



EXAMPLES

The Economy:

- Fetterman highlighted words like "inflation"; Ryan used the word "trade" seven times.

Populism:

- Fetterman dressed casually in the majority of his ads; Ryan used a setting in a bar playing darts.

The Elite:

- Fetterman called his opponent "out-of-state rich guy"; Ryan called his opponent "a celebrity and CNN analyst."

Symbolic Group Appeals:

- Fetterman called out to "working families" or "working people"; Ryan showed himself walking with two men in a factory.

IMPLICATIONS

- Democrats may face a conundrum that Republican candidates do not: appealing to the white working-class while still considering people of color within their electorate ads.
- When appealing to the white working-class, Democratic candidates may need to feature populist rhetoric or position their opponent as "the elite," which may be difficult for incumbent candidates.
- Symbolic group appeals to the white working-class may be a core appeal that Democrats need to use but again may be a drawback if candidates only focus on the white-working class.
- Finally, it may be attractive to utilize policy-buzzwords by incumbents but may counteract their populist appeals by reminding voters that they are still apart of "the establishment."