


Geographical Proximity of War as a Catalyst for Variations in the Frequencies of Emotional Appeals in Pre-Election Debates

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Abstract: Appealing to fear was widely believed to be a rhetorical strategy behind the last decade's successes of populists. Recent empirical studies, however, show that this perception has been oversimplified, highlighting that emotional appeals are frequently used by politicians across the spectrum and that their distribution is shaped by multiple factors. Our study contributes to this field by introducing another dimension: proximity to war. We hypothesize that politicians in countries bordering a militarily aggressive neighbor would aim to evoke different emotions than their peers running for office in countries distant from it. To validate this hypothesis, we employed a Large Language Model (GPT-4) to assess emotional appeals in pre-election debates in six European countries (Estonia, Poland, Finland, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands). Our results confirm that appeals to fear dominate debates in countries close to conflict, while appeals to anger prevail in those more distant from it. Consequently, studies on populism and political communication in general, should consider conflict proximity as a crucial variable.

Keywords: political communication; emotional appeals; war proximity; pre-election debates; populism.

INTRODUCTION

Appeals to emotion play a central role in political communication, allowing politicians and campaigns to establish contact and mobilize citizens them in the desired direction (Brader, 2020; Jones et. al, 2013; Ridout & Searles, 2011). Recent research on emotions has concentrated on their role in the success of populists adopting

an passionate tone, frequently characterized by fear-mongering (Bonikowski 2017, Gerstlé & Nai, 2019; Rico et al., 2017; Skonieczny 2018). Throughout history, politicians have resorted to creating a sense of military threat to generate a ‘rally around the flag’ effect, portraying themselves as strong leaders and diverting public attention from domestic political challenges (Baum, 2002).

The success of such rhetoric relies on the public’s perception of threat. In the absence of a tangible enemy, the America and its allies were persuaded by political and media activities following the events of 9/11 that the threat could materialize anywhere (Polletta, 2006; Redfield, 2009; Rychnovská, 2014). Similarly, ecological movements and parties often use fear-driven rhetoric around climate change, emphasizing severe consequences like environmental collapse or resource scarcity (Furedi, 2018; Gil, 2016; O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

Research suggests that populists use significantly more negative and fewer positive emotional appeals than mainstream politicians (Widmann, 2021) to fuel the narrative of ordinary people versus corrupt elites (Skonieczny, 2018). However, the scale of affective responses to such rhetoric varies only among specific audiences (Schumacher et al., 2022), and there is evidence that mainstream politicians adapt simplistic language as often as the populists (Wang & Liu, 2018).

Politicians’ rhetoric depends on adapting to the communicative context within which public functions exist. War is one of the few factors with the potential to reshuffle an entire political scene (Edelman, 2013), but its impact is supposed to be closely determined by audience’s proximity to the conflict (Kemmelmeyer & Winter, 2000). Through an examination of the types of emotional appeals used in pre-election debates, this study empirically validates whether political discourses adapt various emotional tones in countries close to war zones (henceforth Frontline states). Employing qualitative linguistics methodology, the study also answers calls for examining each emotion separately (Weber, 2013) to help better understand problems of political communication and international relations (Clément & Sangar, 2017).

In the context of populists needing to build a sense of fear to succeed, it is interesting to observe how the entire political scene changes when an external source of fear emerges. By aggregating data from six countries, which held elections in 2023, we investigate whether geographical proximity to a conflict zone correlates with an increase in the frequency of fear appeals across the political spectrum.

EMOTIONAL APPEALS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In the last decade, numerous analyses have cast emotions in a rather negative light, blaming their exploitation for the contemporary decline in the quality of public discourse. Prior to the recent rise of populist movements, scholars considered emotions were an essential catalyst for establishing connections and trust between leaders and the public (Marcus, 2000) as well as a tool for mobilizing emancipatory movements (Bargetz, 2015). As emotions facilitate perception, preference formation, choice, and memory, they play a crucial role in social order formation and maintenance (Long & Brecke, 2003).

The persuasive rhetoric employed by contemporary populist leaders in the online sphere encompasses several key aspects, which collectively create a potent appeal that resonates with a broad audience. At the core of their strategy lies an emotional appeal, which skillfully taps into emotions, often leveraging fear, anger, and nostalgia to evoke powerful reactions among their followers (Mudde et al., 2017). This strategy is complemented by a dual-pronged approach that involves simplification (Martelli & Jaffrelot, 2023), rendering complex issues in easily digestible terms (Wang & Liu, 2018), and the cultivation of a divisive 'us vs. them' narrative, fostering a sense of unity among their supporters while vilifying the perceived elite (Hawkins, 2009). Furthermore, populist leaders extensively use mobilizing language, encouraging active involvement, and repetition to embed their core messages firmly in the collective consciousness. In addition, their adept usage of social media and multimedia content, combined with personal engagement with the audience, fosters a sense of community and loyalty. Social media have also made non-populists more prone to appeal to anger, disgust, and fear as they mimic adversaries with emotionality and framing promoted by platforms' algorithms (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021).

Characterizing populism is difficult because it is simultaneously understood to be an ideology, a style, a discourse, and a strategy. Furthermore, its simplistic arguments do not have to be explained in unsophisticated language (McDonnell & Ondelli, 2022). These elements converge to establish a persuasive online presence that garners widespread support and engagement, contributing to the success of populist leaders in the digital era. In the last decade, democratic politicians struggled to find rhetoric would present an alternative to fear-mongering language (Moffitt, 2016). As a result, mainstream politicians circulated between offering a sense of hope and positive agenda and portraying the populists as a dangerous threat to international stability and quality of life. When factors like the pandemic, climate change, and military conflicts heightened citizens' sense of insecurity, constructing optimistic democratic narratives became an even more challenging task (O'Regan, 2023).

It is important to recognize that the use of fear as a rhetorical tool was never exclusive to populists. In situations where genuine cause for concern exists and fear is justified, employing fear-based rhetoric is an effective method of communication. Fear has the potential to foster community cohesion, mobilization, compassion, and even hope. The crucial distinction lies in the underlying causes, determining whether the aim is to address pressing issues necessitating solutions or to target and eliminate perceived adversaries. McDonnell and Ondelli (2022) suggest mainstream politicians have already simplified their language, speaking in a manner no more complex than that of populists (McDonnell & Ondelli, 2022) and Boler and Davis (2018) argue that mainstream politicians are more likely in digital environments to appeal to anger, disgust, and fear to mimic their populist adversaries' emotionality and framing promoted by platforms' algorithms. There is not however any research to show either whether escalations in the use of emotional appeals positively affect election performance or how frequently they present specific emotions.

In the modern conceptualization of emotional appeals in political discourse, Konat et al. (2024) argue that over half of the arguments presented by politicians during pre-election debates contained some form of emotional appeal. This observation builds upon the classic Aristotelian concept of *pathos*, which with *logos* and *ethos*, constitutes the three rhetorical strategies. The inclusion of emotions in the analysis of everyday argumentation, a tradition dating back to Walton (1992), further enriches this framework. Understanding emotional appeals or *pathos* as discursive phenomena enables their identification and analysis within discourse samples.

Our categorization of emotions is rooted in cognitive psychology, which views emotion as a reaction to a stimulus. Each emotional appeal can be understood as a type of stimulus, where speakers, using specific words or phrases (such as “war”, “children”, or “coward”), are attempting to elicit emotions in the audience. Emotions in cognitive psychology are primarily studied through two approaches: dimensional and categorical. The dimensional approach places emotions within a multi-dimensional space, often using three dimensions: valence (ranging from positive to negative), arousal (from low to high), and dominance (from weak/submissive to strong/dominant) (Russell, 1980). Alternatively, the categorical approach divides emotions into distinct categories. Paul Ekman (1992) and Robert Plutchik (2003) each propose categorical models that are commonly employed both in psychology and computational linguistics. Ekman's framework identifies a quintet of foundational emotions – anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and joy – posited as universal, innate, and deeply embedded in human nature (Ekman, 1992). Plutchik's theory expands on this foundation, presenting eight primary emotions, inclusive of Ekman's five, with the addition of surprise, trust, and anticipation (Plutchik, 2003).

Emotion is a complex process, beginning with the cognitive evaluation of a stimulus, leading to actions to cope with it. This sequence includes the feeling state, known as the emotion, and ends with a return to equilibrium. Emotional reactions are responses to vital stimuli, preparing organisms to respond appropriately. Emotions correspond to varying patterns of behavior and physiological responses. Below is a table adapted from Plutchik’s model, outlining emotions as sequences of events. Each emotion is described by a typical stimulus event, cognitive evaluation, feeling state, behavior, and its effect. Although our set of basic emotions is based on Ekman’s categorization, we rely on Plutchik’s later operationalization, which frames emotions as reactions to stimuli (see Table 1). This perspective better supports our aim to identify emotional appeals (pathos), rather than expressions of felt emotion, as typically captured in sentiment analysis.

Table 1. Conceptualization of Emotions based on the model developed by Plutchik (2003)

Emotion	Stimulus Event	Cognition	Behavior	Effect
Anger	Obstacle	Enemy	Attack	Destroy Obstacle
Fear	Threat	Danger	Escape	Safety
Sadness	Loss of Valued Object	Abandonment	Cry	Reattach to Lost Object
Joy	Gain of Valued Object	Possession	Retain	Gain Resources
Disgust	Unpalatable Object	Poison	Vomit	Eject Poison

This conceptualization provides the grounds for operationalization of emotions in terms of a stimulus-reaction framework. In this manner, from the perspective of cognitive psychology, words can be treated as emotion-eliciting stimuli, as evidenced by a multitude of emotional lexicons (Mohammad & Turney, 2010; Wierzbica et al., 2021). In those lexicons, language units are tested in their efficiency to elicit emotions in human subjects. This is under the model of pathos (emotional appeal) used in this study, where we observe how politicians use language as an emotion-eliciting device.

PROXIMITY OF WAR AND THREAT PERCEPTION

Research indicates socio-economic factors underpin of the recent rise of populist movements. The inability of established political establishments to address the ambitions of their constituents has led to mounting frustration, providing fertile ground for the growth of anti-elitist movements (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022; Rodrik, 2018). Ongoing cultural transformations and rapid technological

advancements fuel a pervasive sense of disorientation and upheaval, prompting a proclivity among citizens for anger, the pursuit of simplistic remedies, and the emergence of populist leaders as a response to this disarray. The concept of social anomie, initially described by Durkheim (1893) and developed further by Merton (1938), has resurfaced in discussions on the contemporary political climate (Teymoori et al., 2017). It reflects a state of normlessness and disillusionment, exacerbated by the rapid forces of globalization and technological progress, which results in disaffection from social and cultural change (Margalit, 2019). In such times, charismatic leaders appealing to fear are more likely to emerge, capturing the allegiance of disoriented masses.

In response to these multifaceted factors causing dissatisfaction with the existing political system, numerous countries have seen a rise in support for populist-authoritarian leaders. These politicians skillfully harness the public's frustration, directing it towards specific groups, such as migrants and perceived treacherous elites, to rally their supporters. Populist politicians try to hold a monopoly on fear, portraying mainstream political elites as a threat to citizens' freedom and well-being.

Russia's aggression towards Ukraine resulted in the re-emergence of another source of fear, that of war, but the effect was uneven among European countries (Anghel & Jones, 2023). War is an event so powerful that its entrance into the context can transform the public perception of social reality. Although individual personality traits play an important role in the perception of conflict as a threat, its emergence is a powerful event with the potential to restructure citizens' priorities entirely (Boehnke & Schwartz, 1997). Afraid for their lives, citizens reconfigure expectations towards democratic institutions, political leaders, and policies.

A looming threat of war can be a potent source of fear, particularly in front-line countries, i.e., bordering aggressive neighbors. An existential threat has the potential to reshape political discourse, often leading to phenomena such as the „rally around the flag” effect (Porat et. al, 2019). This type of crisis amplifies both the pace of information exchange and the need for physical and emotional proximity (Huang et. al, 2015). However, geography plays a crucial role, as proximity to conflict amplifies the realistic nature of this threat and its emotional resonance (Åhs et al., 2015). Physical closeness, usually corresponding with higher refugee visibility, alters threat perception, influencing desired leadership and defense policies (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007; Zaborowski, 2022). Leaders in endangered regions are tasked with the delicate balance of guaranteeing safety while navigating competition with other political actors to present themselves as competent guides through turbulent times. Taking these factors into account, we posit the notion that politicians adopt one of several emotional strategies when war breaks out across the border.

POLITICAL LEADERS IN DEBATES

Pre-election debates are unique events, being the most viewed spectacles during campaigns, whose primary function is to inform the voters about the policy and character of the candidates (Benoit et al., 2003; Benoit 2013). Although they are sometimes criticized for their focus on the performative, dramatic aspect (Coleman, 2020), there is evidence that they help voters clarify issue position as well (van der Meer et. al., 2016; Zhu et al., 1994). Voters learn about policy differences better by watching election debates than during other campaign events, when news coverage tend to omit them (Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000). Differences in format designs influence whether they meet the capabilities and entitlements of the citizens (Coleman & Moss, 2015) and Turkenburg (2022) suggests that their emotional appeal contributes positively to their role in the deliberative system, driving citizen reflection and engagement.

Televised debates become even more important as the audience becomes fragmented due to the growing number of communication channels running on separate platforms. After the rise of social media and the subsequent atomization of political discourse, they remain the only campaign events offering 'cross-cutting' exposure (Goldman & Mutz, 2011). As the only moment in the digital world with all perspectives gathered in the same time and space, debates force collective reflection on who we are and the nature of the common social state. In debates, assorted candidates are viewed and offered the same means for persuasion. Within them, despite variation in formats and question blocks, they formulate their appeals on equal terms. Politicians usually use this moment to strengthen their campaign message to ensure their electoral base that they hold the correct views. Their reception can, however, change when they are seen in direct comparison with others.

Taking part in a debate can also be analyzed as a performance whose aim is to establish leadership credentials worthy of a vote. Political communication in a debate is a series of attempts to convince the audience to take part in a social drama with the selected political actors playing the leading role (Schechner 2014). Primarily constructed by the acts of speaking, it shares other characteristics with a performance, starting from showing up at a specific place and arranging communicative situations with other people (Austin, 1975). By verbal and nonverbal acts, politicians perform their roles in the media spectacle, trying to leave an impression of being fit for leadership.

Appealing to emotions allows politicians to create bonds with the audience and position themselves as the right leaders (McDermott, 2020). The emotional aspect determines the course of action that society should be mobilized towards and allows leaders to carry it, as it makes speech memorable and redefines common identity. Eliciting certain emotions can result in identifying threats

to avoid, dangers to confront, or prospects to hope for. The audience decides if the attempts are successful, based on their worldview and overall performative footprint that all leaders carry with them. When politicians succeed in meeting the demands of the population, their leadership is legitimized by establishing a political community around them. The need to connect with the mood of the population means that to be successful, emotional appeals should reflect the state the population is in, so that it can identify with the message and be transformed by it.

Considering these dynamics, this paper employs automated language analysis models to dissect the role of fear in contemporary political discourse. Specifically, we analyze transcripts from pre-election debates held in 2023 across six European countries, aiming to recognize the intensity of appeals to different emotions and check whether in frontline countries bordering an aggressive neighbor, the politicians employ fear-based rhetoric more extensively than those in regions distant from military conflicts.

METHODS

MATERIAL

For textual analysis, transcripts were extracted from popular pre-election debates that took place before parliamentary elections in 2023 in six European countries: Estonia, Finland, Poland (frontline countries bordering the aggressor in the Ukraine war—Russia) and Greece, The Netherlands, and Spain (all three distant from the aggressor). All of these countries condemned the war and supported the attacked side, but the degree and type of their actions varied. (Volintiru et al., 2024). The number of debate participants varied from Estonia, Finland, Poland and Greece ($n=6$) to Spain ($n=7$) and The Netherlands ($n=16$). The latter statistic reflects the high diffusion of the Dutch party system. According to the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index (TAP), the most comprehensive index of populism in Europe, the selected countries varied significantly on the level of populism support, 2018 data showing over 40% of populist support in Greece and Poland, 20-25% in The Netherlands and Spain, 18% in Finland and 8% in Estonia. The material was pre-processed using Spacy IO Python packages for sentence and token identification. The exact dates, participants' list, and information on the entities organizing the debates can be found in the Appendix Table.

PROCESSING

As our methodology, we use the conceptualization of pathos as an appeal to emotions, used widely in current empirical studies on rhetoric (Walton, 1992; Konat et al., 2024). Pathos is conceived as an interactional event in which the speaker is attempting to elicit emotions in the audience for rhetorical gain, using linguistic means. The presence of emotional appeal in text can be manually annotated by human raters assessing whether a given unit of text aims to elicit emotions in the audience. Developing this approach and using a manual annotation scheme, we performed automatic annotation with OpenAI's GPT-4 model via API (December 2023). We provided the automated language model with a set of instructions (annotation scheme) previously used for human annotation.

Initial investigations in computational linguistics annotation have shown that GPT models, when provided with clear annotation schemes, can perform at a similar level to untrained human annotators (Gilardi et al., 2023). More recent studies further confirm this reliability in complex emotion-related tasks. For example, Moon et al. (2024) demonstrated that GPT-3.5 could successfully identify rhetorical strategies such as logos, ethos, and pathos in Korean-language health discourse, with results aligning closely with human judgments. Rønningstad et al. (2024) found that GPT-4 performed comparably to human annotators in entity-level sentiment annotation, sometimes even showing greater internal consistency than individual raters. Rathje et al. (2024) also report that GPT models can reliably detect psychological constructs such as discrete emotions and moral foundations across twelve languages, showing test-retest stability and outperforming traditional lexicon-based methods. Taken together, these findings suggest that when grounded in well-defined annotation frameworks, large language models like GPT-4 can serve as robust tools for emotion analysis, making them a practical and theoretically defensible alternative to manual validation—especially in multilingual, cross-cultural, and resource-constrained research contexts.

Automated analysis methods have one advantage over manual analysis – they can be used for vast amounts of data with little effort. They also have a disadvantage – they still are quite crude, providing only an approximation of classification. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the nature of human communication is fuzzy – each sentence may contain an appeal to more than one emotion and have more than one communicative intention. Second, the natural language processing (NLP) methods used in this study are still in the early stages of development and each of them has its internal limitations. Using GPT models with an annotation scheme allows for most sophistication, close to untrained humans – yet it yields little replicability, due to the “black box” nature of the model itself. Using sentiment analysis to explore emotional reactions seems to be the most established and widely used method, yet in the context

of political discourse, its results are distorted by the noise in social media data produced by trolls, bots, and avid supporters. Each result obtained with the use of NLP methods should be considered with respect to the research questions and the size and type of data used.

With this method we can determine if the appeals and potentially elicited emotions vary between populists and across different countries. Our methodology includes analyzing intensity and distribution of five basic emotions: anger, fear, sadness, joy and disgust. This typology is based on Paul Ekman's concept of basic emotions, which are culturally universal and biologically based, reflecting common human experiences. This allowed us to quantify and visualize the prevalence and intensity of specific emotional appeals in political speeches, offering a nuanced understanding of how politicians leverage the range of emotions to influence public opinion.

SEGMENTATION AND CLEANING

The debates were all transcribed automatically using OpenAI Whisper with Huggingface distribution (openai/whisper-largev2). Transcription files were then segmented into sentences, which were then treated as basic units for analysis. Segmentation was performed using Spacy 3.7, except for Estonian, where we adapted a simple regex-based segmentation due to the lack of an available Spacy model. Segments shorter than 30 characters were merged with the following sentence to mitigate errors in segmentation resulting in one word or very short sentences (such as 'How so?') see Table 2¹.

Table 2. Aggregates (N) and Frequency (n) of sentences longer than 30 characters by language

Geographical Proximity to War	Language	Sentences of more than 30 characters (n)	Aggregates (N=6973)
Frontline	Estonian	852	2091
	Polish	386	
	Finnish	853	
Distant	Dutch	2054	4882
	Greek	1284	
	Spanish	1544	

¹ All data is available in repository: https://osf.io/kusbe/?view_only=743cd202b0af4f7e9b165ab141035b45 [Anonymous view-only link for blind review]

EMOTIONAL APPEALS ANALYSIS WITH OPENAI API

The manual annotation scheme was transformed into a message for OpenAI GPT API. To capture appeals to emotions in pre-election debates in multi-lingual data we used Application Programming Interface (API) to GPT-4 (gpt-4-0613) language model. Each sentence was processed by the chat completion API with the message:

```
{
  „role”: „system”,
  „content”: „You are an analytical tool designed to identify rhetorical pathos
  in text. Your task is to analyze if the speaker’s intention is to elicit specific
  emotions for rhetorical purposes. The only emotions to consider are joy, fear,
  disgust, sadness, and anger. If the text does not intend to elicit these emotions,
  or if the intention is ambiguous, respond with ‚No pathos’ or ‚Unclear’, respec-
  tively. Do not infer emotions not explicitly stated in the text, and do not iden-
  tify emotions outside of the five specified.”
},
{
  „role”: „user”,
  „content”: f”Analyze the following text for pathos: {text}”
},
{
  „role”: „assistant”,
  „content”: „Based on the analysis, is there an attempt to elicit an emotion?
  If so, identify only one of the specified emotions: joy, fear, disgust, sadness,
  anger. If not, respond with ‚No pathos’. If uncertain, respond with ‚Unclear’.
  Do not identify emotions not listed.”
}
```

The construction of the message was based on previous tests to match two criteria: 1) clarity of instruction to focus on attempts at eliciting emotions and to return only five basic emotions without hallucinations; 2) avoiding false positives by not biasing the model towards searching for emotions even if they are not present.

POST-PROCESSING

In the data returned by API, next to the requested categories of five basic emotions, no pathos and unknown, there were several erroneous answers (such as sentence repetition etc.). These were merged into the category “incorrect answer”.

RESULTS

Results for each country separately, as well as the results of the joint analysis (see Table 3 below), show the general dominance of the category ‘No pathos’, which accords with previous human annotation studies on other data sets.

Table 3. Frequency of appeals to emotion (Pathos) in percentages in the six countries.

PATHOS	Frequency Of Emotional Content of Sentences Longer than 30 Characters	Percentages of Overall Aggregate (N=6973)	Aggregate Percentages (N)
No Pathos	5184	74.34	83.65
Unclear	539	7.73	
Incorrect	110	1.58	
Anger	426	6.11	16.35
Fear	360	5.16	
Sadness	208	2.98	
Joy	102	1.46	
Disgust	44	0.63	

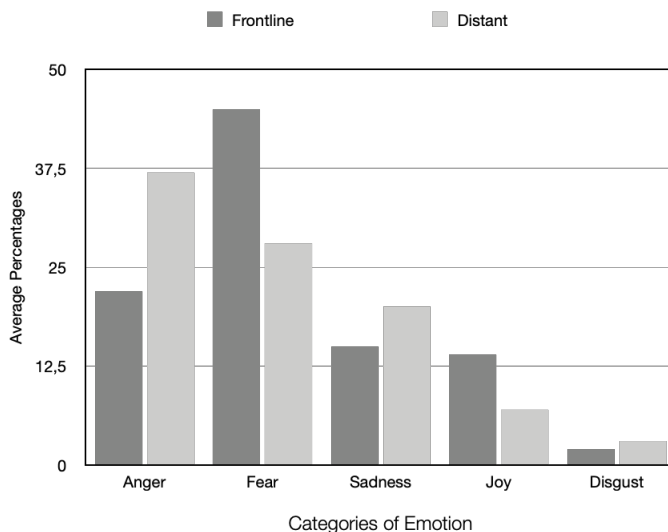
Fear appeals were the most frequently used emotional strategy in the Frontline countries, accounting for 45.03% of all emotional appeals - 1.56 times more frequent than in the Distant group, where they constituted 28.78% (see Table 4). Conversely, anger was more prevalent in the Distant countries, making up 38.74% of appeals, which is 1.78 times more than in the Frontline group (21.82%). Sadness appeared with relatively similar frequency in both groups (20.37% in Distant vs. 16.60% in Frontline), while joy was nearly twice as frequent in the Frontline countries (14.65%) as in the Distant group (7.86%). Disgust remained marginal in both cases, with a slightly higher frequency in the Distant group (4.24%) than in the Frontline countries (1.90%).

Table 4. Frequency of emotional appeals – numerical (#) and average percentage (%) – in the Frontline and Distant groups of countries

PATHOS	#Frontline	%Frontline	#Distant	%Distant
Anger	62	21.82	364	38.74
Fear	122	45.03	238	28.78
Sadness	45	16.60	163	20.37
Joy	30	14.65	72	7.86
Disgust	5	1.90	39	4.24

The frequencies (as percentages of the aggregate) of the five types of emotional appeals in those sentences containing more than 30 characters ranged from any emotional appeal ranged from a high of 38% (Anger) through 32% (Fear), 19% (Sadness), 8% (Joy) and 4% (Disgust). The frequencies become more interesting when we divide the data following the distinction between countries bordering the conflict zone and those distant from it to validate the research hypothesis.

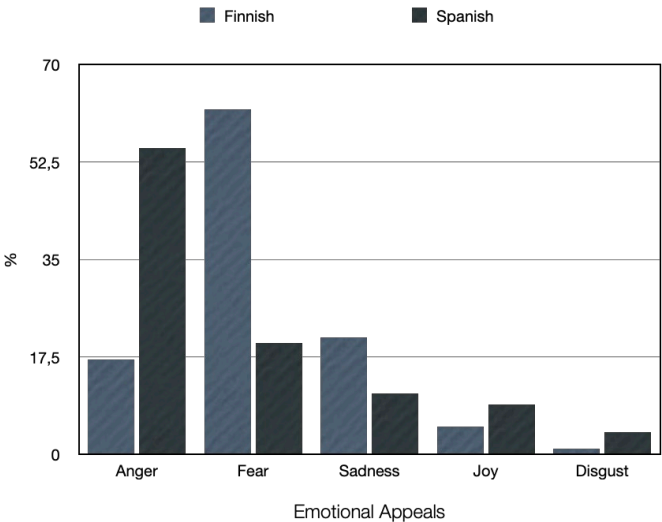
Figure 1. Frequencies of emotional appeals in Frontline and Distant states



As we can see in Figure 1, there are some differences, especially in terms of fear, which is more frequent in Frontline countries, and anger, which seems to be more dominant in Distant ones—surpassing 45% of emotional appeals. These results should be treated with some caution, as the raw data was small, due to the general infrequency described above.

Due to the differences in data set sizes, we performed a proportions z-test, used to compare two proportions (or proportions from two different groups) and determine whether the observed differences are statistically significant. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that there were significant differences in the proportions of fear and anger between the compared groups, as indicated by p-values of 0.00000, while no significant differences were observed for joy, disgust, and sadness, with p-values of 0.11662, 0.05856, and 0.56463, respectively. These differences can be observed selected representatives of the Frontline and Distant groups presented in Figure 2, in which Spain shows a high level of anger with a low level of fear compared to the levels of Finland's anger (lower) and fear (higher)

Figure 2. Comparison of extreme frequencies of emotional appeals in the language representatives of the Frontline group (Finnish) and the Distant group (Spanish)



These differences can be observed in a detailed qualitative investigation of examples, where we can see how, in three distinct languages, appeals to emotions are realized similarly. The varying intensity of appeals to emotions can be observed in the following cases of fear appeal:

EXAMPLE 1 – ESTONIA:

English: Ukraine’s victory or Ukraine’s loss is an existential question of our security, so in addition to the moral perspective of humanity, it is especially us, a neighbor of Russia, who have a particular security obligation to ensure that the [defender survives] the great war started by Russia against Ukraine. [Isama vastus on, et Ukraina võit või Ukraina kaotus on eksistentsiaalne meie julgoleku küsimus, nii et lisaks inimsuse moraalsele vaatele on just meil, Venema naaberriigil, eriline julgoleku kohustus seista sellest, et tänapäeva.]

EXAMPLE 2 – SPANISH:

English: Currently in Spain, more people die from heat waves than from traffic accidents, and this is a very serious statistic. [A día de hoy en España mueren más personas por olas de calor que no en accidentes de tránsito y eso es un dato muy grave. A día de hoy en España mueren más personas por olas de calor que no en accidentes de tránsito y eso es un dato muy grave.]

EXAMPLE 3 – DUTCH:

English: And we're going to lose our country if we don't do something about it very quickly.

[En we raken ons land kwijt als we daar niet heel snel wat aan gaan doen'.]

CONCLUSION

Appeals to emotions suffered from a negative reputation after being blamed for their role in paving the success of populism. Scholars and commentators often put rhetorical techniques in the same category as factors such as disillusionment with the globalized economy and the emergence of social media, whose design promoted both an over-flux of negative emotions and audience fragmentation (Bossetta & Schmøkel 2024; Kubin & von Sikorski 2021; Stier 2018). This type of oversimplified approach resulted in multiple suggestions on how their effect could be mitigated to preserve the democratic system, including normative calls for distinguishing between factual and emotional argumentation (Oraby et al., 2017). Schumacher et al. (2022) suggest the success of appeals to emotions are conditional on the listener's education level. Others scholars argue that positive emotions, such as compassion, reappraisal, and empathy, can be a basis for successful alternative political communication, producing stronger responses among audiences (Wawrzyński, 2022; Wawrzyński & Marszałek-Kawa, 2022). It remains unclear, however, if the emotional dynamics of debates might adapt to the transformations of the political climate when a fear factor such as a war dominates the public agenda. This study analyzed how politicians react to the emergence of a fear factor—was—and if their choice of emotional strategies was dependent on geographical proximity, frontline state or distant, as threat perception theory would predict.

Our findings suggest that proximity to war can be an important factor that should be considered in future studies on political communication. Politicians have long been advised to portray distance from threats in their speeches to their advantage, either as an imminent threat they are ready to face or as an unnecessary foolish danger that can be avoided under wise leadership. Human perception is largely determined by a threat-sensitive surveillance system that enables or hinders our ability to act. To react to external threats, most of the time it remains cautious, avoidant, and anticipatory (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014). Channeling anxieties fueled by proximity to war toward political enemies is a powerful rhetorical strategy, as avoidance is the primary response in fight-or-flight situations, especially when facing authoritative power figures (Webster et al., 2016).

We confirm empirically that in contemporary politics, distance to military conflicts still has the potential to differentiate the rhetoric politicians employ.

The results show the general dominance of appeals to negative emotions in all the analyzed cases. However, the difference between the dominance of appeals to anger (which prompts people to attack to destroy obstacles) and fear (prompting to escape and reintroduce safety) points to the roles political leaders try to play at the stage altered by the war context, which Plutchik's (2003) theoretical model of emotions suggests. If politicians can understand and adapt to the emotional expectations of their audience, it suggests that the emotional foundations of leadership reflect the dominant desires of the public. Those distant from conflict may seek leaders who are capable of initiating action, while those closer to it are more likely to desire leaders who offer safety. As audience expectations change with geographical distance, emotional fuel for rhetoric needs to appeal to a variety of senses. Proximity to war correlates strongly with fear-oriented emotional strategies, with politicians trying to adapt and present themselves as the right leaders for times of conflict.

In this paper, we explained how the characteristics of pre-election debates discussed in the theoretical section relate to our findings. Still, it is worth mentioning the limitations of analyzing this format and suggesting directions for future studies that could further enrich our understanding of mediatized political communication.

More studies on threat perception are needed to examine factors responsible for its role and intensity. Future studies should observe how it evolves in time and if the feeling of safety evolves gradually, together with geographical distance. Although it is bound to be an important factor, it can be mitigated by historical experiences and differences in political culture (Wildavsky & Dake, 2018). Although pre-election debates offer unique insights into political rhetoric by requiring candidates to present themselves alongside their opponents, it is important to recognize that most political communication takes place through other channels, which should also offer valuable findings. Future research could explore comparisons between politicians' rhetoric on social media, where they have greater control over their messaging, examine cultural influences, and investigate how rhetorical strategies evolve, particularly in response to emerging conflicts.

The transcriptions with Whisper models range between 70-90% accuracy, depending on the language (Radford et al., 2022). In future studies, it would be worthwhile to employ human correction of transcription to ensure high-quality annotation. The model also does not yet provide full diarisation nor data-set based speaker identification. Employing human annotators who will match voices with the names of the speaker will allow for more fine-grained analysis of specific political parties and personal pathos styles of politicians.

As a limitation, our analysis is based on a basic emotion model to ensure clarity and reliability in automated annotation. Future research in political communication could build on more complex frameworks, such as TenHouten's (2006) social theory of emotions or the Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2009), to capture the moral and social dimensions of emotional appeals more comprehensively. Another limitation lies in the capabilities of the GPT-4 model in recognizing the speaker's intention. In 1.58 % cases, the model did not return one of the requested answers, instead providing erroneous responses such as "I do not know this language". Adoption of more advanced models or the human-in-the-loop (HILT) paradigm would produce more accurate results.

Although populism can transform the entire political scene (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021), it is difficult to identify in which historical moment is the present. It is possible that the reshuffling of the political scene influences the popularity of emotional appeals, and they are going to be affected by conflicts long after their duration. It might also be true that emotions dominate alternative venues to preelection debates, and comparing our study with other pre-election events in the following years would allow us to observe the evolution of the dynamics captured in that study over time.

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APPENDIX

Information about the six debates analyzed in the study

Country	Date	Organizers	Participants	Duration (hour: minutes)	Moderators	Geographical Proximity to Conflict Zone proximity
Estonia	29 January	Eestlaste Kesknõukogu Kanadas (EKN), Ülemaailmse Eesti Kesknõukogu (ÜEKN), Postimehe, Tartu College (VEMU), Eesti Elu	6	2:06	Martin Ehala (Postimees, Editor), Reet Marten Sehr (EKN, ÜEKN)	Frontline
Poland	9 October	Telewizja Polska (TVP)	6	1:00	Michał Rachoń, Anna Bogusiewicz-Grochowska (both TVP)	
Finland	13 November	Ilta-Sanomat, Politico	6	1:52	Hanna Vesala, (Ilta-Sanomat) Sarah Wheaton, (Politico)	
Greece	10 May	Ελληνική Ραδιοφωνία Τηλεόραση (ERT1)	6	2:56	Mara Zacharea (STAR), Sia Kosioni (ΕΚΑΪ), Georgios Papadakis (ANT1), o Antonis Sroiter (ALPHA), Panagiotis Stathis (OPEN) Rania Tzima (MEGA)	Distant
Spain	13 July	Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE)	7	2:55	Xabier Fortes (RTVE)	
Netherlands	3 November	Radio 1 (NPO)	16	2:25	Winfried Baijens, Wilma Borgman (both NPO)	