Chris Overberg

Argument Paper 1

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Governor Otter: Winner of Debates

When determining the winner of a political debate, there are a number of factors to consider. Did the candidate stay on message? Did the appear prepared and well informed on the issues? Did the candidate use effective tools of speech? These questions could be asked over and over again with differing answers, depending on who you ask. Ultimately, though, there will be wide-ranging opinions on who really won. Such is the case when looking at one of the more interesting televised debates ever captured. The 2014 Idaho GOP Governors debate has become a viral sensation. With over 700,000 views, the debate no doubt owes most, if not all, of its fame to a couple of guys who had no business being on the debate stage, Harley Brown and Walt Bayes. However, we will disregard these two gentlemen and instead focus on the candidate who, in my opinion, won the debate by simply being prepared and staying on message, and exhibiting a strong ethos and logos. That man would be C.L. “Butch” Otter, the incumbent governor, and likely winner of the debate.

Ethos is a very effective tool used in rhetoric. Ethos means an appeal to credibility and character. No one on the stage exuded those traits more than Governor Otter. One area where Governor Otter has an advantage over his opponents is his ability to establish ethos. During this election, he was seeking the Republican nomination for Governor, and looking to serve his third term as Governor of Idaho. Having served those two terms is a huge boost for him in terms of name recognition alone. In terms of boosting his ethos, he can point to a number of things he has done while in office, and convince the voters that he is best served for job because of these things. Experience is a helpful factor for him. One of the first questions he is asked pertains to a statement he made about the “buck stopping at his desk.” The question centers around two scandals that occurred during his previous term, and whether or not he handled it correctly, as he said he would. Governor Otter responds, “Well the buck did stop with my office, and that’s why we have an investigation, an FBI investigation… into the CCA prison problem.” Here, Governor Otter is using ethos reassure the voters that he possesses the credibility to hold the office for a third term, and that he will run things the right way. By mentioning that there is an ongoing investigation, and later say that, “I’ll take action when I have all the facts,” he is attempting to show that he runs a clean office that is not corrupt. Not only does this help his credibility, but also his character. He is painting the picture that he is a no nonsense governor. Throughout the debate, Governor Otter uses ethos to further heighten his credibility and character. In responding to the other serious candidate, Senator Russ Fulcher, he quips, “First off, I’m very proud of the fact that 88% of Senate leadership has endorsed my candidacy.” Although the line is short, this is a two pronged statement from Governor Otter, containing elements of both ethos and logos. He uses the statistics to dent his opponent, Senator Fulcher, and boost his own ethos at the same time. Senator Fulcher is a state senator, so the fact that 88% of the Senate leadership in Idaho endorsed is a serious hit on Senator Fulcher’s credibility. Voters would undoubtedly wonder why Senator Fulcher’s coworkers would not endorse him. He also uses logos by bringing up the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Senate leadership stands with him. If so many politicians have endorsed him, then he must a good governor, and they must not like, or agree with, Senator Fulcher. Governor Otter did a great job not only cutting into Senator Fulcher’s ethos but also boosting his logos with this statement. Another instance where Governor Otter boasts his character occurs toward the end of the debate, where himself and Senator Fulcher are debating what it means to be a true Republican. Senator Fulcher says that Governor Otter has strayed away from the core values Republicans have, to which Governor Otter responds “The person I disagree with 20% of the time and agree with 80% of the time is not my enemy.” Senator Fulcher and Governor Otter then share a smile at each other. During the debate, Senator Fulcher and Governor Otter had disagreed on a number of things, but this line makes Governor Otter appear as friendly, joking kind of guy. It certainly broke up the monotony, as Senator Fulcher and Governor Otter had been going back and forth for awhile. This line did a lot to soften up the character of Governor Otter and make him appear more human, instead of just a politician just reciting facts at a podium. Another move that Governor Otter made, although not in the debate, was insisting that the two non-establishment candidates be allowed to debate. He insisted that if they weren’t allowed to debate, he wouldn’t either. This was a very calculated move on the part of the incumbent Governor. Without even saying anything, and just by having those gentlemen on the stage with him, his ethos was already boosted. They were not dressed as nice as he was, they rambled for most of the debate, and did not sound like politicians at all. On the other hand, Governor Otter and Senator Fulcher both appeared like real candidates for Governor. They had notes, they answered the questions that were asked, and they stayed on message. Just by having Bayes and Harley Brown, the other not so serious candidate, on the stage, Governor Otter appeared much more credible, and his character was on display as well. Governor Otter was very heavy in his use of the word “experience” during this debate. This further emphasizes the credibility he has been building up the whole debate.

As mentioned earlier, Governor Otter is not limited to just using ethos during the debate. There are instances where he uses logos, or an appeal to logic. One of the biggest occurrences of logos happens while the candidates are debating the issue of how much land should the federal government should own in Idaho versus how much the state itself should own. Walt Bayes, one of the non-establishment candidates, brings up the issue that the federal government own a sizable portion of the land in Idaho, and that Idahoans should fight to take the land back. Governor Otter counters this with, “I would love to have the fact that we have all of that land, but two years ago, my fire bill was $220 million.” Governor Otter sets up his argument by introducing this figure, and follows it with, “I actually paid $14 million of it, Walt, and the federal government paid the other 206.” Governor Otter then goes on to point out that if Idaho owned more of that land, they would have to pay a higher portion of that fire bill, and to afford that, they would have to cut from either “education, corrections, or health and welfare.” In my mind, this is a very solid logos based argument. Governor Otter brings solid numbers to refute Bayes statement, and mentions three critical areas of spending, areas which just about everyone would agree should not be cut to pay a larger portion of a fire bill. This a great appeal to logic, because those are three very critical areas of spending, especially in a state like Idaho where they don’t have as much money as other, more populated states. Money is most likely at a premium in Idaho, so any voter listening to the debate would almost certainly not want these three areas to have money taken away from them. Governor Otter’s use of logos during the debate was well-used and well-timed. He effectively used it to negate his opponents attacks on him, and at the same time it served the purpose to deflate his opponents ethos, specifically Senator Fulcher.

Although not used extensively, Governor Otter uses pathos occasionally. Most of his statements that use pathos are meant to evoke a sense of pride from his fellow Idahoans. Whenever he is boasting that something his administration had done, he almost never used the word “I.” Everything that was accomplished was described as something “we” did. Using we in that situation is no accident. Governor Otter is purposefully using the word we to inspire the voters, and try to instill in them that his accomplishment are also theirs. Pathos can be a great tool to draw emotional responses from the audience. Again, Governor Otter did not do this much, but he did not need to. In my mind, he used ethos and logos so effectively that his lack of pathos did not really hurt him in the debate. By simply using the word “we” to describe the state and its achievements, he gives the voters the sense that they are involved in the success of the state, whether they truly are or not.

Overall, through the use of ethos and logos, Governor Otter was the winner of this debate. After watching the debate, it is easy to see that Governor Otter is very comfortable on stage, and he comes across as knowledgeable and informed. He knew what he was talking about, and frequently brought up his credentials and accomplishments while in office, helping build his credibility. His joke with Senator Fulcher helped him appear genuine and not so robotic. The fringe candidates also boosted his credibility and character, all Governor Otter had to do was simply not act like them at all, which he did. It was a savvy move by the Governor to insist the two non-establishments candidates be on the stage with him. They immediately made him look like a much better candidate, and even with Seantor Fulcher on the stage next to him. Others might say that Senator Fulcher, or even Walt Bayes or Harley Brown, won the debate through their use of ethos, logos, or pathos. However, these candidates only offered fantastical ideas to solve the problems that exist within Idaho. Governor Otter has the proven track record, and showed that he can get things done for the State of Idaho. In the end, through mostly his use of ethos and logos, Governor Otter showed Idaho that he deserves to serve a third term as governor.