

POLITICAL RHETORIC AND THE FORMATION OF POWER LEGITIMACY : A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND A PROPOSED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract : This article examines how political rhetoric contributes to the formation of power legitimacy in contemporary political communication. Rhetorical scholarship has mapped persuasive strategies and linguistic devices in political speech, while discursive legitimacy studies have explained mechanisms of justification, yet the two traditions have rarely been connected explicitly. Using a qualitative conceptual approach grounded in literature review, this study synthesizes scholarship on classical rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, political legitimacy, discursive legitimization, and populism. The findings show that ethos, pathos, and logos operate in layered configurations across cognitive, moral, and pragmatic bases of legitimacy, and that contemporary political rhetoric functions bidirectionally, legitimizing political actors while simultaneously delegitimizing opponents, institutions, or competing narratives. Building on these findings, the study proposes the Layered Rhetoric-Legitimacy Framework, integrating rhetorical pillars, legitimation mechanisms, legitimacy bases, dual directionality, and temporal vulnerability, and offering an analytical tool for future empirical research on political speeches and digital political communication.

Keywords: Political Rhetoric, Power Legitimacy, Legitimacy Formation, Discursive Legitimation, Power.

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Introduction

In late August 2025, as waves of demonstrations erupted across several Indonesian cities, the public witnessed a distinctive linguistic event: an official statement by the head of state, carefully composed through symbolic diction and sentence structures designed simultaneously to calm public unrest and reassert governmental authority (Pangemanan, 2025). Almost at the same time, the 2024 United States presidential campaign debate displayed a structurally similar pattern, despite unfolding in a very different political context: "us versus them" polarization, demonization of opponents, emotional nationalism, anti-institutional rhetoric, and the personalization of leadership emerged as mutually reinforcing strategies that both built and undermined political legitimacy (Pangemanan, 2025). These two episodes, separated by geography and political regime, indicate that contemporary power is not sustained by formal-constitutional procedure alone; it must be continuously reproduced through language.

This phenomenon is not merely a surface feature of political communication. It touches one of the classical problems of political science: where the legitimacy of power originates and how it is sustained. Legitimacy is fundamentally a perception that an action, authority, or institution is desirable, proper, and appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms (Suchman, 1995). In the political domain, legitimacy derives not only from formal rules but also from citizens' conviction that the ruling authority is entitled to make decisions and to demand compliance (Levi et al., 2009). Recent research further confirms that political legitimacy cannot be reduced to institutional procedure alone; it is also the product of citizens' acceptance and trust, continuously renegotiated through discourse (Harfst & Wiesner, 2024). Within a broader framework, political legitimacy interacts with economic and social legitimacy, such that the erosion of one dimension can undermine the others (Ignácz, 2024). Communication, and rhetoric in particular, therefore occupies a central position as the mechanism bridging formal structures of power with forms of public acceptance that are psychological, social, and moral in nature.

Scholarship on political rhetoric has grown substantially, particularly through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA). A review of CDA literature on political speech shows that repetition, metaphor, presupposition, and pronoun use are consistently deployed by political actors to assert dominance, construct national identity, and marginalize opposition (Shamim et al., 2025). At a more specific level, studies of American electoral campaign speeches demonstrate how politicians systematically construct rhetorical and persuasive strategies to influence voters (Khajavi & Rasti, 2020). Within the study of populism, populist rhetoric has been shown to construct political claims through the opposition between "the people" and "the elite" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Collectively, this body of work indicates that political rhetoric is not merely a communicative style but an instrument for constructing identity, opposition, and claims to legitimacy.

Research on discursive legitimacy has developed along a comparatively distinct trajectory, shaped mainly by organizational sociology and systemic functional linguistics. Van Leeuwen (2007) formulated four categories of discursive legitimation: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) demonstrated that institutional vocabularies and theorizations of change can be mobilized by actors to legitimize contested organizational transformation. Reyes (2011) further explained that political legitimacy can be constructed through strategies of emotion, rationality, expert voice, hypothetical futures, and altruism. A more recent synthesis by Vaara, Aranda, and Etchanchu (2024) integrates multiple strands of discursive legitimacy research into a framework encompassing strategies, positions, foundations, temporality, and arenas. Collectively, these studies show that legitimacy operates not solely through formal rules but through language that renders power appearing lawful, rational, moral, and worthy of acceptance.

The difficulty is that these two streams of scholarship, political rhetoric on one hand and discursive legitimacy on the other, have largely developed in parallel, without an explicit conceptual point of convergence. CDA studies of political speech generally stop at identifying linguistic and ideological patterns without systematically explaining what type of legitimacy each rhetorical strategy generates (Khajavi & Rasti, 2020; Shamim et al., 2025). Conversely, discursive legitimacy research originates predominantly from organizational and business contexts, only recently being extended more broadly to state-level political contexts (Leeuwen, 2007; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara et al., 2024). Consequently, the specific dynamics of political rhetoric, those connected to state authority, citizen compliance, public policy, and the contestation of democratic acceptance, remain incompletely mapped. At the same time, research on specific phenomena such as presidential rhetoric or populist rhetoric in campaign debates tends to remain descriptive and case-bound, rarely elevated to a generalizable theoretical synthesis (Pangemanan, 2025; Wise, 2025).

This is precisely the gap this article seeks to address: the absence of a theoretical framework that explicitly maps the systematic relationship between rhetorical strategy and legitimation mechanism in the formation of political power legitimacy. Rhetorical strategy explains what political actors say and how they say it, whereas legitimation mechanism explains why such utterances come to be accepted as valid, natural, or worthy of obedience. Without such mapping, the study of political rhetoric risks being trapped in the description of recurring linguistic patterns without clear theoretical purchase, while legitimacy research risks neglecting the concrete linguistic mechanisms that serve as the principal medium of legitimacy production in the digital communication era.

To address this problem, this article adopts a conceptual approach grounded in literature review. The literature examined spans political rhetoric, political communication, discursive legitimation, and institutional legitimacy. Through this

mapping, the article seeks to connect the classical rhetorical tradition, especially ethos, pathos, and logos, with categories of discursive legitimation such as authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis (Leeuwen, 2007; Reyes, 2011; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In doing so, the article asks not only what rhetorical strategies political actors employ, but also how those strategies function in forming, sustaining, or undermining the legitimacy of power.

Based on this background, the article pursues three objectives. First, to systematically map the literature on political rhetoric and power legitimacy. Second, to identify patterns and theoretical gaps within the study of political rhetoric and discursive legitimacy. Third, to formulate a new conceptual framework, referred to here as the Layered Rhetoric-Legitimacy Framework, intended as a theory-building contribution that integrates the classical rhetorical tradition with the contemporary tradition of discursive legitimacy. The contribution of this article is conceptual-theoretical rather than purely descriptive, and is expected to serve as a foundation for subsequent empirical research on the dynamics of political communication within democratic spaces increasingly fragmented by digital media and social polarization.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a literature-based conceptual approach, chosen because the primary aim is not to measure statistical relationships between variables but to map, interpret, and synthesize the theoretical relationship between political rhetoric and power legitimacy, following the logic of theory-building literature review (Snyder, 2019). The object of analysis is scholarly literature on political rhetoric, political communication, discursive legitimation, and institutional legitimacy, including journal articles and academic books published mainly between 2018 and 2025, alongside foundational classical works. The literature sample was selected purposively for substantive relevance, drawing on Suchman (1995), Suddaby and Greenwood (2005), van Leeuwen (2007), Reyes (2011), Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018), Khajavi and Rasti (2020), Harfst and Wiesner (2024), Vaara et al. (2024), Pangemanan (2025), Shamim et al. (2025), and Wise (2025). Data were collected through documentary study across Scopus, Google Scholar, Crossref, and Sinta-indexed journals using keywords such as "political rhetoric," "discursive legitimation," and "political legitimacy." An extraction matrix recorded authorship, focus, theoretical approach, rhetorical concepts, legitimacy forms, findings, and gaps for each source, enabling systematic comparison. Analysis combined qualitative content analysis with conceptual synthesis, and trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation across rhetorical, discursive, and populism traditions, alongside repeated critical re-reading of key texts.

Results and Discussion

Based on the literature review conducted, this study identifies four principal findings concerning the relationship between political rhetoric and power legitimacy.

First, the literature reviewed reveals three broad clusters of scholarship: studies of rhetorical patterns in political speech, studies of political and discursive legitimacy, and studies of populism and political polarization. Second, rhetorical strategies, namely ethos, pathos, and logos, do not operate in isolation but correspond to discursive legitimation mechanisms such as authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Third, the legitimacy constructed through political rhetoric is layered, capable of functioning simultaneously as legitimation and delegitimation, and remains vulnerable to shifts in the sociopolitical context.

Table 1. Mapping of Literature Clusters on Political Rhetoric and Power Legitimacy

Literature Cluster	Main Focus	Representative Sources	Limitations
Rhetorical patterns in political speech	Identifying rhetorical strategies in speeches, debates, or specific political statements	(Nurhadi & Utami, 2026; Pangemanan, 2025; Wise, 2025)	Rich in empirical data, but limited theoretical generalization
Theories of political and discursive legitimacy	Explaining legitimation mechanisms conceptually	(Harfst & Wiesner, 2024; Ignácz, 2024; Leeuwen, 2007; Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara et al., 2024)	Conceptually robust, but partly rooted in institutional and corporate contexts
Populism, polarization, and contemporary rhetoric	Explaining populist rhetoric as a mechanism of legitimation and delegitimation	(Khajavi & Rasti, 2020; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Shamim et al., 2025)	Tends to be case-bound and not yet synthesized into a general framework

Table 1 shows that the literature on political rhetoric and power legitimacy continues to develop along largely separate paths. Studies within the first cluster supply rich empirical evidence on political actors' language strategies but rarely specify the type of legitimacy such strategies produce. Studies within the second cluster provide robust theoretical apparatus, particularly regarding institutional and discursive legitimacy, yet remain only partially adapted to the context of state power. Studies within the third cluster demonstrate the importance of populism and polarization in contemporary politics but still require more systematic theoretical synthesis. Together, these observations point to a conceptual gap: no existing mapping explains the relationship between specific rhetorical strategies and specific legitimation mechanisms.

The second finding indicates that political rhetoric operates in layers across distinct bases of legitimacy. Logos tends to correspond to rationalization, since political actors mobilize data, policy arguments, claims of achievement, and appeals to

effectiveness to render power appear rational and acceptable. Ethos corresponds to authorization, as public officials build credibility through office, constitutional authority, experience, or moral leadership image. Pathos, meanwhile, corresponds to moral evaluation and mythopoesis, as political actors frequently draw on collective emotion, national narrative, threat, hope, and moral storytelling to cultivate public acceptance. This correspondence reinforces van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of discursive legitimation while extending it by incorporating classical rhetoric as an analytical lens for reading political communication.

Table 2. Relationship between Classical Rhetoric and Discursive Legitimacy

Rhetorical Pillar	Form of Political Strategy	Legitimation Mechanism	Legitimacy Basis
Ethos	Leadership credibility, positional authority, moral image	Authorization	Cognitive and personal legitimacy
Pathos	Public emotion, threat narrative, nationalism, solidarity	Moral evaluation and mythopoesis	Moral legitimacy
Logos	Policy argument, data, achievement, effectiveness claims	Rationalization	Pragmatic legitimacy

Table 2 demonstrates that ethos, pathos, and logos function not merely as tools of persuasion but as entry points for understanding the production of legitimacy. This finding corroborates Suddaby and Greenwood's (2005) argument that rhetorical strategy can be used to justify institutional action or change. In the political domain, such justification is directed not only toward the acceptance of policy but also toward acceptance of the authority exercising power. Political rhetoric therefore becomes the mechanism connecting formal structures of power with forms of public acceptance that are social, moral, and psychological in character.

The third finding shows that contemporary rhetorical strategy operates bidirectionally, constructing legitimacy for one party while simultaneously delegitimizing another. This pattern is evident in populist rhetoric, particularly through the construction of "the people" against "the elite," the polarization of "us" versus "them," the demonization of political opponents, and claims to represent the popular will. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) show that populism operates by constructing a moral opposition between a people regarded as pure and an elite regarded as corrupt. Within this framework, legitimacy is produced not only through self-justification but also through the delegitimation of opponents, institutions, or political procedures perceived as obstructing the people's will.

This finding is significant because it extends discursive legitimacy research, which typically examines how an actor justifies its own action or institution. In contemporary political rhetoric, especially amid populism and polarization,

legitimation and delegitimation frequently occur simultaneously. As a political actor constructs an image as the people's representative, that actor may concurrently erode the legitimacy of the opposition, formal institutions, media, or particular social groups. Political legitimacy is therefore not solely affirmative but also antagonistic in character.

The fourth finding indicates that rhetorically constructed legitimacy is inherently fragile and reversible. Legitimacy built through rhetoric may strengthen when political narrative aligns with public experience, yet weaken when the public perceives a mismatch between political utterance and social reality. Legitimacy grounded in *logos* is relatively easier to test against policy outcomes, data, and empirical results. By contrast, legitimacy grounded in *pathos* and *mythopoesis* depends more heavily on emotional resonance and collective narrative, making it more susceptible to erosion when counter-narratives or crises of trust emerge. This corresponds with Levi et al.'s (2009) view that legitimacy concerns citizens' belief in the propriety of authority rather than the mere existence of formal rules.

Building on these findings, this article proposes the Layered Rhetoric-Legitimacy Framework (LRLF) as a conceptual contribution integrating classical rhetoric, discursive legitimacy, and contemporary political communication. The novelty of the LRLF rests on three aspects. First, it maps the relationship between *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* and discursive legitimization mechanisms. Second, it introduces a dual-directionality dimension, whereby political rhetoric can function simultaneously as legitimization and delegitimation. Third, it incorporates a temporal dimension, whereby rhetorical legitimacy may be stable, volatile, or reversible depending on the legitimacy basis employed and its congruence with public experience.

Table 3. The Layered Rhetoric-Legitimacy Framework

Layer	Main Elements	Analytical Function
Rhetorical layer	Ethos, pathos, logos	Identifying political persuasion strategies
Discursive legitimization layer	Authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, mythopoesis	Explaining mechanisms of power justification
Legitimacy basis layer	Cognitive, moral, pragmatic	Determining the type of public acceptance targeted
Political direction layer	Legitimation and delegitimation	Explaining the dual effect of political rhetoric
Temporal layer	Stable, volatile, reversible	Assessing the durability of rhetorical legitimacy

Table 3 shows that the LRLF is not intended to replace existing legitimacy theory but to bridge the study of political rhetoric with that of discursive legitimacy. Through this framework, researchers can identify not only the linguistic style of

political speech but also how that style constructs particular legitimacy claims. In other words, the LRLF helps answer four questions: what rhetorical strategy is employed, what legitimation mechanism is activated, what basis of public acceptance is targeted, and whether the rhetoric simultaneously produces a delegitimizing effect on other parties.

These findings collectively address the study's stated objectives. First, the relationship between political rhetoric and power legitimacy lies in language's function as the medium through which public acceptance is formed. Second, the gap between classical rhetorical scholarship and discursive legitimacy scholarship lies in the absence of a systematic mapping between persuasive strategy and legitimation mechanism. Third, the LRLF is offered as a conceptual model for reading political rhetoric more holistically, particularly within digital democracies marked by polarization, opinion fragmentation, and eroding trust in public institutions.

The theoretical implication of these findings is that research on political rhetoric needs to move beyond stylistic description toward analysis of legitimation mechanisms, while discursive legitimacy research needs to engage more seriously with classical rhetoric as a tool for understanding political persuasion. In practical terms, the LRLF can be applied to analyze presidential speeches, campaign debates, official statements, social media posts, or government crisis communication. The framework may also assist civil society in assessing whether the legitimacy political actors construct rests on verifiable argumentation and accountable credibility, or merely on emotional resonance and polarization.

These findings also carry implications for how political rhetoric is studied in digitally mediated environments. Contemporary political communication no longer unfolds solely through formal speeches or televised debates; it is dispersed across social media platforms, short video formats, and algorithmically curated feeds that compress and amplify rhetorical cues. In such settings, ethos may be communicated through visual symbolism and platform-specific authenticity markers rather than institutional titles alone, pathos may be intensified through virality and repeated exposure, and logos may be reduced to decontextualized statistics or slogans. The LRLF's layered structure accommodates this shift because it separates rhetorical pillars from legitimation mechanisms and legitimacy bases, allowing researchers to trace how the same underlying mechanism, such as authorization or mythopoesis, is re-expressed through new media formats without assuming that classical rhetorical categories become obsolete.

A further implication concerns the cross-cultural applicability of the framework. Much of the discursive legitimation literature synthesized here, including van Leeuwen (2007), Suddaby and Greenwood (2005), and Vaara et al. (2024), originates from Western-secular institutional and organizational contexts. Political rhetoric in non-Western or religiously inflected polities may draw on additional sources of authorization, such as religious authority, customary legitimacy, or communal moral narratives, that are not fully captured by existing categories. The LRLF's temporal and

dual-directionality dimensions nonetheless remain analytically portable, since the vulnerability of rhetorical legitimacy to shifting public experience and its capacity to simultaneously delegitimize rivals are not confined to any single cultural or institutional setting. Future empirical work is therefore encouraged to test whether the correspondence between rhetorical pillars and legitimation mechanisms proposed here holds across religious, local, and hybrid political contexts, thereby refining the framework's scope conditions.

Taken together, the four findings and the resulting framework suggest that the legitimacy of political power in contemporary democracies is neither purely procedural nor purely performative, but co-produced through the continuous interplay between rhetorical strategy, legitimation mechanism, and the shifting texture of public experience. This positions the LRLF as a starting point rather than a closed model, inviting further empirical testing across speech genres, media formats, and political-cultural settings.

Conclusion

This article concludes that political rhetoric and power legitimacy are two closely interrelated dimensions in the formation of public acceptance of power. Drawing on a synthesis of Scopus- and Sinta-indexed literature from 2018 to 2025, the study finds that research on political rhetoric and on discursive legitimacy has largely developed along separate paths, the former emphasizing language, persuasion, and discursive pattern, the latter explaining justification mechanisms without systematically mapping the rhetorical devices that activate them. The findings show that rhetoric operates in layers across cognitive, moral, and pragmatic bases of legitimacy; that contemporary rhetorical strategy, especially within populist and polarized discourse, functions bidirectionally as both legitimation and delegitimation; and that rhetorically constructed legitimacy remains fragile and reversible, contingent on narrative resonance and the congruence between political speech and public experience. From these findings, the article develops the Layered Rhetoric-Legitimacy Framework (LRLF) as an initial theoretical contribution bridging the two traditions. As a literature-based conceptual study, its propositions remain untested against primary empirical data; future research is therefore encouraged to examine the LRLF through critical discourse analysis of political speeches, campaign debates, and digital political communication, including within religious, local, and non-Western political traditions.

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