

Securitization and Elections: Speaking Security at Ballot Boxes and Beyond

Written by Faye Donnelly and Bao-Chau Pham

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FAYE DONNELLY AND BAO-CHAU PHAM, NOV 18 2017

Whether the spotlight falls on the 2016 Brexit vote, the 2016 Presidential election in the United States, the rejection of the Columbian peace deal at the ballot box or this year's heated contestations between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen in the French presidential race, narratives about game changing tactics, post-truth politics and electoral woes have dominated media headlines. By design, however, elections are meant to reduce risk and uncertainty by allowing voters and political elites to communicate on a range of issues in a highly regulated manner. Therefore, a glaring gap appears to exist between how these 'banal' modes of communication play out (Enloe 2011; Huysmans 2011) that merits further attention. The aim of this article is to explore the relationship between security and elections. To do this we engage with a series of questions that we feel have been underexplored to date. What happens if we study elections as sites of security? What happens if we conceptualize elections as securitization processes? Can we broaden our analysis to identify new audiences and speakers? Does securitization continue beyond elections? To address these questions, we seek to move security beyond ballot boxes and to conceptualise elections as sites of contestation and even insecurity.

Words that Matter: Securitization, Escalation and Elections

At present, elections taking place around the globe appear to pivot on a host of security issues ranging from corruption to terrorism to immigration. Indeed, it is hard to find an example where candidates are not fighting tenaciously over what security means, what the biggest security issues are and what policies should be implemented to manage them. Once we begin to notice the powerful role that security plays within elections we also begin to realise that security is spoken in different ways in different elections. In general, this plurality and diversity should be applauded as a way to foster greater levels of representation, participation and inclusion. However, security speech acts uttered in elections cycles do not always create plurality and diversity. On the contrary, in order to win, candidates often resort to the language of security to exaggerate threats and even tell lies. As Otto von Bismarck famously stated, "people never lie so much as after a hunt, during a war or before an election" (cited in Oravec 2005: 190). Although it is tempting to dismiss fearmongering in election campaigns as a harmless rhetorical tool, this article contends that these words matter.

As securitization theory reminds us, security threats do not exist naturally (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). Instead, certain issues are constructed as threats by speakers and their audiences. In light of recent elections, it would be unwise to deny the ability of candidates to openly designate an issue as an existential threat on the campaign trail, in televised debates or by a tweet. These speech acts are powerful for several reasons. First, they give candidates an enormous platform to convey their message to national and international audiences. The first face-off between Hillary Clinton versus Donald J. Trump broke the record as the most watched presidential debate in US history. In this way, millions of people were exposed to what the candidates were claiming as security threats. Moreover, the nomination of any individual as running candidate can serve to imbue their voice with a sense of authority, legitimacy and knowledge. This increases the potential of their security claims to resonate with the beliefs, feelings and emotions of voters. Third, with the support of certain audiences, the candidate speaking security can promise to implement extraordinary and emergency measures that are often unthinkable and even unlawful in normal politics.

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Within the context of an election, of course, there is always the possibility for rival candidates to desecuritize their opponent's security policies, moves and discourses. Judging from past elections, however, desecuritization is unlikely to be an easy option or the preferred strategy adopted by politicians seeking to secure victory at the ballot boxes. Rather than returning issues back into the realm of normal politics, opponents tend to respond with counter-securitizing moves hence entering into "a prolonged game of moves and counter-moves" (Stritzel and Chang, 2015: 548; also see Vuori 2011). Part of the reason they may choose to adopt a counter-securitizing strategy is that this approach empowers them to frame the political promises canvassed by their opponent, and to some extent even the rival candidates themselves, as the 'real' threat to national security. This type of personal vilification was clearly displayed in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum when the leader of the Better Together campaign, Alasdair Darling, likened the behaviour of his political rival, Alex Salmond to the then North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. Hence, as candidates continue to vie for votes during an election, the escalation of securitizing narratives may significantly increase. These types of contestations (Balzacq 2015; McDonald 2008; McDonald and Wilson 2017) can quickly spiral into a continuous battle of securitization and counter-securitization moves, thereby raising the security stakes even higher.

Multiple Speakers and Audiences

While it is possible to study the relationship between securitization and elections solely at the level of speech acts uttered between political candidates from opposite camps, there are further areas to consider. Even within a single political party there are manifold factions that enable and constrain the way security can be spoken during elections. Consequently, candidates may have to convince internal audience members rather than simply those awaiting them in the public sphere. After the Brexit vote, for example, many commentators blamed pesky backbenchers in the Tory party for this wildcard outcome. A similar narrative still haunts Theresa May's decision to call a snap election in 2017, a decision that ultimately reduced the Conservatives to a minority government and the creation of an unlikely Tory alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (Tonge 2017). The divisions over the nomination of Donald J. Trump as the Republican candidate and the election of the new UN General Secretary arguably offer similar examples of internal contestations over the suitability of a particular candidate.

With the increasing importance of social media, candidates must also find new ways of connecting to voters from different backgrounds and ages. This automatically increases the number of audiences and speakers participating in elections and securitization processes. It is therefore unwise to overlook the role of social media as a crucial site in which election are being fought and potentially won. This observation raises two big questions. Do these platforms empower audiences and speakers? Or do they make them more insecure? Currently these questions are being debated in light of Mark Zuckerberg's decision to provide congressional investigators with the contents of 3,000 advertisements purchased by Russian's during the 2016 US presidential election. This move represents a major shift by Facebook given that the CEO had previously rejected the idea that fake news on Facebook had any impact on voters as a "pretty crazy idea".

Similarly, in the current era of hyper-technological communication, visuals have a tremendous potential to speak security during elections. In fact, something as small as campaign posters or photograph can inform voting behaviour. This observation is important given that images of electoral candidates regularly adorn the front pages of newspapers and magazines during elections and circulate on social medial platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. These visuals allow people to identify who the candidates are, what they stand for and whether they are worthy of their vote, perhaps unintentionally. The appearance of a candidate can therefore have a tremendous potential to speak security during an election. Put differently, even the clothes that political candidates wear during an election enable them to speak to voters (see Behnke 2017). Examples here range from the red baseball cap that Donald J. Trump wore to rallies across America to the leopard print kitten heels that Theresa May wore whilst delivering a conference speech. The ability of clothes to transmit signs to voters cannot be separated from how gender and feminism operate in elections and securitization processes. Here we can certainly ask, do women candidates speak security different than men in elections? What pre-existing gendered discourses and stereotypes do electoral candidates draw on and reproduce to secure trust and support? Do female and male voters view male and female candidates in the same way? What role do LGBTQ communities as speakers in elections? These questions reinforce that every candidate has to cater to different audiences and cultivate visual personalities.

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While it is true that political elites and parties have the power to canvas certain slogans and visual brands, this is not the end of the story. Instead ordinary people remain powerful speakers who have the final word on how security is spoken in elections. By casting their vote, these individuals can distinctively alter the map current affairs, domestic agenda and foreign policies. This is why it is even more important for voters to understand the dynamics, tactics and rhetorical games that are at play within elections. In the current climate of post-truth narratives and fake news, however, voters are often less attracted by the candidate who adheres to the truth and sobriety of facts, but are more likely to be convinced by the narrative that better fits into their own perception of the world.

Beyond the Campaign Trail

Although the nature of elections requires winners and losers, many of the most controversial security issues do not simply vanish with a final result. These residues make it necessary to consider some of the legacies of securitization beyond the speech acts, moves and visuals generated on different campaign trails. For starters, while the language of fear and threat often attract voters, they can also generate deep rifts that are difficult to bridge after an election. This type of scenario is captured by the Women's Marches against Trump after his inauguration and anti-government protests in Venezuela. Conceptualising securitization as a continuous and iterative process, these protests can be seen as counter-securitization moves uttered by the audience in response to the election result. This invokes important questions about the role of the voter as both an audience and a speaker of security in elections.

Furthermore, the securitized discourse of elections can spill over into our everyday lives. As threats become the new norm alternative voices, such as the far-right, can gain more political traction. Considering the Geert Wilders effect in the Netherlands or Marine Le Pen's presidential bid in France it is unwise to underestimate the ability of far-right voices to influence mainstream security discourses. Looking ahead, it will be interesting to observe how the winning parties in each of these countries will attempt to deescalate and desecuritize the security issues raised by anti-immigrant and anti-euro voices. Another factor to remember is that not all elections occur within a time of peace. Events that are currently taking place in Kenya, and that occurred in Afghanistan in 2014, reinforce the dangers of holding elections in politically volatile and securitized environments. In such cases elections can fuel fraud, corruption, pre-existing divisions and even further cycles of violence. These conditions remind us that how we speak security in elections could mean several things and have very serious, sometimes unintended, outcomes.

Security and insecurity are a fundamental feature of elections. Adopting securitization as a rhetorical strategy in elections can give rise to potentially dangerous, divisive and long-term ramifications. We therefore wonder whether the language of compromise might render a better ending to the story of elections. Looking ahead, however, the preference that political elites and voters appear to have towards counter-securitizing over desecuritizing strategies poses a series of challenges for achieving compromise during and at the end of an election. Any move in that direction will require more research into the complex ways in which security is spoken beyond the ballot boxes.

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