The Rhetoric of Dover’s Tax Cap Campaign

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Dover Tax Cap Proposal

“An amendment which would, if implemented, limit city and school spending growth to the National Consumer Price Index, a standard which measures inflation (usually at 2.5 percent). The spending cap would be on total taxes raised and not on individual tax bills and includes a provision which allows the council to override the cap with 2/3 vote.” – Dover Independent News 8/3/07
Approach To Our Analysis

- Public ownership of the problem.
- Tax Cap Proposal as a rhetorical situation.
- How the sides of contention framed the issue.
- Use of language.
Ownership

- Ownership refers to the ability to create and influence the public definition of a problem. (Hauser)
- City Councilmen David Scott was ultimately the most successful in owning the problem.
The Tax Cap as a Rhetorical Situation

- A situation which calls discourse into existence. An imperfection marked by urgency. (Bitzer)
- It is not the exigence which invited utterance, but rather the utterance strongly invites exigence. (Vatz)
Framing the Tax Cap Debate

- Issues of Policy-
- Ill (What is the problem?)
- Blame (What is the cause?)
- Remedy (What can be done?)
- Cost (What resources must be expended?)
The opposing sides use what Burke calls a vocabulary of motives in that groups advance their common identity and goals through rhetoric which provides a common rationale and framework for group unity, essentially the language used by proponents of a certain issue work to create a shared common identity for the group, and in turn strengthen the group.
Opponents Language

- “public safety”
- “quality of life”
- “safety and security risk”
- “quality of education”
- “community health”
- “don’t cap Dover’s future”
Proponents Language

- “fiscal responsibility”
- “out of control spending”
- “safeguards to protect citizens against unmanageable taxes”
- “quality of life”
- “limiting government”
“Quality of Life”

- **Opponents**
  - an appeal to the community at large
    (emergency services, education, city services)

- **Proponents**
  - individual families struggling to pay their bills
God and Devil Terms

There are “some words which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate.” Weaver

Opponents used god terms such as safety and education.

Proponents used god terms such as prudence and saving money. Also used devil terms like communist.
Conclusion

- Populist style rhetoric used by those in favor of the tax-cap contained an inherent resonance with the citizens of Dover.
- The Dover Tax Cap issue was an excellent case study in that we were able to see the emergence of the issue to its completion.