Chapter 7
Charismatic and Affective Rhetoric in a Presidential Campaign

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ABSTRACT

Although prior research demonstrates that charisma and rhetoric are two determinants of voting behavior, few studies have examined the effects of charismatic rhetoric and affect as they pertain to the outcomes of presidential elections. Using DICTION software for content analysis, 432 pre-convention speeches from the 2008 presidential election were analyzed to explore the effects that charismatic rhetoric and affect have on presidential candidates’ success. Results indicate that there were more similarities than differences in the charismatic and affect-laden rhetoric of successful and unsuccessful presidential candidates in both the Republican and Democratic parties. Overall, the results demonstrate that both successful and unsuccessful presidential candidates used charismatic rhetoric and emotional language to motivate their followers in the 2008 presidential election.

INTRODUCTION

In democratic societies, followers are charged with the critical task of electing the individuals who will lead the country in both prosperous and lean times. Voters provide the latitude to make judgments and decisions that drastically impact educational, economic, social, national, and international outcomes. Evaluating the leadership of political leaders is one of the most important tasks of followers in a democratic society, and choosing a presidential leader arguably impacts both public and private aspects of everyday life. As a result, identifying the factors that influence...
perceptions of leadership ability in political candidates is critical for enhancing the likelihood of choosing the most effective candidate. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the rhetoric of US presidential hopefuls, as it is an important avenue through which candidates proactively attempt to influence perceptions of their leadership potential.

BACKGROUND

According to Greenstein (2004), public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence are six criteria with which individuals judge a president’s effectiveness. Greenstein further notes that without effective public communication, all other criteria can be rendered useless, suggesting that rhetoric plays an important role in evaluations of a candidate’s leadership suitability. Moreover, research has demonstrated that voters’ evaluations of a presidential candidate’s leadership capabilities impact both intentions to vote and actual voting behavior (Pillai, Williams, Lowe & Jung, 2003). Therefore, during an election cycle, candidates’ speech-making and the content of their messages to voters are important sources of evidence on which voters base their evaluations of the candidates’ leadership qualities (Shamir, 1995) and subsequent voting behavior.

Most voters do not have the opportunity to directly witness leadership behavior, which may contradict the candidates’ rhetoric (Shamir, 1995), and followers must base their evaluations of a potential leader’s effectiveness largely on public speeches, debates, and media engagements. As a result, followers’ evaluations of a presidential candidate’s suitability for office are predominantly influenced by their attributions of leadership characteristics to potential leaders.

One important influence on voter attributions is charismatic leadership. Weber (1947; p. 333) defined charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which s/he is set apart from ordinary people and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities”. Applying the concept to leadership, charismatic leaders have the uncanny ability to emotionally connect with followers and influence them to internalize a vision that aligns their self-concept with the collective goals of an organization (House, 1977). While charismatic leaders can have a significant impact on followers’ behavior, researchers have consistently provided evidence that the influence attempts of charismatic leadership are strongly mediated by followers’ perceptions and attributions (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl 2004a, Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Jacquart & Antonakis, 2010; Lord, 1985; Meindl, 1990; Shamir, 1995). Therefore, charismatic leadership, in large part, resides “in the eye of the beholder,” making the experience of charismatic leadership highly subjective and variable. These perceptions make charismatic attributions particularly important to understanding evaluations of candidates’ leadership potential.

Research suggests that a leader’s rhetoric and perceptions of his or her charisma are closely related (Bligh et al., 2004a; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). Shamir and colleagues (1994) outline seven general propositions regarding the content of speech that is likely to produce charismatic effects among followers. These include more references to a collective history and collective identity, more positive references to followers’ worth and efficacy, a greater number of references to the similarity between leader and followers and a leader’s identification with followers, and more references to values, moral justifications, distal goals, hope and faith. Other elements of charismatic rhetoric include the use of goal-oriented language, metaphors and similes, stories, lists, and rhetorical questions (Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Frese, Beimel, & Schoenborn, 2003; House, 1977). The present chapter examines the charismatic elements of candidate rhetoric in the 2008 election. Given that the outcome of the election is known, it is possible to determine