

Chapter 6

Democratic Deference in a Republican Primary

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ABSTRACT

U.S. political culture holds everyday citizens to be efficacious and sovereign, while elected elites are to be their public servants. Politicians draw on this cultural truth by speaking in a deferential style. This chapter examines the various registers of the language of deference in the 2012 Republican presidential primary and argues that this lexicon produces a tone that rhetorically constructs hierarchical social roles between citizens and leaders. This chapter finds that the candidates were more likely to speak appreciatively when hailing the citizenry but with accommodation and obligation when calling upon political leaders. The chapter concludes by considering how further study of the language of deference could improve leader-citizen relations in the United States.

CIVILITY AND DEFERENCE

About 20 years ago, when the U.S. political climate began to show signs of change, scholars started investigating incivility and the related issue of polarization, legislative intransigence, and emotion in politics.¹ Now even more evidence suggests that the political environment is seriously amiss. One cataclysmic standoff after another dominates the congressional calendar. In the media, outrage passes for political reporting (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Across the country, elites and masses are sharply divided along partisan lines and increasingly unwilling to compromise (Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012).

Troubling as it seems, others give reasons not to tamp down the discursive flame. Some find that uncivil discourse does no noticeable damage to the electorate (D. J. Brooks & Geer, 2007). Historically, U.S. politics has long been ferocious (Kurtz, 2012). Emotion in politics, particularly anger, can have desirable side effects, motivating public engagement (Kim, 2009). Finally, the politically disenfranchised make necessary and justifiable use of uncivil speech, thereby disrupting hegemonies that trap the otherwise powerless (Cloud, 2012).

This is a vital area of research and an important debate. Here, I approach the topic from a completely different but equally consequential angle: how and when do political leaders symbolically

defer to citizens, and toward what end? Most importantly, what are the implications of these deferential overtures for U.S. political culture?

These are relevant questions because, for better or worse, social conduct is permeated by deference. Legal scholars Massaro and Stryker (2012) argue for the better, maintaining, “liberalism recognizes that humans have an abiding need for respect and recognition, and seek to avoid the painful emotions of shame and humiliation” (p. 382). Informal norms as well as legal ones promote “liberalism-based interest in respect for others’ autonomy and right to participation” (p. 382-383). Professor Mark Slouka (2008) argues for the worse. He sees in the United States a slavish devotion to power, a dangerous “unthinking loyalty” that “by definition, qualifies individualism, discouraging the expression of individual opinion, recasting honesty as a type of betrayal” (para. 16). Such a culture “is fatally undemocratic,” he writes (para. 16).

The prevalence but also the unsettled nature of deference makes it worthy of examination. The following descriptive analysis is a first foray into such a project. But whereas Slouka calls out U.S. culture for promoting deference to social superiors, I will examine how those of relatively high political status symbolically defer to everyday citizens. Just as actors use civility and incivility as strategic tools (Herbst, 2010), rhetors also use deference for persuasive ends. To investigate how political leaders employ this resource, I use *DICTION* to identify the presence of the language of deference in speeches, debates, and question-and-answers from the 2012 Republican presidential primary. In doing so, I offer insights into how words of reverence work in a campaign setting, constructing a political leadership that appreciates citizens but concedes to the power of elites. I conclude by discussing the implications of the language of deference and need for further research.

WHY DEFERENCE?

Civility and incivility are prodigious topics in the scholarship of public deliberation, social-movements, public address, popular culture, politics, and political communication (e.g., Arnett, 2001; Hwang, Borah, Namkoong, & Veenstra, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Muddiman, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004). In contrast, deference has received little consideration outside of psychology, sociology, and political thought. Even so, it is a productive concept because it is intrinsically relational. Of course, civility is a social phenomenon, too, but colloquially, we show deference to someone or something, while we behave in a civil or an uncivil manner more generally. Put differently, civility is the socially sanctioned demeanor displayed in a particular context (namely, the civic realm), but proper deference is a function of interpersonal, social, and even international relations (Fraser & Nolen, 1981; Scheff, 1988).

As Goffman (1956, p. 478) points out, this by no means makes deference more authentic, for “those who render deference to an individual may feel, of course, that they are doing this merely because he is an instance of a category, or a representative of something, and that they are giving him his due not because of what they think of him ‘personally’.” Nevertheless, it does mean that deferential acts, symbolic or otherwise, are clues to the underlying relations between social actors. If every speech situation is a kind of interaction, (O’Connell, Kowal, Sabin, Lamia, & Dannevik, 2010), then conceptually, deference has rich heuristic value, drawing attention to the ways that discourse projects social relations.

The Rhetorical Roots of Symbolic Deference

Psychologically, humans need deference. Contemporary psychology demonstrates the importance of mutual deference to developing a healthy self-esteem and warding off acts of violence (Mecca,

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