

Chapter 8

Evaluating Presidential Leadership Styles in Campaigning and Governing

Diane J. Heith
St. John's University, USA

ABSTRACT

Since 1932, presidents increased their reliance on their unique relationship with the public in order to exercise leadership. However, after 1992, the president could no longer dominate the public sphere as partisanship increased in intensity and media outlets proliferated. The change in environment yielded a change in leadership style, as the size and strength of the president's electoral constituency inspires the approach to public leadership presidents could employ (Heith, 2013). An analysis of President Obama's presidential speech, using DICTION's five master variables, Activity, Optimism, Commonality, Realism, and Certainty, allows for the continued investigation into how presidents use different voices targeted toward different audiences. This chapter's comparison of President Obama's reelection and governing rhetoric indicates not only that President Obama abandoned a national voice during his reelection year, but also how different his campaign voice was from his governing voice.

INTRODUCTION

Since FDR's impressive use of his Inaugural Address, fireside chats and editorial influence, presidents have used rhetorical leadership to achieve legislative success. "The mass public appeared to be the not-so-secret, extra-constitutional weapon that FDR used to prod a nation of citizens, not just partisans, to engage in politics, to end an economic crisis and support a war. FDR's triumph was not merely reaching out against traditional norms, *but reaching out to the nation in its entirety*, not just members of his own party" (Heith, 2013, p. 19).

Moreover, the president's legislative success is predicated on the ability to "use" the public first indirectly and then directly. Indirectly, public opinion influences the environment for action (Neustadt, 1990; Cornwell, 1965); directly, the president "goes public" which forces congressional compliance as their constituents respond to the president, which pressures their congress member (Kernell, 2007).

The president's ability to use, and dependence on, rhetorical leadership increased as the means of communication evolved. By President Obama's second term, the president governs in a

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5003-9.ch008

sea of communication platforms: television, radio, newspapers, magazines and the fastest growing platform, the Internet. The multitude of platforms means that the president no longer dominates the media agenda and cannot guarantee media or public attention for his legislative goals (Cohen, 2010; Baum & Kernell, 1999). Compounding the president's problem, the late 20th century and early 21st represent a period of intense political polarization. The combination of media fragmentation and party polarization challenges the president's ability to exercise nationalized leadership (Heith, 2013). The president's ability to capitalize on his status as sole national figure and lead from a place of unity has been compromised by the environment in which he functions (Heith, 2013). Comparing the tone of presidential rhetoric can capture the effect of environment on the use of national leadership.

President Obama entered office riding the wave of his historic campaign. He benefitted from the extraordinary intensity and interest from Democrats and Independents during the primary season. The personal connection compounded the rejection of the Republican handling of the economic crisis of 2008, and provided Obama with both a comfortable Electoral College victory (68%) and a sizable popular vote lead (53%), a feat not accomplished by either of his two predecessors. Consequently, President Obama entered office with a large stable coalition based on a majority of voters, using either the Electoral College or the popular vote total. This large, majority-based coalition allowed President Obama to exercise national leadership regardless of the audience to which he spoke; he spoke with one, nationalized, voice (Heith, 2013). Unfortunately, for the new President, his first term was a bruising combination of financial disaster, high expectation, and intense polarization. His first term approval ratings indicated a narrowing of his initial coalition, from 69% to 49%¹, although he was reelected with only a percentage point difference (Han & Heith, 2012). Comparing President

Obama's reelection campaign rhetoric with his first term governing rhetoric via the DICTION master variables indicates that the President surprisingly exercised different rhetorical leadership during the 2012 campaign, less national and with different emphasis.

BACKGROUND

Campaigns require vastly different skills, style and approach than governing. Or at least, that was the thinking prior to 1980. The differences between campaigning and governing should be stark: 1) Campaigns have a fixed end point; you either win or lose. 2) Campaigns create coalitions for a single purpose – winning. 3) Campaigns require an “us” vs. “them” mentality (Heclo, 2000; Heith, 2004). Edwards contends that presidential rhetorical efforts are actually “antithetical to governing” as they frustrate coalition building, prevent compromise, and seek to “mobilize an intense minority of supporters as [much as] to persuade the other side” (Edwards, 2008, p. 163). Therefore, it seems likely that campaign rhetoric would be different from governing rhetoric. However, with the Reagan administration, scholars and members of the media began to notice the prevalence of campaign tools, campaign skills and even a campaign-like approach to leadership. Sydney Blumenthal (1980) termed the Reagan approach “a permanent campaign” while Samuel Kernell (1986) dubbed it “going public.” The permanent campaign leadership approach employed “addresses to the nation; travel around the nation; and reliance on public opinion polls” (Heith, 2013, p. 19). In particular, the creation and institutionalization of a public opinion polling apparatus within White House decision making installed campaign staffers and campaign analysis into key decision making pathways (Heith, 2004; Tenpas & McCann, 2009). Consequently, the presidential governing leadership bore many similarities to campaign behavior.

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