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Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign rhetoric: Making America whole again

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ABSTRACT

This article sought to investigate Hillary Rodham Clinton's 2016 campaign rhetoric for the U.S. President as found in her South Carolina Primary Victory Speech and Super Tuesday Victory Speech. Qualitative content analysis was used through Leanne's analytical tool of rhetorical strategies to deconstruct the texts. It gave way to new analytical narratives to decipher the core meaning as expressed in the central ideas and the main ideas of the two speeches. By so doing, access was easily made for studying the four components of Clinton's campaign rhetoric. The article showed that both speeches shared similar themes in the four components of the campaign rhetoric, illuminating consistently Clinton's lines of thought and political goals. She succinctly spelled out her agenda to make America whole again; thus, providing opportunity, dignity, and justice for every American. She framed her political stand to continue the preceding Democratic President's success to improve the American economy. She presented herself as a strong leader capable of advancing the American economy that worked for every American, breaking all barriers and restoring their common faith for a better America. She evoked hopes on the part of her prospective voters for their common better future and urged them to desire love and kindness in their lives, and use the emotion of anger against the barriers that divided them.

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Introduction

Theodore Otto Windt Junior identified that presidential rhetoric emerged as a distinct subfield within rhetorical studies in 1984. It is within this subfield that a study of campaign rhetoric seeks to know, understand, and interpret campaign speeches as public affairs and public culture (Medhurst, 2008).

The campaign speech of a presidential hopeful is an important part of his or her strategy to win the presidency. This study focuses on the campaign rhetoric of Hillary Rodham Clinton (henceforth Clinton) in her two campaign speeches (Clinton, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d) to see

whether or not these speeches powerfully showcase her as the most acceptable candidate. Presidential election involves offering competing narratives, that is, competing visions of the present and the future. The vision of the present identifies the existing problems, and that of the future is concerned with offering a possible solution to those problems (cf. Bowers & Daniels, 2011). Those competing narratives attempt to persuade voters to see why a particular candidate would be the most suitable to select. As this research was being prepared, it was clear that Clinton applied a strategic positioning as a continuation of Obama's policies. Therefore, there was no doubt that this could result in her encouraging victory over Senator Bernie Sanders in the southern states that historically had supported Obama to win the ticket to the White House (Przybyla, 2016). This presumptuous Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, won seven states, revealing her broad

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support among minorities in the South. Alongside her victory, a Republican presidential hopeful, Donald Trump, also won seven states across the nation. His victories indicated the strength of his anti-establishment movement (Collinson, 2016).

Studying Clinton's campaign rhetoric is part of the broader inquiries in studying the great speakers—those who affected the course of history (Charteris–Black, 2011). As a mode of inquiry, this may benefit those who wish to advance their political career, which is closely related to the quality of their rhetorical skills. Such an inquiry also provides knowledge and skills for those who need to upgrade the quality of their leadership relating to public speaking. As this article was being prepared, election polls indicated that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump would become the most likely nominees from their respective parties (“The race,” 2016). There was no doubt that Clinton's rhetoric finally enabled her to win the Democratic nomination. As a result, the two candidates had to fight head-to-head to win the ticket to the White House. In this respect, she convincingly showed she had a chance to win the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. For this reason, Clinton's speeches undoubtedly became insightful resources in the study of the American campaign rhetoric, especially in relation to her role as a female politician with an outstanding record of accomplishments.

Objectives of the Research

The research reported in this article investigated Clinton's campaign rhetoric in her two presidential campaign speeches: South Carolina Primary Victory Speech and Super Tuesday Victory Speech (henceforth, respectively referred to as SCPVS and STVS). These two speeches were chosen for the reason that Clinton had a strategic positioning to continue Obama's policies. The two regions where the two speeches delivered were evidently instrumental in supporting Obama to win his ticket to the White House. Therefore, the research seeks to investigate whether Clinton's two campaign speeches shared things in common in terms of the components of campaign rhetoric and whether they were also consistent with her earlier campaign rhetoric as declared in her Presidential Campaign Launch Speech (Clinton, 2015a, 2015b).

Literature Review

Rhetorically, the preparation of a campaign speech, as public speaking, starts with the first of the five classical canons, that is, “invention” (Beebe & Beebe, 2009; Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007). In preparing the text of a speech, this is concerned with the concept of “central idea” and “main idea”. The former is understood as the very essence of the speech that can be grasped and then summed up in one sentence (Beebe & Beebe, 2009), while, the latter is understood as the topic sentences or the key points of the text as further elaboration of a given central idea (Beebe & Beebe, 2009). These two concepts were used as points of departure to get into the main object of investigation of this article, that is, Clinton's campaign rhetoric. The reason why this was done was that the texts of Clinton's campaign

speeches—the prepared written texts and their accompanying videos—were authentic texts which were originally prepared and intended for native speakers (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990). The study as undertaken in this article gave room to examine both speeches in the contexts of American studies for students majoring in social sciences or in English as a foreign language.

Medhurst (2005, cited in Barrett, 2016; Basten, 2016; Culotta, 2016) states that the campaign rhetoric of the presidential hopeful usually contains four components: (a) agenda-setting, (b) framing, (c) character construction, and (d) emotional resonance. Agenda-setting is understood as the choice of a given issue which is then foregrounded to become more salient than any other issue while framing deals with the selection of a particular aspect of perceived reality which could be delivered as something salient within a text (Bernhard, 2012). Character construction is concerned with a candidate's representation of himself or herself as a stronger leader who is able to overcome the problems he or she has framed (Barrett, 2016; Basten, 2016; Culotta, 2016). Finally, emotional resonance deals with a candidate's evocation of the audience's emotions, such as some sense of urgency (Culotta, 2016), emotions of insecurity and excitement (Barrett, 2016), feeling anger towards injustice, and hope for rewarded economy (Basten, 2016).

The four components of campaign rhetoric were well illustrated in the analysis by Mueller (2016) of Chris Christie's bid for the U.S. 2016 presidency. For instance, when announcing his bid, Chris Christie used agenda-setting to establish that America was lacking in strong leadership. He pointed out that the lack of strong leadership caused the country's problems. By constructing his character as a strong and experienced leader and eliciting the emotion of the audience, he urged people's support. Basten (2016) also succinctly illustrated Clinton's campaign rhetoric in her Presidential Campaign Launch Speech (Clinton, 2015a, 2015b) in terms of the four components of campaign rhetoric. Clinton's agenda-setting was economic reform that would work for every American, giving them fair treatment and equal opportunity. She framed the unfair existing system of the economy that needed to be reformed. By constructing her character as a champion to reform the economy for every American and evoking hope and anger on the part of her audience, she enlisted their support.

Methods

The research employed qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2013) to deconstruct the texts in terms of their rhetorical styles as found in both the prepared texts as well as their related video clips to give way to the new narrative analysis to derive the very essence of the speeches—their central ideas. Leanne (2010) provided a list of analytical tools of some rhetorical strategies such as: (a) establishing common ground with the audience, (b) using transcendence in order to gain a wider audience, (c) expressing vision by personalized examples, (d) using events or iconic characters in history familiar to a wider audience, (e) borrowing sounding political lexicons from iconic figures, and (f) using a crescendo to appeal

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