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## Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences

journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/kjss>

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

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 26 August 2016

Received in revised form 10 November 2016

Accepted 15 November 2016

Available online xxxx

### Keywords:

campaign rhetoric  
campaign speeches  
political goal  
strategic positioning  
victory speeches

## 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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Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2016.11.002>

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Please cite this article in press as: Gunawan, S., Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign rhetoric: Making America whole again, Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2016.11.002>

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

audience's determination and support. From there, "the central idea" could be deduced, and the list of "the main ideas" for each speech could also be identified by re-examining closely the texts with the help of the new analytical narrative. Finally, the campaign rhetoric could be grasped and discussed. To verify the findings and avoid bias in the result of the findings, important comments were gathered from other scholars through a focus group discussion on American studies and American presidential rhetoric. In addition, the researcher also used a peer debriefer to review the earlier draft of the research results so that other people could better count on the findings.

#### *Data and Sources of Data*

The data were Clinton's central ideas, lists of the main ideas, and utterances in her two campaign speeches containing the four components of campaign rhetoric. The sources of the data were both the prepared texts and the video clips of Clinton's SCPVS (2016a, 2016b) and STVS (2016c, 2016d). The first prepared text was delivered on February 28, 2016, in Columbia, South Carolina, while the second was delivered on March 1, 2016, in Miami, Florida after she won several state primaries on Super Tuesday.

#### *Data Analysis*

Through the new analytical narratives, the size of the data was reduced to focus both on the central ideas and the identification of the main ideas for each text (Schreier, 2013). In the light of the broader context of American politics that the researcher had access to through the internet, some interpretation of the deeper layers of meaning of the texts was made to arrive at the essential elements of Clinton's campaign rhetoric (Krippendorff, 2004).

### **Results**

#### *Central Idea and Main Ideas of Clinton's SCPVS*

Clinton established her common ground with her audience in Columbia, South Carolina, as she praised their support that sent the transcendent message to a wider audience throughout the country. If they stood together, nothing would become a barrier for their common effort to move forward.

Clinton's expression of thanks to various local leaders showed her familiarity and strong long-lasting ties with the community begun by her husband, former president Bill Clinton. As this electorate was instrumental in bringing Obama to the White House, she borrowed this iconic figure's legacy to enlist the electorate's support to continue her predecessor's successful policies.

She appreciated the grass-root support of South Carolina voters. She achieved a transcendence of her message to gain a wider audience as she further pleaded Americans to join hands together to overcome whatever barriers were in the way, enabling every American to live up to their full potential.

Clinton openly drove home her political agenda covering education, business, and bonds of family and community. Her victory would bring about better education in the rural

areas and throughout the country, reviving entrepreneurs to realize their dreams of growing businesses of their own. These reforms would specifically benefit colored people and women working together to strengthen love, kindness, and mutual respect despite everybody's differences. She used the occasion to fire back at the Republican presidential hopeful Trump's campaign slogan to "make America great again" (Trump, 2015b). She urged that America never stopped being great. Instead, she emphasized the need to make "America whole again" (Clinton, 2016a, 2016b). She highlighted the need to break down whatever existing barriers continued to drive the nation apart.

She understood her political position was to fight against corporations that have denied the truth that made America great, companies that collected unreasonable profit at the expense of lay people, companies that shifted their offices overseas to avoid their fair share of taxation.

She was determined to advance the economy, which was built by her predecessor President Obama. She sounded her faith in the power of the rhetorical device of the tricolons of "breaking the barriers" (Clinton, 2016a, 2016b) highlighting attempts to do away with women's social inequality, supporting better education for the younger generation, and creating a better economy to support a better life for the younger generation. She was determined to support historically black institutions of higher education. She was going to fight against racism in order to forward opportunity, dignity, and justice for every American, especially for colored people.

She exemplified the experience of the five women who were brought together as they lost their beloved children by tragedy. These events, familiar to most people, extended her message to a wider audience of common people. She exemplified them as Americans who channeled their catastrophe and became stronger in spirit to make things better. She reminded Americans to join hands to improve their country.

She ended her speech in a crescendo calling for her voters' determination and support to keep fighting against inequality and discrimination. She promised to fight for the availability of more good jobs, better retirement, honored hard work, family support, strong communities, mutual trust, and respect.

Based on the new analytical narrative above, the central idea of Clinton's SCPVS can be deduced to: "Clinton sounded her political stand to make America whole again and keep breaking barriers that impeded every American to live up to their potential".

The result of the analysis of the main ideas of Clinton's SCPVS are summarized in Table 1.

#### *Central Idea and Main Ideas of Clinton's STVS*

Clinton was appreciative of the people's support to establish her common ground with her supporters for their determination to back her up, to break down barriers, and to stand together. She pleaded their continued support.

She spelled out her transcendent message as she emphasized her political stand to "make America whole" (Clinton, 2016c, 2016d); not as her opponent's soaring slogan to "make America great" (Trump, 2015b). She

**Table 1**  
Clinton's main ideas in South Carolina Primary Victory Speech

<b>Opening</b>	
1	Greeting
2	Expression of gratitude and plea for further support to move on
<b>Body</b>	
3	Hillary's victory for a better America
4	Fight against those that turned their back on America
5	Together to break down all the barriers
6	Opportunity, dignity, and justice for every American
7	Plea to work together for a better tomorrow
8	More love and kindness in America
<b>Closing</b>	
9	Move on together for a common better future

convinced her audience that America had never stopped being great. Therefore, she pleaded with them that America needed love and kindness to amend everything broken. America should be one people, with everyone having a contributing factor for the common good.

She was determined to fight against those corporations that turned their back on America as they denied their fair share of taxation and forgot that they had been bailed out before.

She called for American unity to work together to break down barriers that impeded the nation and families. She promised to create more good jobs that provide decent pay for families to live on. She promised to keep fighting for the middle-class economy. She promised to keep breaking down barriers impeding families and minorities. Using her familiarity with the voices from the common people, she expressed her vision by sharing personalized examples to call people to work together to restore their common faith for a better future. She called for them to keep fighting against forces that drove them apart. By using the example of the less fortunate community in Flint, she sent a message of the high value of love and kindness, as seen in the voluntary social services of other communities across the country, who came to their aid.

She ended her speech using a crescendo to call for the people's support to continue the progress that the preceding Democratic president, Barack Obama, had made. By mentioning this iconic figure in the region that supported him to go to the White House, she undoubtedly enlisted their support. She called on every American to keep moving forward together to enable every American to live up to their potential.

Based on the new analytical narrative above, the central idea of Clinton's STVS can be summed up as follows: "Clinton was determined to make America whole again, breaking all barriers that divided the people apart and restoring their common faith for a better future".

The result of the analysis of the main ideas of Clinton's STVS is summarized in [Table 2](#).

#### *Essential Components of the Campaign Rhetoric in Clinton's SCPVS*

The four components of Clinton's campaign rhetoric in her SCPVS were deduced through the new analytical narratives by means of the central ideas and the main ideas for the text (cf. [Schreier, 2013](#)), from which some

**Table 2**  
Clinton's main ideas in Super Tuesday Victory Speech

<b>Opening</b>	
1	Greeting
2	Expression of gratitude for Hillary's victory
<b>Body</b>	
3	The job of making America whole
4	Fighting those that turned their back on America
5	A call to work together to break down barriers
6	Restoring a common faith in America's common future
7	Building on the progress that America has made
<b>Closing</b>	
8	A call to keep working together

interpretation of the deeper layers of meaning of the text was made to arrive at the essential elements of her campaign rhetoric (cf. [Krippendorff, 2004](#)). The following is the result of the analysis of the four components of Clinton's campaign rhetoric in her SCPVS.

#### *Agenda-setting*

Clinton seeks to make America whole again. She promises to create more good jobs to provide decent lives to the people and continue the progress that her predecessor, President Obama, had made in building the middle-class economy.

#### *Framing*

Clinton frames her political stand to improve the American economy to provide opportunity, dignity, and justice for every American. She stresses the need to do away with existing barriers.

#### *Character Construction*

Clinton presents herself as a strong leader who has strong ties with the common people and, therefore, will be capable of working together with them for their common good.

#### *Emotional Resonance*

Clinton evokes the hopes of her prospective voters for their common better future and urges them to realize more love and kindness in the lives of the nation. She speaks to the emotion of anger against all barriers that impede the lives of the common people, especially minorities.

#### *Essential Components of Campaign Rhetoric in Clinton's STVS*

Similarly, as previously done with Clinton's SCPVS, the following is the result of the analysis on the four components of Clinton's campaign rhetoric in her STVS.

#### *Agenda-setting*

Clinton underscores her political goal to make America whole again. She promotes her agenda to create more new jobs and industries of the future.

#### *Framing*

Clinton frames her political goal to continue the economic advancement made by her Democratic predecessor, Barack Obama.

### Character Construction

Clinton presents herself as a strong leader capable of advancing an American economy that works for every American, breaking all barriers, and restoring the people's common faith for a better America.

### Emotional Resonance

Clinton evokes the hope of her prospective voters by urging them to create more love and kindness in their lives and drawing on the anger against barriers that impede families and minorities.

### Discussion

The central ideas of Clinton's two campaign speeches make much of her political goals to continue the economic progress made by the preceding Democratic president's administration. Quite important is her strong political stand to make America whole again. Although she does not mention the name of her Republican rival, the message is clear that she is attacking Donald Trump, who spells out the slogan to "make America great again" (Trump, 2015a, 2015b). Instead, Clinton states that America never stopped being great. Therefore, she emphasizes her political stand to make America whole. Contrary to Trump's political stand to build walls, Clinton points out her determination to break down existing barriers that divide the lives of the people and the nation and to break down barriers that cause injustice and inequality. Only by doing these can America restore their faith in their common better future to live up to their God-given potential. The central ideas and their elaboration into the main ideas of the two speeches are saliently spelled out and spread out in the four components of the campaign rhetoric. In other words, the four components of the campaign rhetoric in both her SCPVS and STVS consistently spell out her political lines of thought and goals as they are expressed in the two speeches (see Tables 1 and 2).

In both SCPVS and STVS, Clinton spells out her agenda to make America whole. Obviously, she takes aim at the presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump whose slogan is to make America great. She plans to advance the middle-class economy by creating more good jobs that provide more people with decent lives, built on the economic progress of her predecessor, President Barack Obama. She promises to fight for the availability of more good jobs, better retirement, honored hard work, family support, strong communities, mutual trust, and respect. To stress the importance of her message, she repeats her slogan, "break down barriers", eight times in SCPVS. She promises to improve education and business. She highlights that America needs more love, kindness, and mutual respect to strengthen the bond of families and communities. She mentions President Obama twice in SCPVS and three times in STVS to show her high respect for the president and his legacy to convince her voters that she is quite determined to continue the progress made under Obama's administration. This progress can be seen in areas such as: manufacturing, small business, scientific research, and clean energy. In her STVS, she spells out again the political stand to continue her predecessor's Democratic

success and accomplishments by improving the health care system and creating more decent jobs. She stresses the importance of the Democratic voices throughout the country as she uses the stylistic device of repetition with her slogan to "break down barriers" seven times in STVS.

Clinton frames her political stand in both her SCPVS and STVS to improve the American economy as succinctly stated in the slogan "make America whole" and "break down all barriers". The slogans drive home the message to provide opportunity, dignity, and justice for every American so that every American can live up to their potential. In SCPVS, she points out the massive influence of support she has among local leaders and grass-root donors or voters that are capable of working together to make changes and continue the progress made by President Barack Obama. Together with the people, she is determined to break down barriers that drive their lives apart. In STVS, this determination to break down all barriers is used to emphasize that America can rise together. The slogan "make America whole" does not only involve improving the economy, but also strengthening the basic value of America as one people with more love and kindness. She ensures the spirit of her campaign as the power of working together as one people to restore their common faith in their common better future. She frames her position to continue Obama's progress like what Obama did in his first announcement speech, that is, she places herself as part of the long procession in the course of history to perfect the country (Obama, 2007).

In both SCPVS and STVS, Clinton presents herself as a strong leader who knows the common people very well; therefore, she is capable of advancing an American economy that really works for every American. For most of her prospective voters, this sounds as an echo of her earlier presentation in her campaign launch speech as "a champion for every American" (Clinton, 2015a, 2016b). In SCPVS, she mentions her ties with local leaders, grass-root support, and her familiarity with the voices of the common people. As one people, she convinces them that they can accomplish their political goals. In STVS, she convinces the people as a leader who is able to continue her predecessor's accomplishments. She presents herself as a leader who makes things right.

In both SCPVS and STVS, Clinton evokes the emotion of her prospective voters to realize more love and kindness, more mutual respect and trust. Her mention of the names of civil right activists in SCPVS is used to arouse the emotion of her voters to support her determination to fight against racism. In STVS, the spirit of the campaign is empowered by slogans such as making America whole, breaking down barriers, and restoring common faith in a common better future. She arouses anger towards forces that try to divide America, and calls on the people to resist. She invokes anger towards those having the most wealth and power who have forgotten the American basic truth; anger to those that move their corporations overseas to deny their fair share of taxes; anger to those who cause injustice to minorities. Instead, she offers hope as she promises to create good jobs and restore people's common faith in their common better future.

The four components of Clinton's campaign rhetoric in her two campaign speeches undertaken in this study echo her previous Presidential Campaign Launch Speech (Basten, 2016; Clinton, 2015a, 2016b). In her Presidential Campaign Launch Speech she underscored economic reforms that would work for every American. She brought to light the unfair system that causes inequality, and therefore needs to be reformed. She presented herself as a strong leader—a champion for everyday Americans—to reform the economy. She aroused anger toward injustice and inequality and hope for a better future on the part of her prospective supporters. Therefore it could be said that she is quite consistent in delivering her lines of thought and political goals as spelled out in the four components of the two campaign speeches.

## Conclusion

Following the result of the analysis and the discussion of Clinton's two campaign speeches, conclusions are:

- a) Clinton spells out succinctly her political goal to make America whole. She takes aim at the Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump when she highlights the message that America does not need to be great. She urges that America never stopped being great. Instead, they need to make America whole again.
- b) Attacking the Republican presidential hopeful again, Clinton pushes that, instead of building walls, America has to keep breaking down barriers that split the nation apart.
- c) Clinton consistently echoes her high regards for her predecessor, Democratic President Barack Obama, and spells out her determination to continue the progress he has made. This strategic positioning to be on good terms with the iconic figure Barack Obama yields support from southern states that historically brought him to the White House.
- d) Clinton's campaign speeches succinctly spell out her line of thought and political goals.
- e) Clinton's four components of the campaign rhetoric are strong enough to showcase her as the most likely candidate to choose.
- f) Clinton's two campaign speeches undertaken in this study also consistently echo the campaign rhetoric as expressed in her previous Campaign Launch Speech.

It can be concluded that Clinton demonstrates her rhetorical prowess in these two campaign speeches. As stated earlier in this article, she convincingly showed she has a chance to win the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Therefore her rhetoric speeches undoubtedly will become 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.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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