

## The Rhetoric of the Presidential Campaign Trail

Communication 520

Professor Tom Hollihan

ASC 202

213.740.3947

[hollihan@usc.edu](mailto:hollihan@usc.edu)

Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 11-12, 1-2, and by appointment

It would be difficult to point to a time when the United States was more polarized and divided than it is now. Perhaps the only parallel in history was in the years prior to the Civil War. Although no one expects that we are on the verge of a similar conflict today, nonetheless the nation is suffering through a period of disruptive politics with many citizens feeling that the system is “rigged” to favor a few at the expense of the others. The Republican Party’s nomination of reality TV personality Donald Trump, a candidate with no previous political experience and seemingly little political knowledge reveals the extent to which support for conventional politics and politicians has declined. But of course it was not just the GOP voters who were motivated by their disdain for the political system. The unexpected rise of Senator Bernie Sanders an independent-socialist in the Democratic Party also reflected the widespread political alienation on the left.

This political polarization did not arise spontaneously in the 2016 presidential campaign; President Barack Obama experienced a tumultuous presidency. He assumed office in January 2009, in the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. His first actions were efforts to stabilize the banks and insure liquidity in the financial markets in order to prevent the collapse of the economy. His actions saved the banks and prevented the collapse of the US auto industry, but many conservatives and progressives nonetheless viewed them negatively. Although the path to economic recovery has been uneven and slow, eight years later unemployment is greatly reduced and the stock market has rebounded. Still, the benefits of the economic recovery have gone mostly to those earning the highest incomes, while the middle class and the poor, and many regions in the country have fallen further and further behind. Whenever it has appeared that a more robust recovery might be just around the corner events undermined the progress. The global debt crisis in the Eurozone, anxieties about a slowing in growth in the Chinese economy, the BREXIT decision in the UK, even a drought of epic proportions across much of the nation, all conspired to prevent a return to an era of more rapid economic growth. President Obama did manage to fulfill a long-standing commitment of his party to undertake a major reform in the health care system in order to expand access to care to uninsured Americans, but the debate over health reform, and indeed Republican resistance to Obama’s agenda overall, further polarized the American electorate.

President Obama was challenged throughout his tenure by a deeply entrenched opposition that sought to thwart his every move. The GOP leaders in the Senate filibustered virtually all significant legislative initiatives proposed by the Democrats and created a situation where 60 votes were required to pass almost all bills. The Republicans also captured control of the House of Representatives in 2010 and pursued their own

deeply conservative agenda. Goaded on by an increasingly restive population nurtured on a steady diet of polarizing rhetoric and inspired by Tea Party activists, the GOP has moved further and further away from compromise. The frustration that resulted from gridlock in Washington no doubt contributed to the mobilization of many progressives who were motivated by the Occupy Wall Street movement. Many of these activists supported Senator Sanders for the Democratic nomination, and as their ranks grew, they managed to tug the Democratic Party platform further to the left. Although President Obama made wide use of his executive power (and indeed we may come to regret the precedents that he set in doing so), he was unable to deliver on some of his most important promises such as genuine immigration reform, a path to citizenship, the closing of Guantanamo Bay, and further banking and Wall Street reforms. These issues further motivated the Sanders' supporters and sharpened their calls for political reforms.

The Republican Primary campaign began with a large field of candidates most of whom who sought to convince their party that they were even more firmly ideologically conservative than their peers. For much of the race political experience was a detriment as figures such as Donald Trump, Ben Carson, and Carla Fiorina captured the support of GOP partisans making it difficult for the more moderate and experienced candidates such as presumptive front-runner Jeb Bush to gain traction. On the Democrat side Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders battled over which of them could best be trusted to rein in the corporate welfare state and help grow the incomes of middle class voters.

Participants in this seminar will closely study the events, strategic maneuvering, and press coverage of the election. We will examine a wide array of campaign discourse including: speeches, advertisements, debates, press reports, blogs, websites, social networking sites, etc. The topics and daily assignments remain somewhat tentative and may change as the issues unfold during the remainder of the campaign. As we discuss the topics that I have proposed below, and other topics that are added, we will also be engaged in assessing the theories that have been offered regarding how the news and entertainment media influence the formation of public opinion.

The day-to-day course of a modern political campaign often defies predictions. Campaign strategies emerge, and outcomes often turn on important news events, candidate gaffes, or rhetorical surprises. I hope that our meetings will permit each of us to have a hand in adding topics for discussion and in modifying course content. I propose that we teach each other as we compare our readings, perceptions, understandings, and conclusions about the campaign and its implications for the study of political rhetoric and communication.

We will read significant portions of these books. We will also of course read many other journal articles and chapters listed below. Students will also have to follow the media to keep up with the campaign issues.

Arceneaux, K. & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press.

Hollihan, T.A. (2009). *Uncivil wars: Political campaigns in a media age*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Bedford-St. Martins.

Iyengar, S. (2016). *Media Politics: A Citizens Guide*. New York: Norton.

Keane, J. (2013). *Democracy and Media Decadence*. New York: Cambridge UP.

Kenski, K., Hardy, B. & Jamieson, K.H. (2010). *The Obama Victory: How media, money, and message shaped the 2008 election*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lakoff, G. (2008). *The political mind: Why you can't understand 21<sup>st</sup>-century American politics with an 18<sup>th</sup> century brain*. New York: Viking.

Pfister, D.S. (2014). *Networked Media: Networked Rhetorics*. University Park: Penn State Press.

Schudson, M. (2008). *Why democracies need an unlovable press*. Cambridge: Polity.

Sheeler, K.H. & Anderson, K.V. (2013). *Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Culture*. College Station: Texas A&M Press.

Westen, D. (2007). *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*. New York: Public Affairs.

#### Assignments:

**Major Paper:** Each student will be expected to prepare a major paper studying one or more aspects of the 2016 campaign. The paper should be grounded in theory. Please meet with me independently to work out your topic. The goal is to have every student produce an original and insightful study that is suitable for conference presentation and publication. Thirty pages including references should be considered the maximum length. Students should also expect to present their papers to the class on December 12<sup>th</sup> and the papers are due that day. The papers will count for 40% of your final grade.

**Media Critique or Strategy Critique:** Each student will be expected to write TWO Short (3 page) critique essays (similar to op-ed essays) that use some aspect of political communication theory to analyze either media coverage or a strategic turn in the campaign. The goal of these essays is to write in a way that will be accessible to ordinary audiences. If we can get some of these papers published somewhere that will be all the better. The papers are due on September 19<sup>th</sup> and October 24<sup>th</sup>. Each paper will count 15% of your final grade.

**Student-Led Seminar:** Each student will be responsible for organizing and leading 30 minutes of discussion on November 21st. You have the opportunity to choose a topic from the campaign that interests you (either from the possible topics that I have proposed below or by introducing another topic of your own). You should select a set of readings that you think will best capture the important issues that merit study and conversation. Please share these readings in advance with your fellow seminar participants. The assignment will count for 20% of your final grade.

**Reaction Papers:** Each student should complete a one page reaction paper each week. The paper should contain your reflections, musings, thoughts, questions, rants about the readings for the week, some campaign events, candidate statements, news coverage,

polls, etc. The papers should be photocopied and shared with fellow participants and should be used to stimulate our discussions. The reaction papers will count for 10% of your final grade.

### **Tentative topics and schedule:**

#### **August 22     Introductions**

#### **August 29     The Modern Campaign, the History of Political Communication Research**

Rogers, E.M. (2004). Theoretical diversity in political communication. In Kaid, L.L., Ed., *Handbook of political communication research*. Mahwah: Lawrence Earlbaum., pp. 3-16.

Gronbeck, B.E. (2004). Rhetoric and politics. In Kaid, L.L., Ed., *Handbook of political communication research*. Mahwah: Lawrence Earlbaum, pp. 135-54.

Castells, Communication Power, chapter 4, pp. 193-298.

McClurg S.D, & Habel, P. (2011). Presidential elections: Campaigning within a segmented electorate. In Medvic, S.K., Ed. *New directions in campaigns and elections*. New York: Routledge, pp. 200-220.

Iyengar, chapters 1-3.

#### **September 5   Labor Day Holiday**

#### **September 12 Creating Images, Personality Politics, and Reading the Conventions Rhetorically**

Benoit, W. L., Wells, W. T., Pier, P. M., & Blaney, J. R. (1999). Acclaiming, attacking, and defending in presidential nominating acceptance addresses, 1960-1996. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 85, 247-267.

Smith, L.D. (1990). Convention oratory as institutional discourse: A narrative synthesis of the Democrats and Republicans of 1988. *Communication Studies*, 41, pp. 19-34.

Morris, J.S. & Francia, P.L. (2007). Losing control? The rise of cable news and its effect on party convention coverage. In C. Panagoulou, ed. *Rewiring politics: Presidential nominating conventions in the media age*, pp. 147-163. Baton Rouge: LSU Press.

Fine, T.S. (2007). Mass media and the democratization of presidential nominating conventions. In C. Panagoulouos, ed. *Rewiring politics: Presidential nominating conventions in the media age*, pp. 165-88. Baton Rouge: LSU Press.

Pomper, G.M. (2007). The new role of conventions as political rituals. In C. Panagoulouos, ed. *Rewiring politics: Presidential nominating conventions in the media age*, pp. 189-208. Baton Rouge: LSU Press.

Roberts, K.G. (2011). "Brand America": Media and the framing of "cosmopolitan" identities. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 28, pp. 68-84.

Manusov, V. & Harvey, J. (2011). Bumps and tears on the road to the presidency: Media framing of key nonverbal events in the 2008 Democratic election. *Western Journal of Communication*, 75, 282-303.

### **September 19 Politics and Emotional Rationality**

Westen, D. (2007). *The political brain: The role of emotion in deciding the fate of the nation*. New York: Public Affairs. Chapters 1-6

Lakoff, G. (2008). *The political mind: Why you can't understand 21<sup>st</sup>-century American politics with an 18<sup>th</sup> century brain*. New York: Viking. Chapters 1-5.

Mondak, J.J. (2010). *Personality and the foundations of political behavior*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 4-5.

Bulkeley, K. (2008). *American dreamers: What dreams tell us about the political psychology of conservatives, liberals, and everyone else*. Boston: Beacon Press. Chapters 1-2.

### **September 26 Politics and the News Media**

Gulati, G.J., Just, M.R., & Crigler, A.N. (2004). News coverage of political campaigns. In Kaid, L.L., Ed. *Handbook of political communication research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum, pp. 237-256.

Keane, chapter 1 & 3.

Schudson, M. (2008). *Why democracies need an unlovable press*. Cambridge: Polity. Chapters 1-6.

Hollihan, T.A. (2011). Campaigns and the news media. *The electoral challenge: Theory meets practice, 2d ed.* Washington, D.C.: The CQ Press. Pp. 144-164.

Arceneaux & Johnson, chapters 1-4.

### **October 3 Campaign Debates**

Carlin, D.B. (2005). Debate watch: Creating a public sphere for the unheard voices. In M.S. McKinney, LL. Kaid, D.G. Bystrom & D.B. Carlin, eds. *Communicating politics: Engaging the public in democratic life*, pp. 223-234. New York: Peter Lang.

McKinney, M.S. (2005). Engaging citizens through presidential debates: Does the format matter? In M.S. McKinney, LL. Kaid, D.G. Bystrom & D.B. Carlin, eds. *Communicating politics: Engaging the public in democratic life*, pp. 209-221. New York: Peter Lang.

Zhu, J., Milavsky, J.R., & Biswas, R. (1994). Do televised debates affect image perception more than issue knowledge? A study of the first 1992 presidential debate. *Human Communication Research*, 20, 302-333.

Bob Shrum, (2006). Debate strategy and effects. In K.H. Jamieson, ed. *Electing the President, 2004: The insider's view*. Philadelphia, Penn UP, chapter 4.

Weger, H.; Seiter, J.S.; Jacobs, K.A.; and Akbulut, V. (2010). Perceptions of debater effectiveness and appropriateness as a function of decreasingly polite strategies for responding to nonverbal disagreement in televised political debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 47, pp. 39-54.

Seiter, J.S.; Weger, H., Kinzie, H.J., and Jensen, A.S. (2010). Impression management in televised debates: The effect of background nonverbal behavior on audience perceptions of debaters' likability. *Communication Research Reports*, 26, pp. 1-11.

Benoit, W.J. & Henson, J.R. (2009). A functional analysis of the 2008 vice presidential debates: Biden versus Palin. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 46, pp. 39-50.

Benoit, W.J., Henson, J.R., & Sudbrock, L.A. (2011). A functional analysis of the 2008 presidential primary debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 48, pp. 97-110.

### **October 10\* Politics and Race and Gender**

Frank, D.A. & McPhail, L. (2005). Barack Obama's address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, compromise, consilience, and the (im)possibility of racial reconciliation. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs Quarterly*, 8, pp. 571-594.

Murphy, J.M. (2011). Barack Obama, the Exodus tradition and the Joshua generation. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 97, pp. 387-410.

Burrell, B.; Elder, L., and Frederick, B. (2011). From Hillary to Michelle: Public opinion and the spouses of presidential candidates. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 41, pp. 156-176.

Sparks, A. (2009). Minstrel politics or “He speaks to well:” Rhetoric, race, and resistance in the 2008 presidential campaign. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 46, pp. 21-38.

Falk, E. (2009). Press, passion, and Portsmouth: Narratives about “crying” on the campaign trail. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 46, pp. 51-63.

Shepard, R. (2009). Confronting gender bias, finding a voice: Hillary Clinton and the New Hampshire crying incident, *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 46, pp. 64-77.

Sheeler & Anderson, chapters 1-3.

### **October 17\* New Technology Politics**

Giroux, H. (2011). The crisis of public values in the age of the new media, *Critical Studies in Media and Communication*, 28, pp. 8-29.

Pfister, chapters 1-6.

Kephart, J.M. & Rafferty, S.F. (2009). “Yes We Can”: Rhizomic rhetorical agency in Hyper-Modern campaign ecologies. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 46, pp. 6-21.

Keane, Chapters 4-5.

Owen, D. (2011). Media: The complex interplay of old and new forms. In Medvic, S.K., Ed. *New directions in campaigns and elections*. New York: Routledge, pp. 145-162.

Perlman, N.G. (2012). *Margin of victory: How technologists help politicians win elections*. Santa Barbara: Praeger. Chapters: 7-14.

Nielsen, R.K. (2012). *Ground wars: Personalized communication in political campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 5.

### **October 24 Politics and Religion**

Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant: Know your values and frame the debate*. White River Junction, VT: Cheslea Green. Chapter 3.

Westen, D. (2007). *The political brain: The role of emotion in deciding the fate of the nation*. New York: Public Affairs. Chapter 10

Domke, D. & Coe, K. (2008). *The God strategy: How religion became a political weapon in America*. Oxford: Oxford UP. Chapters 1-3, 5.

Green, J.C. (2007). *The faith factor: How religion influences American elections*. Westport, CT.: Praeger. Chapters 1-3.

Wald, K.D. & Calhoun-Brown, A. (2007). *Religion and politics in the United States*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Chapters 8-10, 12.

Iyengar, chapter 9.

### **October 31 The Advertising Campaign**

Geer, J.G. (2006). *In defense of negativity: Attack ads in presidential campaigns*. Chicago: Chicago UP. We will read selected chapters.

Ansolabehere, S. & Iyengar, S. (1995). *Going negative: How political advertisements shrink and polarize the electorate*. New York: Free Press. We will read selected chapters.

Iyengar, chapter 6.

### **November 7 Playing the China Card**

Hollihan, T.A. & Zhang, Z. (2012). Media diplomacy and U.S.-China military-to-military cooperation. *CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy*. Los Angeles: Figueroa Press.

Hollihan, T.A. (2014). *The Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands: How Media Narratives Shape Public Opinion and Challenge the Global Order*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, chapter 8.

<http://chinausfocus.com/political-social-development/the-presidential-election-and-us-china-relations/>

<http://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/china/report/2012/03/13/11349/u-s-china-relations-in-an-election-year/>

Find and read 6 recent articles from newspapers, magazines, or blogs on the topic of China's claims in the South China Sea.

If you get a chance, see the documentary film *Death by China*.



**November 14 Post-Election Analyses and Discussion of Media Coverage**

**We will each offer suggestions of the best post-election analysis essays for discussion.**

**November 21 Student Taught Seminar**

**November 28 Civic Engagement, Political Reforms, and Rituals of Transition:  
Lessons Learned from this Campaign for Political Communication Theories**

Readings TBA

**December 12 Student Presentations of Final Papers**