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"Change" in the 2008 presidential campaign: A study in rhetorical definition

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"CHANGE" IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTAL CAMPAIGN:

A STUDY IN RHETORICAL DEFINITION

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ABSTRACT

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Every election cycle, the major party candidates accept a nomination for the presidency and launch the general campaign. These rhetors not only weave a narrative about themselves as qualified candidates; they also forward an argument about how the public should choose between two candidates. In particular, the 2008 presidential campaign's central question asked Americans about the type of change the nation should undertake. By tracing the definitional arguments utilized at the outset of the general election, this project analyzes how Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain utilized this desire for "Change" as a strategic theme.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The 2008 presidential election was unique in many ways. According to Dennis

Johnson, Fulbright Award winner and Professor of Political Management at The George

Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, it was "the longest,

most expensive, and one of the most interesting contests in memory."[1] It is hard to

pinpoint exactly when the campaign really began, with some timelines of the campaign

marking the beginning with Senator Barack Obama's keynote address at the 2004

Democratic National Convention.[2] The speech was powerful and spurred rumors that

Obama might someday run for the presidency.[3] The 2008 presidential campaign had

unofficially begun and though Obama denied the rumors, citing his inexperience and

unequivocally stating in January of 2006 that he would not run for the presidency in

2008, he eventually entered the race and defeated contenders such as Hillary Clinton in

the Democratic primary and Republican John McCain in the general election. Americans

wanting "change" voted and the campaign came to an end on November 4, 2008, when

Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States, a victory which *The

Economist* said "scrambled the assumptions that have governed American politics for

half a generation."[4] Change was the predictably decisive issue of the 2008 campaign. Yet

even though the "nation reached the destination that most foresaw," political scientists

James W. Ceaser, Andrew E. Busch, and John J. Pitney, Jr. commented that "it did so by

a path that defied every expectation and that produced a story of classic dimension."[5]

The campaign for change was not led by the Democratic frontrunner, but rather by a

junior Senator relatively new to the national political scene. Republicans, determined to

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fight for a third term in the White House, also campaigned on the mantle of change. This strategy allowed the Republican candidate to compete realistically with the Democratic candidate; and Americans across the board became captivated by what NPR called "the historic and embattled 2008 presidential race between Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain."[6] Other news sources said this was a "conversation" considered "plainly . . . different from what American voters have grown accustomed to."[7] This difference has also been noted by communication scholars Lance Holbert and Nick Geidner, who argue that this campaign was particularly important because it "brought to light a continually evolving political communication landscape."[8]

The new and changing features of political discourse are currently being explored, and it is the purpose of this project to enter that conversation. Though the 2008 election has been studied and discussed extensively, there is a gap in the research regarding how Obama and McCain both attempted to define themselves as credible agents of change. Given the intense coverage and discussion of this historic and ground-breaking election, it is important to understand how each one attempted to capitalize on America's latest craze for "change." Thus, through what Edward Schiappa terms a "rhetorical analysis of definition," I hope to understand further how Obama and McCain aspired to persuade voters in their favor.[9]

The Run-Up to the 2008 General Election

Analysis of the 2008 presidential election must begin with the context within which Obama and McCain battled for the presidency. Thus, this section seeks to understand how Obama and McCain were positioned as general election candidates, beginning with

an account of each candidate's primary race and then an examination of the general election itself. On March 21, 2006, Democratic Senator Joe Biden became the first candidate to announce informally his candidacy for the presidential nomination. Democrats Mike Gravel, Christopher Dodd, and Duncan Hunter followed suit before Republicans John McCain and Rudy Giuliani announced the formation of their exploratory committees.[10] The informal announcements continued until November 30, 2006, when Democrat Tom Vilsack became the first to announce formally for his party's nomination.[11] Democrats Biden, Dodd, and Clinton also formally announced before Republican Sam Brownback became the first to do so for his party on January 20, 2007.[12] Official announcements for the Democratic presidential nomination ended on February 10, 2007, when Obama declared his candidacy.[13] McCain announced formally on April 25, 2007. The pool of candidates remained constantly in flux until January 3, 2008, when the primary and caucus phase began in Iowa.[14] Over the course of this period there would be twenty officially declared candidates.[15]

Obama's victory in the Democratic primaries was in some ways unexpected. He initially did not have support from the African-American community, while Clinton had a substantial advantage with the less-educated, with women, and with the Democratic base, and was recognizable by name alone to almost any American.[16] Thus, Clinton was considered "the 'inevitable' frontrunner."[17] The Obama organization challenged this conventional wisdom by creating a campaign that rested on "the importance of being the *change* candidate in a *change* election."[18] Although Obama's keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention had created considerable attention, his campaign stalled in the summer of 2007.[19] He faced problems introducing himself and staying positive, all

while fostering doubts about Clinton. Over the next few months, Obama honed his message and on October 19, 2007, the "Change We Can Believe In" campaign made its debut.[20] According to John Kenneth White of the Department of Politics at Catholic University of America, this message proved successful and ultimately Obama was victorious, helping to illustrate "just how desperate voters were for change."[21] The electorate had spoken and the contest for the Democratic nomination ended on June 7, 2008, when Clinton officially conceded the race.

McCain, who ran against George W. Bush in 2000, was an early frontrunner in the Republican race for the nomination. Though in 2000, McCain had campaigned as a "Maverick," he "began a deliberate campaign in early 2007 to embrace Republican leaders, notably President Bush, and leaders of the religious right."[22] Republicans were shopping around for alternatives and the McCain campaign ran out of money in the summer of 2007, opening the door for other Republican candidates.[23] These candidates, however, could not jumpstart their campaigns either. Former mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani and former Tennessee senator Fred Thompson generated initial media attention and public interest, but their campaigns failed to convert this name recognition into broader opportunity, and ultimately they dropped out of the race.[24] Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee, who built support from within the Republican base, failed to gain it from Republican voters who identified as part of "the religious right."[25] When Giuliani, Thompson, Romney, and Huckabee failed, "McCain—a tenacious contender with a strong personality, a compelling personal life story, the understanding of presidential election campaigns, skills developed from his 2000 White House bid, and … the most favorable press coverage of any Republican candidate in a half century" moved in "to fill

the void."[26] As the primary season began and the votes actually began to be counted, McCain gained momentum in New Hampshire and moved on to victory as other competitors continued to drop out of the race or split the Republican base.[27] By March 4, 2008, Senator John McCain passed the 1,191 delegate threshold, thus assuring himself of the Republican nomination.

Though official announcements would not be made until the party conventions, both Obama and McCain earned their nominations by the time primaries ended on June 3.[28] The first full week of the general election then began, as candidates started "an intense fight over the economy and the Iraq war."[29] Though McCain had been attempting to frame the campaign in terms of national security and the Iraq war, "Obama opened a two-week tour of battleground states," where he sought to make the economy "the central theme of the general election campaign."[30] According to the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, stories about the 2008 presidential campaign constituted 24% of the "newshole" during that week, dominating every media sector except for network television from June 9 to June 15.[31] Although these stories remained dominant, overall campaign coverage was at the second-lowest total of all 2008. When it comes to coverage of individual candidates, Obama "topped" McCain's exposure, appearing "as a significant or dominant newsmaker in 77% of the week's campaign stories compared with 55% for the GOP candidate."[32] However, much of Obama's advantage can be attributed to higher coverage in terms of "campaign controversies and gaffes." These statistics indicate there was considerable public attention to the campaign. In particular, it is important to note that though the media focused on Obama, they mostly discussed his flaws and mistakes, rather than providing positive coverage in the run-up to

his acceptance of the nomination. In this sense, Obama faced a larger challenge than McCain.

Republicans, however, faced the difficult task of remaining partisan at a time when "Republican fortunes appeared to be at a distinctly low ebb."[33] Not only were Democrats looking for change, but Republicans were also searching for a new and revitalized direction for the party. McCain would have to cater to Independents and Democrats who were tired of Republican leadership, as well as Republican voters who remained partisan, but also wanted to rebrand. In terms of public opinion, Stanley Renshon in *Political Science Quarterly,* "unequivocally" argued that the mood in the country was "deeply dour" with "82 percent of a national sample of respondents" stating "that the country was going in the wrong direction."[34]

It is almost conventional wisdom that an "outgoing president nearly always defines the next election," and 2008 was no different as people sought "a replacement, someone who represented different qualities."[35] It was obvious "voters of all political backgrounds were signaling they wanted change."[36] As the campaign went on "the issue that would seem most determinative of the presidential election outcome changed several times," but this change theme remained constant throughout.[37] It is in this context that McCain and Obama would officially accept their parties' nominations for the presidency.

The Democratic National Convention occurred first, with Obama accepting the presidential nomination on August 28, 2008.[38] Obama faced a two-fold challenge; to unify the Democratic party after a long and contentious primary battle, and to "reassure voters still harboring doubts about him, make them feel comfortable about him as commander in chief of a country in deep trouble, and deliver the strongest, most forceful

case against George W. Bush . . . and particularly against John McCain."[39] Obama

marshaled his change theme to meet this challenge. Throughout his acceptance speech, he

defined change as a historically American process of stepping up during defining

moments to make hard choices that ensure American promises are kept. In other words,

change is not really "change"; rather it is bending the arc of history back towards what

Obama terms as the original American promises of freedom and prosperity. Obama's

speech was well-received, "he went in to the convention tied with McCain on 45 percent

support but finished 49-43 ahead."[40] These statistics indicate that at a minimum, Obama's

strategy was able to at least energize his supporters enough to provide the traditional

convention bounce.

McCain accepted the Republican nomination a week later, on September 4, using the

opportunity to attempt to "rewrite the terms of the change debate."[41] Although McCain

initially developed a "Country First" theme, he chose to "compete with Obama for the

mantle of 'change' candidate" and used the Republican Convention to "reboot" his

campaign, thus "fundamentally" changing its direction.[42] McCain defined change in

individualist and combative terms, arguing that we should not look back at history to

determine the course of change, but rather move forward, arguing and resolving our

differences, and fighting for what we believe is right. In changing his campaign theme to

meet Obama's framing, McCain defied the conventional political wisdom of White

House veterans such as Jennifer Palmieri, "that it is best to run your own race. Pick your

message, and stick with it."[43] Despite this, he enjoyed "a bounce of six points, and so the

Republican candidate ended his convention leading Obama 49-44 points, having trailed

43-49 at its start."[44] Though it is impossible to know from these figures whether the boost

was because of McCain's address or other factors at the convention, it is clear that the entire strategy rested on the campaign's decision to compete with Obama for the parts of the electorate demanding change.

At this point in the general election, voters faced a definitional argument: "what really constitutes change? Will it be the candidate who is more of a maverick or the one who is more different from Bush?"[45] The answer is clear, as Obama capitalized best upon the need for change and "established himself as the most impressive vote-getter of the new millennium."[46] Obama won the election, overcoming huge obstacles in the process. At the same time, McCain's candidacy and his ability to challenge Obama were surprising in and of themselves. The electoral contest began in earnest once each candidate amassed enough delegates mathematically to wrap up the nomination, setting the stage for each candidate's acceptance speech at the party convention. Due to this set-up, both candidates faced similar challenges in the run-up to their respective national conventions. Obama and McCain both needed to define themselves as credible agents of change who could respond to the problems of the status quo, thus presenting a useful opportunity for the further study of presidential campaign rhetoric. In particular, the case study may tell us something useful about "what makes one definition of the situation more effective than another," thus engaging in one type of rhetorical research suggested by David Zarefsky in a keynote address at the National Communication Association meeting in 1997.[47]

Statement of Purpose

This project seeks to understand the strategy employed by presidential candidates from the two major political parties to frame their election as the "change" desired by

American voters in 2008. The analysis explains how Obama and McCain defined

themselves as credible agents of change, and to account for the choices made in rhetorical

language. More specifically, I study the way Barack Obama and John McCain used their

nomination acceptance speeches to kick-off the general election in a way that motivated

voters in a society with consistently low voter turn-out.[48] The following section explains

the method of investigation and supporting literature.

Method of Investigation

Both the McCain and Obama speeches are examples of political rhetoric, specifically

acceptance speeches at national party conventions. They were selected because they

occurred at the official start of the general election and at very similar events within one

week of each other. Although the immediate audience, Republicans or Democrats

differed, both speakers had to deal with the consequences of immediate broadcasting by a

variety of networks. Additionally, both speakers highlighted the theme of "change," thus

presenting a unique opportunity to compare how two presidential campaign rhetors

competed to fulfill a popular demand. Thus, this study examines nomination acceptance

speeches at national party conventions as a case study in presidential campaign rhetoric.

The research approach taken to each candidate's address is a comparative analysis,

supported by the literature which explains how one can find meaning in convention

speeches as well as theories of how speakers utilize framing as a strategy. This section

summarizes the existing research on convention speeches and further explains the

analytical framework.

Communication scholars have extensively studied convention speeches, thus providing a solid base of literature about this particular type of rhetoric. The party conventions used to be important decision-making events, actually nominating the presidential and vice-presidential candidates for each party. Due to changes in the electoral process, however, this historical function no longer exists. Today's conventions are scripted media events and Roderick P. Hart contends that "the acceptance address now constitutes the only passably climactic moment in an otherwise predictable affair."[49] Even these speeches are characterized as "often dreary intellectually, dull televisually, and predictable politically," thus posing a significant question, "why bother with them?"[50] Scholars attempting to answer this question have distinguished between the instrumental and consummatory functions of presidential campaign rhetoric, specifically discussing the value of nomination acceptance speeches. The "instrumental" functions are defined as "*realpolitik*" goals, for example, behavioral activation.[51] In contrast, the "consummatory" functions are defined as "second-level or meta-political images, personae, myths, associations, and social-psychological reactions."[52] These examples all refer to the larger effects of political rhetoric, those which may occur even if political language is not instrumentally successful. Scholars choosing to focus on the consummatory aspect of political rhetoric, Bruce Gronbeck and Arthur Miller contend, "treat the political campaign and election as an enlarged process of social construction."[53] Rhetorical critics using this method have been able to find new value in the genre, though "it would take a tome to explain why political language is so reviled."[54]

Though convention speeches no longer serve the instrumental purpose of candidate selection, they still "try to inspire political imagination, to get the party faithful to

envision a broader, brighter, grander set of possibilities."[55] The acceptance of the

presidential nomination by each party's candidate is the capstone of the convention. On

one hand, the speaker fulfills a ceremonial purpose by dutifully accepting the party

nomination, thus concluding the convention. On the other hand, the speaker is also

launching a national campaign. Thus, "the acceptance speech is one part ceremony and

the other part stump speech. It is a rhetorical hybrid."[56] One telling piece of evidence is

that "acceptances contain significantly more [a]mbivalence than inaugurals, but

significantly less than stump speeches."[57] Speakers cannot be as strident as when on the

campaign trail in one specific geographic location, nor can they be as vague as if they had

already won the election. Acceptance speeches are thus characterized by "a much broader

agenda than is possible on the campaign trail .… [T]he speaker is more likely to roam

across a broader set of topics, maximizing political spaces available on such occasions,"

using "a mélange of symbols."[58] These speakers talk about more issues using diverse

language, yet they still remain ambivalent in some ways so as not to alienate too many

potential voters at the outset of the general election. Acceptance speeches have grown to

this form because they "must appeal, simultaneously, to the faithful and to the merely

curious, because it must preach and also sell" to create "a picture-hungry audience."[59]

Furthermore, "The American people hear this story every four years."[60] Consequently,

nomination acceptance speeches can often seem trite and full of platitudes, and thus they

are generally criticized on these grounds.

Despite these criticisms, the potential remains that a lot of meaning is packed behind

the recurring rhetoric of nomination acceptance speeches. Hart further explains that "the

modern acceptance address is a political homunculus, a miniature version of the stresses

and strains now besetting mainstream American politics."[61] Significantly, political language not only reflects reality, it also has the potential to create it. Multiple levels of research surrounding these social construction aspects of campaign rhetoric exist. In particular, "one important center for symbolic activity" is candidates' use of "campaign events and messages" to define themselves, "their opponents, the citizenry and its role in a free society, and American society itself."[62] This avenue of research points to rhetoric's role in the construction of a speaker, context, and audience.

This project thus supports Hart, Jarvis, and Lim's proposition that "an electorate is not a stable, ontological entity but one 'summoned up' periodically by political actors who define it in order to control it."[63] This can be considered a distinct type of rhetoric, as Hart elaborates "this was not a matter of changing minds or behaviors, as traditional rhetorical studies of effect might put it; it was a matter of evoking reciprocal identities rhetorically."[64] According to this "representational model of rhetorical process, rhetors, audiences, and even those talked about are constituted, that is given image, contour, and power, through public discourse. Identities are made and remade through signifying practices."[65] Thus, some of the value of political language lies not in its direct political effects such as voting behaviors, but rather in its power to influence the audience's very sense of identity. Distinct from traditional persuasive rhetoric which seeks a direct effect, this is an example of what Maurice Charland terms "constituitive rhetoric," or speech which "positions the reader towards political, social, and economic action in the material world."[66]

The study of constituitive rhetoric is a different way of studying the effect a speech can have. I do not mean to study "effect" in traditional political science terms, as

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Obama's impressive vote-winning records already speak for themselves. Rather, I seek "to understand *effectivity* – the power to influence others concretely … how language affects the self-identities of individuals and their relationships with others."[67] This is an aspect of social criticism, a method which Sillars and Gronbeck explain is used to study "how human beings use and manipulate languages … to affect the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of other people."[68]   In other words, I do not seek to understand the direct political effect of Obama and McCain's rhetoric; I want to understand its role in a larger process of social construction.

Many types of rhetoric can be termed "constituitive," but this research endeavor chooses to study the case of persuasive definitions in particular. This approach is "grounded in an argumentative perspective that seeks to account for the influence that arguments based on definition(s) exert in a given discursive milieu," though philosophers have traditionally studied definitions as metaphysical or ontological questions.[69] For example, the Greeks did not even have a word for definition, but their extant works reveal that they used ideas such as "the Forms" and also tried to define words according either to "*a fact of essence*" or to a "*fact of usage.*"[70] These scholars were "asking for a real definition: statements that identify what X necessarily *is*," metaphysically or ontologically speaking, and the focus would remain the same for centuries.[71] In 1938, American analytic philosopher Charles Stevenson "first began the systematic study of [definitions] as tools of persuasion."[72] Since then the study of definition has produced the generally accepted notion that "the act of defining words is a culturally-variable linguistic practice that has evolved over time."[73] Consequently, research on definitional practice

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has unfolded as a series of case studies on a variety of topics approached from a variety of perspectives.

Specifically, "definitional argument is a mode of rhetorical inquiry that investigates how particular definitions are wielded to control, redirect, undermine, validate, support, qualify, or otherwise influence the development and suasiveness of specific arguments."[74] Some studies in this field look at how definitions can be "deployed persuasively" or "may be stipulated in order to delimit argumentation."[75] This research usually identifies, and then classifies a definitional shift.[76] Most of this research depends on a constructivist perspective, meaning that "whether or not they believe in a material reality that exists outside language, [they] maintain that our perceptions of reality, and certainly our ethical assessments of reality, are influenced by the words we use and the definitions we attribute to those words."[77] This "turn to constructivism" is particularly beneficial for the study of definition, for if

> even definitions cannot be anchored in the material world or transcendent truths in any permanent way .… [A]ll that we can do is to study how definitions are created, transformed, and discredited, as measured by intersubjective agreement among interlocutors in a specific discursive community, where intersubjectivity emphasizes the social dimension to the rhetorical construction of reality.[78]

The constructivist approach is then considered "the best available choice" because it encourages communication scholars to see how persuasive definitions are "extremely powerful and significant argumentation tactics in legal and political argumentation with highly significant financial implications at all levels of government and at all levels in the

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justice system."[79] Research continues to evolve, moving from simply identifying a definitional shift to understanding the process and the impact of definitional argument.

The power of definition has been attributed to the ability to present a frame through which the audience is asked to evaluate rhetors' competing claims. Definitions can be considered the quintessential example of framing because the very "act of definition isolates what might at the moment seem to be particularly important ideas or attributes of a concept."[80] Definitions do not just neutrally tell us of a word's meaning; rather, "definitions 'fix' or 'freeze' language in order to function as a sort of road map demarcating what words mean."[81] When we "define problems" we also "determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values."[82] As described by Robert Entman, the first function of framing is problem definition because "the frame determines whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it."[83]

The theory of framing, "unlike many more esoteric research concepts, has gained remarkable popularity in both the scholarly literature and the public imagination . . . . [P]eople intuitively grasp what it conveys."[84] As a result, framing is often considered an abstract and amorphous concept used by a variety of fields. Despite this diversity, two works are considered seminal to studies of framing in any field. The oldest "roots of framing theory" are in the conference paper, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," delivered in 1955 to the American Psychiatric Association by anthropologist and psychologist Gregory Bateson, where he argued that a statement such as "this is play" provides a "frame" for a conversation because it structures the way anything after the statement is

perceived.[85] When understood as "play," what would normally be considered an insult might be considered a joke, or a mean trick might be considered a simple prank. In other words, a statement's meaning would change according to the frame by which it is understood. As essential as this basic premise is to the broader study of framing, Bateson's conclusions about frames remained limited because they were secondary to his study of "playful human interaction" and were mostly about the psychological aspects of frames.[86]

Bateson's work was further developed in Erving Goffman's 1974 *Frame Analysis*. This work has been said to be the "seminal" work on framing and "a new orthodoxy" for some researchers.[87] Though frames had been discussed tangentially to other studies, this was the first attempt to expand and systematize a theory of framing. Goffman argued that frames were "sets of organizational premises about an activity, sustained both in mind and in activity."[88] These frames provided a "laminate" over "an unkeyed 'core' of wholly untransformed reality" and could be naturally existent, socially fabricated, and even manipulated by those wanting to induce false beliefs.[89] Though academic reviews of his work were "scarce" at the time, it was reviewed by more popular outlets such as the *New York Times* and *Time*.[90] Goffman's *Frame Analysis* eventually would be utilized in multiple academic fields, and today "is no longer *Goffman's* frame analysis, but is frequently only loosely connected to the original formulation."[91]

The "unorthodox appropriation by scholars from very different traditions" is considered "probably the single most important factor for the success of Goffman's frame analysis." Over time, the term framing "has been used repeatedly to label similar but distinctly different approaches."[92] Many interpretations and applications exist and will

continue to exist as some scholars argue that this diversity is necessary for framing theory to have any value at all.[93] This has made the development of a cohesive theory of framing difficult, so "despite its omnipresence across the social sciences and humanities, nowhere is there a general statement of framing theory that shows exactly how frames become embedded within and make themselves manifest in a text, or how framing influences thinking."[94] Research continues to explore the specific depth, breadth, and complexities of an elusive theory of framing; however, it is important to note that today the notion that frames can "affect the outcome of an issue" and "influence one's opinion" is readily accepted by a broad range of scholars.[95]

In communication studies, framing has been studied mostly by media scholars since Entman first proposed that "the discipline of communication might contribute something unique," by systematizing and synthesizing framing concepts and the ways "they invariably involve communication."[96] He argued that "framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text. Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness."[97] This research has been useful for the study of political communication, as political strategists themselves acknowledge their attempts to frame the debate in particular ways. This is particularly true in the McCain and Obama cases, as both candidates specified how they wanted to frame the presidential race. Entman himself justified framing as a research paradigm on the grounds that framing plays "a major role in the exertion of political power," thus building on mass communication literature on agenda-setting and priming.[98] The notion that "framing

shapes public dialogues about political issues" has been generally accepted, even by scholars with differing interpretations of the concept or associated research methods.[99]

Furthermore, framing research has been proven useful rhetorical study. As Gronbeck argues, along with the concept of framing, "we have the beginning of a poly-centered understanding of rhetorical inquiry, where so-called theory is mobile because rhetoric can be examined from many directions or positions - many perspectives, many frames."[100] Undertaken from a rhetorical perspective, frames allow a critic to explain both what a speaker attempts to make salient, as well as how the audience processes that message. Thus, framing might be just another name for strategic tactics that have always been employed in communication, but the prevalence of research on the theory and its political implications make it a worthwhile subject of study.

Using definitional argument to frame the debate in a particular way is not enough; candidates must be able to translate a persuasive message into actual votes in order to win an election. Providing a definition of a situation is not enough, speakers must also motivate the audience to act if they wish their message to have an effect. Thus, a final analytical tool is necessary. One proven strategy for translating a frame into action is the "collective action frame," first studied comprehensively by William A. Gamson.[101]

Collective action frames are usually used by scholars of social movements in a variety of areas, but all "offer ways of understanding that imply the need for and desirability of some form of action."[102] Though Obama's campaign was not a social movement proper, his "formative experience as an organizer has seemed to carry through to his presidential campaign, which has hired more organizers and invested more in grassroots activity than any campaign in recent memory."[103] Additionally, his run for the

presidency has publically been discussed as "unexpectedly refreshing," particularly because it was considered a "grass-roots initiative of citizens in a threateningly powerful nation, bearing witness to their responsibility in the eyes of a global public sphere, who have found their own visibility in and through the campaign of Barack Obama."[104] These factors merit the application of collective action framing to Obama's campaign rhetoric. Though the same may not be said directly about the McCain campaign, application of the collective action framing scheme can help reveal why his rhetoric ultimately failed in comparison to Obama's, and thus more about how these types of rhetors attempt to motivate action.

Studies of definitional argument, framing, and presidential campaigns are clearly related, with various articles even discussing the relationship between definitional argument and framing or framing and presidential campaigns, but research on political rhetoric has not explicitly combined all three strands of literature. In this context, the cases of Obama and McCain as rhetors in a presidential campaign seeking to make an argument about the definition of change in order to frame the debate presents a useful and unique opportunity to study the interrelations between these distinct types of research and reveal something useful about political rhetoric. In particular, the project explores how candidates use rhetorical definition as a strategy to frame their campaigns, their opponents, and American society itself. Most basically, I explain and account for how two presidential campaign speakers utilized definitions and framing as a strategy to adapt to the audience's demand for change. Thus, the rest of this chapter explains the plan of development for this project.

Chapter Preview

Following is a preview of the project's remaining three chapters.

Chapter two, Defining Change, investigates how Obama campaigned for the Democratic nomination and the particular political situation he faced in the run-up to his acceptance of the nomination. Attention then turns to the analysis of the response Obama gave in his nomination acceptance speech, and how this rhetoric positioned the audience for political action.[105]

Chapter three, Redefining Change, investigates how McCain campaigned for the Republican nomination and the particular political situation he faced after Obama's acceptance of the nomination and the Palin announcement leading up to his own nomination acceptance speech. Following, the chapter turns to analysis of McCain's acceptance of the nomination and how this rhetoric attempted to position the audience for political action.[106]A study of his speech presents a useful counterpoint helpful in further understanding Obama's speech.

The final chapter summarizes the project's goals as well as its findings before suggesting implications for future research.

Notes

[1] Dennis W. Johnson, "Ten Plays That Won (and Lost) the Presidency, McCain: Strategies and Tactics in the General Election," in *Campaigning for President 2008*, ed. Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

[2] Johnson, "Ten Plays," 231.

[3] James W. Ceaser, Andrew E. Busch, and John J. Pitney, Jr., *Epic Journey* (Boulder: Rowman & Littleton Publishers, Inc., 2009), 90.

[4] The Economist, "Obama's Historic Victory," ¶ 1, November 4, 2008, http://www.economist.com/research/articlesBySubject/displaystory.cfm?subjectid=9139211&story_id=E1_TNVQQGSR.

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CHAPTER 2

DEFINING CHANGE

Barack Obama overcame numerous obstacles to win his party's nomination for the

presidency and then the general election itself by capitalizing on the American

electorate's desire for change.[1] In doing so, he distinguished himself by an impressive

ability to generate political involvement.[2] This poses questions regarding rhetoric's role

in political campaigns, particularly Obama's carefully chosen words as he launched the

general election phase of his run for the presidency at the 2008 Democratic National

Convention. Though nomination acceptance speeches are not usually considered the most

important aspects of presidential campaigns, scholars such as Roderick P. Hart, Dean of

the College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, and Bruce Gronbeck,

the A. Craig Beard Professor of Public Address at the University of Iowa, attest to the

various instrumental and consummatory values of such rhetoric.[3] These scholars have

analyzed nomination acceptance speeches to further the study of rhetorical strategy in the

context of presidential communication.

In the same vein, this chapter analyzes the rhetoric of "Change" in Barack Obama's

acceptance of the Democratic presidential nomination as an example of definitional

argument, in order to understand better the functions and limits of argument *by* definition

as a rhetorical strategy.[4] Specifically, the ways in which argument *by* definition allowed

Obama to frame the debate in terms of the George W. Bush administration's failures, and

also in terms of the American people's ability to move away from a failed form of

politics. Background information on the battle for the Democratic nomination and the

political climate leading up to the 2008 Democratic National Convention provides

important context for understanding Obama's strategy for launching his general election campaign.

Obama's Campaign for the Democratic Nomination

Obama rocketed onto the national political scene after delivering the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, a speech which made Obama a "national celebrity," even though he had not yet won his Illinois Senate race.[5] Soon there were rumors that he would run for the presidency in 2008, but Obama stated unequivocally that he would not run due to his lack of experience. He won his Senate race and went on a foreign tour before "his key group privately began giving serious consideration to a presidential run."[6] According to Dan Balz and Haynes Johnson, award-winning journalists who based their book, *Battle for America 2008,* on two years of reporting as well as exclusive interviews with the candidates and key staff members, Obama's top advisor, David Axelrod, prepared a private presidential strategy memo for Obama dated November 28, 2006.[7] Balz and Johnson explain that in "Axelrod's opinion, Obama's profile fit this historical moment. . . . Obama could spark a political movement and prevail against sizeable odds."[8] According to conventional political wisdom Obama should have waited to acquire more experience before running, but Axelrod argued that political inexperience could actually help him get elected, especially in a year when the electorate desired change.[9]

However, Obama was not ready to commit to a 2008 presidential run and called a press conference in Manchester, New Hampshire, stating that he "hadn't made a final decision about running," and that he "didn't believe ambition alone justified candidacy."

He also stated he believed the "hype" surrounding him was due to the American people's underlying desire for real change.[10] Ultimately, these types of statements indicated that Obama "sensed a possibility. . . . In this climate, his inexperience might actually be an asset at the polls."[11] Political scientists James W. Ceaser, Andrew E. Busch, and John J. Pitney, Jr. explain that as "a newcomer to Washington politics, [Obama] could run as a change agent not bound to the mistakes of the past."[12] On February 10, he announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination, becoming the last Democrat to do so, and marking the official beginning of Senator Barack Obama's historic campaign for the presidency.[13]

The general notion that "voters of all political backgrounds were signaling they wanted change" is well-documented, but Obama had to win the Democratic nomination before he could tap into this desire.[14] According to Balz and Johnson, Axelrod concluded that Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator John Edwards would be Obama's main opponents in a race to win the Democratic presidential nomination.[15] Ron Faucheux, of *Congressional Quarterly*, explains that "unprecedented fundraising . . . separated Clinton and Obama from the field, and in effect made them the 'two titans' of the race."[16] Clinton, of course, was the early frontrunner, considered the "inevitable" Democratic candidate "through most of 2007."[17] According to Faucheux, Clinton's strategy was built on her "cloak of inevitability," and she hoped "to ride her advantages as the race's early frontrunner through the primaries, to the Denver convention, and into November 2008, when her election would make history as that of the nation's first woman president."[18]

Obama, on the other hand, initially campaigned vaguely, using "a self-effacing introduction" and a message based on "a different kind of politics" and "the idea that we

are all connected as one people."[19] Though these themes had been successful in jump-starting the campaign, supporters needed something more tangible to show that Obama could beat Clinton in the Democratic race, or even a Republican in the general election.[20] Ceaser, Busch, and Pitney Jr. explain that "a potential threat to the theme of change was its very vagueness, opening it to the charge of being an abstract concept without substance."[21] Additionally, the "different kind of politics" message made it difficult for Obama to question Clinton's credentials without appearing to engage in traditional campaign smear tactics.[22] The message was too general, so Obama "faced a message challenge: he had to introduce himself, stay positive, and underscore doubts about Clinton."[23] At this point, Obama needed to hone his campaign. He decided to talk "about the unique promise his presidency could hold vis-à-vis Clinton's," and he introduced a new slogan, "Change We Can Believe In," on October 19, 2007.[24] This message fulfilled the campaign's strategic needs as it was "both positive about Obama and negative about Clinton"; it could also be tweaked for use in the general election, allowing the Obama campaign to continue using the "Change" theme it had introduced early on.[25] Thus from the start of his run for the presidency, "Obama worked successfully to establish his basic themes of hope and change."[26] Though these themes would continue to develop as the campaign went on, their basic meaning was clearly outlined early on.

Although eventually Hillary Clinton and John McCain would challenge Obama's claim to be the "Change" candidate, he was the first to articulate the theme.[27] Over the course of his campaign, he used his oratorical skill to deliver speeches which progressively defined "Change" as a historically American process, arguing that citizens needed to step up during defining moments to make hard choices to fulfill classically

American promises.[28] According to media sources such as Chuck Todd, Political Director of NBC News, and Sheldon Gawiser, Elections Director of NBC News, these speeches were "the key to his campaign," allowing Obama to develop the "Change" message.[29] Political scientists agree that from his impressive introduction onto the national stage of American politics, Obama would go on to "almost exclusively . . . frame the race" through his use of the change theme.[30]

Todd and Gawiser confirm that Obama's campaign used "hope" and "change" consistently, clearly outlining "the organizing principle for that candidacy via his announcement speech," something which both Clinton and McCain failed to do until later in their campaigns.[31] Poll data indicate Obama's use of the change theme was "magic," with 34% of voters naming "change" as the most important "candidate quality" and nine out of ten of those voters preferring Obama.[32] Obama also won 69% of new voters in the 2008 election and there was an increase in the number of Independents and Republican defections.[33] He broke voter records and "established himself as the most impressive vote-getter of the new millennium."[34] Though his rhetoric is not the only reason voters turned out, this type of data indicates that Obama's words resonated with the voting public who desired "Change." Robert L. Ivie, professor of Rhetoric and Public Culture at Indiana University, and Oscar Giner from Arizona State University, note the same phenomenon, writing that "the mythos of the campaign energized a disaffected electorate and elevated the national élan with the spirit of democracy."[35] In short, Obama's campaign succeeded, at least in part, because it won over voters who wanted change, thus capitalizing on the political environment of the time and forcing his opponents to respond to the debate on his terms.

Though Obama had a powerful and persuasive message, as evidenced by the strong following he drew, the battle for the Democratic nomination would be long and hard-fought. Recent amendments to the rules governing the Democratic nominating process meant that "the road to the nomination would be long and winding, and not the short sprint that the most recent nominees, from Bill Clinton through John Kerry, had navigated."[36] In 2008, the Democratic Party would not use the "winner-take-all" method in primary elections, but instead would use proportional representation. This meant that if Obama and Hillary Clinton could stay competitive, it would ensure a long drawn out race.[37] Obama and Clinton did compete in each state because of "their individual appeal to different parts of the Democratic voting base."[38] This meant that neither candidate could amass enough delegates for the nomination early on, so the contest continued as a "war of attrition."[39] Momentum "ebbed and flowed" and "the [b]attle between Clinton and Obama would continue into June."[40]

Significantly, Obama had "effectively won" the Democratic nomination by the Wisconsin primary on February 19, but Clinton refused to give up campaigning as Obama continued to pursue delegates, stating her campaign would "take the contest all the way to Denver."[41] On June 3, 2008, on the last night of the Democratic primaries, Obama "declared himself the Democratic nominee," though Clinton would not officially concede the race until four days later, on June 7.[42] Though Obama had won the nomination, it was by a very close delegate margin and he had angered Clinton supporters by presumptively declaring himself the Democratic nominee, thus sparking fears that Democrats would vote Republican in the general election.[43] Clinton threw her support behind Obama, stating so in her concession speech. However, according to

Andrew Wroe, Lecturer on American Politics at the University of Kent, this could not change the fact that "Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton fought tooth and nail in the closest primary race in memory, setting the stage for a tense, emotional, and potentially self-destructive Democratic convention in late August."[44]

In addition to creating some problems for the Democratic convention, the drawn out primary gave Republicans useful fodder and time to attack Obama. At this point, Republicans were "enjoying a free ride while Obama and Clinton were damaging each other and the party's chances in November."[45] Because Obama had mathematically wrapped up the nomination by February 19, Republicans knew they were not just competing with the generic Democrats; they were competing against a specific candidate with a more specific set of potential liabilities. Charles E. Cook, Jr., political analyst for NBC News and writer for the *Congressional Quarterly*, argues that Republicans had "little doubt that the conditions were ripe for a Democratic win," so they focused on the question of "whether they were ripe for an Obama win."[46] Thus, McCain started a negative ad campaign against Obama in July.[47] Jennifer Palmieri, an eight-year veteran of the Clinton White House and former press secretary for the Democratic National Committee, explains the Republicans' "two major lines of attack"–that Obama was not ready to be the commander-in-chief and that he was an elitist and therefore "not truly American."[48] She further notes that at this point, "Obama was not in serious trouble; he still led in the polls … McCain was making headway with this line of attack, and it needed to be contained."[49] Due to these events Obama "faced two great tests" in the run-up to the 2008 Democratic National Convention, convincingly introducing himself to

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voters who wanted change, and resolving questions about his ability to lead the country as commander-in-chief.[50]

The 2008 Democratic National Convention

The onslaught of Republican attacks and Democratic divisions made the 2008 Democratic National Convention "among the most eagerly anticipated in U.S. electoral history."[51] The 2008 convention was held August 25-28 at the Pepsi Center in Denver, Colorado.[52] According to David Plouffe, Obama's chief campaign manager, there were four "straightforward" goals for the convention–to close the "fractured Democrats" story line, to introduce Obama to the millions of Americans who still did not know him, to lay out the case against McCain, and to strengthen the Colorado campaign.[53] To that end, Senator Ted Kennedy began the convention by delivering a speech which sent a "signal that Obama was about to inherit the Kennedy family legacy."[54] Michelle Obama also "delivered an absolute gem" of a speech, aimed at helping voters perceive Barack Obama's "promise to try to improve their lives" as "more tangible and real."[55] Though these remarks are from Obama's campaign manager, they clearly indicate the campaign's goals were to present a unified vision of Obama as a candidate.

The next day's keynote was delivered by Hillary Clinton. Balz and Johnson commend her address, writing that "whatever resentment or recrimination remained from the long primary battles, however deep her supporters' disappointment at her not being picked as Obama's vice president, everyone watching had to know she was a team player."[56] The next afternoon, Senator Clinton "had one more dramatic role to play. . . . She moved that the convention stop the roll call and nominate Obama by acclamation," something the

Obama camp had asked her to do.[57] That night, her husband, former president Bill

Clinton "reiterated his wife's call for unity, set out his support for Obama, and attacked

President Bush and McCain ferociously."[58] Thus, the Clinton's worked to help Obama

show America that Democrats were united.

According to the Obama campaign, the Clinton speeches were "all we could have

asked for."[59] Balz and Johnson provide the media perspective, writing that from

Kennedy's symbolic passing of the Democratic torch, to Michelle Obama's

personalization of Obama, and finally to the Clintons' resounding endorsement, the

collection of speeches, "set the stage for Obama. . . . [T]hey presented the gift of a unified

Democratic Party. Now it was up to him to deliver."[60] Going into Obama's acceptance

speech, his strategists reevaluated their goals and laid out "three major imperatives" for

Thursday night's speech: build on family and values, lay out what Obama would do as

president, and launch a tough critique of McCain.[61] Though the preceding speeches

provided an adequate backdrop, Obama needed "to reassure voters still harboring doubts

about him, make them feel comfortable about him as commander in chief of a country in

deep trouble, and deliver the strongest, most forceful case" against the Republicans.[62]

Obama's Democratic nomination acceptance speech was thus "the most eagerly

awaited moment and the highlight of the convention," with 80,000 people in attendance

and a television audience of 38 million.[63] Plouffe wrote in his memoir that all of Obama's

strategists believed he "had just nailed it."[64] Obama's speech "finished with fireworks

lighting up the Colorado sky" and even John McCain released a congratulatory video.[65]

According to Wroe, the speech and the convention "were widely regarded as successes"

and Obama received the traditional "convention bounce."[66] Balz and Johnson report the

bounce put him "six points ahead" and energized the Democratic party.[67] These statistics indicate Obama met the challenges identified by Balz and Johnson; he introduced himself convincingly to voters who wanted change, helping to resolve their concerns about voting for an inexperienced political candidate at a perilous time in American history. These citizens voiced support for Obama in the polls in the hours following the speech, eventually turning up at voting booths in November.[68]

Not only did Obama's message resonate with Americans who wanted change, it also met his strategists' goals: to build on American values, answer questions about what an Obama presidency would look like, and launch an attack on McCain's candidacy. Thus, Obama delivered a well-crafted argument about the definition of change that met the argumentative challenges posed by the situation. Although it is impossible to attribute Obama's victory to his rhetoric, the acceptance of the nomination established the theme of "Change" voters desired and ultimately resonated with the public.[69] The consistency of Obama's themes and arguments from 2004 until the time he was elected has been thoroughly documented by others studying rhetoric.[70] Thus, it is important to understand not only Obama's argumentative purpose, but also how that purpose helped inspire citizens to political action. A two-part analytical scheme is used here to explain Obama's rhetorical strategy. The key elements, definitional argument and collective action framing, are explicated in the following section before moving to analysis of the text.

Framework for Analysis

The structure of Obama's convention speech can be described as having three parts, beginning with a traditional introduction, followed by a definition of the problem, and

concluding with a definition of "Change."[71] One significant aspect of the address

highlighted in this project is that the argumentative step remains unacknowledged by

Obama himself. This is the main characteristic of argument *by* definition, a type of

argumentation where, as David Zarefsky explains "the key definitional move is simply

stipulated, as if it were a natural step along the way of justifying some other claim."[72] In

other words, the argument is made with no acknowledgment that an argument is being

advanced. Thus, when Obama defines the problem and solution, he offers what Edward

Schiappa maintains are "descriptions that function strategically by redefining phenomena

without acknowledging that a redefinition is taking place and a new point of view is

being promoted."[73] According to Schiappa, this strategy usually allows the advancement

of "an advocate's values and beliefs without the advocate having to defend such values

and beliefs explicitly."[74] In this context, Obama's definitions are not mundane or

objective; rather they serve an argumentative purpose and should be acknowledged and

analyzed as such. Consequently, the first task in analyzing Obama's speech is to

understand its strategic functions as an example of argument *by* definition. Before

moving on to the second component of the chosen analytical scheme, it is important to

build a theoretical foundation for the next section's claims about definitional argument.

Zarefsky explains that definitional arguments are "disputes centered on questions of

meaning or interpretation."[75] In the Obama case, the dispute is about the meaning of

change. According to both Zarefsky and Schiappa, these disputes can be understood or

classified as arguments *about*, *from*, or *by* definition. The first type, argument *about*

definition, argues for a particular definition for a term based on the question "What is

X?"[76] According to Schiappa, these usually occur in "academic, public policy, and legal settings," when "novel definitions are set forth and debated formally and explicitly."[77]

The second and third types, arguments *from* and *by* definition, are disputes where "a definition of X is generally shared and accepted by interlocutors and the debate turns on whether or not a particular event or phenomenon should or should not be understood as an instance of X."[78] Zarefsky notes that although they are similar, it is important to distinguish between arguments *from* and *by* definition. According to him, arguments *from* definition "reason from a premise about the nature of a thing," constructing a syllogism.[79] In contrast, arguments *by* definition occur when the definition is used for argumentative purposes with no acknowledgment of this new persuasive function.

Argument *by* definition, the third type of definitional argument, is a particularly useful strategy for rhetors in situations like Obama's. Brian McGee explains "the argument by definition is employed when a controversial definition is advanced in support of a claim for purposes of framing that claim to the advantage of the rhetor."[80] In Obama's case, this type of argumentation could be useful because though he was well-suited to capitalize on the country's general desire for change, his newness to politics also generated many concerns about his ability to lead the country. Additionally, "Obama strategists viewed McCain as the one Republican with the potential to steal the 'anti-Washington' message that had been used effectively by Obama during the Democratic primaries."[81] Obama faced the risk that McCain could steal his theme, so he needed to define change in a way suitable to him, while offering a definition that McCain could not co-opt. In this context, argument by definition provides a useful lens for understanding how Obama attempted to define McCain as an extension of the Bush administration,

"change" as broader than "not Bush," and the act of voting for Obama as the full embodiment of "change." These three claims may seem incompatible with each other, but Obama was able to advance all three lines of argument through the use of a definition. It is precisely because of this that definitional argument is a useful device for an analysis of his rhetoric. The use of this analytical tool to study the text reveals how Obama could advance a notion of change which rejected traditional politics, and thus McCain, without appearing too radical to be elected and without having to defend the implications of his argument.

Though definitional argument provided a solid case for Obama's candidacy, his convention speech also sought to mobilize voters to action. Thus, the second task of this project is accounting for how Obama's definition of change framed the debate in a way which generated political participation. Just as theories on definitional argument are useful in understanding how Obama's definitions fulfill an argumentative purpose, a second tool is necessary to further an understanding of how he motivated voters in a politically apathetic climate.[82] One heuristic device, the "collective action frame" first comprehensively studied by William A. Gamson, a Professor of Sociology at Boston College, is particularly useful in understanding the phenomenon of translating a frame into action.[83]

Theories of collective action framing are generally used by scholars to understand how social movements "offer ways of understanding that imply the need for and desirability of some form of action."[84] During his run for the presidency, Obama officially acted as a presidential candidate, not as the leader of a social movement, yet the way his experience as a community organizer in Chicago carried through to this

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campaign has been thoroughly documented by news and academic sources alike. [85] The Obama campaign itself has stated how integral a grassroots approach was to success.[86] These factors merit the application of collective action framing theories in conjunction with definitional argument, to provide at least one plausible explanation for the impact of Obama's campaign.

Collective action frames are used to study movements which "involve initiatives for social change that occur at a societal level, mobilizations" that "depend on individuals developing a sense of commitment and a feeling of solidarity with others they may not know."[87] Collective action frames are used in these situations to persuade audience members to act together for some particular cause. They are an important type of "motivational framing" used to overcome the natural problems a campaign faces with translating emotion to action.[88] They are also used to overcome "ideological problems" or opposition.[89] This type of framing could have been useful to Obama, who needed to translate hype to votes and overcome the political predisposition towards experienced candidates with a quantifiable track record. Thus, Obama's rhetoric is most like that of "structural innovators in organizational fields," when they "behave like social movement leaders" to "mobilize participants in the face of competition from established organizational forms," further justifying the use of collective action framing theory to understand the motivational power of the text.[90] In particular, the application of the theory to this case can help illuminate the ways definitional argument can be used by presidential candidates to solicit political action, especially when an individual faces problems building their credibility or attempts to challenge established practices.

Obama's address reflects the main tenet of collective action frame theory, which holds that "social movements are more successful when leaders are able to diagnose a cause to a problem, provide solutions that flow from the cause, and develop motivational language that incites action."[91] Gamson identifies three components in collective action frames. First, "the *injustice component* refers to the moral indignation expressed."[92] Second, "the *agency component* refers to the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action."[93] Third, "the *identity component* refers to the process of defining this 'we,' typically in opposition to some 'they' who have different interests or values."[94] According to Gamson, these "core-framing tasks inspire activism by generating and sustaining an identity among participants that corresponds with a collection-action frame."[95] Thus, though "the identity and the agency components can be distinguished for heuristic reasons," the two are interrelated because how people recognize "themselves as affiliated with a larger collective (the identity component) is embedded in their hopes and visions of what may constitute effective social action (the agency component)."[96] As will be demonstrated shortly, this scheme is applicable to Obama's speech, where he defines a problem or an injustice before moving on to describe the corresponding identity and agency required for the solution.

Gamson argues the injustice component is the most strategic element of collective action framing because it "facilitates the adoption of other elements" such as identity and agency.[97] According to him, the injustice part of the speech explains "how the indignities of daily life are sometimes transformed into a shared grievance with a focused target of collective action."[98] Thus, the moral indignation expressed by the speaker seeks to define the identity of the audience and their agency according to their desire to change a

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particular circumstance. According to Gamson, this "is the key to integrating the three elements into a single collective action frame."[99] Thus, a speaker's rhetoric about a group's situation articulates a shared problem to elicit a desired solution, without ever having explicitly to state an argument. Applying this model to the Obama case in the next section reveals that he defined the situation at hand as a violation of the American promise to posit the solution as citizens themselves, thus diverting attention from his qualifications and towards the voters' sense of identity and agency. By defining the problem as one of the citizenry, he made the election a question of the audience's identity and agency, not his own, thus reframing it.

Together, theories of definitional argument and collective action framing help reveal how Obama made the argument that he was a credible agent of change. It is important to note that although the two components of analysis are distinguished here for the purposes of conceptual clarity, the two tasks are intermixed. By studying the use of definition as a framing strategy and in terms of its ability to motivate action, this project aims to shed light on Obama's rhetorical choices. Thus, in the next section, both definitional argument and collective action framing are used to explore the functions and limits of this rhetorical strategy.

Obama and "The American Promise"

Close textual analysis reveals that Obama's argument regarding change is actually built around what he calls the "American promise" defined as the idea "that through hard work and sacrifice, each of us can pursue our individual dreams but still come together as one American family" (6).[100] The word "promise" is not only used over 30 times in the

text, but has also been singled out as a key term by scholars who write that the "rhetorical continuity of the campaign was evident in Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention when he spoke of change in terms of fulfilling America's promise at home and abroad—a promise of democracy that was both the nation's greatest inheritance and its destiny."[101] This section argues that Obama used this definition of the "American promise" to identify the political establishment as responsible for the hardships faced by citizens, thus winning the "Change" election by framing himself as the most appropriate and credible harbinger of new times to come.

In the introductory remarks, Obama accepts the nomination "[w]ith profound gratitude and humility" before thanking Senator Hillary Clinton, then her husband, former President Bill Clinton, and finally his own family, naming Michelle, Sasha, and Malia individually (2-4). After these words, Obama introduces himself, beginning with a reminder, "Four years ago, I stood before you and told you my story" (5). He defines this story as one of a "brief union between a young man from Kenya, and a young woman from Kansas who weren't well-off or well-known, but shared a belief that in America, their son could achieve whatever he put his mind to" (5). Right away, Obama moves to define such beliefs as quintessentially American, by stating "It is that promise that has always set this country apart" (6). In this way, Obama identified the "American promise" as a key theme within the first few minutes of beginning to speak.

Obama attributes his candidacy to this "promise," stating, "That's why I stand here tonight." (7). In doing so, Obama attempts to define his campaign in terms of America's ability to fulfill its historic pledge. The details of the definition remain nebulous, but the attribution of his candidacy to threats against the "American promise" assures an opening

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for Obama to define further the character of that promise and the people that ensure its continuity. Right away, he references the "ordinary men and women–students and soldiers, farmers and teachers, nurses and janitors" who responded when "that promise was in jeopardy" and who for "two hundred and thirty two years" have "found the courage to keep it alive" (7). Here the word "promise" is used as a way to define a corresponding identity; according to Obama, the "promise" is one of freedom and those who ensure it are characterized by courage in times of peril. The strategy is strategically nebulous, allowing listeners to mold the message to fit their personal frame of reference.

Having invoked the idea of an American spirit, Obama argues that just like Americans of old, today's citizens, himself included, meet at "one of those defining moments" because "the American promise has been threatened once more" (8). To prove this point, Obama lists mostly economic problems, stating "more Americans are out of work and more are working harder for less. More of you have lost your homes and even more are watching your home values plummet. More of you have cars you can't afford to drive, credit card bills you can't afford to pay, and tuition that's beyond your reach" (9). With no transition to speak of, Obama directly states that, "These challenges are not all of government's making. But the failure to respond is a direct result of the broken politics in Washington and the failed policies of George W. Bush" (10). Obama thus devotes the first ten paragraphs of his speech to a depiction of our fractious political system and the politicians who lead it as the problem. This is one particular function of problem definition, a practice which seeks "to explain, to describe, to recommend, and above all, to persuade" by gaining control of the definition of the problem at hand.[102] By first offering a key term such as "the American promise," then defining it in terms of personal

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characteristics such as "hard-work," "sacrifice," and "courage," Obama attempts to make the audience focus on their own identity. As such, this can be understood as a framing strategy used by Obama to focus on the George W. Bush administration's failures and the American people's identity.[103]

By specifying the problem as the loss of the American promise, Obama creates an opportunity to define a corresponding identity and values. Thus, the definition of the "American promise" Obama provides serves as a frame of reference, allowing him to claim, "We are better than these last eight years. We are a better country than this" (10). If the problem is as he says and we are simply failing to live up to this identity, then the solution is evident; we need to be "more decent" to "a woman in Ohio" (11), "more generous" to "a man in Indiana" (12), and "more compassionate than a government that lets veterans sleep on our streets and families slide into poverty" (13). This definition attempts to frame the debate in terms of listeners' ability to live up to the American tradition of stepping up during risky times to ensure that the country's promise is preserved. Consequently, Obama speaks directly "to the American people, to Democrats and Republicans and Independents across this great land," stating that, "This moment–this election–is our chance to keep, in the 21st century – the American promise alive" (14). In doing so, Obama describes the situation at hand as one that requires a response by the American people.

According to Obama, American's face a challenge "[b]ecause next week, in Minnesota, the same party that brought you two terms of George Bush and Dick Cheney will ask this country for a third. And we are here because we love this country too much to let the next four years look like the last eight" (14). His claim is that people with a real

devotion to America will seek a change in direction for the country. With one fell swoop, Obama has made the "argument" that being American means having the courage and compassion to keep the American promise of achievement through hard work by looking for a rejection of the status quo. According to Obama, anecdotal evidence "proves" that this promise has not been kept under the Bush administration, and thus it is clear something different is necessary. Without having to lay out a syllogism, Obama advances an argument about how Americans should make their voting decisions. Though success of the argument depends on the audience's response, it is important to first recognize how the proposition strategically operates.

The Obama case illustrates Zarefsky's point that what is being articulated is not a definition, but "a frame of reference."[104] Obama's rhetoric does not just describe, rather it also invites voters to understand the election as an opportunity to act like Americans and to take a risk by voting for a lesser known candidate to ensure that the country's identity stays true. Ivie and Giner identify this as a "discourse of restoration, renovation, and renewal," present in Obama's rhetoric leading up to the address.[105] By defining the situation as an electoral one of having the wrong people in office, Obama then posits voting for change as a solution. He tells voters directly that "On November 4th, we must stand up and say: 'Eight is enough'" (14). This is a perfect example of how a definition can help politicians "take ownership of a problem, propose their preferred solutions, and empower themselves as the legitimate solvers of the problem."[106] In this case, Obama defined the American promise in terms of restoration of American character, which allowed him to cast the entire political system as a failure, thus tainting McCain's candidacy, regardless of his 'Maverick' qualities. Obama asks, if McCain "has voted with

George Bush ninety percent of the time" and the last 8 years have not lived up to the American promise, "what does it say about [his] judgment?" (16). Furthermore, the implicit question is, what does it mean about the judgment of those who vote for him? According to Obama, such a vote would be akin to taking "a ten percent chance on change," an option which a true American would not consider because it would not fulfill the American promise (16). Thus, the promise becomes the frame of reference which proves the need for change from anyone who has been tainted by the legacy of the "last eight years" as a natural and necessary course of action for Americans seeking to restore the country's identity and values.

The definition of the situation as a violation of the American promise at the hands of people like Bush and McCain thus logically excludes McCain as a credible agent of change, but Obama continues to provide further evidence. He recognizes that "John McCain has worn the uniform of our country with bravery and distinction," acknowledging that "we owe him our gratitude and respect," and that "next week, we'll also hear about those occasions when he's broken with his party as evidence that he can deliver the change that we need" (15-16). Yet, Obama remains firm that "the record's clear" (17). He then uses stories of "the proud auto workers at a Michigan plant," as well as McCain's gaffes on the economy and votes on tax policy, health care, oil, and education as proof that McCain was not likely to be an agent of change (16-19). To highlight examples, Obama poses various questions, asking the audience "why" or "how" McCain could vote as he had "for over two decades" (17-18). Obama argues that these examples so obviously show failure and poor judgment, that the only possible conclusion is not "that Senator McCain doesn't care what's going on in the lives of Americans";

rather, it must be because "he doesn't know. . . . It's not because John McCain doesn't care. It's because John McCain doesn't get it" (18-19). By defining McCain as an establishment candidate with a record that shows he does not understand the problems facing the country, Obama reinforces his description of the status quo as a "failure" which Republicans must "own," while the rest of "us change America" (21). The argument is that if McCain and Bush are part of the establishment that is responsible for America's problems, then the solution is to move in a different direction as a country. The move to the collective "us" is a significant point in the speech because it signifies the place where Obama begins making the case for his own candidacy.

In addition to raising doubts about McCain's candidacy, Obama's definition of the problem simultaneously highlights his own credibility as an agent of change. He defines his party, and thus himself, as the solution because Democrats "have a very different measure of what constitutes progress in this country" (22). Again, the problem creates the frame of reference because the violation of the American promise discussed in the first part of the speech is offered as the yardstick for voters to use when evaluating candidates. Obama argues that Democrats are worthy because they "measure progress" in human terms, such as savings, jobs, health care, honor, dignity, and how well "we are living up to that fundamental promise that has made this country great" (24-25). According to him, it is these values and their commitment to that promise which makes them worthy of a vote. Using examples of young veterans, young students, single moms, factory workers, and his mother, Obama argues that we are not keeping America's promise to these "heroes," and that "it is on their behalf that I intend to win this election and keep our promise alive as President of the United States" (30). In other words, McCain is the

wrong person for the job because of his identity, which is too closely linked to Bush's and the politics of his presidency, while Obama is the right person because he understands the identity and promise of the American people and will fight on their behalf. The collective nature of this definition is significant because it is Obama's strategy for introducing himself as a credible agent of change.

Once Obama has identified himself as an advocate for the American promise, he defines the charge specifically, using the question "What is that promise?" as a transition (31). He begins by stating that it includes not only "the freedom to make of our own lives what we will," but also "the obligation to treat each other with dignity and respect" (32). He discusses generally how "the market" (33) and "government" (34-35) could exhibit the principle or "idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation; the fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper" (36). According to Obama, it is this societal code "[t]hat's the promise of America" and thus, "[t]hat's the promise we need to keep" (36-37). Obama asks the audience to let him explain the changes that will be required, beginning as if it were a natural step, "So let me spell out exactly what that change would mean if I am President" (37). Until now, the violation of the promise has been used to define members of the political establishment such as McCain and Bush, as politicians who just "don't get it" and are thus irredeemable.

Obama's definition of the American promise attempts to frame the appropriate response for voters as changing the country's direction. Significantly, Obama not only discusses values in the abstract form, but he spends almost half of the speech on specific policy appeals.[107] In doing so, he "was like most presidential candidates over the past few

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decades in that his discussion of policy ultimately outweighed other more superficial issues."[108] Over the course of the campaign, the "economy, national security, health care, environment, and education" were identified as Obama's most prominent policy topics.[109] In this particular address, Obama begins with the economy, arguing that, "Change means a tax code that doesn't reward the lobbyists who wrote it, but the American workers and small businesses who deserve it" (38). He sounds very specific, stating, "Unlike John McCain, I will stop giving tax breaks to corporations that ship jobs overseas, and I will start giving them to companies that create good jobs right here in America. I will eliminate capital gains taxes … I will cut taxes–cut taxes – for 95% of all working families" (39-41). Obama then uses the economy to launch into the issue of oil dependence. For "the sake of our economy, our security, and the future of our planet," he declares, "I will set a clear goal as President: in ten years, we will finally end our dependence on oil from the Middle East" (42). Having discussed the economy, ostensibly the biggest issue in the election, Obama reiterates that change is necessary, stating "America, now is not the time for small plans" and moving to outline further policy changes (45).Obama argues "Now is the time to finally meet our moral obligation to provide every child a world-class education," "to finally keep the promise of affordable, accessible health care for every single American," and "to change our bankruptcy laws, so that your pensions are protected," (49) and "to keep the promise of equal pay for an equal day's work" (46-50).

Obama underscores the specificity of his policy appeals by stating that he has "laid out how [he'll] pay for every dime" (52). Yet at the same time, he argues, "we must also admit that fulfilling America's promise will require more than just money" (52). He

specifies that it "will require a renewed sense of responsibility from each of us to recover what John F. Kennedy called our 'intellectual and moral strength'" (52). According to Obama, "Individual responsibility and mutual responsibility" are "the essence of America's promise," and should thus be the primary concern of voters (53). Though the economy, health care, education, and the environment might be important, Obama chooses to highlight the American promise to a collective identity as most significant. Obama's point is that though he will discuss the specifics of policies, as any American ought to, the most important issue is to be consistent with the American pledge to individual and mutual responsibility.

By focusing on the question of living up to American responsibilities, Obama moves to dealing with foreign policy, stating that "just as we keep our promise to the next generation here at home, so must we keep America's promise abroad" (54). Because he understands this promise, Obama argues, he is better suited to represent the country, even in an international context. According to him, "If John McCain wants to have a debate about who has the temperament and judgment, to serve as the next Commander-in-Chief, that's a debate I'm ready to have" (54). As proof, Obama mentions how "days after 9/11, I stood up and opposed this war [Iraq], knowing that it would distract us from the real threats we face" (55). In making this claim, Obama attempts to use his inexperience as a positive attribute while answering the questions this raises about his credibility. He is arguing that unlike McCain, he is a newcomer to Washington, yet voters need not worry because he has also shown good judgment as a public official.

Though Obama argues that "[w]e need a President who can face the threats of the future, not keep grasping at the ideas of the past," he couches his qualifications as a

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candidate in terms of his association to his party and their history (57). Just as he did in the first part of the speech, Obama associates himself with Democrats to build his credentials, stating, "We are the party of Roosevelt. We are the party of Kennedy. So don't tell me that Democrats won't defend this country. Don't tell me that Democrats won't keep us safe" (59). Not only does Obama use such leaders to build himself, but he again reiterates the failures of the last eight years, once again framing Democrats as the solution, by stating "The Bush-McCain foreign policy has squandered the legacy that generations of Americans–Democrats and Republicans–have built, and we are here to restore that legacy" (59). Obama makes an appeal rooted in history and tradition at the same time as he demands change, rhetorical moves which might seem antiethical to each other. To deal with this issue, Obama outlines specific policy changes to show how these are actually compatible lines of argument.

Obama specifies, "As Commander-in-Chief, I will never hesitate to defend this nation, but I will only send our troops into harm's way with a clear mission and a sacred commitment to give them the equipment they need in battle and the care and benefits they deserve when they come home" (60). The same pattern is evident as he promises "to end the war in Iraq responsibly, and finish the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban," at the same time as "renew[ing] the tough, direct, diplomacy that prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and curb Russian aggression" (61). Obama highlights his key priorities, stating

I will build new partnerships to defeat the threats of the 21st century: terrorism and nuclear proliferation; poverty and genocide; climate change and disease. And I will restore our moral standing, so that America is once again that last, best hope for all

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who are called to the cause of freedom, who long for lives of peace, and who yearn

for a better future. These are the policies I will pursue (61-62).

In this way, Obama attempts to build his credibility by association to Democrats, without

associating himself with the same political establishment implicated by his argument

against McCain's candidacy.

After Obama outlines specific policy concerns, he reiterates that American identity is

his most important priority, stating, "These are the policies I will pursue. And in the

weeks ahead, I look forward to debating them with John McCain" (62). According to

Obama, he is willing to do so "[b]ecause one of the things we have to change in our

politics is the idea that people cannot disagree without challenging each other's character

and patriotism" (63). Precisely because the frame of reference he has drawn is one where

the American promise is at risk, Obama can use the justification that "the times are too

serious, the stakes are too high for this same partisan playbook." Thus, he states "So let

us agree that patriotism has no party. I love this country, and so do you, and so does John

McCain. . . . We all put our country first" (64-65). In defining a love for America as a

given, Obama hopes to paint attacks on his patriotism as distracting tactics meant to

prevent us from doing the right thing: "to cast off the worn-out ideas and politics of the

past." According to him, it is exactly due to these types of political games that we have

"lost our sense of common purpose – our sense of higher purpose." The challenge is thus

clear, as Obama puts it, "that's what we have to restore." Obama goes on to define this

higher goal, mentioning specific issues that people disagree on, such as abortion, gun

ownership, gay rights, and immigration, yet at the same time citing points of

commonality. He concludes, "[t]his too is part of America's promise–the promise of a

democracy where we can find the strength and grace to bridge divides and unite in common effort" (66-67). Again, Obama emphasizes the "American promise" as the central reason why voters should look for change.

Thus, Obama has defined a love for America, a commitment to its promise, and the ability to discuss policy even when deep disagreements exist as the core of the American character. In making this argument, Obama once again highlights identity, yet in a way that subtly redefines the terrain of the political campaign. He defined the solution not just as change generally, or even specifically, away from the Bush administration, but from our very way of continuing politics, despite "the cynicism we all have about government" (70). The problem and the solution are each person's individual commitment to preserve American values of democracy, even if that means voting for an unlikely candidate and even if we are not sure it will make a difference. Obama's definition of American identity does not stop at the traditional campaign issues like taxes and immigration; rather, it includes the *modus operandi* of American politics.

Defining the solution of "Change" so broadly allowed Obama to deal directly with the questions his campaign faced regarding his ability to lead the United States. He argues that he is running even though he is an unlikely candidate precisely because he wants to do his part to keep the American promise he has spent so much of his speech defining. First, Obama admits candidly the weakness of his candidacy: "I get it. I realize that I am not the likeliest candidate for this office. I don't fit the typical pedigree, and I haven't spent my career in the halls of Washington" (71). Second, he attributes his nomination to the American people, saying "I stand before you tonight because all across America something is stirring. . . . [T]his election has never been about me. It's been

about you." The argument is that he is the Democratic candidate, despite his inexperience, because for "eighteen long months, you have stood up, one by one, and said enough to the politics of the past." Obama wants the audience to believe that his candidacy is proof in and of itself that change will "come to Washington," not "from" Washington (72-73). In defining the situation as such, Obama shifted the focus from himself to the American people. Palmieri explains further that "[t]hese words connected America to its 200-plus-year continuums of struggle and triumph. They asserted America's strengths as a measure of its ability to do right by the American people and lead the world."[110] The question is no longer whether he is qualified to be president, the question is whether Americans will rise up to "defining moments like this one" (73). This definition put the ball in the voters' court, posing a challenge to take a leap of faith on Obama, the unlikely candidate.

The point of the argument is to shift the problem from Obama to the American people, posing something of a challenge to their identity, rather than answering a challenge to his own. This helps to illustrate Gamson's argument that the injustice component of collective action framing is the most important element of the rhetorical strategy because it "facilitates the adoption of other elements" such as identity and agency.[111] Having laid out an account of the last eight years as a violation of the American promise, Obama establishes the appropriate course of action for Americans who will learn from "what history teaches us. . . . Change happens because the American people demand it–because they rise up and insist on new ideas and new leadership, a new politics for a new time" (73). According to Obama, in situations like this unjust one, being American means being courageous and participating in the political sphere. Thus,

the injustice helps Obama define the agency and identity of his audience. Significantly, he does not stop at this level of abstraction. Instead, he tells voters exactly what it means to act accordingly: voting for the first time, Republicans voting Democratic, "workers who would rather cut their hours back a day than see their friends lose their jobs," "soldiers who re-enlist after losing a limb," "good neighbors who take a stranger in when a hurricane strikes and the floodwaters rise" (76). He defines these as the essential qualities of the "American spirit" and the "American promise" (78).

Having defined the American promise and character, Obama once again reinforces their importance. He states once more that this promise is "our greatest inheritance" (79), reiterating how "[i]t's a promise I make to my daughters when I tuck them in at night, and a promise you make to yours," and how it is a promise that has motivated immigrants, women, and civil rights activists to believe in the idea that "people of every creed and color, from every walk of life–is that in America, our destiny is inextricably linked. That together, our dreams can be one" (82). According to him, this promise is not an empty one and should not cause cynicism; rather, it should provoke political action. Thus, quoting the words of "a preacher" who is actually Martin Luther King, Jr., Obama urges once again that the nation "keep that promise – that American promise." Having laid out the problem and appropriate response for true Americans, Obama ends by thanking the listeners and asking God to bless them and "the United States of America" (84-85). Thus, Obama closes the speech by reiterating the importance of "change" for Americans who believe in "the American promise."

Though only one case study, analysis of Obama's acceptance of the presidential nomination at the 2008 Democratic National Convention sheds light on how definitions

of particular terms can help rhetors frame a political debate by summoning particular identity and agency roles. By defining the problem as one of the American people's failure to live up to the requirements of a time of need, Obama shifted the focus from questions about his personal identity to questions about the integrity and identity of voters themselves, a motivational type of framing known to enhance the likelihood of political action. In this way, Obama advances a radical definition of change designed to motivate voters and respond to doubts about his candidacy. The case thus illustrates one way that presidential candidates may use definitional argument strategically to frame a political conversation.

Using a two-part analytical scheme built from theories of definitional argument and collective action framing, this chapter studied how presidential candidate Barack Obama defined himself as a credible agent of change, particularly as he accepted his party's nomination at the formal outset of the general election. Investigation of the primary season reveals that Obama's "Change" theme was present from the very beginning of his campaign and constituted a useful strategy against his main rival, Senator Hillary Clinton. It also reveals a divisive primary battle with the potential for a disastrous convention.

Instead, the party rallied and set a perfect stage for Obama's message of hope in the chance of change. Although Obama's speech was conventional in many ways, it also offers the potential to study definitional argument as a framing strategy, especially in the context of presidential rhetoric. By making the debate about the definition of a credible agent of change, Obama reframed the debate, moving the focus away from his inexperience and toward the American people's ability to stay true to the quintessential American spirit. By clearly defining an injustice to be addressed and delineating identity

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and agency roles for the voter, Obama motivated the electorate, a difficult task in today's political climate of apathy. Questions of agency, identity, and injustice are interrelated in all rhetoric, yet the Obama case shows how focusing on the injustice component can allow a speaker to provide a cohesive story to mobilize political action.

Notes

[1] As noted in chapter 1, Obama's victory "scrambled the assumptions that have governed American politics for half a generation." The Economist, "Obama's Historic Victory," ¶ 1, November 4, 2008, http://www.economist.com/research/articlesBySubject/displaystory.cfm?subjectid=9139211&story_id=E1_TNVQQGSR. Additionally, statistics from chapter 1 indicate 34% of voters said "change" was the most important "candidate quality" and 9 out of 10 of these voters preferred Obama. Chuck Todd and Sheldon Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 31

[2] As noted in chapter 1, Obama "established himself as the most impressive vote-getter of the new millennium." Rhodes Cook, "From Republican 'Lock" to Republican 'Lockout'?," in *The Year of Obama,* ed. by Larry J. Sabato (New York: Pearson Education, 2010), 75. Additionally, he won 69% of new voters in the 2008 election and there was an increase in the number of Independents and Republican defections. Todd and Gawiser, 31, "How Barack Obama Won," 45.

[3] As noted in chapter 1, please see Roderick P. Hart, *Campaign Talk: Why Elections Are Good for Us* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Bruce E. Gronbeck and Arthur A. Miller, "The Study of Presidential Campaigning: Yesterday's Campaigns and Today's Issues," in *Presidential Campaigns & American Self Images*, ed. by Arthur A. Miller and Bruce E. Gronbeck (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); Roderick P. Hart, Sharon E. Jarvis, and Elvin T. Lim, "The American People in Crisis: A Content Analysis," *Political Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2002).

[4] As discussed in chapter 1.

[5] Dan Balz and Haynes Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 25.

[6] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 27.

[7] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 29.

[8] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 29.

[9] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 30.

[10] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 32.

[11] James W. Ceaser, Andrew E. Busch, and John J. Pitney, Jr., *Epic Journey* (Boulder: Rowman & Littleton Publishers, Inc., 2009), 15.

[12] Ceaser, Busch, and Pitney, Jr., *Epic Journey*, 92.

[13] Dennis W. Johnson, "Ten Plays That Won (and Lost) the Presidency, McCain: Strategies and Tactics in the General Election," in *Campaigning for President 2008*, ed. by Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 232.

[14] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 291.

[15] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 30.

[16] Ronald A. Faucheux, "Why Clinton Lost," in *Campaigning for President 2008*, ed. Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 44.

[17] Devine, "Obama Wins the Nomination: How He Did It," 34.

[18] Faucheux, "Why Clinton Lost," 44.

[19] John A. Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 25.

[20] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 25.

[21] Ceaser, Busch, and Pitney, Jr., *Epic Journey*, 18.

[22] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 26.

[23] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 25.

[24] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 26.

[25] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 26.

[26] William Greener and Christopher Arterton, "McCain: Strategies and Tactics in the General Election," in *Campaigning for President 2008,* ed. Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 174.

[27] Ceaser, Busch, and Pitney, Jr., *Epic Journey*, 16.

[28] Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (2009): 362.

[29] Chuck Todd and Sheldon Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 11.

[30] Ceaser, Busch, and Pitney, Jr., *Epic Journey*, 15.

[31] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 10.

[32] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 31.

[33] Todd and Gawiser, "How Barack Obama Won," 45

[34] Rhodes Cook, "From Republican 'Lock" to Republican 'Lockout'?," in *The Year of Obama,* ed. by Larry J. Sabato (New York: Pearson Education, 2010), 75.

[35] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism," 360.

[36] Devine, "Obama Wins the Nomination: How He Did It," 31.

[37] Devine, "Obama Wins the Nomination: How He Did It," 32-33.

[38] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 31.

[39] Devine, "Obama Wins the Nomination: How He Did It," 34.

[40] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 30.

[41] Andrew Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 118.

[42] Gans Jr., "The Democratic Primaries," 333.

[43] Faucheux, "Why Clinton Lost," 56

[44] Andrew Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 115.

[45] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 118.

[46] Charles E. Cook Jr., "The Campaign No One Will Forget," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 198.

[47] Jennifer Palmieri, "Setting the Agenda: 'Yes We Can,'" in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 95.

[48] Palmieri, "Setting the Agenda: 'Yes We Can,'" 93.

[49] Palmieri, "Setting the Agenda: 'Yes We Can,'" 94.

[50] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 289.

[51] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 115.

[52] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 118.

[53] David Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win: The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama's Historic Victory* (New York: Viking, 2009), 299.

[54] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 317.

[55] Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win*, 301.

[56] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 318.

[57] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 318.

[58] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 119.

[59] Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win*, 300.

[60] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 320.

[61] Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win*, 304

[62] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 321.

[63] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 119.

[64] Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win*, 306.

[65] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 120.

[66] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 120.

[67] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 324.

[68] As explained in note 1.

[69] Rhodes Cook, "From Republican 'Lock' to Republican 'Lockout'?," in *The Year of Obama,* ed. by Larry J. Sabato (New York: Pearson Education, 2010), 75.

[70] Stefanie Hammer, "The role of narrative in political campaigning: An analysis of speeches byBarack Obama," *National Identities* 12, no. 3 (2010): 269-290.

[71] Barack Obama, "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: The American Promise (Democratic Convention)," August 28, 2008, *Organizing for America*, http://barackobama.com/2008/08/28/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_108.php (accessed February 17, 2010). The author has counted and numbered 85 paragraphs total within this text. All subsequent references to this text are parenthetically cited.

[72] David Zarefsky, "Definitions," in *Argument in a Time of Change: Definitions, Frameworks, and Critiques,* ed. James F. Klumpp (Annandale, VA: National Communication Association, 1997), 4.

[73] Edward Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 130.

[74] Schiappa, *Defining Reality*, 131.

[75] Zarefsky, "Definitions," 1.

[76] Schiappa, *Defining Reality*, 36.

[77] Schiappa, *Defining Reality*, 33.

[78] Schiappa, *Defining Reality*, 109.

[79] Zarefsky, "Definitions," 4.

[80] Brian R. McGee, "The Argument From Definition Revisited: Race and Definition in the Progressive Era," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 35, no. 1 (1999): 142.

[81] Alicia Kolar Prevost and James A. Thurber, "A Perfect Campaign: The Role of Money, Organization, and Strategy," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections: A Story in Four Act* ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 100.

[82] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism," 360.

[83] William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

[84] Gamson, *Talking Politics*, 7.

[85] Christopher Hayes, "Organizing & Obama: A Forum," *The Nation*, September 2008, 34; Susan Buck-Morss, "Obama and the Image," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50, no. 2-3 (2009), 146.

[86] Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win*, 379.

[87] Stephen Adair, "Overcoming a Collective Action Frame in the Remaking of an Antinuclear Opposition," *Sociological Forum* 11, no. 2 (1996): 352.

[88] Linda Markowitz, "Structural Innovators and Core-Framing Tasks: How Socially Responsible Mutual Fund Companies Build Identity Among Investors," *Sociological Perspectives* 50, no. 1 (2007): 145.

[89] Adair, "Overcoming a Collective Action Frame," 350.

[90] Markowitz, "Structural Innovators and Core-Framing Tasks," 147.

[91] Markowitz, "Structural Innovators and Core-Framing Tasks," 148.

[92] Gamson, *Talking Politics,* 7.

[93] Gamson, *Talking Politics,* 7.

[94] Gamson, *Talking Politics,* 7.

[95] Markowitz, "Structural Innovators and Core-Framing Tasks," 148.

[96] Adair, "Overcoming a Collective Action Frame," 352-353.

[97] Gamson, *Talking Politics,* 175.

[98] Gamson, *Talking Politics*, 31.

[99] Gamson, *Talking Politics,* 176.

[100] Obama, "The American Promise," ¶ 6. As indicated in note 67, citations from the speech are hereafter noted internally in the text of the analysis.

[101] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism," 362.

[102] David A. Rochefort and Roger W. Cobb, *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping the Policy Agenda* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 15.

[103] Other authors have noted that "[n]otably, focusing on change may also have been an attempt by the Obama campaign to deflect criticism away from Obama's lack of political experience. Thus, Obama complemented his detailed focus on the economy with a heavy emphasis on a broader thematic appeal." Kevin Coe and Michel Reitzes, "Obama on the Stump: Features and Determinants of a Rhetorical Approach," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2010): 406.

[104] Zarefsky, "Definitions," 5.

[105] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism," 360.

[106] Timothy M. Jones and Penelope Sheets, "Torture in the Eye of the Beholder," *Political Communication* 26, no. 3 (2009): 20.

[107] Coe and Reitzes, "Obama on the Stump," 405.

[108] Coe and Reitzes, "Obama on the Stump," 405.

[109] Coe and Reitzes, "Obama on the Stump," 394.

[110] Palmieri, "Setting the Agenda: 'Yes We Can,'" 85.

[111] Gamson, *Talking Politics,* 175.

CHAPTER 3

REDEFINING CHANGE

John McCain and Barack Obama both eventually staked their claims to the

presidency based on their credibility as agents of change. In all other respects, McCain's

campaign contrasts starkly with Obama's. Just like Obama, McCain used his convention

speech officially to move his candidacy from the primary stage to the general election.

Unlike Obama, who refined the definition of change he had been building all campaign

season, McCain chose to redefine the very nature of his campaign in terms of the popular

"Change" theme. Although McCain's bid for the presidency ultimately failed, his ability

to challenge Obama's candidacy in a year when Republican fortunes seemed to be at their

lowest has been noted.[1] McCain stole Obama's thunder just as the Democratic National

Convention ended, but ultimately he could not win over voters who wanted change, even

though Obama strategists had labeled him the likeliest threat in this category.[2] McCain

lost the definitional argument because, ultimately, people who wanted change either

voted for Obama or chose experience as a more important "candidate quality."[3] Thus,

McCain's definition of himself as a credible agent of change just did not hold up. This,

too, poses questions regarding the role of rhetoric and McCain's use of the "Change"

theme at the 2008 Republican National Convention.[4]

As chapter two sought to understand how Obama's rhetoric defined him as a credible

agent of change, the analysis here seeks to apprehend why McCain's definitional

argument failed to do the same. Thus, the analysis mirrors that of the preceding chapter.

First, how McCain campaigned for the Republican nomination, and the political situation

he faced en route to acceptance of the nomination, is examined. Second, theories of

presidential rhetoric, definitional argument, and collective action framing are used to understand and account for McCain's inability to generate voter support from those who wanted change.

McCain's Campaign for the Republican Nomination

Some political commentators described the Republican nomination in 2008 as "completely wide open," since President George W. Bush did not endorse a successor.[5] However, Senator John McCain was "deemed the de facto front-runner"; as the runner-up from the last contested nomination fight, he was the Republican party's most senior candidate.[6] Thus, McCain adopted a strategy similar to the one Senator Hillary Clinton attempted to use against Barack Obama in the Democratic primary, initially portraying himself as "the inevitable nominee."[7] However, an inability to raise enough funds forced him to reorganize his campaign. As other Republican candidates split the base, McCain picked up votes, rallying to key wins early in the primaries.[8] Although he almost had to drop out of the race, McCain eventually became the clear-cut winner of the Republican nomination, at which point he "tried to use the Republican Convention to reboot his campaign and fundamentally change its direction. After months of attacking Obama for his thin resume, the McCain campaign used the convention to shift the debate and compete with Obama for the mantle of 'change' candidate."[9] In this sense, McCain's road to the general election is best described as "a perfect parabola."[10] Consequently, it is useful to examine McCain's political career beginning with the presidential campaign of 2000 and leading to the general election of 2008.

In 2000, McCain challenged Governor George W. Bush of Texas in the Republican primaries by building "for himself a reputation as a 'maverick'."[11] Charles E. Cook, Jr., political analyst for NBC News and writer for the *Congressional Quarterly*, details how not only McCain explicitly reached out to Democrats and Independents, but also "seemed to think nothing of offending the sensibilities of some of the party's most entrenched constituencies, and indeed he seemed to revel in it."[12] The core of his campaign was built upon his tendency to disagree with the Republican establishment. This strategy was considered risky as "major political parties rarely nominate mavericks for president. Party nomination contests are dominated by party regulars, by the establishment, who view mavericks as undependable and troublemakers."[13] The conventional wisdom proved true and McCain lost the Republican presidential nomination to Bush.

Despite this loss, McCain's close race positioned him as the next Republican in line for the nomination in subsequent campaigns. Because of a hierarchical Republican party structure, "the runner-up from the last contested nominating fight would be deemed the de facto front-runner" when no incumbent president or sitting vice-president was in the field.[14] Knowing this, McCain attempted to redefine his relationship to the Republican party over the next seven years. Cook explains that McCain spent considerable time "cultivating many of his former rivals in the establishment and among the GOP's most conservative activists, campaigning relentlessly for Bush's 2004 reelection campaign and for particularly ardent conservative Republican candidates from coast to coast, occasionally even siding with the most ideological candidates in primary fights instead of with moderates closer to his own personal politics."[15] According to the media perspective, provided by Chuck Todd, NBC News' Political Director, and Sheldon

Gawiser, NBC's Elections Director, McCain "needed to move from outsider to insider" in order to win the election.[16] Thus he went from purposefully distancing himself from the Republican establishment to ingratiating himself to its members. This type of political activity laid the ground work for McCain's 2008 campaign.

The Senator thus pursued an aggressive reconciliation strategy and entered the 2008 cycle by parking "the Straight Talk Express" and running "a conventional Republican 'next in line' campaign."[17] The new approach would be more traditional, though it would be a 180 degree turn from McCain's previous campaign strategy. According to Cook Jr., the 2008 campaign was supposed to be a "political juggernaut designed to emulate the Bush campaigns of 2000 and 2004," and to "secure the GOP nomination through overwhelming force."[18] This would require massive fundraising efforts to get off the ground. Unfortunately for McCain, Republicans "were searching for an alternative," and thus he "struggled mightily to raise money in the first six months of his campaign."[19] He had adopted an initial strategy for which he did not have sufficient money or popular support. Just like that, McCain "went from frontrunner to dead in the water in the summer of 2007."[20] However, "instead of dropping out, McCain essentially filed for Chapter 11" and underwent "a massive reorganization."[21] He cut his staff and budget and continued campaigning on a smaller scale.

During McCain's reorganization period "there was a massive effort by the other Republicans to fill the vacuum."[22] These would include former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, former Tennessee Senator and actor Fred Thompson, former Governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee, Texas Congressman Ron Paul, and California Congressman Duncan Hunter.[23] As these

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candidates began, and then continued, to drop out of the race, McCain persisted. Tony Fabrizio, a Republican pollster, argues that McCain started gaining momentum in Iowa, when Huckabee beat Romney, thus stalling the Romney campaign.[24] This opened the door for McCain, who had devoted substantial resources in New Hampshire to win the state's contest, a victory which "catapulted him to the front of the Republican pack in tracking polls and gave him the frontrunner status."[25] Just like that, McCain was once again a viable candidate. In the meantime, Huckabee and Romney divided the social conservative base, giving McCain what Fabrizio calls yet another "strategic plus."[26] The primaries and caucuses would continue with McCain gaining momentum and amassing delegates until March 4, 2008, when he won his 1,191st delegate and clinched the nomination.[27] McCain's quest faced various challenges and underwent many changes, allowing him to win the race despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Though his victory was in some ways unexpected, it ended up occurring as a matter of course, with McCain steadily picking up delegates as other candidates dropped out of the race.

McCain Prepares for the Convention and the Fall Campaign

Looking ahead to the acceptance of the Republican nomination, McCain's campaign faced the tough challenge of satisfying a diverse body of voters; some wanted change and some still voiced approval for President George W. Bush. Trevor McCrisken, a professor at the University of Warwick, explains that McCain needed to appeal to Republican voters at a time when "opinion was particularly partisan, and 76 percent of Republicans approved of Bush and his policies."[28] McCain was only considered a *de facto* frontrunner and Republicans felt so compelled to "shop around" that his campaign went bankrupt and

had to reorganize.[29] Going into the 2008 Republican National Convention, McCain desperately needed to energize these voters. At the same time, the electorate's desire for change was well established. And in this context, "the abysmally low job approval for President Bush during his second term . . . clouded the electoral prospects for the entire Republican Party in 2008."[30] Thus, McCain was in the difficult position of needing to satisfy partisan Republicans while leaving the door open to appeal to these voters. The challenge was twofold: he "needed to find a way to placate the doubts of the conservative base of the party while also broadening his appeal."[31]

To meet the political demands of the situation, McCain "settled on the theme of 'Country First'."[32] William Greener and Christopher Arteron, George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management, argue that his strategists selected the approach because it allowed McCain to "unite Republicans with a reasonable number of independents without appearing to be either offering a third Bush term or being someone at odds with basic Republican principles."[33] The campaign's argument was that the commitment to putting the country first "accounted for what motivated John McCain to do *anything*: his loyalty was to his country, not to any party or individual."[34] Using this theme, McCain attempted to energize the Republican party with traditional "themes and buzzwords that have worked for the GOP in the past."[35] The strategy was thus selected because its flexibility allowed McCain to remain "nimble" enough to support traditional Republican values, while challenging Obama's definition of change.

Although McCain prepared a theme with the dual purpose of strengthening his own campaign while questioning Obama's, the "Country First" message was not debuted until the Republican National Convention. In contrast to the Democratic campaign for the

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nomination which ended in June, Senator McCain wrapped up the Republican nomination almost three months earlier, in March. Theoretically, this factor should have allowed McCain to "ratchet up his national organization, hone his general election message, begin the VP vetting process, and raise the boatload of money he would need to keep up with the financial juggernaut that was and still is Barack Obama."[36] This is especially true given that McCain had already formulated the "Country First" theme to work against the Democrats. However, the McCain camp was curiously silent until late July when they "launched perhaps the most famous TV ad of the 2008 campaign, calling Obama the 'biggest celebrity in the world' and comparing him to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears."[37] Greener and Arteron document how these attacks "apparently penetrated Obama's image armor," illustrating that "doubts as to Obama's readiness to do more than merely give a great speech were becoming more than a minor annoyance to his campaign."[38] Yet, the negative ads did nothing to explain McCain's claim to the presidency; instead, they "detract[ed] attention" from his own spots on tax policy.[39] McCain was forcing Obama to prove his credentials, but he was not building his own "Country First" message.

Although Obama was criticized for not aggressively responding to McCain's negative ads, his convention speech has been praised for offering "the most direct response to the notion that he was an elitist who did not understand America."[40] The address was generally considered a success and Obama benefitted from the traditional convention bounce, which put him "six points ahead" and energized the Democratic party.[41] Not wanting to lose steam, the Republicans responded by announcing Sarah Palin as McCain's running mate just "12 hours after Obama finished giving what the Democratic

campaign believed was a historically significant acceptance speech."[42] Todd and Gawiser

argue that thanks to this move "barely a word was being replayed" about Obama's

historic speech just 13 hours after its delivery.[43] Once again, McCain proved his ability to

thwart Obama's oratorical efforts. In preparation for the upcoming Republican

convention, Palin's selection was McCain's attempt to define change "on its own

terms."[44] The strategy was meant to help the McCain campaign "translate Country First

into meaning that the ticket presented new, maverick leadership not wedded to the special

interests and ways of Washington."[45] Although the Palin pick drew a lot of criticism, it

also allowed the McCain campaign to advance the claim that its nominees would be

agents of change in the run up to the Republican National Convention of 2008.

<div align="center">The 2008 Republican National Convention</div>

From the cancellation of the first day's events to the candidate's concluding address,

the entire 2008 Republican National Convention was shaped by McCain's attempts to

distance himself from the Bush administration while capturing the "Change" theme so

persuasively employed by Obama. The 2008 Republican National Convention was held

September 1-4 in St. Paul, Minnesota.[46] Not wanting to appear callous to natural

disasters in the wake of the New Orleans and FEMA controversies in 2005, McCain

significantly modified the first day of the convention due to the approach of Hurricane

Gustav.[47] As government leaders responded to the potential catastrophe, the appearances

of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney were cancelled, and only

Laura Bush, Cindy McCain, and a handful of Gulf State Republican governors took the

stage.[48]   Hurricane Gustav blew over without causing any serious damage and the first

day of the convention was cancelled for almost no reason, but it did produce notable differences from traditional party meetings. Notably, "this was the first party convention ever where weather (and political consequences) caused a delay."[49] Bush's speech on the first day was cancelled and instead he delivered an "awkward performance" on September 2, "via satellite hookup."[50] This was "the first time in forty years that a sitting president did not appear in person at his party's nominating convention," and thus represented another notable difference in the convention schedule.[51]

Furthermore, on the third day of the convention, "not a single speaker uttered the name of the Republican Party's current president."[52] McCain had begun the process of distancing himself from the Bush administration long before, but the sitting president's role in a national party convention had never been so visibly restricted. Whereas Obama's campaign built an argument meant to frame the candidate's inexperience as a positive attribute, the McCain camp left unexplained an important part of their candidate's long political history. Others who addressed the convention included Joe Lieberman, a former Democrat and now Independent, as well as other Republican politicians. These speakers often "highlighting John McCain's courage and service," performed traditional convention tasks.[53] Their speeches served traditional purposes, such as stressing the candidate's suitability, yet the sitting president's absence remained significant.

While Obama's remarks had been preceded by notable speeches unified by a single campaign theme, the same could not be said of McCain's speech. In fact, the Republican party would not mention the case for change until the third day of the convention, when headliner Sarah Palin spoke. Thus, the convention ran for three days before Palin introduced the convention's theme. Her two goals were to "thrill the base" and "lay out

her reformer credentials."[54] Palin's address was "widely regarded as a triumph …

reinforcing her outsider status, and tearing into Obama's political inexperience and

alleged sneering attitude toward working people."[55] Liberals admitted that Palin was

"giving the GOP and McCain a chance to re-brand: Maverick 2.0."[56] Some commentators

noted it as a pitfall because "heading into the last day of this convention, after her rousing

speech before a giddy convention hall and a national TV audience, and all anybody wants

to talk about is Sarah Palin."[57] In contrast to the Democratic convention, which used

speeches to build excitement and a unified stage for Obama to deliver his message of

change, the Republicans failed to energize the convention until the third day. When

Republicans finally made the case for change, scholars such as Andrew Wroe, Lecturer

on American Politics at the University of Kent, and even media sources such as the *New

York Times* said Palin emerged as the center of attention and McCain's nomination

became "a sideshow to the evening's main event."[58]

In the aftermath, Senator McCain had the substantial challenge of making the claim

that he could be an agent of change, though he had already been elected to office for

decades. The Palin pick set the groundwork for this argument, a theme which she

reinforced very well during her convention speech, ironically detracting attention from

McCain. Still, McCain ended the conference on the fourth day, setting "out to seize the

'change' theme and make it is his own, arguing that he and fellow maverick Sarah Palin

could shake up Washington and achieve results."[59] McCain's message did not have the

same effect that Obama's did nationally, and the address was "much less rapturously

received" than Palin's was at the very same convention.[60] McCain did enjoy the same six

point bounce that followed Obama's convention performance, but Wroe argues that "the

momentum and excitement created by Palin's address … dissipated in a sea of poorly delivered platitudes and inchoate messages" as the campaign went on.[61] In short, McCain's speech performed the essential functions required by his campaign, but he failed to electrify the audience.[62] Though it is impossible to attribute the failure to this speech alone, identifying how McCain launched a definition of himself as a credible agent of change and comparing it to Obama's attempts may shed further light on why McCain's rhetoric was unable to motivate voter action as Obama's did.

<center>Framework for Analysis</center>

Although McCain's portrayal of himself as an agent of change did not, ultimately, match Obama's success, the candidate's shift in campaign strategy merits the attention of campaign communication researchers. In providing such attention, this chapter draws heavily on the analytical scheme developed in chapter two, adapting and adjusting as the textual evidence warrants.

In contrast to Obama's speech, which solidified primary campaign themes, McCain's acceptance of the Republican nomination attempted to redefine his candidacy in terms of "Change." In doing so, he defied the conventional political wisdom "that it is best to run your own race. Pick your message, and stick with it."[63] As Greener and Arteron elucidate, "Sensing the public wanted change (and wanted change more than experience), the McCain campaign decided to do its best to define this on its own terms."[64] In effect, McCain conceded to Obama's major premise that "Change" was necessary; at the same he sought to re-define what course best constituted change. The next section thus

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attempts to understand how McCain attempted to win the contest. The injustice, identity, and agency components of collective action framing are useful tools in this endeavor.

Although at first glance the application of social movement theory might not seem appropriate, the application can help further our understanding of political rhetoric's motivational power according to its framing of the injustice, identity, and agency of the listener. Since collective action framing was originally conceptualized as a particular type of consciousness demonstrated through discourse implying the need for and desirability of some form of action, it is a useful tool for those seeking to understand how politicians use rhetoric to motivate action. This is not to argue that it is appropriate to study McCain as a social movement candidate, but to suggest that these particular analytical tools might help illumine campaign rhetoric in the 2008 presidential election. Not a social movement rhetor himself, McCain was nevertheless competing against one. He did not have the same social movement aura that Obama did, but the theory is applicable because McCain had the same task of generating political participation. In particular, he was trying to energize the conservative base, while also motivating Independents or moderates to vote for him. In this context, simply getting voters to agree that he was a credible agent of change would not be enough to win the election. McCain literally needed these voters to believe in his message so much they would go to the polls. Because collective action framing is mostly seen in situations where action is required, the three components of injustice, identity, and agency provide a useful method for understanding how McCain attempted to motivate listeners into action.

Furthermore, the unification of this social movement research in combination with rhetorical-critical means may further our understanding of how political rhetors use

similar strategies in their rhetoric. Collective action framing was originally used to study media discourse, with more detailed studies indicating that such discourse actually occurs within peer groups.[65] This research identified the components of collective action framing in media and peer group discourse, but did not consider how a rhetor might manipulate these three components to incite action. Thus, this project extends that research to presidential campaign rhetoric by asking the question of how the components of collective action framing illumine a rhetor's efforts to frame political campaign discourse. Just as studies of framing began as an exercise in psychology, then later expanded to communication studies, and finally to application in a variety of fields, this project seeks to use the research on framing in a social movement context, extending it to a political one.

According to William Gamson, the original collective action framing theorist, the injustice component is the "diagnostic" aspect of collective action framing.[66] He argued that it was the key component to integrating the other two, agency and identity. Chapter two explained that Obama's speech reflected this strategy, as he used a definition of injustice as the status quo violation of the "American promise" to frame the election in terms of the audience's sense of agency and identity. In contrast, McCain's speech spends little time defining "injustice." Instead, he spends the speech defining himself as an agent of change by contrasting his own identity with Obama's, a very different strategy which affords a useful opportunity for comparison. In doing so, McCain neglects the agency and identity components of collective action framing, important aspects which Gamson argues are critical to defining a collective "we" and motivating a listener to undertake a particular course of action. This chapter thus seeks to understand the ways

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McCain emphasized his own identity and agency, rather than that of the audience, as well as the effect of this choice on the rest of the speech.

McCain's Redefinition of "Change"

Theories of definitional argument and collective action framing combined to reveal that Obama's address at the 2008 Democratic National Convention relied heavily on a definition of "Change" as the historically American process of citizens stepping up during critical moments to make hard choices, thus restoring "the American promise." Earlier analysis maintained that this choice resulted in Obama's framing of the election in terms of an "injustice" component, thus implicating the identity and agency of citizens themselves, motivating them to act on a personal level. In contrast, close textual analysis of McCain's address reveals that he defines no key term and does not develop a strong "injustice" component. Instead, McCain defines himself as a candidate with enough experience to produce change, thus framing the election in terms of his own identity and abilities. Statistics from chapters one and two indicating nine out of ten voters who ranked "change" as the most important "candidate quality" also preferred Obama.[67] Although it is difficult to make any inferences about which of these votes were swayed by this particular speech, this section analyzes the speech to document how McCain attempted to redefine the "Change" theme in comparison to Obama and the effect of this choice on the rest of the address. In particular, this section argues that McCain attempted to define himself as an agent of change by distinguishing himself from the Bush administration, while arguing he had the right experience to bring about change.

Furthermore, this focus on his own identity undermined the effectiveness of his rhetoric by neglecting an agency and identity role for the voter.

McCain begins the introductory remarks by thanking "you all" for the "privilege given few Americans–the privilege of accepting our party's nomination for President of the United States."[68] Although he accepted the nomination "with gratitude, humility, and confidence," (1) McCain asserted his role as one of a privileged few. Having accepted the nomination and positioned himself as part of the elite, McCain says that this victory, like all others, did not come "without a good fight" (2). Although this statement is supposed to be "a tribute to the candidates who opposed [him] and their supporters" (2), the focus is still McCain's character. Thus, McCain begins the process of establishing his own identity as the central focus of the speech.

After the introduction, McCain devotes a paragraph to thanking "the President" and "the First Lady, Laura Bush," for "their outstanding example of honorable service to our country." Notably, President George W. Bush's name was not mentioned, even though McCain states that he is "grateful to the President for leading us in those dark days following the worst attack on American soil in our history, and keeping us safe from another attack many thought was inevitable." McCain also commends "the First Lady, Laura Bush," for being "a model of grace and kindness in public and in private." In this way, the Republican candidate expresses his "gratitude to the 41st President and his bride of 63 years" (3), while avoiding trigger words that would cause a negative reaction in voters dissatisfied with Bush. Thus, McCain begins the convention address with a nod to his predecessor. In the context of the situation's strategic demands, these moves can also be understood as McCain's attempts to define himself as an experienced candidate

without inheriting what political scientist professor Trevor McCrisken called the "poisoned chalice" of the Republican nomination.[69]

The focus on his own character is evident as McCain turns to his personal life to thank his wife, "Cindy, and [his] seven children." McCain describes "[t]he pleasures of family life" as "a brief holiday from the crowded calendar of our nation's business." In honoring his family, McCain frames the home and family life as a welcome respite from political work, stating that for this reason, he has "treasured them all the more, and can't imagine a life without the happiness you give me." McCain singles out Cindy's personal characteristics as proof that he will be a good candidate, stating that "Cindy said a lot of nice things about me tonight. But, in truth, she's more my inspiration than I am hers. Her concern for those less blessed than we are–victims of land mines, children born in poverty and with birth defects–shows the measure of her humanity. I know she will make a great First Lady" (4). The message is that voters should be excited about McCain because his association with Cindy inspires him.

McCain then transitions from his wife's character to his mother's, also using her as proof that he will be a good president by stating, "Roberta McCain gave us her love of life, her deep interest in the world, her strength, and her belief we are all meant to use our opportunities to make ourselves useful to our country. I wouldn't be here tonight but for the strength of her character" (5). It is significant that in these introductory remarks, McCain uses about 100 words more than Obama does to introduce himself and his family, while explicitly linking their character to his own. This reflects a heavy focus on McCain himself, even when he is discussing other people. In conjunction with Sharon Jarvis' research that shows candidates who talk more about themselves are more likely to

lose an election, the case suggests one of the reasons McCain's rhetoric might not have been as effective as Obama's. [70] Collective action framing helps explain why, as when candidates are talking about themselves, they are not accounting for the identity and agency role of the voter. Essentially, when politicians are talking about themselves, they fail to tell voters what they should do or how they should participate.

McCain begins to wind down the introductory remarks by offering his "heartfelt thanks to all of you, who helped me win this nomination, and stood by me when the odds were long." In contrast to Obama, who used injustice or the violation of the American promise as the reason for his nomination, McCain references his own identity and agency, saying "I won't let you down," to those who supported him, and "thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to win your trust. I intend to earn it," to those "who have yet to decide who to vote for" (6). This is a stark difference from Obama's speech which set up the violation of the American promise as the injustice which precipitated his involvement in politics. Instead, the focus here is on McCain's ability to win, thus implicitly framing the election as the most important situation faced by Americans.

McCain calls out "to Senator Obama and his supporters" specifically, honoring "their achievement" and admitting that "[d]espite our differences, much more unites us than divides us. We are fellow Americans, an association that means more to me than any other." By defining patriotism as a commitment to "the proposition that all people are created equal and endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights," McCain appears as though he is conceding to the request for civility Obama made on behalf of the American promise in his own speech (7). Despite this concession, McCain still directly refers to the

presidential contest, stating "let there be no doubt, my friends, we're going to win this election. And after we've won, we're going to reach out our hand to any willing patriot" (8). Thus, McCain ends his introductory remarks by focusing on his character and ability to win an election, while giving a nod to the ideas that Obama spent his whole speech defining. Although this framing appears conciliatory, it also defines the election and Obama as the injustice component of the speech. As Robert L. Ivie, professor of Rhetoric and Public Culture at Indiana University, and Oscar Giner from Arizona State University, write in their description of this overall strategy, "McCain's campaign made clear that Barack Obama—the Hollywood celebrity and community organizer—was the Evil to be feared, the Other to be purged."[71] McCain does not define an unjust situation, as usually required by the injustice component. Rather, he singles out the election and Obama's potential victory as the problem. This is a marked difference from Obama's strategy. Given this radically different choice, it is important to understand its effect of the rest of McCain's speech and ability to outline identity and agency roles for the voter.

The claim that McCain focused on his identity, rather than on defining a strong injustice component, is supported by the fact that he does not even mention American voters until after he is done with the attention to his credibility. At that point, he acknowledges that "These are tough times for many of you. You're worried about keeping your job or finding a new one, and are struggling to put food on the table and stay in your home. All you ever asked of government is to stand on your side, not in your way." Having mentioned the injustices faced by the electorate, McCain attempts to define himself as the solution to the situation at hand with the statement, "that's just what I intend to do: stand on your side and fight for your future" (9), thus quickly transitioning

to the solution part of his speech. In contrast to Obama, who spent fifteen percent of his speech defining the situation, McCain spent less than one percent before moving on to describe himself directly as the solution.

McCain begins the solution segment of his speech with an allusion to Governor Palin, calling her the "right partner to help [him] shake up Washington" (10). According to him, Palin is credible not only because "she has executive experience and a real record of accomplishment," but also because "[s]he knows where she comes from and she knows who she works for" (10-11). It is due to this character that McCain "can't wait until I introduce her to Washington," and it is on this basis that he offers "an advance warning to the old, big spending, do nothing, me first, country second Washington crowd: change is coming" (11). Having linked his candidacy to Palin's credentials, McCain continues to lay out his argument about their credibility as agents of change. "I'm not in the habit of breaking promises to my country," he declares, "and neither is Governor Palin." Thus, "when we tell you we're going to change Washington, and stop leaving our country's problems for some unluckier generation to fix, you can count on it" (12). Hence, Palin's credibility as an outsider with experience is supposed to legitimize the idea of McCain as a bearer of change.

After using Palin to introduce the "Change" theme, McCain begins to discuss himself as a credible agent of change: "You know, I've been called a maverick; someone who marches to the beat of his own drum." According to McCain, "What it really means is I understand who I work for. I don't work for a party. I don't work for a special interest. I don't work for myself. I work for you" (13). This claim attempts to define experience as proof that McCain is a credible agent of change. This premise is the crux of his argument

that his track record is a reason that voters who want change should vote for him. Consequently, he mentions how he "fought corruption," "fought big spenders," "fought to get million dollar checks out of our elections," "fought lobbyists who stole from Indian tribes," "fought crooked deals in the Pentagon," and "fought tobacco companies and trial lawyers, drug companies and union bosses" (14). McCain concludes with the most unpopular fight, stating "I fought for the right strategy and more troops in Iraq, when it wasn't a popular thing to do." Accordingly, these examples show the core of his character, which is one that would "rather lose an election than see [his] country lose a war" (15). Thus, his identity is defined as one which prioritizes the country and its people, regardless of the particular circumstance.

McCain argues that he does not "mind a good fight," but he also makes an important distinction: "I learned an important lesson along the way. In the end, it matters less that you can fight. What you fight for is the real test" (17). Thus, he proclaims "I fight for Americans. I fight for you" (18), before laying out the stories of individuals across America to show for whom he will fight. McCain isolates three families to discuss. First, he fights "for Bill and Sue Nebe from Farmington Hills," a family that "lost their real estate investment," and now survives on a combination of four jobs. Second, he fights for "Jake and Toni Wimmer of Franklin Country, Pennsylvania," a couple with two disabled sons whose lives "should matter to the people they elect to office" (19). Third, he fights for "the family of Matthew Stanley of Wolfboro, New Hampshire, who died serving our country in Iraq" (20). This is also the beginning of McCain's use of anecdotes, which William F. Lewis' seminal essay on narrative criticism defines as "quick stories, jokes, or incidents that are the verbal counterpart of the visual image."[72] Though Lewis does not

explicitly describe anecdotes as frames, he establishes that the way they operate is by defining a relationship between the issue discussed and the audience. In other words, the anecdote itself can structure discourse in the same way that a psychological frame or a formal definition might. According to Lewis, "[a]necdotes define the character of an issue."[73] In McCain's case, the examples are supposed to show that he not only understands the issues faced by Americans, but that he will fight to resolve them. The key once again is that McCain's anecdotes place him as the actor, while the American people are the subjects awaiting his rescue from "the bad housing market," "autism," and war (18-20). Thus, McCain focuses on his own identity not only by association with Palin and his own family, but also by using anecdotes to position himself as a hero soon to rescue Americans in distress.

At this point, McCain deals with the perceived contradiction between his long political history and the claim that he is the best agent of change by arguing that the real challenge of change is to "restore the pride and principles of our party" (21). He admits frankly that "We were elected to change Washington, and we let Washington change us" (21). According to him, "We lost the trust of the American people when some Republicans gave in to the temptations of corruption" (21). The "we" is nebulous, as McCain goes on to specify that "both parties made [government] bigger" and "both parties and Senator Obama passed another corporate welfare bill for oil companies" (21). Despite this vagueness, McCain states plainly, "We're going to change that" (22). Significantly, the "we" who created the problems remains as nebulous as the "we" that is supposedly going to solve them. This can be understood as an example of Burke's notion of subtle identification, a strategy which is usually utilized when the audience and rhetor

have little in common.[74] According to George Cheney, John T. Jones Centennial Professor of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, this strategy is most powerful because when successful, it goes unnoticed by the audience.[75] Thus, in addition to anecdotes, McCain attempts subtly to create identification between himself and the audience. Though this choice in itself may not be revolutionary, it does present an opportunity to study the development of subtle identification in a speech where the rhetor's focus is on his own identity.

Having asserted the credibility of the ticket, McCain goes on to define the Republican brand, arguing that he and Palin will "recover the people's trust by standing up again for the values Americans admire. The party of Lincoln, Roosevelt and Reagan is going to get back to basics" (22). These allusions reflect what Roderick P. Hart, Dean of the College of Communication at the University of Texas, calls a "rhetoric of icons, one that causes the head to tilt upward."[76] Although Hart identifies this as one of the distinctive features of the Republican party's language, this is one of the only instances where McCain references the party's historic members. Even then, McCain focuses on their beliefs and association to him, stating that Republicans believe "everyone has something to contribute and deserves the opportunity to reach their God-given potential" (23). On this basis, McCain identifies "low taxes," "strong defense," "personal responsibility," "rule of law," "values," and "creativity and initiative" as hallmarks of American culture and Republican beliefs (23-26).[77] According to McCain, only Republicans understand that Americans want a "Government that doesn't make your choices for you, but works to make sure you have more choices to make for yourself" (26). Thus, McCain's argument

is supposed to be reaffirmed by his association with a party that understands what he terms as the "basics."

After establishing his credibility based on his association to his family, to Sarah Palin, and to the Republican party, McCain moves to compare and contrast himself with Obama by defining specific policy proposals. He begins with the economy. McCain states, "I will keep taxes low and cut them where I can. My opponent will raise them. I will open new markets to our goods and services. My opponent will close them. I will cut government spending. He will increase it" (27). McCain uses the same pattern when discussing taxes and health care (28). In doing so, he contrasts himself with Obama by focusing on what each candidate "will" do about the economy. According to Lynn Vavreck, political scientist at the University of California in Los Angeles, McCain was an "insurgent candidate" in that he was "the one predicted to lose based on the state of the economy."[78] Thus, she argues that his challenge should have been "straightforward: refocus the election off the economy and onto something else."[79] Yet, McCain did not do so. Instead, he chose to focus on the economy, just as Obama did. Vavreck notes that McCain was one of only three candidates who "didn't even try to refocus the election off the economy and onto something else."[80] This means that even from a political science perspective, McCain's focus on the economy was doomed. Yet, he spoke at length on this topic, even given the low probability of success. This was a necessary consequence of his choice to focus the speech on his own identity and its effect on the presidency. Because he was arguing that he was the only candidate with enough experience to bring about change, he was forced to discuss specific policy proposals and their benefits.

The economy remains a central feature of the speech as McCain continues.[81] McCain argues that his tax plans "will help American companies compete and keep jobs from moving overseas," "will improve the lives of millions of American families," "will let you keep more of your own money to save, spend, and invest as you see fit" (29). He thus focuses on his ability to fix the situation once again. According to McCain, he understands that these problems were created by "the changing economy and it often seems your government hasn't even noticed." He promises, "That's going to change … on my watch." Again, McCain takes the opportunity to compare himself to Obama, stating, "My opponent promises to bring back old jobs by wishing away the global economy. We're going to help workers who've lost a job that won't come back, find a new one that won't go away" (30). In contrast to Obama's speech, the absence of collective action language is notable, as McCain defines himself as the agent of action. Rather than defining a common injustice and identity, McCain chooses to focus on a comparison of the two candidates, effectively forcing him to discuss issues detrimental to him.

The strategy of subtle identification is once again evident in McCain's rhetoric as at this point, he switches from the "I" language to "we" language again, yet continues to leave the "we" undefined. The use of "we" may be common in political speech, but the simultaneous use of individualist language presents a useful opportunity for further study. McCain proclaims "We will prepare them for the jobs of today. We'll use our community colleges to help train people for new opportunities in their communities" (31). He links the issue of jobs to the issues of education and rights, by arguing that "Education is the civil rights issue of this century. Equal access to public education has been gained. But

what is the value of access to a failing school?" (32). According to McCain, the solution is collective: "We need to shake up failed school bureaucracies with competition, empower parents with choice, remove barriers to qualified instructors, attract and reward good teachers, and help bad teachers find another line of work." Yet, at the same time, he reaffirms individualism by linking it to his identity, stating "When a public school fails to meet its obligations to students, parents deserve a choice in the education of their children. And I intend to give it to them" (33). Thus, in his attempts to identify, McCain uses a nebulous collective language, yet often reverts back to individualistic recommendations. This seeming contradiction in an attempt to unify the audience and rhetor merits further examination.

McCain's use of both collective and individualistic language represents what Hart says is the "still-unsettled debate between American individualism and communitarianism that has been waged, perennially, within the U.S. polity."[82] According to Hart, the "rhetorical complexity of the acceptance address" can actually be attributed to this dilemma.[83] The McCain example shows how this strategy can unfold in a speech where the candidate's identity is the main focus. Even though McCain attempts to use "we" language, it remains vague and undefined and McCain instead returns to the question of what either candidate can do. Thus, even when McCain is discussing the role of parents by saying they should have more choices about the education of their children, his focus is on how *he* can best further their ability to act. This point is underscored at the end of the section, as McCain begins to contrast himself with Obama once again. He states, "Senator Obama wants our schools to answer to unions and entrenched bureaucracies. I want schools to answer to parents and students. And when I'm President,

they will" (34). Whether due to the rhetorical complexity of a convention address or due to a strategic choice to build his own credibility, McCain's address takes a highly individual tone, thus inhibiting his ability to build agency and identity roles for the voter.

From education, McCain moves to energy policy. "My fellow Americans," he pledges, "when I'm President, we're going to embark on the most ambitious national project in decades. We are going to stop sending $700 billion a year to countries that don't like us very much," and we "will produce more energy at home" (36). The same urgent tone is used as McCain states, "We will drill new wells offshore, and we'll build them now." He then lists nuclear power, clean coal, and wind, tide, solar, and natural gas as alternative forms of energy. After listing his policies, McCain argues that "Senator Obama thinks we can achieve energy independence without more drilling and without more nuclear power. But Americans know better than that" (36). This can be read as McCain's attempt to challenge Obama's promises by painting them as naïve, and therefore incompetent. According to McCain, Americans know that "We must use all resources and develop all technologies necessary to rescue our economy from the damage caused by rising oil prices and to restore the health of our planet" (36). Although incredulous at Obama's naiveté, McCain believes in his own "ambitious plan," because "Americans are ambitious by nature" (37). At this point, McCain finally enacts an agency role for the voter: "It's time for us to show the world again how Americans lead." Yet, even though he tells Americans to act, he does not tell them how. Instead, he reiterates the result that will follow. "This great national cause will create millions of new jobs," he declares, "many in industries that will be the engine of our future prosperity; jobs that will be there when your children enter the workforce" (37).

McCain transitions to the question of national security by stating that, "Today, the prospect of a better world remains within our reach," but only if we "see the threats to peace and liberty in our time clearly, and face them, as Americans before us did, with confidence, wisdom, and resolve" (38). McCain lays out the wrongdoings of our international enemies and emphasizes their role as continual threats. He begins with the most recent terrorist threats. "We have dealt a serious blow to al Qaeda in recent years," he notes. "But they are not defeated, and they'll strike us again if they can." At the same time, "Iran remains the chief state sponsor of terrorism and on the path to acquiring nuclear weapons" (39). Then, McCain evokes the Cold War, "Russia's leaders, rich with oil wealth and corrupt with power." Again, he reiterates that we can rely on him, stating "As President, I will work to establish good relations with Russia so we need not fear a return of the Cold War." According to McCain, we should vote for him because, "We face many threats in this dangerous world, but I'm not afraid of them" (40).

McCain's rhetoric focuses on his own worldly experience to make the argument that he is the type of candidate who has the experience to bring about change. "I know how the military works," he declares, and "I know how the world works. I know the good and the evil in it. I know how to work with leaders who share our dreams of a freer, safer, and more prosperous world, and how to stand up to those who don't. I know how to secure the peace" (40). In an analysis of this very same passage, Ivie and Giner argue that "[o]n the basis of a simple conviction, [McCain] offered himself as a candidate for president."[84] In other words, the proof offered is simply McCain's belief in his own candidacy. Thus, McCain's personal experience from boyhood through service in Vietnam authorizes him to say, "I hate war. It is terrible beyond imagination" (41). He places his candidacy in this

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context with the statement, "I'm running for President to keep the country I love safe, and prevent other families from risking their loved ones in a war as my family has" (42). Therefore, he promises, "I will draw on all my experience with the world and its leaders, and all the tools at our disposal … to build the foundations for a stable and enduring peace." Thus, McCain's personal experience with the horrors of war and the way they affected him are described as the reason for his campaign for the presidency.

In the final third of his speech, McCain turns to the definitional question of "Change" by stating, "In America, we change things that need to be changed" (43). McCain links his definition to American history by stating that, "Each generation makes its contribution to our greatness," and that the "work that is ours to do is plainly before us. We don't need to search for it" (43). According to McCain, this work is to "change the way the government does almost everything" (44). He lists a litany of necessary adjustments, from security, to the economy, to transportation, and to education, before linking these types of policies to American history. He argues that "[a]ll these functions of government were designed before the rise of the global economy, the information technology revolution and the end of the Cold War." Thus, he frames the challenge in a fashion similar to Obama's. According to both candidates, America must "catch up to history, and we have to change the way we do business in Washington" (44).

In a way, McCain's rhetoric reflects "argument from definition," a strategy which Hart argues is usually employed by conservatives.[85] David Zarefsky explains that argument from definition is a strategy "in which the advocate reaches a conclusion from a premise that stipulates the nature of a thing."[86] This is similar to a syllogistic argument where the main premise is a definition. According to Schiappa, the original Aristotelian

form of this strategy would usually advance the reasons why "An X is (a kind of) *class name* that has such-and-such *attributes*."[87] The strategy would then be characterized by a description of the defining attributes, thus constituting a definition or a main premise. Therefore, one would expect McCain's speech to spend time defining the attributes that make up the class of Americans who plainly know the work before them. However, McCain does not spend much of his speech defining these class attributes. In this sense, McCain's rhetoric is more traditional, utilizing strategic ambiguity as many politicians do. Significantly, however, Obama's speech does develop a heavy identity component which specifies the attributes of the "American class." This is strategically important because McCain's "strategic ambiguity" actually cedes to the main premise of Obama's speech, the idea that Americans have a history of rising to the occasion and bringing about change when it becomes necessary. The main difference is that all of this definitional work is done in Obama's speech, and McCain just agrees to it, so that he can make the argument that he is a better person to lead that process of living up to the American promise. This is not to argue that McCain and Obama see all key terms identically, rather it is to suggest that McCain's choice not to develop the "main premise" or definition essentially cedes the ground to Obama.

McCain uses his experience as proof of his credibility, specifically to argue that he is a more credible agent of change than Obama: "Again and again, I've worked with members of both parties to fix problems that need to be fixed. That's how I will govern as President. I will reach out my hand to anyone to help me get this country moving again. I have that record and the scars to prove it. Senator Obama does not" (46). McCain tells the listener that he will "finally start getting things done for the people who are counting on

us," and that he "won't care who gets the credit" (48). According to Wroe, this is part of a narrative which McCain used to emphasize bipartisanship and reform as a way of defining change on his own terms.[88] Thus, McCain begins to fuse the "Country First" and "Change" campaign themes by admitting that, although he may have "been an imperfect servant" to the country, he was always "been her servant first, last and always" (49). At this point in the address McCain specifically begins to define himself as a credible agent of change due to his prior political experience.

McCain then offers an account of his military service during the Vietnam War as the strongest proof that he always puts his "Country First," and that he is a candidate with the right kind of experience to bring about change. He introduces the story of his time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam with little linguistic ornamentation, mentioning only that a "Long time ago, something unusual happened to me that taught me the most valuable lesson of my life" (50). The language becomes very personal as he returns again to the question of his character. "I was blessed because I served in the company of heroes," he states, "and I witnessed a thousand acts of courage, compassion and love" (50). Just as he used his wife, mother, and running mate to boost his credibility, McCain now uses the identities of those he encountered in Vietnam. Again, he admits that he is imperfect, disclosing, "I hadn't any worry I wouldn't come back safe and sound. I thought I was tougher than anyone. I was pretty independent then, too. I liked to bend a few rules, and pick a few fights for the fun of it. But I did it for my own pleasure; my own pride. I didn't think there was a cause more important than me" (51).

McCain links the personal admission to his P.O.W experience by telling of how he "[t]hen found [himself] falling toward the middle of a small lake in the city of Hanoi,

with two broken arms, a broken leg, and an angry crowd waiting to greet me" (52).

McCain uses the story to tell of the lessons he learned. "I couldn't do anything," he declared," I couldn't even feed myself. They did it for me. I was beginning to learn the limits of my selfish independence. Those men saved my life" (52). McCain tells of how he turned down an opportunity to go home because he knew it would demoralize his comrades. But, he also speaks of how eventually "they broke [him]" (54). It is due to these lessons that McCain says, that "I fell in love with my country. . . for its decency; for its faith in the wisdom, justice, and goodness of its people" (56). According to McCain, the experience defined him: "I was never the same again. I wasn't my own man anymore. I was my country's" (56). Thus, McCain returns once again to the question of his character by using the P.O.W story to explain how he learned the important lesson, "Country First."

The P.O.W. narrative draws heavily on themes of inspiration, liberation, and patriotism. Significantly, these represent three out of the four most important themes used by Republicans when utilizing argument from definition.[89] Traditionally, these themes are used by candidates to glorify the party identity or of the community. These narratives are usually used to provide "a sense of importance and direction . . ., a communal focus for individual identity."[90] Yet, as Hart explains McCain differs because he highlights his own inspiration, liberation, and patriotism, citing them as the basis for his decision to run for president: "I'm not running for president because I think I'm blessed with such personal greatness that history has anointed me to save our country in its hour of need. My country saved me. My country saved me and I cannot forget it. And I will fight for her for as long as I draw breath, so help me God" (57). Although McCain states he is not

blessed with personal greatness, he spent the entire speech defining his identity as an exceptional one, proclaiming that he will change education and tax policy as well as protect the nation from the dangers of terrorism and another Cold War. Thus, the humbling statement is not consistent with the definitional argument regarding McCain's character already presented in the speech.[91]

Finally, McCain defines the agency and identity roles of the voter. "If you find faults with our country," he challenges the audience, "make it a better one" (58). He lists a multitude of things viewers can do, if they are "disappointed with the mistakes of government." These include: "Enlist in our Armed Forces. Become a teacher. Enter the ministry. Run for public office. Feed a hungry child. Teach an illiterate adult to read. Comfort the afflicted. Defend the rights of the oppressed." Just as these are urgent missions for citizens, McCain defines his responsibility as "to fight for my cause every day as your President" (59). After briefly describing the potential courses of action available to voters, McCain once again reiterates his identity and own ability to change the situation: "I'm going to fight to make sure every American has every reason to thank God, as I thank Him: that I'm an American, a proud citizen of the greatest country on Earth, and with hard work, strong faith and a little courage, great things are always within our reach." Thus he urges the audience, "Fight with me. Fight with me" (59).

The tone is combative, as McCain urges, "Fight for what's right for our country. Fight for the ideals and character of a free people. Fight for our children's future. Fight for justice and opportunity for all," (60-63) and "Stand up to defend our country. … Stand up for each other. . . . Stand up, stand up, stand up and fight" (64-66).[92] Ivie and Giner, in an analysis of the very same passage, observe that "McCain addressed the

gathered Republicans at the 2008 convention in martial terms."[93] Significantly, they also note that "[w]hat was left strategically ambiguous—perhaps because it was obvious to 'real' Americans—was who were our enemies, and how exactly were they to be fought."[94] Instead, McCain returns to the use of collective language by saying "nothing is inevitable here," because "we're Americans, and we never give up. We never quit. We never hide from history. We make history" (66). Although McCain does return to the use of collective language, his rhetoric has already prescribed social roles for the voter and a political role for the President. Whereas Obama used his definition of the problem to prescribe a solution requiring the American electorate's participation, McCain's speech focused on his own ability to change the situation.

In his attempt to capture the "Change" theme by spending his speech defining himself as a credible agent of change, McCain actually allowed Obama to frame the debate in terms of Americans' political participation. Senator John McCain spent over 85% of his speech describing how he and Sarah Palin were harbingers of change, using specific policy proposals and even the story of his experience as a prisoner of war in Vietnam to prove this identity. Unfortunately for McCain, he could win 100 percent of this claim, and he would still leave totally untouched the question of the listener's identity. Though some audience members might identify with McCain, his rhetoric does not specifically attempt to activate their sense of political agency or identity. His rhetoric, in contrast to Obama's, does not provide a personal reason why voters should go out and cast their votes for McCain. Furthermore, the anecdotes, myths, and tone McCain uses throughout the speech are inconsistent, disrupting the narrative he attempts to build.

Every candidate in the 2008 presidential election knew the contest would be about change from the Bush administration.[95] After running a conventional Republican primary campaign, John McCain attempted to re-define himself as a credible agent of change as he accepted his party's nomination. This chapter sought to understand better the rhetorical strategies McCain employed to achieve this goal. Investigation of McCain's failed "Maverick" strategy in 2000, and his subsequent attempts to ingratiate himself to the Republican party, reveal that McCain won the nomination by outlasting his competitors, and not because he particularly energized the conservative base. Thus, going into the 2008 Republican National Convention, McCain faced the same problem Obama did in motivating voters. Where Obama used his speech to define the nature of the American promise and the character which assures it, however, McCain used his to define himself and Sarah Palin as instantiations of that character, and thus of "Change." Where Obama reframed the debate away from his inexperience and onto the American people's ability to stay true to the quintessential American spirit, McCain chose to focus his speech on his own agency and identity. This strategy made it necessary for McCain to discuss specific policy options in comparison to Obama. In doing so, he disrupted the very narrative he wove.

McCain's rhetorical strategy provides support for Gamson's argument that "the only idea of agency" promoted during modern presidential elections is "individual" and "reflected in a consumer's private choice of which product to buy" in the voting booth.[96] This helps explain why McCain did not inspire the political turnout that Obama did; his rhetoric did not account for the audience's agency as Obama's did. Although he lists a multitude of things Americans can do "if [they're] disappointed with the mistakes of

government," he does not offer any form of political agency.[97] Instead, McCain leaves that role for himself. Thus, whereas both candidates appealed to the American electorate's desire for change, only Obama created a role for the audience's agency within his rhetoric. This fact becomes increasingly relevant, especially as Americans continually feel as though they are losing influence.[98] The comparison points powerfully to the importance of collective action in political rhetoric, especially when voters often feel that they are disconnected from electoral politics.

Notes

[1] William Greener and Christopher Arterton, "McCain: Strategies and Tactics in the General Election," in *Campaigning for President 2008,* ed. Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 167.

[2] As noted in Chapters 1 and 2.

[3] As noted in Chapters 1 and 2.

[4] John McCain, "McCain's Nomination Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention," September 4, 2008, Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.cfr.org/publication/17100/ (accessed May 1, 2010), paragraph 1. The author counted and numbered 67 paragraphs in this transcript of the speech. All subsequent references to the address are cited parenthetically in the text of the chapter.

[5] Chuck Todd and Sheldon Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 5.

[6] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 6.

[7] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 6.

[8] Trevor B. McCrisken, "The Republican Primaries," *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 60.

[9] Justin Sizemore, "The Contemporary Significance of a Great American Institution," in *The Year of Obama,* ed. Larry J. Sabato (New York: Pearson Education, 2010), 28.

[10] Tony Fabrizio, "McCain: From Frontrunner to Dead-in-the-Water to Nominee," in *Campaigning for President 2008*, ed. Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 76.

[11] Trevor B. McCrisken, "The Republican Primaries," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 57.

[12] Charles E. Cook Jr., "The 2008 Presidential Primaries: What in America's Name Is Gong On?" *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 197.

[13] Cook Jr., "The 2008 Presidential Primaries," 197.

[14] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 6.

[15] Cook Jr., "The 2008 Presidential Primaries," 197-198.

[16] Dan Balz and Haynes Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 35.

[17] Fabrizio, "McCain," 66.

[18] Charles E. Cook Jr., "The Campaign No One Will Forget," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 197.

[19] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 6.

[20] Cook Jr., "The 2008 Presidential Primaries," 193.

[21] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 6.

[22] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 6.

[23] McCrisken, "The Republican Primaries," 43-44.

[24] Fabrizio, "McCain," 71.

[25] McCrisken, "The Republican Primaries," 60.

[26] Fabrizio, "McCain," 74.

[27] Fabrizio, "McCain," 76.

[28] McCrisken, "The Republican Primaries," 41.

[29] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 16.*

[30] Rhodes Cook, "From Republican 'Lock' to Republican 'Lockout'?," in *The Year of Obama,* ed. Larry J. Sabato (New York: Pearson Education, 2010), 79.

[31] McCrisken, "The Republican Primaries," 62.

[32] Greener and Arteron, "McCain," 167.

[33] Greener and Arteron, "McCain," 167.

[34] Greener and Arteron, "McCain," 167.

[35] Carl Berstein, "McCain turns to old GOP themes, buzzwords," *CNN*, September 3, 2008, http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/03/bernstein.rnc/index.html.

[36] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 16.

[37] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 18.

[38] Greener and Arterton, "McCain," 166-167.

[39] "The Smear Gap," *Newsweek*, August 18, 2008, http://www.newsweek.com/2008/08/17/the-smear-gap.html

[40] Jennifer Palmieri, "Setting the Agenda: 'Yes We Can,'" in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 93.

[41] Balz and Johnson, *The Battle for America 2008*, 324.

[42] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 21.

[43] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 21.

[44] Greener and Arteron, *Campaigning for President 2008*, 167.

[45] Greener and Arteron, *Campaigning for President 2008*, 167.

[46] Larry Sabato, *The Election of Our Lifetime*, in *The Year of Obama,* ed. Larry J. Sabato (New York: Pearson Education, 2010), 27.

[47] Sizemore, "The Contemporary Significance," 25.

[48] Sizemore, "The Contemporary Significance," 25.

[49] Dennis W. Johnson, "McCain: Strategies and Tactics in the General Election," in *Campaigning for President 2008,* ed. Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

[50] Johnson, "McCain," 10.

[51] Johnson, "McCain," 10.

[52] Sizemore, "The Contemporary Significance," 26.

[53] Sizemore, "The Contemporary Significance," 25.

[54] Sizemore, "The Contemporary Significance," 26.

[55] Andrew Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 121.

[56] Elizabeth DiNovella, "Maverick 2.0," *Progressive*, October 2008, 72 (10), 24.

[57] Cal Thomas and Bob Beckel, "What's the maverick's mission?" *USA Today*, September 4, 2008, 17a.

[58] Elisabeth Bumiller and Michael Cooper, "On Center Stage, Palin Electrifies Convention," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2008, A1; Andrew Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections*, ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 122.

[59] Sizemore, "The Contemporary Significance," 27.

[60] Alicia Kolar Prevost and James A. Thurber, "A Perfect Campaign: The Role of Money, Organization, and Strategy," in *The 2008 Presidential Elections: A Story in Four Act* ed. Erik Jones and Salvatore Vassallo (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 121.

[61] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 122.

[62] Wroe, "The Conventions and Debates," 122. Bumiller and Cooper, "On Center Stage," A1.

[63] Palmieri, "Setting the Agenda: 'Yes We Can,'" 96.

[64] Greener and Arteron, "McCain," 167.

[65] William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 27.

[66] Gamson, *Talking Politics,* 31.

[67] Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 31.

[68] John McCain, "McCain's Nomination Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention," September 4, 2008, Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.cfr.org/publication/17100/ (accessed May 1, 2010), paragraph 1. The author counted and numbered 67 paragraphs in this transcript of the speech. All subsequent references to the address are cited parenthetically in the text of the chapter.

[69] McCrisken, "McCain," 41.

[70] Sharon E. Jarvis, "Campaigning Aline: Partisan Versus Personal Language in the Presidential Nominating Convention Acceptance Addresses, 1948-2000," *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no. 12 (2001): 2154.

[71] Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (2009): 368.

[72] William F. Lewis, "Telling America's Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency," in *Reading in Rhetorical Criticism*, 264.

[73] Lewis, "Telling America's Story" 264.

[74] George Cheney, "The rhetoric of identification," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69, no. 2 (1983): 148-149.

[75] Cheney, "The rhetoric of identification," 154.

[76]Roderick P. Hart, *Campaign Talk: Why Elections Are Good for Us* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 163.

[77] These topics were discussed as sub-topics or themes over the course of three paragraphs.

[78] Lynn Vavreck, *The Message Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), xxii.

[79] Vavreck, *The Message Matters*, xxii.

[80] Vavreck, *The Message Matters,* xxii.

[81] Vavreck, *The Message Matters,* xxii.

[82] Hart, *Campaign Talk*, 116.

[83] Hart, *Campaign Talk*, 116.

[84] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism, 367.

[85] Hart, *Campaign Talk*, 162.

[86] David Zarefsky, "Strategic Maneuvering through Persuasive Definitions: Implications for Dialectic and Rhetoric," *Argumentation* 20 (2006), 404.

[87] Edward Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 109.

[88] Wroe, "The Conventions," 121.

[89] Hart, *Campaign Talk*, 163.

[90] Lewis, "Telling America's Story," 265.

[91] Ronald Reagan's rhetoric and use of narrative presents a useful contrast. According to Lewis' extension of Fisher's research, Reagan was often inconsistent in his stories, but he got away with this because the "Reagan in the story" was always consistent and made common sense. This illustrates that in addition to being strategically sound, definitional argument and collective action framing must follow the same rules of "narrative probability" and "narrative fidelity" established by Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," in *Reading in Rhetorical Criticism*, 264.

[92] Though these numbers indicate 4 paragraphs of text, each line was numbered as one paragraph in the transcript of the address utilized.

[93] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism, 368.

[94] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism, 368.

[95] As noted in Chapter 1.

[96] Gamson, *Talking Politics*, 61.

[97] Gamson, *Talking Politics*, 58.

[98] Hart, *Campaign Talk*, 57.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

This project set out to understand how Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain campaigned in an election focused around the American electorate's desire for change. To do so, I first sought to understand how Obama and McCain posited themselves as credible agents of change through their nomination acceptance speeches at their respective national party conventions. Second, the analysis sought to account for the persuasive effect of this rhetoric by using theories of framing as well as on the social construction aspects of presidential campaigns. Now, a summary of the project's findings and limitations, as well as potential directions for future research is in order.

Study of the 2008 election cycle reveals that Obama's use of "Change" as a campaign theme set the tone of the entire debate, forcing other candidates such as McCain and Senator Hillary Clinton to respond to the debate on his terms. In particular, Obama's 2008 Democratic National Convention speech exemplifies the use of argument by definition by a presidential candidate seeking to advance a controversial definition without arousing attendant controversy. As a new candidate with a questionable record and identity according to national poll data, Obama used the strategy to define change so broadly as to excuse his weaknesses as a candidate. By defining the problem as one of the American people's failure to live up to a time of need, he shifts the focus from questions about his personal identity to questions about the integrity and identity of American voters themselves. In this way, Obama advanced a radical definition of change without arousing further doubts about his candidacy.

Investigation of Obama's convention speech through the lens of framing and definitional argument underscores one of the new assumptions of political communication, that "an electorate is not a stable, ontological entity but one 'summoned up' periodically by political actors who define it in order to control it."[1] Obama and McCain both make claims about what the problems are that face the American electorate, and about the proper solution. In the context of a campaign, politicians must translate these definitional claims into political action. In doing so, speakers define not just a situation and its solution, but also the very identity of the audience, thus using "language to redefine that sense of identity," and thus the likely political outcome.[2] Although the project's conclusions may not add up to "effect" in traditional public polling terms, they do lend credence to arguments about the "effectivity" of language.[3]

The Analysis

Chapter one provides the contextual framework for the study by outlining the project's goals and prospective methodology, as well as the salient literature. Study of the 2008 presidential election shows it to be a unique election from the very beginning, narrowing as time went on to a definitional argument about which candidate could truly be considered a credible agent of change. A review of the scholarly literature surrounding presidential campaigns makes clear that this example of political rhetoric could be understood according to either an instrumental or consummatory standard. Although a rhetorician might not study the direct effect of convention speeches through polling, they may study texts' effects on a campaign conversation and on an audience's sense of self-

identification. In this sense, the first chapter in this project establishes an important reason for studying a public address even when its direct effects cannot be quantified.

Chapter two analyzed how Obama campaigned for the Democratic nomination and the particular political situation he faced in the run-up to his acceptance of the nomination, and examined the response he gave in his nomination acceptance speech. A study of the contest for the Democratic nomination exposes the substantial challenges Obama faced introducing himself as a credible presidential candidate given his relative inexperience in elective office, as well as other factors such as his age and race. Additionally, his campaign against Clinton was long and protracted, creating the potential for a nasty general election where many Democratic voters might decide to vote Republican. Despite these barriers, Obama did win the Democratic presidential nomination and went on to win the general election, establishing himself as the most impressive vote-getter of the century. Close reading of his acceptance of the nomination reveals how Obama's speech exemplifies the use of argument by definition, a viable strategy for rhetors seeking to advance seemingly-radical claims without arousing attendant controversy.

Chapter three investigates how McCain campaigned for the Republican nomination and the particular political situation he faced en route to his acceptance of the nomination, as well as the response he gave in his nomination acceptance speech. The analysis reveals that though this rhetoric momentarily challenged Obama's candidacy, McCain failed to produce the voter turn-out Obama did. Using the concept of collective action framing as a heuristic device demonstrated that McCain did not account for the audience's agency and identity as well as Obama had. Rather, he focused on his own

agency and identity. These findings illustrate the central role of identity to rhetorical

success, helping prove arguments similar to Roderick P. Hart's claim that presidential

campaigns are important because "every four years two prominent politicians ask voters

to rewrite the story of the American presidency."[4] According to Hart, this is the very

reason that convention speeches merit scholarly attention. These addresses may be trite in

some ways, but every four years, two rhetors ask voters to define American values as

they relate to a political context. Thus, the results of chapter three's analysis lend

credence to the idea that the keys to effective political communication are the audience's

sense of agency and identity.

It is important to note that although McCain's text is the main focus of chapter three,

the same chapter also attempts to understand why Obama's argument for change was

ultimately deemed most believable. Having identified the audience's sense of agency and

identity as a key point of departure in the candidate's rhetoric, the chapter maintains that

Obama's rhetoric was more persuasive because he invited the audience to understand

itself as part of the "huge effort … underfoot in America to define and understand a new

progressive movement with the specific goal of restoring all that has been abused,

dismantled and destroyed by six years of rule by an unchecked Republican Party."[5] Every

candidate in the 2008 presidential election knew the contest would be about change from

the Bush administration, but Obama succeeded rhetorically by constructing a place for

the audience to exercise agency in this context. Thus, "the age-old slogan, 'It's Time for

Change,' had powerful new meaning."[6] This instance points compellingly to the

importance of constituitive rhetoric. Not only does the potential to constitute the audience

exist, but publics may crave such opportunities, especially in today's political context which often makes voters feel disconnected.

<div align="center">Implications for Future Research</div>

This project follows in the footsteps of research "grounded in an argumentative perspective that seeks to account for the influence that arguments based on definition(s) exert in a given discursive milieu."[7] I sought to understand how Obama and McCain used rhetoric to produce some type of effect. In the process, I also discovered the effects of many material aspects of campaigning – such as message discipline, political history, and campaign length – typically discussed by political scientists. In one way, these findings are not revolutionary, as they simply point to literature in different fields. On the other hand, however, the conclusions have the potential to illuminate some of the limitations as well as some new directions for rhetorical studies. In particular, this section discusses the ways in which important groundwork laid by other fields, such as political science, can and should be incorporated into research in communication studies. This section also notes potential directions for those studying definitional argument or framing.

Perhaps one of the most underrated factors in the success of Obama's rhetoric is the idea of message discipline.[8] Obama had an organizing principle to his candidacy announcement, something which was absent from both McCain's and Clinton's candidacy announcements. From the very beginning, Obama hammered away at the same change theme. Even when he tweaked his message against Clinton and against McCain, he was only refining his definition of change. In this way, "Obama's campaign rarely wavered from its theme and message . . . Time and again when the Obama campaign

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faced challenges . . . Obama returned to the central theme and message: change."[9] Definitional argument allowed him to maintain a consistent theme, although really he was honing and tweaking the whole time. Obama won the presidency for several reasons, "but one of the central factors was he always made the case for why he was the candidate of change, the candidate who was change from Bush."[10] This is significant because it remains unrecognized in many accounts of Obama's rhetoric, as Jennifer Palmieri explains "nearly everyone–friend and opponent alike–admired Obama's oratory," but "most failed to recognize the calculated, methodical strategy that lay at the foundation of his message. . . . The campaign's message and strategy were one and the same."[11] There is no denying the power of Obama's oratory, but other political and strategic factors also influenced the production and reception of his discourse. These merit examination by those studying political rhetoric.

In contrast to Obama's focused message, both Clinton and McCain failed to present a continuous narrative throughout the campaign. From the moment Obama announced his candidacy, he "shattered all assumptions about the 2008 presidential campaign," forcing his opponents to reconsider their political strategies.[12] Eventually, both of Obama's main competitors "came to the reluctant conclusion that they had to adapt their message to fit the changed political landscape Obama had created."[13] Though the decision allowed both Clinton and McCain to challenge Obama in new ways, the fact remains that these candidates' presidential bids were ultimately unsuccessful. Further studies of political rhetoric might do well to take into account the efficacy of conventional political wisdom, such as "it is best to run your own race. Pick your message, and stick with it."[14] These

studies might also further examine the way definitional argument may be used to create the appearance of message discipline, as occurred in Obama's case.

The case study of Obama's and McCain's convention speeches also reveals another opportunity for the further study of definitional argument. In this particular project, McCain's speech was examined as a response to Obama's dominant framing of the election. However, McCain also attempted to define himself as an agent of change on his own terms. Hillary Clinton, too, attempted to define herself as an agent of change during the primary season. Thus, further study of these two examples might reveal more about McCain's and Clinton's definitional arguments in campaign speeches as independent rhetorical artifacts. Additionally, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin also emerged as a potential candidate for "change," thus presenting yet another opportunity for a point-counterpoint analysis.

Several structural factors of argumentation may also be accounted for in further research. In particular, some political commentators note that Obama's drawn-out campaign with Clinton helped hone his skills as a debater. Thus, although some accused Clinton of giving Republicans fodder for the general election and of causing party disunity, others argued that "the long, drawn-out primary campaign with Clinton did more to help Obama than hurt him."[15] By being forced to get into the election early, Obama became accustomed to being a presidential contender. Obama himself "has testified many times to the fact that Hillary Clinton made him a better candidate."[16] Ultimately, "the lessons he learned, the way he handled the issues, and the brand he built positioned him to defeat John McCain in the general election."[17] This example points to another old adage, the idea that practice makes perfect. Phrases may be crafted for a

particular effect, but it is important that we account for the rhetor's skill in delivering them.

The visual aspects of framing present more fertile ground for research. One particularly striking example is the way that "Obama looked like change."[18] Not only was his personal story an "even more dramatic narrative" than the rest of the field's candidates, but he also looked very physically distinct from the rest of the candidates.[19] Young and "black," his own physical appearance may have literally operated as a frame that highlighted his credibility as an agent of change. McCain could again serve as a useful counterpoint in this type of study. Republicans themselves point to a New Orleans event where "McCain delivered a toughly worded speech … designed to make the case that he was the true change agent," as proof of McCain's visual weakness.[20] According to political commentators, "against a garish green backdrop, McCain looked old and tired, in contrast to his youthful opponent. For Republicans, the appearance symbolized a McCain on the wrong side of a 'change' election."[21] Thus, further research might look into the ways that physical appearance affected the credibility of McCain's and Obama's arguments about change.

In addition to the natural physical features of each candidate, scholars might study each speaker's strategic use of visual framing. For example, although the Democratic National Convention was held at the Pepsi Center, Obama's acceptance of the nomination was deliberately delivered at a different venue, Mile High Stadium. This idea came about because Obama's campaign staff was adamant that as "a grassroots campaign … it felt wrong that our biggest night so far could not be shared with those who had selflessly given so much time and effort."[22] These efforts were meant to allow a larger

crowd in an open space, thus visually highlighting Obama's grassroots campaign efforts.

Additionally, the speech was delivered on "a stage resembling a miniature Greek

temple," and "two hundred spotlights would bathe the scene in a sea of soft light."[23]

According to Obama strategists, the campaign added these physical features to the stage

to highlight Obama's oratory and his commonalities with Martin Luther King Jr., who

delivered his historic "I Have A Dream" speech exactly forty five years earlier to the

day.[24] Just as Obama's physical appearance may have influenced the way his message

was received, these stage modifications aimed to elicit a specific response from the

audience. Due to real and potential political influences, such visual rhetoric merits further

consideration.

Visual framing also points to the way Obama always embodied the "Change" theme

of which he spoke. For example, the campaign said that their decision to deliver the

acceptance speech at the Mile High Stadium instead of the Pepsi Center shows how "four

of [their] central operating philosophies came together in one moment."[25] Although the

move was organizationally challenging, it demonstrated the Obama team's "willingness

to chuck the old playbook and test the organization by consistently reaching to

accomplish difficult things."[26] Not only did Obama look and talk like change, his

campaign strategies were also innovative. According to David Plouffe, Obama's chief

campaign manager, the decision was easy to make because "we knew who we were–a

grassroots campaign to the core."[27] These types of decisions may have added credence to

Obama's specific definition of change as broader than anti-Bush. Although Democrats

had been defining change as difference from President George W. Bush, "the change for

America Obama proposed in Iowa went beyond replacing a Republican president with a

Democratic one. He campaigned against the political status quo and Washington's corrupt habits. By implication, Obama's message subtly rejected the entire Clinton-Bush era."[28] Notably, "even McCain's 'Maverick' theme failed to meet the criteria of a winning insurgent issue. . . .To argue that you are the candidate who has the *experience* to bring change is demonstrating that you are something *old* when the point of this argument is to sell yourself as something *new*."[29] Obama thus made it impossible for Clinton or McCain to embody his definition of change, as they had been part of the political establishment for decades. Consequently, Obama "capture[d] the full dimension of change," where other candidates failed to do the same.[30] The way candidates embody their messages thus may have a powerful influence on the way their rhetoric is understood, presenting another useful opportunity for exploration.

Finally, the upcoming 2012 presidential election provides the prospect of studying how Obama's rhetoric of "Change" has evolved over the course of four years in office. Obama announced formally on April 4, 2011 that he would run for re-election in 2012; the announcement was distributed via email, a blog, and a YouTube video.[31] The campaign is also breaking 40 years of tradition by making Chicago its home base.[32] Already, Obama is utilizing new methods and types of media to gain public support, demonstrating the fertile ground his rhetoric presents for further study.

Many potential research areas exist because even a cursory look at this type of discourse reveals that "the rhetorical study of the audience is much more than a matter of public opinion polling."[33] Quantitative analysis through poll data does not tell us about the secondary rhetorical effects of a speaker's chosen words. Celeste Michelle Condit explains. Although "[p]ublic advocates rarely convince each other," she writes, and "they

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do not have to do so." Instead "[c]ompeting rhetors persuade third parties–audiences–and create a 'public consensus' that does not require the approval of every individual on every point."[34] A rhetorical conversation is not just about getting a vote, it has other effects. According to Walter Fisher, these are tantamount to giving the audience a moral choice.[35] Yet, rhetors and audiences alike often do not acknowledge this dimension. For example, Obama's victory over Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary was considered "the triumph of hope over experience."[36] However, the significance of such a decision was not explicitly recognized by the candidates. In fact, Obama used argument by definition to gloss over the fact that voters choosing him would be selecting hope over experience. Although this project has identified such a use of definitional argument and its method of operation, further research might study how audiences can respond to these types of claims in better prepared and more informed ways.

The 2008 presidential election has been singled out as a productive area for study by scholars in a variety of fields. Yet much work remains to be done in order to allow for a complete understanding of the campaign's communicative dimensions. This project sought to understand how two orators attempted to gain votes at the outset of the general election. Thorough investigation of contextual information found that he entire nation watched as Barack Obama and John McCain sought to frame the "Change" theme in very different ways. Although we already know whose strategy was ultimately judged the most effective electorally, further research can continue to tell us about the use of framing and definitional argument as strategies of presidential campaign communication. Thus, each candidate's campaign strategy continues to present fertile ground for those seeking to understand presidential campaign rhetoric. At a minimum, close textual

analysis of campaign rhetoric allows the public to understand more fully that candidates do not just produce trite rhetoric; rather, their words posit telling arguments about our collective future.

Notes

[1] Roderick P. Hart, Sharon E. Jarvis, and Elvin T. Lim, "The American People in Crisis: A Content Analysis," *Political Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2002), 108.

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