

# Positive and inclusive language and imagery can help candidates win over voters in times of crisis.

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*On the eve of the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America, [David McGuire](#), [James Cunningham](#) and [Thomas Garavan](#) look back at the historic 2008 campaign of Barack Hussein Obama and examine how he used speech imagery and inclusive language to portray a vision of a hopeful and positive future. By comparing the campaign speeches of Barack Obama and 2008 Republican presidential candidate John McCain, they identify important differences in the speech imagery used by the candidates and the language in which these images are captured.*



The 2008 US Presidential campaign was a historic event. On the road to the White house, first-term Senator Barack Hussein Obama successfully defeated former first-lady Hillary Clinton in the Democratic party primary to secure his party nomination and then overcame war veteran John McCain by a wide margin to become the first African-American President of the United States. While a variety of explanations have been proposed for how Obama was able to win the White House, including dissatisfaction with the leadership of President George W. Bush and the impact of the financial crisis, the 2008 campaign might best be remembered for its inspiring speeches and striking use of speech imagery. But are there discernible differences in the use of language and speech imagery by the Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates? Our research suggests that there are.



The use of language, frames and imagery have long enabled leaders to communicate a set of values, beliefs and ideals; allowing followers a psychological proximity to a proposed 'new reality'. In a US context, the primary and presidential campaigns offer candidates an opportunity to connect with the concerns of voters and local communities, giving the candidates a strong appreciation of regional differences in outlook and an opportunity to build a national platform around a set of core themes. In truth, the campaigns represent something of a prolonged courtship allowing candidates through stump speeches to achieve a number of important objectives:



1. *Communicate a positive vision of the future:* In the 2008 campaign, both Obama and McCain embraced the concept of the American dream (the ideal of equality of opportunity open to all Americans), although they each articulated the concept in a distinct way. For his part, Obama adopts the speech image of the American Dream as a collective aspiration to encourage inclusivity and togetherness, while John McCain uses the American Dream image as one of personal hope and opportunity in the belief that America enables individuals to transform their future prospects and develop their potential through hard work and self-belief. Through speeches delivered by the candidates, Obama uses “we” in discussing the American dream to signal inclusivity and a desire to share the task whereas McCain uses “I” to highlight actions that will be taken by him to restore the American Dream.

**Obama:** *If you'll stand to keep the American dream alive for those who still hunger for opportunity and thirst for justice; if you're ready to stop settling for what the cynics tell you that you must accept, and finally reach for what you know is possible, then we will win this caucus, we will win this election, we will change the course of history, and the real journey – to heal a nation and repair the world (Des Moines, IA: December 27, 2007)*

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**McCain:** *As President, I will bring enormous talent — like these great leaders here — from outside of Washington to shake up the government and get it working to promote economic growth and jobs for the American people. My team and I will take action to put an end to this economic crisis, restore confidence in our markets, get stock and home prices moving up again, grow businesses, create jobs and restore the great American dream. (Cleveland, OH: Oct. 28, 2008)*

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2. *Creating a Sense of Dissatisfaction with the Status Quo:* While approval ratings for George W. Bush [declined](#) in his final years in office, the latter stages of the 2008 Presidential campaign were also marked by the onset of the global financial crisis (in [particular](#), the financial bailouts of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008). Combined with [rising](#) unemployment rates, these events set a tone for dissatisfaction with the status quo amongst the American populace. Both McCain and Obama worked hard to convince the American people of their ability to depart from the fractured political system of the past. Adopting the speech image of broken politics, they demonstrated empathy with the public in their speeches through highlighting emotions such as tiredness, brokenness and disappointment and the urgent need to bring about reform of the political system.

Significant differences appear however in relation to how the candidates indicate that they would address perceptions of economic decline and issues of corruption and special interests in Washington. In his speeches, McCain emphasised his individual conviction and resolute determination to address failed policies and wasteful spending in Washington. His focus on specific actions he would take as President contrasts sharply to the challenge posed by Obama for Americans to reject passivity and come together to fight for change. Obama's language is very inclusive and incorporates a direct appeal for change as well as hopefulness, optimism and confidence in society's ability to deliver such change.

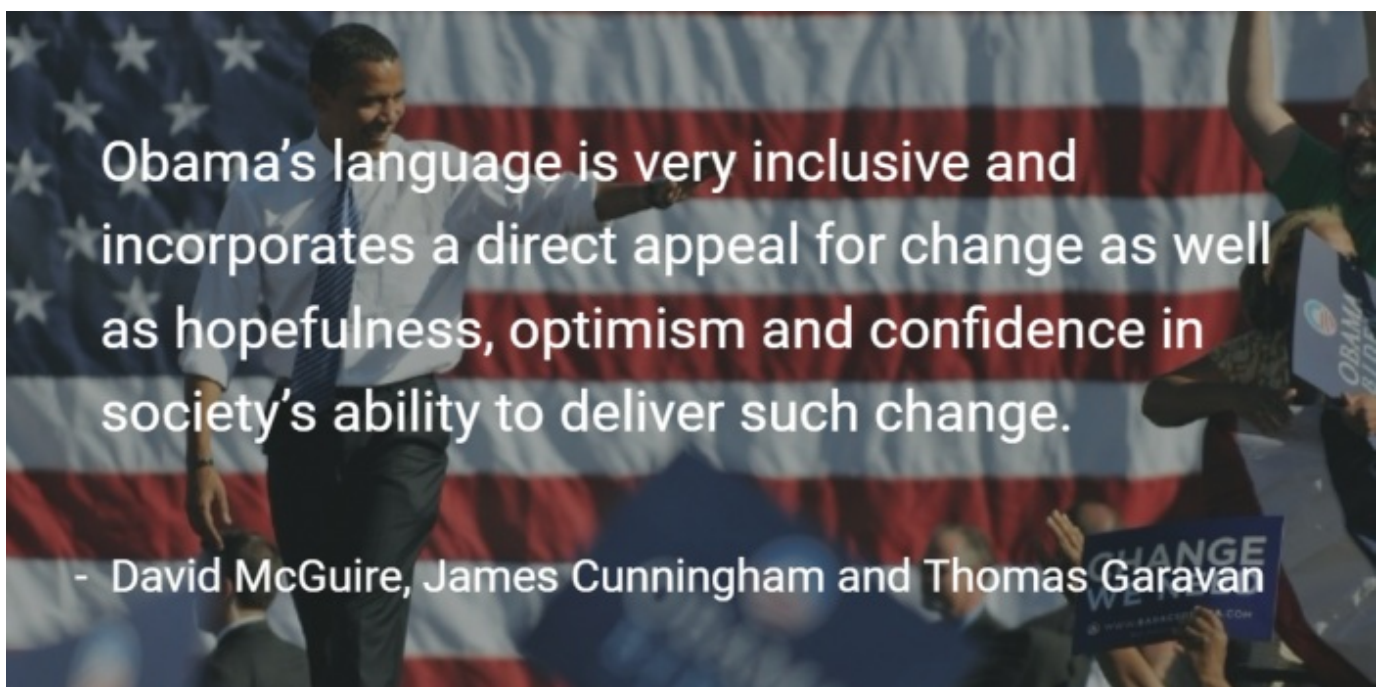
**Obama:** *It is time to turn the page on eight years of economic policies that put Wall Street before Main Street but ended up hurting both. We need policies that grow our economy from the bottom-up, so that every American, everywhere, has the chance to get ahead. ... Because if we've learned anything from this economic crisis, it's that we're all connected; we're all in this together; and we will rise or fall as one nation – as one people. ...But now we need a rescue plan for the middle class. (Londonderry, NH: October 15, 2008)*

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**McCain:** *The financial markets are in crisis. Times are tough. Enormous strain is being put on working families and individuals in America. I know that the events unfolding can be difficult to understand for many Americans. The dominos that we have seen fall this week began with the corruption and manipulation of our home loan system. Today we need a plan that doesn't wait until the system fails. I am calling for the creation of the mortgage and financial institutions trust – the MFI (Cedar Rapids, IA: Sept. 18, 2008)*

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3. **Personal History:** Campaign speeches offer candidates the opportunity to communicate important messages about their background, history and personal experiences. It also allows candidates to link their background to some of the key themes within their campaign. In this regard, Obama in his speeches works to position himself and his family as ordinary Americans connected to the experiences of small-town America. Obama's unique background allows him to create and mould a shared identity with many cultural strands, in sync with one of his overarching campaign themes of inclusivity. In contrast, McCain sets out to demonstrate his suitability for the role of commander-in-chief. He makes reference to his family's service in the US navy and his extensive experience in the US senate – perhaps as a point of contrast to the limited experience of Obama at the highest levels of government.



**Obama:** *I wasn't born into a lot of money. I was raised by a single mother with the help my grandparents, who grew up in small-town Kansas, went to school on the GI Bill, and bought their home through an FHA loan. My mother had to use food stamps at one point, but she still made sure that through scholarships, I got a chance to go to some of the best schools around, which helped me get into some of the best colleges around, which gave me loans that Michelle and I just finished paying not all that many years ago. In other words, my story is a quintessentially American story. (Washington, DC: April 14, 2008)*

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**McCain:** *I was blessed to have been born into a family who made their living at sea in defense of our security and ideals. My grandfather was a naval aviator; my father a submariner. Their respect for me was one of the great ambitions of my life. And so it was nearly pre-ordained that I would find a place in my family's profession, and that occupation would one day take me to war. (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Aug. 27, 2007)*

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So, what are the key lessons from examining the speeches of both candidates in the 2008 US Presidential campaign? First, the contextual factors surrounding the 2008 campaign (high unemployment; global financial crisis; distrust in politics) presented an opportunity for both candidates to create a compelling vision about the need for change and the urgency to shape a more positive future. Second, the consistent use of inclusive language by Obama helped to generate a collective esprit-de-corps amongst his followers and articulate a set of values around unity, respect for difference and working together for a common future. Finally, the speech images used by Obama create a stronger emotional connection with and among followers than the more individualistic approach adopted by McCain.

Speech images and language can be an important toolkit for leaders in articulating their vision of the future, outlining their persona, experience and values and building a strong relationship with followers. Leaders would thus be wise to invest time and care in framing imagery and language in order to generate the desired impact and maximise their leadership effectiveness.

*This article is based on the paper, 'The use of imagery in the campaign speeches of Barack Hussein Obama and John McCain during the 2008 US Presidential Election' in the Leadership & Organization Development Journal.*

Featured [image credit: Barack Obama](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-SA](#))

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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**David McGuire** – *Edinburgh Napier University*

Dr. David McGuire is a Reader in Human Resource Development at Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland



**James Cunningham** – *Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen*

Dr. James Cunningham is lecturer at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland.



**Thomas N. Garavan** – *Edinburgh Napier University*

Prof. Thomas N. Garavan is Research Professor at Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland.



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