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## Introduction

American presidents represent the kind of public figures who cannot escape the headlines. They fatally attract the media, generate rumors and make the entire world talk about them. Their public image is constructed piece by piece in the different phases that mark their ascendancy to the presidency, from the early stage of the pre-primary election up to the general election. This means that by the time the competition is reduced to a direct confrontation between a Democratic and a Republican frontrunner, people already know a lot about both candidates. In this last and heated phase of political contest, the words of the candidates on how they would lead the country have been repeated often enough to have found their way into people's minds and hearts. Thus, the stage is prepared for the *grand finale* when the president elect is acclaimed with standing ovations.

What happened to America on 4 November 2008 was more than the election of the 44th President. The ascendancy to the American presidency of Barack Hussein Obama was taken as a sign that the time of change had finally come to America and to the world. Obama was the first African-American President and his victory was taken to mark the beginning of a new chapter in the history of America. The front pages of newspapers and magazines all over the world celebrated this historic event. The outburst of enthusiasm could not be silenced and Obama was soon made into a world celebrity.

Obama no doubt happened to be the right person at the right time. After two terms of Republican administration, the country was ready and eager to be led by a President who promised renewal. Significantly enough, Obama's election campaign focused on change and hope. These very concepts responded to the needs and wishes of the American people, and they could be truthfully supported by Obama himself. In other words, change and hope represented what the American electorate was looking for and they depicted the Democratic candidate Obama as the right option for the ballot.

Obama was young and non-white, and he represented a powerful embodiment of the American Dream. His own personal story could tell Americans

that everyone can make it, notwithstanding all odds. He was also the man of the new global era. As proved by his successful communication through new media technology, Obama was able to engage young voters and obtain their support (see McKinney and Banwart 2011). His genealogy and upbringing also gave him a very special status. Being the son of a white mother and an African father, he could be seen as reconciling the deep racial divide between Whites and Blacks in the US. At the same time, the presence of an Indonesian stepfather and the experiences he could collect from three different continents (Asia, Africa, America) facilitated drawing an image of him as the cosmopolitan citizen or, to put it differently, the universalist who cannot deny particularity. In this way, he could attract the sympathies and embrace the aspirations of many different people: ethnic groups, immigrant communities, white liberals and even radicals. In addition to this, the fact that he was raised by a single parent, his mother, and received caring affection by other female figures in his extended family, was probably appreciated by many 'untraditional' American families.

Besides embodying and communicating so many positive messages, Obama has been credited with very skillful use of linguistic devices throughout the 2008 election campaign. For instance, Alim and Smitherman (2012) have recently emphasized Obama's flexibility in language usage as one typical feature of his rhetorical style during his first run for the presidency. In particular, they refer to Obama's unusual capacity to aptly switch his mode of expression from Standard American English to African American Vernacular English, depending on the context and on the receivers of his varied oral deliveries.

Language was central to Obama's victory. His electoral speeches, which constitute the long-lasting core of his hard-fought campaign, proved his rhetorical ability. Here, Obama's words seemed to prove an innate disposition for crafting messages that can speak to and inspire many different Americans. Obama's speeches also seemed to demonstrate his sensitivity for recognizing the real problems affecting people. Furthermore, they showed his pragmatic approach in making reasonable proposals to face problems effectively.

Obama's mastery in leading discussions and mediating perspectives is a facet of his personality and subjectivity that his biographers like to emphasize. So, for instance, when discussing Obama's experiences at Harvard Law School, Remnick (2010: 189) observes how 'Obama attracted attention at Harvard for the confidence of his bearing and his way of absorbing and synthesizing the arguments of others in a way that made even the most strident opponent feel understood'. An additional proof of Obama's talent for successful communication is given by his admission to the group of excellent students who were selected out of hundreds for contributing to the *Harvard Law Review*.