



Explaining Donald Trump via communication style: Grandiosity, informality, and dynamism



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ABSTRACT

How did Donald Trump dominate his more experienced competitors in the primaries? We suspected the answer might lie in his communication style rather than his platform details. Hence, we analyzed the announcement speeches of the top nine Republican contenders as of October, 2015. We transcribed 27 speech segments each and applied Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a computerized text analysis software. We also conducted acoustic analyses of the speech recordings and had them coded for grandiosity by trained (but blind) raters. Trump scored highest on (a) grandiosity ratings, (b) use of first person pronouns, (c) greater pitch dynamics, and (d) informal communication (including Twitter usage of all 17 candidates). With number of primaries won as the criterion, our results suggest that Trump benefited from all these aspects of campaign communication style. It remains to be seen whether this same communication profile will help or hinder success in a general election.

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Empirical comparisons of the relative contributions of content and style to political influence have a long history in psychology (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949). Both verbal and non-verbal aspects of style have been linked directly to social dominance (e.g., Ellyson & Dovidio, 1985; Gifford, 1991; Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005). Rather than a unique platform, such stylistic factors may explain the surprising success of Donald Trump in winning his party's nomination for the presidency. The present research investigated what stylistic factors led Trump to stand out and how they ultimately led to him to win the Republican nomination.

Campaign speeches provide voters with key information about both content and communication style. Relevant stylistic information can be gleaned from word usage (Slatcher, Chung, Pennebaker, & Stone, 2007), vocal style (Tigue, Borak, O'Connor, Schandl, & Feinberg, 2012), and social media (O'Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, & Smith, 2010). To document such information, we tracked down actual campaign speeches of nine Republican candidates including Donald Trump. The speeches were transcribed and evaluated for grandiosity, informal word usage, and vocal style. We also indexed candidate Twitter use statistics for all 17 candidates. Campaign success was indexed by number of primaries won and drop-out date.

1. Grandiosity

Although generally viewed as maladaptive, narcissism has been linked to success in areas such as leadership (Brunell et al., 2008; Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011), job interviews (Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez, & Harms, 2013), show business (Young & Pinsky, 2006), and initial interactions with others (Paulhus, 1998). However, the construct of narcissism has proved to be multidimensional, with both adaptive and maladaptive elements (e.g., Back et al., 2013). Foremost among these is the distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Pincus & Roche, 2011).

Among current politicians, few would dispute that Donald Trump is a paragon of grandiosity. His self-promotional style has built a high profile in both show business (the television show, *The Apprentice*) and the financial world. However, the question remains whether grandiosity helps or hinders political success. Previous research has shown that historian-rated narcissism is associated with charismatic leadership, overall performance and creativity among U.S. presidents (Deluga, 1997). However, a recent study clarified that result by showing that U.S. presidents exhibit high levels of *grandiose* but not *vulnerable* narcissism (Watts et al., 2013).

Here, we evaluated the grandiosity of Republican contenders and whether this disposition was associated with success in the 2016 primaries. Whereas the research by Watts and colleagues utilized global historical ratings of U.S. presidents, our study used ratings of campaign speeches of current candidates to look for linguistic markers of grandiose style.

Previous research has shown that traces of grandiosity can be found in an individual's word usage (Craig & Amernic, 2011). One potential

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indicator is the tendency to use first person pronouns (also known as I-talk). As a concrete index, I-talk provides a linguistic marker of self-focus (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007; deWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011; Raskin & Shaw, 1988). However, a recent review by Carey et al. (2015) concluded that the link between I-talk and scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) appears weak and/or complex. Even if not associated with the NPI, I-talk may be interpreted by observers as reflecting an arrogant but insecure personality (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). Therefore, we collected observer ratings of grandiosity as well as first-person pronoun counts. We hypothesized that (a) Donald Trump would show higher levels of both indicators than the other candidates and (b) overall primary success would be associated with both indicators of grandiosity.

2. Informality

The classic example of excessive rhetorical sophistication is Adlai Stevenson, who lost two presidential elections in landslides despite being acknowledged as intellectually superior to his opponents.¹ Most successful politicians seem to be aware that voters favor simple over sophisticated rhetoric (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007). However, only a handful of empirical studies have examined language complexity in presidential candidate success. In one example, candidates tended to reduce their complexity during election season (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007). Furthermore, this reduction in complexity seems to be a quality attributed to successful leaders. Similarly, Suedfeld and Rank (1976) showed that successful leaders exhibit lower complexity while seeking power but higher complexity after gaining power. On the other hand, research by Conway et al. (2012) indicated that the relation between complexity and candidate success is not that straightforward. Whatever the case, both baseline levels and change in complexity seem to play a role.

2.1. LIWC informality

LIWC permits the scoring of several variable related to formality level (e.g., word length, analytical words). Based on the predominance of prior evidence, we hypothesized that (a) there would be a positive association of informality with candidate success and (b) Trump would score highest on informality.

2.2. Twitter usage

Social media such as Twitter have opened up more informal methods of communicating with voters and the media. Whereas Facebook is socially-oriented, Twitter tends to be topic-oriented (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012). Without constraint, one can comment immediately, as often as wanted, any time of day or night. Hence use of Twitter has become a prominent medium for political communication (Gaurav, Srivastava, Kumar, & Miller, 2013; Verweij, 2012).

Moreover, a candidate's tweet count is readily available for research. Studies on the link between Twitter use and election outcomes has been met with both success (Gaurav et al., 2013; Sang & Bos, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2010; Soler, Cuartero, & Roblizo, 2012) and failure (Chung & Mustafaraj, 2011; Jungherr, 2016; Mejova, Srinivasan, & Boynton, 2013). Based on news reports, we predicted that actual usage statistics would confirm Trump's extensive Twitter use. Based on the preponderance of previous research, we predicted an overall association of Twitter use with primary success across the 17 Republican nominees.

3. Vocal qualities

3.1. Mean pitch

Finally, we conducted an analysis of the candidate's voice qualities – in particular, mean pitch and pitch variability. Previous research has shown that politicians with more attractive voices are seen as more favorable than those with less attractive voices (Surawski & Ossoff, 2006). Specifically, lower pitch voices in men are judged to be more attractive (Feinberg, DeBruine, Jones, & Little, 2008) and dominant (Jones, Feinberg, DeBruine, Little, & Vukovic, 2010; Puts, Gaulin, & Verdolini, 2006; Puts, Hodges, Cárdenas, & Gaulin, 2007). Indeed, Tigue et al. (2012) found that listeners voted for politicians with lower-pitched voices more often than those with higher-pitched voices. In short, likeability, dominance and subsequent political preference have been linked to a lower-pitched voice. Because of his dominant demeanor, we hypothesized that Trump would show a lower mean pitch than his competitors.

3.2. Pitch variability

Potentially more influential are differences in speech dynamics. Previous research has found that pitch variability is associated with a dynamic and extraverted personality (Scherer, 1979). According to Brown, Strong, and Rencher (1973), those who vary their voice are viewed as more charismatic and are rated more favorably. Similarly, DeGroot and Gooty (2009) found that interviewees who vary their pitch are more likely to be perceived positively. The link with actual interviewee success is inconclusive: Most, but not all research indicates a positive association of pitch variability with interview success (Oksenberg, Coleman, & Cannell, 1986; Sharf & Lehman, 1984). The bulk of the evidence led us to predict that Donald Trump would show stronger pitch dynamics than the other Republican candidates and that primary success would be associated with pitch dynamics.

4. Method

4.1. Candidates and speeches

We analyzed early campaign speeches of the top nine Republican presidential candidates: Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, Ben Carson, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Rick Perry, Lindsey Graham and Mike Huckabee. The speech videos were downloaded off YouTube. To minimize the effects of raucous campaign dynamics, we selected each candidate's initial announcement speech and two other early speeches. The criteria for choosing the two extra speeches were as follows: (a) they had to be available online for download and (b) include a minimum of 30-minutes of continuous speech not prompted by a question. If a video did include an interview in addition to the 30-minute speech, the interview sections were omitted. These 27 speeches were then transcribed by two trained research assistants.

The speeches averaged 37 min and 38 s. To keep them at a feasible length for coding, each speech was cut into two equal segments. Thus each candidate had six speech segments leading to a total of 54 segments. Two variables were coded from the speeches: grandiosity, and informality – see below.

4.2. Grandiosity

4.2.1. Observer ratings

Transcripts of all 27 speeches were coded for grandiosity by three blind coders. Several steps were taken to avoid any biases and preconceptions regarding political party and individual candidates. Effectively, coders were blind to both the hypothesis and the candidates. To this end, all personal information was removed from the speeches: For example, instances where candidates referred to themselves or included

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adlai_Stevenson_II

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