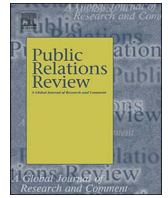




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# Stewardship, credibility and political communications: A content analysis of the 2016 election

Geah Pressgrove<sup>a,\*</sup>, Carolyn Kim<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Reed College of Media, West Virginia University, Martin Hall, 315, Morgantown, WV 26501, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Media, Journalism and Public Relations, Biola University, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Public participation in the democratic process and trust in elected leaders are both declining. Drawing on research from the fields of public relations and communications, this content analysis examines political communication through the lens of credibility and stewardship, both concepts central to predicting favorable relationship maintenance outcomes. In this analysis of all presidential, Senate and congressional candidates in the 2016 election, findings indicated that candidates more commonly communicate ways to provide support for the campaign (relationship nurturing), than demonstrating that they are worthy of being entrusted by the public. In addition, candidates' communication primarily centered on the candidate being a credible source, neglecting other strategies for demonstrating credibility (digital and content). While there were no significant differences by party affiliation, incumbents and presidential candidates were more likely to communicate some forms of stewardship and credibility.

## 1. Introduction

Trust and participation in the American political process is eroding. According to the Pew Research Center, barely more than half of the voting-eligible population cast their ballots in 2016, a rate that is lower than typical levels in other developed democracies (Desilver, 2017). Further, research with registered voters indicated relatively low levels of trust in both candidates for president in 2016 (Shockley-Zalabak, Morreale, & Stavrositu, 2017). Additionally, only 37 percent of U.S. adults feel the presidential campaign was conducted in a way that made them feel the electoral process is working as it should (Gallup, 2016). After the election, less than half of American voters trust elected leadership to do what is right (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2017). Understanding that meaning-making in political affairs is largely mediated through public communication, a fundamental question arises: what are politicians and elected leaders communicating that might lead to this lack of political participation and overall distrust of the democratic process? To answer this question, this study goes upstream to examine the messages of political candidates in the 2016 election to better understand their approach to relationship management.

Ledingham and Brunig (1998) posit that effective relationship management focuses on building trust, participating in communities and communicating symmetrically (p. 61). Thus, the lens for this examination focuses on two concepts central to relationship management – credibility and stewardship. Stewardship is said to have biblical roots connecting those entrusted with resources that benefit the public good to their obligation to be good stewards of those resources (Jeavons, 1994). As Grace (1991) noted, “stewardship lets people know on a regular basis that you care about them, respect their support, appreciate their gifts, and want their interest and involvement” (p. 158). In fact, Greenfield (1991) suggests, stewardship is designed to “establish the means for continued

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [geah.pressgrove@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:geah.pressgrove@mail.wvu.edu) (G. Pressgrove).

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communication that will help to preserve [stakeholder] interest and attention to the organization” (p. 148). Additionally, over 2500 years ago, Aristotle espoused that a source’s ethos (credibility) was the most potent means of persuasion (McCroskey & Young, 1981). Further, public relations scholars reference credibility as an important dimension in the organization-public relationship (e.g., Ledingham, 2003), and a key element to examine along the continuum of maintaining successful relationships (Toth, 2000).

Finally, in recent years, scholarly inquiry related to credibility and stewardship has demonstrated independently their power in predicting desirable relationship management outcomes. For instance, in corporate communication, CEO credibility led to increased employee engagement and evaluation of the organizational reputation (Men, 2012). In nonprofit communication, stewardship has been used to predict positive relationship evaluations (e.g., trust), supportive behavioral intentions and loyalty (Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016). Despite classic and contemporary support for the importance of communicating credibility and stewardship as functions of relationship management, scholarly inquiry has yet to investigate these variables in tandem. Further, while the demonstration of stewardship is relevant to political communication, this variable has never been explored in this context. Thus, this study seeks to fill these gaps in the literature and provide a framework for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Stewardship

In 2001, Kelly proposed that stewardship should be incorporated into public relations models as a fifth step to foster relationship growth and make the communication process cyclical. In her conceptualization, stewardship is key for engaging and garnering continued support, providing obvious relevance for political candidates seeking to gain support from the electorate. Notwithstanding the relevance to political communication, research exploring stewardship has primarily been applied in the context of the nonprofit sector (e.g., Waters, 2009, 2011a; Worley & Little, 2002), health communications (Patel & McKeever, 2014), sports communication (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), employee relations (Waters, Bortree, & Tindall, 2013), and corporate communication (Waters, 2011b). In these studies, stewardship strategies have proven to be effective predictors in improving the quality of the relationship with donors, volunteers, fans, and employees.

Contemporary literature conceptualizes stewardship as being comprised of four strategies: responsibility, reporting, reciprocity, and relationship nurturing. In the last decade, a handful of scholars have begun to explore these four factors of stewardship through content analysis of nonprofit websites (Patel & McKeever, 2014; Pressgrove, McKeever, & Collins, 2015), websites of Fortune 100 companies (Waters, 2011b), as well as the Facebook pages and websites of NFL teams (Waters et al., 2011). Other scholars have used case studies (Worley & Little, 2002) and survey methodology (e.g., Pressgrove, 2016; Waters, 2011a) to provide further evidence that the four stewardship strategies are an important part of effectively cultivating and building relationships with potential nonprofit audiences. This study, however, will be the first to explore the role of stewardship in political communication.

Building on the definitions employed in this body of literature, the stewardship strategy of *responsibility* is defined in the context of this study as acting in a socially responsible way and keeping promises to important publics (Kelly, 2001). *Reporting* as a strategy of stewardship relates to meeting legal and ethical requirements of accountability and explaining how assets are used (Kelly, 2001; Waters 2011a). *Relationship nurturing* has been defined as keeping supportive publics central to the organization’s work (Kelly, 2001) by providing stakeholders an opportunity to engage with the organization and maintaining open communication between an organization and its publics. Finally, in previous stewardship research the strategy of reciprocity has been advanced as a single strategy of stewardship that focuses on acknowledgement and appreciation. Recently, however, it was found that *recognition*, or public acknowledgement of support, is actually separate from *regard*, or personalized acts of appreciation (Pressgrove, 2016). Further, Pressgrove and McKeever (2016) found that these separate demonstrations of gratitude differently effect relationship outcomes of trust, commitment, and satisfaction in the nonprofit sector. Therefore, this study uses this new conceptualization when considering the communication of political candidates.

Building on research that has demonstrated the value of stewardship in relationship maintenance, the authors believe it is helpful to consider the ways this important communication strategy may manifest in the political context, and thus the first research question asks:

**RQ1: To what extent do political candidates communicate stewardship strategies?**

### 2.2. Credibility

While credibility is not a new variable for political communications research, most prior research has investigated the ethos/source credibility of political candidates (e.g., Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2002; Metzger, Flanain, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003). Recently, however, research in other areas of communication studies has shown that credibility of the channel/medium influences the selective involvement of the audience (Hwang, 2013; Kang, 2010; Metzger et al., 2003). For instance, there is a long history of scholarship that has examined the role of media in mediating perceptions of political candidates, particularly in relation to trust and trustworthiness (Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2017). Further, research has explored politically-interested publics’ perceptions of media coverage (e.g., Johnson & Kaye, 1998), social media sites (e.g., Ampofo, Anstead, & O’Loughlin, 2011; Johnson & Kaye, 2013; Wise & McLaughlin, 2016), blogs (e.g., Johnson and Kaye, 2004, 2009; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007; Kim, 2012), search results (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, Johnson, Westerwick, & Donsbach, 2015), and chat/instant messaging (Kaye & Johnson, 2006); however, less commonly explored is the channel content itself. With candidates now choosing to engage online (Marder, 2017), the implications for candidate credibility need to be explored (Kim & Brown, 2015).

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