



Incumbency effects in U.S. presidential campaigns: Language patterns matter



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ABSTRACT

Incumbent U.S. presidential candidates have been overwhelmingly successful over the past 150 years. Attempts to explain this success rate have examined both structural advantages enjoyed by incumbents and differences in rhetorical and linguistic style in campaigning, although it is less clear why incumbency conveys an advantage here. This article finds that the language used by U.S. presidential candidates over the past twenty years has an underlying structure associated with electoral success: 1. speech patterns of incumbents differ notably from those they used in their first-term campaign; and 2. speech patterns of winners are different from those of losers. Both differences are consistent, and can therefore be postulated to indicate strength of influence. The resulting inductive model of influential language is characterized by: increased positivity, complete absence of negativity, increased abstraction, and lack of reference to the opposing candidate(s). The greatest intensity of model language is used by incumbents in their second campaign and the least by losers in a first-cycle open campaign. Language improvement by incumbents occurs rapidly, suggesting that it is the result of changing self-perception rather than a conventional learning process. This finding has broader implications, suggesting that both success, and the presence of competing groups trying to make similar arguments, improve the quality of the influencing language used.

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1. Introduction

U.S. presidential election campaigns are the best-funded, most-studied, and highly-motivated attempts to influence strategic behavior of a wide-spectrum audience. Yet, surprisingly little is understood about the determinants of incumbency success: from 1868 to 2012, over two-thirds of the 23 Presidential candidates seeking re-election won. Incumbents evidently have an advantage. Even when the incumbent is lagging in the polls at the start of the campaign, he is not typically as far behind the frontrunner as comparable challengers and, therefore, has a much better chance of closing the gap. Incumbents who win, win by larger margins; if they lose, they lose by narrower margins. In recent times, every president with an approval rating of 50% has gone on to win a second term; even those with approval ratings of only 40% can still reasonably expect to win (all presidents with this margin except

Ford have won). Presidential campaigns thus provide insights into our understanding of influence and, because the outcomes are apparent, its effectiveness (Benoit, 2007; Hacker et al., 2000).

This article examines language patterns in U.S. presidential elections from 1992 to 2012. All three incumbent candidates during this period, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, use language in their second campaign that differs systematically from that of their first campaign and from the candidates who campaigned against them. Furthermore, this difference is also visible, in a weaker form, between their language in their initial campaigns and that of their competitors whom they defeated. In other words, there is an underlying pattern of language which, when deployed well in an open, first-cycle election leads to electoral success, and which becomes stronger in a campaigning incumbent.

The article shows that, behind the language used by challengers and incumbents, and successful and unsuccessful candidates, there is a linear scale of language that wins elections. In any given campaign, the candidate whose language use is higher on the scale wins; presidents campaigning for re-election use better influential language in their re-election campaign than they did in their first

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campaign; and the gap between winner and loser tends to remain roughly constant, suggesting that a challenger to an incumbent is drawn into using better influential language than a losing candidate in an open race. The increase in strength of influence happens quite quickly, either at the beginning of the first term or at the beginning of the second campaign, suggesting that it is driven by changes in self-perception rather than deliberate strategy or increasing experience. Success breeds success for winning candidates, but also raises the game of challengers.

An obvious explanation is the presence of a feedback loop in which campaigns, and especially speechwriters, detect increasing success and modify their language use to strengthen it. However, two factors suggest that this explanation cannot be correct. First, the rapid change in language does not support a conventional learning mechanism. Second, if the change were the result of conscious learning, other campaigns should be able to detect and utilize it. In fact, every individual's first campaign appears to begin with similar, low levels of influential language. Broadly, this implies that those trying to convince others to act are on a learning curve, but not so much because of endogenous drivers, such as experience. Rather exogenous drivers of two kinds appear significant: success itself, which increases self-perceived significance, playing back into more influential language; and competition in the influence marketplace, which raises the quality of all participants.

The article proceeds as follows. We are not the first to observe the advantage enjoyed by incumbents; so, initially we situate the article in the context of that literature. Although there is a literature that deals with language and incumbency, it is quite different from our approach in both substance and method. The subsequent section explains the experimental method we deploy to analyze a semi-structured dataset of that scope. In the next section we take up the observations by word frequency, modelling the difference between candidates, and content. The penultimate section takes up the issue of robustness: how might the results – which are highly robust in themselves – fare over an even longer period of time? This is a bit of a counter-factual problem because data on election speeches from earlier campaigns is so hard to come by, and, as we explain in that section, there are problems with the data. Nonetheless, there are some data and we compare the results of those samples to the observations in the proceeding section. Finally, we identify and summarize six properties that emerge as associated with success in terms of language of influence and point out just how remarkable the results in this article are.

2. Background

Incumbents have significant advantages across the electoral spectrum. Explanations for the success of incumbents have focused on two major areas: structural advantages held by incumbents, broadly speaking the greater control they have of the playing field by virtue of their incumbency; and communication advantages, their greater experience and skill in using argument, language, and recognition to their advantage.

A number of structural hypotheses have been suggested for the advantage held by incumbents. [Campbell \(2000\)](#) posits these: 1) political inertia (those who voted for the incumbent the first time are unlikely to change their vote), 2) experience (incumbents already know how to run a successful presidential campaign), 3) a unified party base (the incumbent will not be damaged by intra-party fighting from the primaries), 4) control of events and agenda (the candidate can take steps in office to increase the likelihood of their re-election), 5) access to the Rose Garden Strategy – named for Lyndon B Johnson – the ability of the candidate to appeal to voters as a world/national leader rather than as a candidate, and so above politics, and 6) the ability to campaign

on continuity or change (when times are good, the incumbent can campaign on stability, when times are bad, on change; whereas the challenger only has the option to campaign on change). [Jacobson \(1981\)](#) proposes that incumbents enjoy a distinct advantage not just because of their experience with the voters, but because of the voters' experience with them.

Incumbents often enjoy a campaign financing advantage over challengers, both because they have a constituency indebted to them, and because their profile often makes fund-raising easier. However, once candidates face off against one another repeatedly [Levitt \(1994\)](#) found that campaign spending is no longer a factor.

[Abramowitz and Pomper \(1996\)](#) develop a model to predict the outcome of U.S. presidential elections based on three structural properties (and so independent of the particular party nominee): the current president's approval rating, the performance of the economy, and the length of time that the current party has held the presidency. A linear regression model based on these three properties is reasonably predictive.

A second strand has examined the way in which presidential candidates convince voters to elect them. There are two widely-held views of channels of influence: rational choice (the best argument has the most influence); and rhetoric (the best interpretation of reality has the most influence) ([Condor et al., 2013](#)). Rational argument founders when the audience collectively holds divergent world-views (general election campaigns) but may be more significant for a homogeneous audience (primary campaigns). However, rhetoric is generally thought to be the more significant channel. For example, rhetorical skill enables a candidate to present himself with a stronger and better persona than his real character, and to deal with the (modern) problem of multiple audiences, the proximate and the universal, who must be influenced simultaneously. This leads naturally to strategic ambiguity as a way to expand appeal ([Shepsle, 1972](#)).

[Windt \(1986\)](#) suggested that studies of presidential language fall into four categories: single-speech rhetoric, constituency building, genre, and miscellaneous. The present article falls within the genre studies category.

[Benoit et al. \(2000\)](#) examine the frequency with which candidates acclaim, attack or defend their respective parties in nominating convention keynote speeches from 1960 to 1991. They found that Republicans and keynoters from the incumbent party are more likely to acclaim the benefits of their party, while Democrats and keynoters from the challenging party are more likely to attack. Looking specifically at rhetoric, incumbent parties campaign with 58% more praise in their speeches, unlike challenger parties with only 38% praise in their speeches. This is consistent with the observations in the present article. Incumbent keynoters rarely defended their party (2%) and challengers never did. Benoit et al. find Democrats more positive when they are the incumbent party and less positive when they are challengers. They hypothesize that incumbency will have an even greater effect on campaign discourse than party rhetoric. In other words, they provide support for this article's hypothesis that incumbency matters. [Benoit et al. \(2000\)](#) also observe that in TV spots and in acceptance addresses, incumbent party candidates are more likely to acclaim their party than attack the challenger's party—which has a greater proclivity in these instances to attack. This article finds similar effects.

Examining 143 Senate elections from 1988 to 1998 in which an incumbent was running for re-election, [Lau and Pomper \(2002\)](#) found that attacking the challenger was a particularly ineffectual strategy: for every 6% of the incumbent's campaign pronouncements that featured attacks, the incumbent did 1% worse at the polls. Incumbents in competitive races who focused on their gains and accomplishments during office did significantly better than those that attacked their opponents. The data in the present

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