Winning words: Individual differences in linguistic style among U.S. presidential and vice presidential candidates ☆

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Abstract

The present study examines the personalities and psychological states of the 2004 candidates for U.S. president and vice president through their use of words. The transcripts of 271 televised interviews, press conferences, and campaign debates of John Kerry, John Edwards, George W. Bush, and Dick Cheney between January 4 and November 3, 2004 were analyzed using a computerized text analysis program. Distinct linguistic styles were found among these four political candidates, as well as differences between political parties and candidate types. Drawing on previous research linking word use and personality characteristics, the results suggest that the candidates had unique linguistic styles variously associated with cognitive complexity, femininity, depression, aging, presidentiality, and honesty.
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1. Introduction

During the 2004 U.S. presidential election campaign, John Kerry was portrayed as flip-flopper. George W. Bush was portrayed as a cowboy—brash and aggressive but also, by

some accounts, likeable. In deciding for whom to cast their ballots, voters likely took into account numerous factors. They may have voted based on which candidate they liked the most, which candidate had the values they shared, which candidate they trusted the most, and so on. In particular, impressions of candidates' personalities have been shown to be robust and powerful predictors of vote choice (Klein, 1996; Pillai & Williams, 1998; Pillai, Williams, Lowe, & Jung, 2003). This is true even after traditional predictors of voting, such as party identification, are held constant (Klein, 1996).

Many of the impressions made by voters are based at least in part on the words the candidates themselves say. For example, in saying "I actually did vote for the $87 billion before I voted against it," John Kerry helped to cement the public's perception of him as an indecisive leader. Further, George Bush's image as a swaggering Texas cowboy was clear when he said that Osama Bin Laden must be taken "dead or alive," and, in offering strategies for capturing members of the Taliban in Afghanistan, that he was going to "smoke 'em out." The words that political candidates use serve as guides to the ways they think, act and feel.

Personality psychologists and political psychologists increasingly have been interested in assessing personality characteristics and other individual differences among politicians (e.g., Greenstein & Lerner, 1971; Rubenzer & Faschingbauer, 2004; Simonton, 1990). A central issue has been that collecting self-reports from politicians and other historical or well-known figures is usually not possible. To get around this issue, biographers and historians have been commissioned to examine presidential biographies and encyclopedic entries. These experts provide ratings on various personality measures, and code texts for markers of personality, performance, and success (Kowert, 1996; Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones, 2000; Simonton, 1986, 1988, 2001).

A more direct approach to assessing individual differences between political candidates is to examine the linguistic residue of their lives—their books, letters, speeches or interviews—using content analytic strategies (Hart, 1984; Lee & Patterson, 1997). Researchers have had judges evaluate the phrases, sentences, paragraphs or even entire texts spoken or written by past presidents along specific dimensions, such as achievement, affiliation, and power motives (McClelland, 1985; Winter, 1987; Winter & Stewart, 1977), and integrative complexity (Suedfeld, 1994; Tetlock & Suedfeld, 1988). Although the final drafts of verbal texts yield useful knowledge about a person, more accurate indicators of people's individual differences are spontaneous speech samples across varied social contexts. Among politicians, examples of available speech samples include press conferences, public interviews, and debates.

Several researchers have applied a content-analytic approach to electoral politics (e.g., Hart, 1984; Seligman, 1990; Zullow, Oettingen, Peterson, & Seligman, 1988). For example, Zullow et al. (1988) were able to predict (after the fact) senatorial and presidential electoral outcomes—even upsets—with remarkable accuracy by comparing candidates' levels of optimism in their speeches. Candidates who spoke more optimistically were more likely to win their elections. Such findings illustrate the utility of content analysis in describing the individual differences between political candidates.

One content-analytic approach is simply to categorize and count the words that people use. This strategy assumes that the words that people select when they are naturally speaking reveal certain features of their personality. While computerized word count programs are generally blind to context and to linguistic devices such as irony and sarcasm, they are objective, reliable, fast, and have yielded promising results in personality and social