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When Water Works A Case Study of Campaign Tears and the 2008 Presidential Election

Ryan Neville-Shepard

Abstract

Since the fall of Senator Ed Muskie in the 1972 Democratic primary there has been an unwritten rule that political candidates should avoid crying. However, four presidential candidates cried in ten separate incidents during the 2008 election cycle, with only three episodes receiving negative attention. Addressing this inconsistency in the “Muskie rule,” in this essay I argue the effect of crying on a political candidate’s image is not well understood. As such, this essay develops and applies a framework for comprehending when crying will likely trigger a public relations crisis, and when it might actually benefit a candidate.

Keywords: crying; politics; presidential rhetoric; emotions; 2008 election

Introduction

In February 1972, following a victory in the Iowa caucuses, Democratic presidential candidate Edmund Muskie appeared at the headquarters of New Hampshire’s *Manchester Union Leader* to denounce its conservative editor for publishing a series of negative stories about his campaign. Muskie protested claims that he used derogatory references for French Canadians, and that his wife was a foul-mouthed chain-smoker (Weil, 1973, p. 59). Stunning those attending the rally, Muskie choked up and wiped his face. Although he later maintained he was simply wiping melting snow from his cheeks, journalists described Muskie as sobbing and the appearance was thereafter known as “the crying incident” (“Campaign teardrops,” 1972; Lutz, 1999; Weil, 1973). Many Americans began doubting whether Muskie was psychologically balanced enough to be president (Lutz, 1999), and he quickly lost his front-runner status (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Renshon, 1996; Weil, 1973). Reflecting on what he learned from the episode, Muskie later stated, “It changed peoples’ minds about me, of what kind of guy I was. They were looking for a strong steady [candidate], and here I was weak” (Renshon, 1996, p. 151). In other words, from Muskie’s “moment” politicians learned a valuable lesson: candidates who cry tend to risk losing elections.

With Muskie’s failure still in public memory, the number of tearful moments involving presidential candidates throughout the 2008 election cycle was astonishing. Overall, there were at least ten incidents including four candidates. Republican Mitt Romney shed tears twice: once while defending his Mormon faith on *Meet the Press*, and again when recalling a ceremony for American soldiers killed in Iraq. Hillary Clinton teared up in a New Hampshire cafe when asked about the difficulties of campaigning, and again a month later when introduced by a supervisor from her days at Yale. Senator Joe Biden choked up at

least five times: during a stump speech in Pennsylvania when he recalled the kindness of Pittsburgh Steelers owner Art Rooney following the deaths of his wife and daughter, while recounting a similar story at the Football Hall of Fame, in a speech to Delaware's delegates just before the Democratic convention, at the end of his debate with Sarah Palin, and at a rally in which he spoke of a gift that he received from a deceased soldier's father. Finally, Barack Obama also wept when announcing his grandmother's death the morning before Election Day.

Clearly, the 2008 election demonstrated the Muskie rule does not apply to all crying incidents. This is not surprising since crying is not entirely foreign in politics. Indeed, since Muskie, several political leaders have wept without being criticized (Lutz, 1999, pp. 232-233). Recognizing a growing trend in politicians crying, some have argued the Muskie rule is dead. Benac (2007), for instance, contended "once kryptonite to serious presidential candidates, today [tears] are more often seen as a useful part of the political tool kit" (para. 2). However, the display of emotions in the 2008 campaign also demonstrated public crying is still risky. For example, Hillary Clinton and Mitt Romney were both attacked for their tears. Clinton's episode in New Hampshire drew sharp criticism, with pundits like William Kristol calling her "solipsistic and narcissistic" (Garofoli, 2008, para. 5). Clinton was also said to be "doing the Muskie" (Davis & Al-Khatib, 2008; Dowd, 2008), and even her closest advisers predicted her tears would spoil her chances of winning the Democratic nomination (Novak, 2008; Thrush, 2008). Romney, moreover, was characterized as delivering a "tear-filled outburst" similar to Muskie's, which according to Retter's (2007) warning caused the earlier campaign to "[go] down in flames" (para. 7). Thus, one can assume from the 2008 election that crying in politics is not as dangerous as once thought, but also not as widely accepted as some critics might currently pretend.

Ultimately, crying in politics can be both risky and beneficial depending on the context. Lutz (1990) hinted at this when she characterized emotions in Western discourse as "paradoxical entities that are both a sign of weakness and a powerful force" (p. 70). However, there are few critical tools to understand the outcome of candidates' crying. Thomas (2008) echoed this thought when he suggested the question still unanswered for politicians is "when to show emotion, how to show it, and how much" (para. 1). Although some recent studies have implied that how crying is generally evaluated depends on how it is done and who sheds the tears (Shields, 2002; Warner & Shields, 2007), few scholars have explored in much depth the impact of crying in national elections. Of course, a few communication scholars examined Clinton's tears during the 2008 election and attributed her crisis to gender bias (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Falk, 2009; Manusov & Harvey, 2011; Shepard, 2009), but attention to why her tears triggered that attention was scant aside from discussion of her gender. Developing a richer understanding of the influence of candidates' tears on their public image is important, because as political communication scholars Valerie Manusov and Jessica Harvey (2011) indicated, non-verbal behavior of political leaders is increasingly used by the mass media as an opportunity to "provide commentary on those cues, offering interpretations and judgments for their au-

diences that are designed to make sense of the behavior in a certain way and that reflect popular beliefs about how communication works” (p. 284). This is often problematic for political candidates, Manusov and Harvey contended, because the press creates “narratives for the behaviors,” thus providing audiences a way to “think about the behaviors and not just a mere description of them” (p. 285). Determining when crying narratives are likely to help or hinder a campaign is important not only for candidates and their staffs, but for communication scholars interested more generally in how types of non-verbal communication impact candidates. Therefore this study deals with an important question: What defines a Muskie moment? In other words, when does crying on the campaign trail trigger an unwanted public relations crisis, and when might it even enhance a candidate’s image?

Through an analysis of the ten crying episodes in the 2008 presidential election, I argue that whether a political candidate can avoid Muskie’s fate depends on five factors: the gender of the crier, the degree to which the candidate is considered an outsider, whether the tears communicate authenticity, the degree and frequency of the tears, and whether the audience perceives strong situational reasons for the crying. This argument develops in four parts. First, crying is defined as a significant rhetorical act due to its inherent ambiguity. Second, based on an extension of previous academic literature, five factors that determine the public’s reaction to a political candidate’s tears are identified and explained. Third, each crying episode from the 2008 presidential race is described in detail and the proposed framework is applied to explain why three instances of crying – involving Clinton and Romney – were criticized while the seven others received meager attention. Finally, this essay concludes with a discussion of the implications that this study has for political communication scholars and practitioners.

A Rhetorical Understanding of Tears

Emotions have long been stigmatized in Western civilization. Lutz (1988), for instance, argued that emotions are often associated with “the irrational, the uncontrollable, the vulnerable, and the female” (p. 3-4). Although there is a tendency to assume that crying stems from inherent weakness, its potential as a form of communication should not be overlooked. Noting the prevalence of public tears, Lutz (1999) contended, “emotions have begun to move from their culturally assigned place at the center of the dark recesses of inner life and are being depicted as cultural, social and linguistic operators” (p. 69). In this section, I develop this point even further by examining the rhetorical function of public crying. More specifically, I define crying as a rhetorical act and explicate the various reactions to public tears due to their enthymematic nature.

Crying in the most basic sense is the emitting of sounds or the presence of certain biological reactions that signal distress, protest, or some other emotion (Koestler, 1964). Although sometimes distinguished from weeping, which has been characterized as a basic reflex (Koestler, 1964, p. 272), many scholars now recognize the two as one in the same (Vingerhoets, Cornelius, Van Heck, & Brecht, 2000, p. 355). Crying is usually accompanied with “the overflow of the

tear-glands and a specific form of breathing [which] vary in intensity from a mere moistening of the eye and ‘catching one’s breath’ to a profusion of tears accompanied by convulsive sobbing” (Koestler, 1964, p. 272). In other words, crying can come in multiple forms, including anything from a slight pause with moist eyes to full on bawling.

Many scholars have considered crying to be a form of communication, whether intentional or not. Behavioral psychologists, for instance, have considered crying to be a device to communicate some sort of need (Frey, 1985; Koestler, 1964; Warner & Shields, 2007). Tears function to influence others “to change the situation to the crier’s liking” thus signaling that “others should pay attention and respond according to the message that the tears convey” (Warner & Shields, 2007, p. 93). Tears can be far more powerful than words, Katz (1999) argued, because they are “a personally embodied form of expression that transcends what speech can do” (p. 197). This is primarily because tears are ambiguous, since they “offer a way to express genuine emotion without the necessity of identifying the emotion behind them” (Warner & Shields, 2007, p. 93-94). Therefore, because of its inherent ambiguity, crying functions enthymematically in that it relies on the audience’s knowledge of the context to determine the cause of the tears. As Manusov and Harvey (2011) contended about crying, “room always exists for more than one possible meaning to be given to the non-verbal behavior” (p. 285).

Because crying functions enthymematically, it can be both powerful and disastrous. As Carey (2008) suggested, “short, emotionally charged narratives can travel through a population faster than any virus and alter behavior on a dime” (para. 5). If interpreted in the crier’s favor, public tears can create a human drama causing sympathetic audiences to rise to the defense of those who have supposedly been wronged and reduced to weeping. However, the ambiguity in crying also makes it risky. “Tears alone,” warned Warner and Shields (2007), “do not clearly indicate whether a person is genuinely and justifiably upset [and] this is especially the case when the situation is extreme or unclear” (p. 112). The enthymematic nature of crying, “leaves room for biases to influence the evaluation of another’s tears” (p. 112). In other words, what is a moment of emotional honesty to some may be considered cheap pandering to many others. Under which circumstances an audience will likely reach one of these two conclusions when the crier is running for political office, however, has yet to be fully understood.

A Framework for Understanding the Influence of Tears on the Campaign Trail

Although many reporters and pundits frequently liken crying incidents to the Muskie moment, the impact of crying in politics is not so simple. While previous research on the subject of public crying has not yet produced a significant critical tool for understanding the influence of tears on the campaign trail, I contend that the collective body of existing scholarship on the matter suggests that the reception of public tears depends largely on five factors: the gender of the crier, the degree to which the candidate is perceived as an outsider, whether the

tears communicate authenticity, the degree and frequency of the crying, and whether the audience perceives strong situational reasons for the behavior. Violating audience expectations regarding any of these factors is sometimes enough to produce backlash against the emotional candidate, but a media spectacle is likely only when multiple violations occur in a single episode.

Gender Restrictions on Crying in Politics

It was once the norm that crying was unacceptable in public for both men and women. Although it was often taught that crying was occasionally a fitting private reaction for females, “males [learned] not to express their emotions, and crying [was] an especially unmasculine expression” (Ross & Mirowsky, 1984, p. 139). Males were taught “real men don’t cry” because they were “expected to be tough, dominant, decisive, logical, and certainly always in control, since it was their duty to protect women and children and run the world” (Frey, 1985, p. 96). Crying, though, is a “socially and culturally conditioned expression” (Ross & Mirowsky, 1984, p. 143) and restrictions concerning who can safely cry have recently loosened.

Men in America are now more able than ever to express their sensitive side in public. The 1980’s and 1990’s saw a trend of powerful men unapologetically crying in public. During that period, Ronald Reagan teared up at the funerals of slain American soldiers, Michael Jordan wept after winning the NBA championship, and U.S. General Norman Schwarzkopf cried for soldiers killed in Iraq (Messner, 1993, p. 731). One cause of the changing perceptions about crying, Fields (2007) contended, is “the public is [now] accustomed to watching both male and female weepers on the television screen” (para. 4). Assuming this is true, it clearly has not diminished the dangers of crying for everyone.

While men have been increasingly able to express more of their emotions in public, the norm for women especially in the political context has changed very little. In short, Shields (2002) argued, “the Muskie rule certainly applies to women politicians” (p. 161). United States Representative Patricia Schroeder learned this when she was criticized for crying after announcing in 1987 that she would not run for president (Benac, 2007). Schroeder became a target of media pundits “for fulfilling gender expectations, for being a weak woman” (Lutz, 1999, p. 233), which led her to conclude, “The good news for men is crying is a badge of courage. The bad news is that for women it’s still a scarlet letter” (quoted in Shields, 2002, p. 161). This sentiment caused critics before the 2008 election to predict that Senator Clinton would be limited by how she could conduct herself. Lutz (1999), for example, predicted that though Clinton faced condemnation for being too cold and calculated, “one can imagine the criticism that would rain down on her if she were to cry on camera” (p. 234).

Crying and the Impact of “Outsider” Status

The inherent ambiguity of crying means weepy candidates risk allowing audience bias to influence the evaluation of their tears. This means rhetors perceived to be more similar to the audience are the best suited to successfully violate norms regarding the expression of emotion. People from outsider groups are

less likely to be accepted by the majority if they cry in public for the behavior may confirm opinions that they do not belong (Warner & Shields, 2007, p. 112). Focusing on the audience, Warner and Shields reported, “their beliefs about the gender and race of the target work in conjunction with their beliefs about the appropriateness of the type and quantity of tears as the basis for evaluating others’ tears” (p. 112). Warner and Shields’ suggestion could probably be taken further. The more different a candidate is from the majority of potential voters – in not only race or gender, but age, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, political ideology, and other demographic categories – the more likely they will be criticized for their tears. In a political landscape where serious candidates attempt to construct a standard image of electability, anyone breaking the mold with their very identity only invites criticism when their behavior magnifies their outsider status.

Crying and Authenticity

The influence that public crying has on a politician’s image depends also on whether the act enhances the rhetor’s perceived authenticity. According to political strategists, authenticity is important to political success (Callahan, 2008). Authenticity, sometimes regarded as sincerity, means “intentionally telling people what one thinks, not holding back pertinent details, and not lying” (Markovits, 2008, p. 21). However, aside from being truthful, authenticity also means being emotionally honest. Because research indicates “lay people may link emotion with authenticity, even though this link may be inaccurate” (Warner & Shields, 2008, p. 113), crying is evidence for some audiences that the rhetor is one of them (Averill, 1983; Hochschild, 1983; Morgan & Averill, 1992).

In terms of enhancing one’s authenticity, crying works best for candidates who normally possess a steely façade. For Ronald Reagan, Thomas (2008) argued, crying never produced backlash because “he was so manifestly rugged...that when he teared up...[it] was just warm-hearted sentiment” (para. 3). As Lutz (1999) concluded, masculine candidates crying is just a “[modern] version of kissing babies, designed to show that [the candidate has] the right kind of stuff to be president” (p. 233). As such, crying can be advantageous especially for candidates perceived as cold and calculated, but in any case will work best when it is deemed sincere.

The Need for a Moderate Degree of Crying

The biggest risk with crying is individuals may be seen as psychologically imbalanced. Crying, Lutz (1990) argued, can weaken a person because it serves “as a sign of a sort of character defect and by being a sign of at least temporary intrapsychic disorganization” (p. 70). Warner and Shields (2007) also maintained tears “can signal loss of control in a situation [and] where someone is expected to act but does not and instead cries, tears may signal failure” (p. 94). Because of these risks, crying is most likely to benefit candidates only when they shed tears moderately, both in degree and frequency.

Crying moderately in degree means an individual gives in to emotion while still maintaining control. In order to avoid a negative public spectacle, weeping,

“must communicate that one feels intensely enough to shed genuine tears, but not so overcome that one cannot still effect exquisite self-control” (Shields, 2002, p. 164). Katz (1999) suggested this kind of crying is limited to moist eyes in sad contexts. Any number of other basic characteristics of crying – including choking up, sniffing, pausing, or wiping stray tears – may also be present as long as their display is minimal. Too much of any of these characteristics, however, “can signal that the tears are deliberate” (Warner & Shields, 2007, p. 98), or that they represent psychological weakness. Similarly, shedding tears moderately also requires displays of emotion are infrequent. Crying too often not only makes an individual appear psychologically unstable and weak, but, again, also leads audiences to wonder if the tears are deliberate. Tears on the campaign trail will likely be beneficial for the rhetor if the behavior appears unusual enough to lead audiences to conclude that it has been triggered by something important (Labott, Martin, Eason, & Berkey, 1991).

Strong Situational Reasons for Crying

Whether the audience perceives there to be strong situational reasons for weeping is another factor determining how crying in political campaigns will impact a candidate. Because voters seek to be represented by serious, stable, and tough leaders, any violation of these expectations is likely to result in backlash (Frey, 1985). As such, occasions demanding strong leadership are inappropriate for tears. This includes major addresses to the nation, crisis rhetoric, state functions directed to the international community, and also speeches of self-defense. On the other hand, situations where moderate crying might be acceptable include moments of personal tragedy, moments of extreme personal pride, and whenever grief is expressed to honor certain members of the American family.

Moving Beyond Muskie: Tears and the 2008 Election

The crying incidents from the 2008 presidential election pose many questions. Is the Muskie rule really dead? Why were Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton criticized for their tears while seven other tearful moments during the election were essentially ignored? To what extent did Clinton being a woman have an effect on the perceptions of her crying? Why could Joe Biden cry five times and avoid the fate of Ed Muskie? Or to summarize, why might have crying created backlash for some candidates, but not others? In the following analysis, I attempt to answer most of these questions by examining the particular cases with the criteria discussed in the previous section. The analysis is organized by examination of the crying episodes involving each candidate: Hillary Clinton, Mitt Romney, Joe Biden, and Barack Obama.

Hillary Clinton

Senator Clinton choked up twice during the Democratic primaries, with the first episode just days before the vote in New Hampshire being the most widely covered of any during the whole election. It was Clinton’s rocky performance in early tests of the campaign that led her there. After suffering an embarrassing defeat to Barack Obama in the Iowa caucuses, Clinton’s campaign lost momen-

tum and her numbers plummeted in the weeks leading to the New Hampshire primary (Liss, 2008). Various polls released before the primary “showed that Senator Obama had opened a double-digit lead over Clinton” (Healy & Santora, 2008, para. 8). It was no shock, *Time*’s Karen Tumulty (2008) reported, that the Clinton machine was “shaken down to its bolts” as the one-time front-runner was no longer the star of the election (para. 1).

Compounding Clinton’s frustration was a difficult debate at Saint Anselm College on January 5, 2008, in which her rivals Obama and John Edwards teamed up against her. Clinton faced two lines of attack (Cohen, 2008; Helman & Issenberg, 2008; Jeffrey, 2008). First, Edwards accused Clinton of representing the status quo, and he repeatedly called himself and Obama the only true candidates of change (“Democrats spar,” 2008). Second, Clinton was accused of being too polarizing to represent her party in the general election. Asked how she felt about some Americans’ dislike for her, Clinton jokingly stated her feelings were hurt, and then praised Obama for being “very likable” (“Democrats spar,” 2008). After Clinton humorously concluded, “I don’t think I’m that bad,” Obama wittily added, “You’re likeable enough, Hillary” (“Democrats spar,” 2008). While some understood Obama’s comment as an attempt to be funny, many pundits called it a cheap shot (Cohen, 2008; Dowd, 2008).

Clinton’s stress got the best of her and on January 7, 2008, she reacted with a brief, but tearful moment. During an appearance at a café in New Hampshire, Clinton responded to an audience member who asked how she remained so upbeat during the campaign. At first, Clinton joked about the difficulty of maintaining her good looks. She then used the moment to answer the accusations from the previous night’s debate. Regarding her likeability, Clinton characterized her campaign as a selfless act in which she was fighting for the well being of America. “It’s not easy,” she suggested, “and I couldn’t do it if I didn’t passionately believe it was the right thing to do” (Kornblut, 2008, p. A09). She added, while briefly choking up, “I have so many opportunities for this country, I just don’t want to see us fall backwards” (Healy & Santora, 2008, para. 6). Clinton added, “You know, this is very personal for me. It’s not just political it’s not just public” (Kornblut, 2008, p. A09). Regarding the assertion that she represented the status quo, Clinton clarified that she, too, was an agent of change. “I see what’s happening,” she claimed, “and we have to reverse it. Some people think elections are a game, [but] it’s about our country, it’s about our kids’ futures, and it’s really about all of us together” (Breslau, 2008, para. 1). Concluding with an attack on Obama, Clinton stated, “Some of us are right and some of us are wrong, some of us are ready and some of us are not, some of us know what we will do on day one and some of us haven’t thought that through enough” (Healy & Santora, 2008, para. 7).

Clinton’s tears in New Hampshire appeared to become a media sensation for a few reasons. Above all, Clinton’s emotional moment in the midst of a difficult point in the campaign opened her up to the criticism that she was insincere and faking in hopes of connecting with female voters. Many critics (Hertzberg, 2008; Novak, 2008; Thomas, 2008) guessed Clinton’s crying – like her loud laughter and newfound love for whiskey shots – might have been a part of a

larger strategy of making her appear more likeable. In essence, questions about Clinton's authenticity in light of the situation likely contributed to the backlash she received.

Second, Clinton's crumbling during a critical moment opened her up to a more brutal attack – that she, like Patricia Schroeder in 1987, had proven women are too emotional to be strong leaders. For instance, Dick Morris, a former adviser to Bill Clinton, told Fox News, "I believe that there could well come a time when there is such a serious threat to the United States that she breaks down like that" (Bellantoni, 2008, p. A01). Similarly, John Edwards told ABC News, "What we need in a commander in chief is strength and resolve, and presidential campaigns are tough business, but being President of the United States is also tough business" (Bellantoni & Curl, 2008, p. A01). This critique alluded to Clinton's gender, but it also reflected concern about the appropriateness of her emotion in the context of defending herself.

Although Clinton's crying looked like it might doom her quest for the nomination, many critics later insisted that it helped produce a dramatic turnaround for her stumbling campaign. As conservative commentator William Kristol summarized, "The pundits got it wrong, the pollsters got it wrong, [and] the voters crossed everyone out" (Liss, 2008, para. 21). Defying expectations that she would fail in the New Hampshire primary, Clinton received forty percent of the vote to Obama's thirty-seven percent. Pundits had assumed Clinton's violation of gender norms along with the belief that she was faking her tears was enough to damage her appeal to the electorate. However, the impact of her crying was likely mitigated by a few other complicating factors. First, Clinton's crying was moderate. It was rare, Givhan (2008) noted, for a woman who "over the past 17 years . . . constructed a public face that is controlled and largely inscrutable" (para. 5). Also, her crying was hardly dramatic. "She did it perfectly," Lutz (2008) suggested, because "it was . . . just enough to signal a breakdown, but never letting go, eyes getting wet, a tremble in the voice . . . but stressing that it was not for herself that she cried" (para. 9). As Givhan (2008) argued, "there were no tears rolling down Clinton's cheeks, and there was no messy sniffing. As displays of emotion go, this one was tasteful and reserved – and ever so brief" (para. 3).

Moreover, Clinton's crying in New Hampshire may have even been advantageous to her campaign because for many potential voters she revealed her human side. Having embraced a masculine political style, "many voters found Hillary off-puttingly 'manly,' cold and calculating over the years" (Lutz, 2008, para. 8). By opening up emotionally, Clinton proved that "she wasn't all macho ambition and ruthless manipulation" (para. 8). By most accounts, Clinton's tears were beneficial because she looked "more vulnerable, more human and more appealing" (Breslau, 2008, para. 5). In short, Clinton was finally showing her authentic side – "the real Hillary" who was "engaging, warm, and witty" (para. 6).

Another reason why Clinton's crying may have ultimately benefited her campaign was many voters felt her tears were acceptable given the nature of the attacks made against her. In other words, Clinton's tears and the spectacle they

created motivated many female voters who identified with her as a victim of sexism (Shepard, 2009). The exit polls partially told this story, as Clinton went from trailing in the female vote in Iowa to a 13-point lead in New Hampshire (Strange & Naughton, 2008). Moreover, exit polls conducted by Edison/Mitofsky, for example, found women who made up their minds in the last three days of the election favored Clinton by a margin of 44 percent to 36 percent (Carey, 2008). Clinton alluded to this data when she later remarked that she “had this incredible moment of connection with the voters” (Strange & Naughton, 2008, para. 3). As Lithwick (2008) summarized, Clinton’s tears “turned the men around [her] into brutes [and] every woman who’s ever been asked whether it’s that time of the month must have felt some kinship” (para. 6). In a tearful moment functioning enthymematically, many women felt Clinton’s pain and may have used the election as an opportunity to rise not only to her defense but to the defense of all women.

Although Clinton is most remembered for crying in New Hampshire, in a more minor incident she was caught tearing up again on February 4, 2008, at an event in Connecticut before the Super Tuesday elections. Penn Rhodeen, who supervised Clinton in a legal-aid society when she was a student at Yale Law School, introduced the senator by sharing some of his best memories of their days together. Hailed as “our incomparable Hillary,” Clinton was remembered by Rhodeen as “[appearing] at my door, dressed mostly in purple” with a sheepskin coat and bellbottoms (Earle, 2008, para. 8). As Rhodeen himself lost his composure, Clinton was seen wiping her cheek (“A sort of,” 2008). This led her to open her speech by joking, “Well, I said I would not tear up. Already, we’re not exactly on that path” (Earle, 2008, para. 11).

Clinton’s second crying episode produced far less attention than her first. For the most part, the incident at Yale was mentioned by the press but more as a general report on her visit (“A sort of,” 2008). There were several likely reasons why Clinton’s crying in Connecticut did not develop into a public spectacle, despite her gender and her previous incident. First, Clinton’s tears in New Haven were seen as moderate in degree, described as a mere welling of the eyes, which she “blinked back...with a smile” (Memmott & Lawrence, 2008, para. 3). In fact, the Yale incident was even more moderate, Earle (2008) argued, in that “she didn’t choke up” (para.4). Clinton’s tears at Yale were also perceived as more acceptable because the situation itself was uncontroversial. Whereas Clinton was crying in New Hampshire in response to the stress of the campaign, her tears in New Haven followed a “warm introduction from an old friend” (Earle, 2008, para. 3). Thus, because of the more acceptable situation, Clinton was not accused of caving under pressure.

Whereas Clinton was attacked for crying in New Hampshire due to her perceived weakness in a stressful moment during the campaign, her gender, and questions about her authenticity, her crying incident in New Haven suggests those might not have been the most important factors at work. While Clinton’s gender mattered in New Hampshire, it played no clear role in reactions to her crying in New Haven. And while Clinton’s crying in New Haven came on the heels of her episode in New Hampshire, the frequency of her crying did not

seem to raise red flags in the mainstream media. As the crying episodes involving Mitt Romney will illustrate, the likely difference between Clinton's two episodes was that concern about a weeping candidate's gender and the degree of their tears may be dependent on the appropriateness of the situation.

Mitt Romney

Although Clinton's crying episode in New Hampshire was the most discussed in the election, it was actually Mitt Romney who first shed tears when he appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press* on December 16, 2007, to discuss his Mormon faith. Romney's religion became an issue in the Republican primary after his opponent, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, was seen as trying to capitalize on American ignorance about Mormonism (Goodstein, 2007). In one instance Huckabee implied Mormons were strange for believing "that Jesus and the devil are brothers" (Goodstein, 2007, para. 1). Romney's emotional moment in the interview came when host Tim Russert asked him what he thought as a younger man about the Mormon Church's exclusion of black members until 1978. "I was anxious to see a change in my church," Romney (2007) confessed, "[and] I can remember when I heard about the change" (paras. 38-39). Describing how he was driving home from law school, Romney reported, "I heard it on the radio and I pulled over and literally wept" (para. 39). At that point during the interview, Romney "choked up" (Benac, 2007, para. 3) and his "eyes appeared to [be filled] with tears" (Allen, 2007, para. 2). "Even to this day," he admitted, "it's emotional" (Romney, 2007, para. 39).

Romney wept again a day later during a stump speech in New Hampshire in which he spoke about watching the casket of a soldier killed in Iraq being ceremoniously unloaded from a plane in Boston. "The soldiers that I was with stood at attention and saluted," Romney said, "and I put my hand on my heart" ("Romney cries," 2007, para. 4). Romney's eyes filled with tears when he added, "I have five boys of my own [and] I imagined what it would be like to lose a son in a situation like that" (para. 4). Recognizing the risks of crying two days in a row, Romney defended himself to the press by saying, "I'm a normal person. I have emotion just like anyone else [and] I'm not ashamed of that at all" (para. 9).

Although Romney's tears did not trigger the media spectacle that followed Clinton's episode in New Hampshire, his own emotional moments were a subject of criticism for a few reasons. First, some of Romney's critics panned his performance because he was allegedly showing weakness in a difficult moment during the campaign. In other words, some critics suggested Romney's tears indicated he could not handle the stress of the general election, especially since he portrayed himself as being an expert in crisis management (Gandelman, 2007). Another problem was Romney's crying lacked authenticity for those familiar with his earlier rhetoric. Romney's weeping for fallen soldiers seemed authentic, but some reported it as a clear "counterbalance to a moment earlier [in the] year, when Romney told a woman in Iowa that his grown sons – none of whom has served in the military – were serving the country by helping with his campaign" ("Romney cries," 2007, para. 3). Moreover, Romney's crying about

the Mormon Church was inconsistent with the way he addressed the issue before. Defending the church in an unsuccessful campaign against Senator Ted Kennedy in 1994, “Romney angrily noted that the policy changed in 1978 [and] said he was greatly relieved, but said nothing about weeping for joy when he learned about it” (Vennoch, 2007, para. 3). According to Romney’s critics, then, it appeared his tears were fabricated to deal with concerns that he once willingly embraced the exclusive policies of his church. Romney “refused to condemn the church’s pre-1978 racial stance,” Lutz (2008) complained, “and he started blinking away the extra tears as soon as he saw where the question was headed” (para. 10).

A third problem with Romney’s crying was that many critics suspected he was faking especially since he wept two days in a row. Skeptics noted Romney’s advertisements preceding his public appearances in December 2007 were obvious efforts to humanize him as a candidate. Vennoch (2007), for example, cited “a new Romney political ad [that] recounts an episode when the candidate, then head of Bain Capital, shut down the company to lead the search for an employee’s missing daughter” (para. 7). The crying appeared to be a continuation of this strategy. “Now, it’s easy,” Vennoch maintained, “to imagine this urgent message emanating from Romney headquarters: ‘Pack up the PowerPoint, muss up your hair, and show voters the tracks of your tears’” (para. 5). Clearly, tearing up two days in a row was a problem for Romney. As one critic warned, “[You, Romney], are in danger of being typecast . . . [so] turn off the waterworks or it’ll become a media theme and a punchline for late night comics” (Gandelman, 2007, para. 2).

Romney’s crying was controversial, but he still avoided the fate of Ed Muskie because his violation of emotional norms was minimal. One reason for this was his crying was still moderate in degree, and he managed to communicate authenticity at least in some sense. Arguing that Romney usually “comes across as cool and detached,” Benac (2007) noted his “showing a little emotion may not be something to cry about” (para. 5). Because Romney constantly faced a challenge of “[proving] he’s not a robot” (Vennoch, 2007, para. 12), a few tears probably had a humanizing effect for some potential voters. Although the frequency of his tears led to questions about his authenticity, the public’s reaction to Romney’s crying was tame compared to the reaction to Clinton’s incident in New Hampshire. Yet, Romney’s crying, like Clinton’s episode in New Hampshire, ultimately highlights the importance of the situational appropriateness of one’s tears – while Romney was criticized for the frequency and inauthenticity of his crying, criticism of his tears stemmed mostly from the belief that he had either opportunistically selected a moment to show his emotional side, or that he had inappropriately caved under pressure. As the crying incidents involving Joe Biden and Barack Obama will indicate, even full on bawling is occasionally tolerated by the public as long as it is warranted by the situation.

Joe Biden

Senator Joe Biden cried as much as all other candidates in 2008 combined, and did so with far more intensity. He had a total of five crying episodes, the

first of which occurred on August 26, 2008, when he thanked Delaware's delegates to the Democratic National Convention during a scheduled breakfast. Biden at first "served up a mea culpa for his foibles and imperfections," but made his remarks more personal than previously planned (Elliot, 2008, para. 1). Treating the occasion as a farewell, Biden added, "This is a great honor being nominated and I'm proud of it, but it pales in comparison to the honor of representing you" (Bacon, 2008, para. 2). At one point, while describing the way his Democratic friends brought food and helped care for his children after a tragic car accident killed his wife and daughter, Biden fell apart. After "pausing and wiping his eyes with a handkerchief" (Gaudiano, 2008, para. 4), Biden confessed, "I wish we could have done this in private because . . . I don't know whether I would have made it through a lot of the tough times in my life without you guys" (para. 6).

Biden wept again a month later when on September 18, 2008, he toured the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Biden stopped at a tribute to players who served in the Vietnam War and his "eyes welled up as he looked at the Purple Heart awarded to Rocky Bleier" (Corsaro, 2008, para. 3). Bleier, Biden explained, visited his sons while they were staying in the hospital following the car crash that killed half of the Biden family. Bleier dropped by the hospital when Biden was away and gave presents to the children to lift their spirits.

On September 25, 2008, Biden openly cried during a rally in Pennsylvania in which he was introduced by Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney. Biden explained that while his sons were in the hospital he left to purchase a Christmas tree. When he returned hours later, Biden saw "they were happy, and . . . they had a football in their beds" ("Biden chokes," 2008, para. 4). Before he attributed the good deed to Dan Rooney's father, "Biden paused, with the whole high-school gymnasium silent as the senator choked up behind the podium" (para. 5) and pressed "a white handkerchief against his welling eyes before composing himself and moving the speech along" (Callahan, 2008, para. 2). Stumbling again, Biden said, "I really apologize, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have tried to do this" ("Biden chokes," 2008, para. 10).

Biden also briefly choked up on October 2, 2008, at the end of his debate with Sarah Palin after she claimed to have a better understanding of middle class families. Asked by moderator Gwen Ifill about his weaknesses, Biden brought up his "excessive passion" and went off on a tangent about the tragedy that broke up his family: "The notion that somehow, because I'm a man, I don't know what it's like to raise two kids alone, I don't know what it's like to have a child you're not sure is going to – is going to make it" (Decker & Finnegan, 2008, para. 12). After choking up and pausing briefly, Biden concluded, "I understand, as well as – with all due respect, the governor or anybody else – what it's like for those people sitting around that kitchen table. And guess what? They're looking for help" (para. 12).

The fifth incident involving Biden crying was at a political rally in Colorado on October 22, 2008. In illustrating his desire to end the war in Iraq, Biden brought up a conversation that he had earlier in the day. A supporter who asked Biden to bring home the troops presented the senator a gift. Biden stated, as his

eyes filled with tears: “And before I knew it, he pinned this on my lapel. It’s a gold star. The only way you get a gold star is if you lose a child in battle” (“Emotional Biden,” 2008, para. 5). It was probably the incident least covered by the media, but was another example of Biden being comfortable enough to open up to potential voters.

Biden demonstrated that sometimes candidates can tear up frequently without significant negative ramifications. His sobbing in public occurred almost every other week between the convention and the general election. However, Biden had something that few candidates ever possess: a reputation and a coherent narrative that made his tears appear both authentic and situationally appropriate. First, Biden’s tears were not too shocking because they were consistent with his sincerity that made him famous for his gaffes. Throughout the campaign, Biden was often discussed more for his mistakes than for his policy. He once asked a gentleman in a wheelchair to stand up, called some of his own campaign’s ads against John McCain despicable, and was criticized for insensitive comments he made about Indians working at 7-Eleven. “But no one cares,” Callahan (2008) wrote, “because it’s just ‘Joe being Joe’” (para. 7). Many voters were attracted to Biden’s gaffes and displays of emotion because he appeared unrehearsed. As a superdelegate from Delaware mentioned during the convention, “We don’t look at it that he talks too much. We like it that he says what he thinks. [And that’s] why he has stayed a six-term senator” (Weeks, 2008, para. 7).

Another reason why Biden’s tears were not controversial was because his behavior was deemed situationally appropriate. In four of his crying episodes Biden was speaking about the death of his wife and daughter and his struggles as a single father. Considering the nature of the tragedy that defined his life, any question about his sincerity would likely have been considered heartless. Biden was widely perceived as a survivor of great misfortune, and his willingness to talk about it came off as appreciation for those who helped him cope. Moreover, his willingness to discuss the accident further enhanced his image as one of the few authentic candidates in the race. As one elderly constituent reported, “He seems down-to-earth; he’s been through a lot. He knows the common person” (Callahan, 2008, para. 8). For many people, this meant Biden could understand their pain. After getting to speak with Biden after a stump speech, one mother reported, “I told him that my son is a quadriplegic, and he gets no help from the government. [Biden] told me he lost a child, and gave me a hug. He’s compassionate. Very authentic” (para. 13). Therefore, Biden’s frequent crying demonstrated that candidates can violate some emotional norms as long as most Americans can identify with the reasons for their tears.

Barack Obama

Barack Obama also cried during the 2008 election when he informed a crowd in North Carolina of his grandmother’s death just before Election Day. Before a large audience standing in the pouring rain, Obama announced, “Look, she has gone home. And she died peacefully in her sleep with my sister at her side” (Finnegan, 2008, para. 5). As tears flowed down his cheeks and his voice

cracked, Obama admitted to the audience “I’m not going to talk about it too long, because it’s hard for me” (Tapper, 2008, para. 4). Obama then discussed the significance of Madelyn Dunham’s life as he had before in stump speeches since his party’s convention.

Obama’s tears for his grandmother were mentioned but not negatively portrayed by major media outlets. He likely avoided a Muskie moment for a few reasons. First, Obama’s crying was moderate. He had never cried in front of the country before, and on this one occasion “a single perfect tear rolled down his manly cheek” (Guest, 2008, para. 7). Second, Obama’s cool and calm demeanor, noted by pundits throughout the presidential debates, meant his crying had a humanizing effect for many audience members. In this sense, Obama’s crying did for him what Clinton’s had allegedly done for her. “It was the most emotional and, well, human I’ve ever seen Sen. Obama,” Julia Hoppock (2008) of ABC News reported after stating that the senator’s coolness was sometimes “downright chilly” (para. 12). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Obama’s tears – like Biden’s, and Clinton’s in New Haven – did not raise any questions about situational appropriateness. Obama was remembering a family member who was discussed in much of his campaign rhetoric. The tragedy of a grandmother-turned-mother who suffered from cancer but died one day before witnessing a historic moment was clearly unfortunate, and an easy source for audience identification.

Conclusion

The Muskie rule has supposedly been in effect for over forty years, and the former presidential candidate’s breakdown narrative has been used analogically on many occasions to explain why emotional moments involving other candidates could doom their campaigns. While shedding tears in public seems catastrophic for politicians on the stump, there are far more examples of candidates who have cried without being criticized. Perhaps no better example of this phenomenon exists than the 2008 election. In this essay I have tried to solve some of this mystery, and have contended that whether crying creates a media circus depends on the gender and perceived authenticity of the crier, the degree to which the candidate is seen as an outsider, the intensity and the frequency of the tears, and the reasons for the weeping.

This essay has several important ramifications. In respect to critical understanding of past crying episodes, this essay suggests that the Muskie rule itself has been exaggerated. Among the ten incidents involving candidates tearing up in 2008 only three led to significant criticism. In short, public tears do not automatically signal the downfall of a candidate, nor do they mean that the news media will necessarily be interested in developing that narrative. Muskie was not criticized simply because he was crying. His crying was perceived as sobbing, inappropriate for the context of defending himself, and a sign of emotional instability in light of many previous incidents that had been noted during his campaign (Shepard, 2009, p. 73). Therefore, the public reaction to his tears made sense given his specific situation and is not necessarily a good parallel for all other crying incidents.

Along the same lines, this essay also indicates that conventional understanding of Hillary Clinton's crying incident has been somewhat flawed. Most scholars examining Clinton's episode have concluded criticism of her tears in Portsmouth was the result of gender bias (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Falk, 2009; Manusov & Harvey, 2011; Shepard 2009). These researchers are partially right. Clinton suspiciously received more criticism for her incident in New Hampshire than any other candidates from 2008 received for their tears, and her critics made clear references to her gender when suggesting she could not be trusted because of her emotions. However, attributing criticism of Clinton mostly to gender bias is as hasty as calling every crying episode a Muskie moment. Clinton's tears at Yale a month later received little attention from the news media. The reason for this was clear: the two incidents were very different. While Clinton was a victim of the double bind throughout the campaign, her crying in New Hampshire occurred in the context of defending herself. As such, her emotion was deemed situationally inappropriate by some of her critics, as were Mitt Romney's tears a month before. Also, the efforts by Clinton's campaign to make her seem more human to voters understandably led to some skepticism when she dropped her guard in front of a room full of cameras. In other words, there were many reasons why Clinton's tears were controversial. My explanation of when crying is a bane or blessing for a candidate should encourage others to refrain from calling future incidents a Clinton or Muskie moment simply because crying is involved, and instead search for other underlying factors that made the emotional display so controversial.

In light of this correction to popular beliefs about Muskie's moment and Clinton's crying incident, this essay offers a few important lessons to political communication scholars and practitioners trying to interpret how tears may impact a candidate's image in a future race. Although each of the five factors explained in this essay play a role in how the public will likely respond to a crying incident, the presence of situational reasons for crying appears to be the most important. Because elections weed out those unfit for office, the appearance of losing control in a situation requiring strong leadership is probably the leading reason that certain crying candidates face such strong criticism. What distinguished the incidents involving Muskie, Clinton, and Romney from all others was the perception that they were collapsing under pressure. As such, when those running future campaigns are trying to assess damage caused by a tearful episode, or when candidates are contemplating being more emotionally honest at times, all should pay heed to the following advice: When the going gets tough, the tough do not cry or lash out. If this rule is ignored, candidates will see damage to their reputation exacerbated if their crying appears inauthentic or insincere, especially if they are women or members of outsider groups. This, however, does not mean campaigns are rendered helpless in these moments. Because crying is ambiguous, its meaning is up for interpretation. When accused of crumbling, and pegged for the same fate as Muskie, campaigns can battle to reinterpret emotion perceived as inappropriate. As Shepard (2009) argued, Clinton's campaign in 2008 rejected the media's framing of her tears, and reacted quickly to redefine the situation, refute the notion that she was sobbing, and

highlight the gender bias inherent in the criticism of her moment. Such a strategy was likely more responsible for Clinton's comeback than the crying itself, and serves as an important lesson to future campaigns.

This essay offers several directions for future research. In short, the findings in this essay have scratched the surface, and may be modified by future studies. First, the framework I outlined could be applied to, and tested against, many other crying incidents. For instance, the framework could be applied to similar episodes in the 2012 campaign to explain why Herman Cain and Rick Santorum were somewhat humanized by their tears (Liptack & Shepherd, 2011; Herman Cain, 2011), while Gingrich was referenced by at least some critics as a "sad, old clown" for his crying (Lupica, 2012). The framework could also be applied to major crying incidents involving political leaders in other countries. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard was criticized in her country for crying during a speech honoring victims of Cyclone Yasi in 2011 (Bolt, 2011), and it may be interesting to compare that incident to Clinton's episode in New Hampshire to determine the influence that the gender of the crying rhetor has on perceptions of their public tears. Second, and related to this first point, future research may attempt to determine whether certain variables should be added to the framework discussed in this essay. It very well could be the case that the character of the media source could be a dominant factor in interpretations of crying, as Manusov and Harvey (2011) have suggested. To what extent this is true was not a subject in this study, but answering that question would likely impact my findings. Finally, in extending this study, future research may also attempt to test this framework with quantitative methods. While this kind of research has been undertaken by at least one political scientist recently to examine the gender bias in candidate emotionality (Brooks, 2011), similar efforts could attempt to put many of the other factors to the test as well.

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