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Chris Christie

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On June 30, 2015, at Livingston High School in New Jersey, Chris Christie announced his bid for the 2016 presidency on the Republican ticket. In his speech, Christie promotes himself as the best candidate by setting the agenda on America's lack of strong leadership, and framing the country's problems as being a result of America's lack of strong leadership. Christie also frames the issue by casting the blame on the current President and Congress. Christie tries to garner support for this frame by constructing his own character as an experienced and effective leader, as well as evoking the emotion of trust in the audience¹.

While Christie brings up many issues briefly in his speech, he sets the agenda on the weakness of American leadership. Early in the announcement, Christie brings up the current weak leadership, listing numerous things it has caused before concluding with, "This weakness and indecisiveness in the oval office has sent a wave of anxiety through our country" (Christie). He brings this issue up again right before he announces his presidential candidacy, "America is tired of handwringing and indecisiveness and weakness in the oval office. We need to have strength and decision-making and authority back in the oval office and that is why today I am proud to announce my candidacy for the Republican nomination for President of the United States of America" (Christie).

Christie frames the issue as of weak leadership as the cause for many of America's current issues. For example, "This lack of leadership, has led to an economy that is weak and

¹ This essay applies Medhurst's (2005) conceptual overview of presidential campaign rhetoric – agenda-setting, framing, character construction, and emotional resonance.

hasn't recovered the way it should. It's lead to an educational system that has us 27th in the industrialized world in Math and 24th in science” (Christie). In this situation, Christie is attributing the weakness in the economy and America’s poorer academic status when compared to other industrial nations to the poor leadership the country is enduring. This makes the audience see that leadership is not just a value, it is a necessity for the proper governance of America, something that is lacking currently. This also provides an obvious solution to the problem; to insert strong leadership into the Whitehouse, this of course refers to his candidacy.

In his speech, Christie frames the issue of weak leadership again by placing the blame for it on both Congress and President Obama. Christie states, “Both parties have failed our country. Both parties have stood in the corner and held their breath and waited to get their own way” (Christie). In this statement, Christie is putting the blame on the both the Republican and Democratic parties for refusing to communicate, thus creating what has been referred to as political gridlock. By assigning blame to both parties, Christie makes himself appear more moderate and less confrontational, like he is above the party lines. After this, Christie states, “We need a Washington D.C. that remembers you went there to work for us not the other way around” (Christie). This reaffirms that the government should answer to the people. The use of us in this statement also makes Christie seem like a part of the people, rather than just a politician. Obama is given the blame for America’s weakened state in global affairs. “After seven years, I heard the President of the United States say the other day that the world respects America more because of his leadership. This is the final confirmation that President Obama lives in his own world, not in our world” (Christie). The use of “lives in his own world” is to paint Obama as out of touch and does not reflect the will of the people.

Christie constructs his character as the best to succeed on the issue of leadership by creating a persona of an experienced and strong willed leader. Christie shows this persona as he differentiates himself from the other candidates by saying, “Unlike some people who offer themselves for the presidency in 2016, you're not going to have to wonder whether I can do it or not. In New Jersey as governor, I've stood up against economic calamity and unprecedented natural disaster” (Christie). This is referring back to a previous section of the speech where Christie lists some of his accomplishments as governor of New Jersey:

We balanced six budgets in a row. We've refused to raise taxes on the people of this state for six years. We made the hard decisions that had to be made to improve our education system, we reformed tenure for the first time in 110 years. We made the difficult decisions to reform pension and health benefits and we continue that fight today (Christie).

These two instances show that Christie is an experienced leader. He has six years of experience as a governor making what he calls “hard decisions” that resulted in a better state. The use of hard and difficult when describing his decisions provides a good counterbalance to his criticisms of weak leadership for the established leaders. This makes it sound like Christie made tough but effective decisions, while other politicians play the waiting game on issues, or only worked in half measures. Later in the speech, Christie says he will, “at the same time reach across the aisle to our friends in the democratic party and say if you have a good idea I'm willing to work with you because that's what our country needs” (Christie). This shows that even though he makes strong decisions, he is still open to working with others, even those in another party. In the political gridlock that has often occurred, this statement potentially makes Christie seem more appealing to moderate voters and voters on the other side of the party line.

Christie makes the issue of leadership emotional by evoking a feeling of trust from the audience. Christie promises to run “A campaign without spin, without pandering or focus group tested answers. You're going to get what I think whether you like it or not or whether it makes you cringe every once and a while or not” (Christie). He’s promising that he will always be honest with his answers, which can be appealing to those who find modern politics to be too politically correct. By admitting that some of his opinions may make you cringe, Christie is showing that he’s willing to be completely honest. This appeal to honesty is used again as Christie says, “I am not looking to be the most popular guy who looks in your eyes every day and tries to figure out what you want to hear, say it and then turning around and doing something else” (Christie). This once again reiterates that Christie will do what he says, regardless of the political consequences. Christie consistently presents himself as honest and steady handed. Voters will always know where Christie stands on an issue, and what he will do regarding it, because he will just say it outright. All of these things contribute to building trust with the audience. Since politics is an arena where half-truths and politically correct answers are to be expected, a candidate that will always tell the truth presents an alternative.

Christie frames himself as the best candidate to deal with the nation’s leading problem which he sets the agenda on as weak leadership. Christie frames weak leadership as the cause of various serious issues such as America’s economic issues, and frames the issue so the blame for this weak leadership is placed on the Obama administration and congress. Christie constructs his character as someone who is prepared to take on these issues by referring back to his record as Governor of New Jersey. Christie evokes the emotion of trust to connect with the audience.

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