

**“Did Obamacare encourage business to hire more people?” –
An analysis of Mitt Romney and Barack Obama’s use of rhetorical questions in the 2012 US presidential election campaign**




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Objectives

- To elucidate how politicians can establish common ground with the general public and compete for votes in election campaigns, by using effective communication strategies.
- To evaluate the use of rhetorical questions between the two candidates **Mitt Romney** (Republican nominee) and the incumbent President **Barack Obama**, during the 2012 US presidential election campaign as an example.
- To examine how Romney and Obama's use of rhetorical questions (RQs) in their political speeches varied with different target audience:
 - (1) safe states for the **Democratic Party**,
 - (2) safe states for the **Republican Party**,
 - (3) **Swing** states.

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- (1) frequency,
 - (2) question type,
 - (3) pragmatic function.

Introduction

- Political speeches, especially those delivered to the public at large, are a particularly important part of election campaigns since they allow candidates to:
 - promote themselves and their policies
 - motivate followers or gain power through persuasion (Helms 2012).
- Candidates do more than promote themselves and they often engage in criticizing their opponents at the same time.
 - To maintain such a delicate balance between attracting audience attention and engaging in face-threatening acts to others, candidates frequently rely on various rhetorical strategies.
- The use of rhetorical questions:
 - has been identified as one of the most effective means of engaging in rhetorical demagoguery (Ephratt 2007: 1922),
 - enables speakers to “minimize face-risk” while engaging in face-threatening acts (Brown and Hansen 1978: 229-230).

Introduction (contd.)

- The political challenges that the two candidates were encountering with:
 - **Romney:**
 - had to challenge the incumbent whose charismatic image had a more favorable imprint in the consciousness of the Americans
 - **Obama:**
 - was inevitable to encounter with his opponent's criticisms, especially because of the difficult economic times under his first term.
- To examine how the two candidates strategized and competed against each other through the use of **rhetorical questions**.

Literature Review

1. Previous analysis of rhetorical questions

1.1 Translatability of rhetorical questions (RQs)

e.g. translation equivalences of all RQs in the Bible (Beekman and Callow, 1979: 229)

1.2 Linguistic features & socio-cultural factors

e.g. Syntactic Mandarin RQ marker : *nan²dao⁴* (< 'hard to say') (Alleton 1988)

Literature Review (contd.)

2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.1 *Yes/no question*

- Demands only an acceptance or a denial of the proposed fact from the addressee (usually involving a simple “yes” or “no” answer),
e.g. “Did *Obamacare* create new jobs?”
- Enables speakers to follow up with more detailed information, or to use the question as an assertion by implicating the speaker’s expectations towards the answer (Han, 1998)

Literature Review (contd.)

2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.2 *Wh*-question

- The *wh*-question allows for a wider range of possible answers, and this provides the speaker with the advantage of simply leaving the question to the listener to interpret the intended meaning (Monzoni, 2008).

E.g. *"Where is the economic recovery we were promised?"*

- The speaker can thus use *wh*- RQs in the following ways:
 - To convey the speaker's knowledge base as an assertion rather than a real (Quirk et al, 1985);
 - To make a criticism;
 - To throw a challenge.

Literature Review (contd.)

2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.3 Alternative question

- To offer a choice between alternative responses; however, the alternative question is “not always neutral” with respect to the speaker’s desire (Van Rooy & Šafářová, 2003: 304).
- e.g. in Bill Clinton’s alternative questions *“Will we be one nation, one people, with one common destiny, or not? Will we all come together, or come apart?”*

Literature Review (contd.)

2. Four types of rhetorical questions

- 2.4 Declarative questions

- To emphasize or establish the truthfulness of a known fact (Balogun, 2011);
- Two types of declarative questions:
 - Structurally identical to declarative statements but uttered with interrogative prosody; its final rising intonation can signal surprise or disbelief rather than a true interest in getting information.
 - Question tag (especially in a falling tone), e.g. “She dances well, doesn’t she?”
 - The speaker is sure of the fact in the declarative question, and the question tag is used to urge the hearer to agree with the assumption(s) in the declarative question (Balogun, 2011: 44).

Literature Review (contd.)

3. Functions of rhetorical questions in political discourse

- Persuasion

- An effective means of persuasion to get the approval and support of the listeners by affecting their attitude, emotion and psychology in political speeches (Nguyen, 2010).
- e.g. “Wouldn't it be great if we could look back on the last four years with confidence that the crisis had been confronted and we'd turned the corner toward a brighter future?”

- Self-Promotion

- Politicians can more aggressively “self-promote” themselves and therefore gain immediate political power and credibility (Edwards, 2007).
- e.g. “Do you want a president who will celebrate success, not attack it?”

Literature Review (contd.)

- Challenge

- RQs are often used as a challenging statement to solicit the listeners' commitment to its implicit answer, essentially by inducing mental recognition of its obviousness and its logical acceptability (Ilie, 1999: 128).
- e.g. "Did he fix the economy?" (Candidates pointed out their opponent's incapability directly)

- Doubt-inducing

- RQs could be used to "induce doubt" inside the mind of the audience more subtly by giving the addressee more freedom to consider the implied message, allowing the speaker to play a more neutral role by avoiding the use of more leading and value-loaded declarations (Bendahmane & McDonald, 1992).
- e.g. "It is often asked why is this recovery the slowest on record?"

Methodology

We compared the results of the last 6 elections from 1992 to 2012, and categorized all states in the US into the following 3 types:

1) Democrat-safe states

(the Democratic Party won most of the time)

State \ Year	2012	2008	2004	2000	1996	1992
California	D	D	D	D	D	D
Illinois	D	D	D	D	D	D
Iowa	D	D	R	D	D	D
Massachusetts	D	D	D	D	D	D
Michigan	D	D	D	D	D	D
New Hampshire	D	D	D	D	D	D
New York	D	D	D	D	D	D
Oregon	D	D	D	D	D	D
Pennsylvania	D	D	D	D	D	D
Washington	D	D	D	D	D	D
Wisconsin	D	D	D	D	D	D

2) Republican-safe states

(the Republican Party won most of the time)

Year \ State	2012	2008	2004	2000	1996	1992
Louisiana	R	R	R	R	D	D
Missouri	R	R	R	R	D	D
South Carolina	R	R	R	R	R	R
Texas	R	R	R	R	R	R

3) Swing states

- No certain trend

- The margin of victory is very small

State \ Year	2012	2008	2004	2000	1996	1992
Colorado	D	D	R	R	R	D
Florida	D	D	R	R	R	D
Nevada	D	D	R	R	D	D
Ohio	D	D	R	R	D	D
Virginia	D	D	R	R	R	R

Year \ State	Florida	Ohio	Virginia	Colorado	Nevada
2012	0.88%	2.98%	3.87%	5.37%	6.68%
2008	2.82%	4.59%	6.30%	8.95%	12.50%
2004	5.01%	2.11%	8.20%	4.67%	2.59%
2000	0.01%	3.51%	8.03%	7.36%	4.54%
1996	5.70%	6.36%	1.96%	1.37%	1.02%
1992	1.89%	1.83%	4.38%	4.26%	2.57%
Average %	2.72%	3.56%	5.46%	5.33%	4.98%

Methodology (contd.)

- Procedure for examining how the frequency, features and functions of Obama and Romney's use of RQs varied in the 3 different types of states.
 1. Count the **number of RQs** in every speech
 2. Classify each token into one of the following 4 types:
 - **Yes/No question**
 - **Wh-question**
 - **Alternative question**
 - **Declarative question**
 3. Classified each RQ token into types of functions:
 - **Self-promotion**
 - **Persuasion**
 - **Challenge**
 - **Doubt-inducing**
 4. Conduct both **quantitative** (frequency-count) and **qualitative** (discourse-context) analyses to evaluate how they used RQs to challenge each other
 5. Provision of **specific examples** for comparison and discussion in terms of the distinctive features and functions of these RQs

Number of RQs in different states

Table 5. Frequency of RQs in the safe states and swing states

State \ RQs	No. of speeches	No. of RQs	No. of RQs per 1000 words
Democrat-safe states	29	76	1.26
Republican-safe states	5	3	0.28
Swing states	14	46	1.51
Total	48	125	n/a

(Romney's 125 RQs)

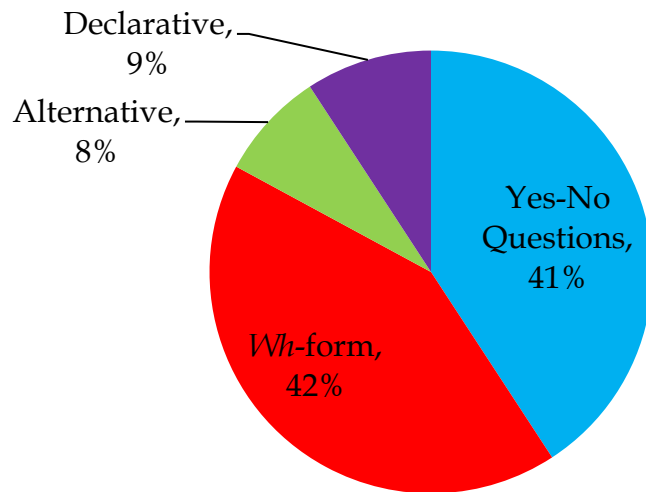
State \ RQs	No. of speeches	No. of RQs	No. of RQs per 1000 words
Democrat-safe states	19	62	0.900
Republican-safe states	2	9	1.06
Swing states	31	129	1.15
Total	52	200	n/a

(Obama's 200 RQs)

- ❖ Both Romney and Obama are inclined to ask more RQs in states with more potential voters of their opponents. **Swing states receive the highest no. of RQs.**

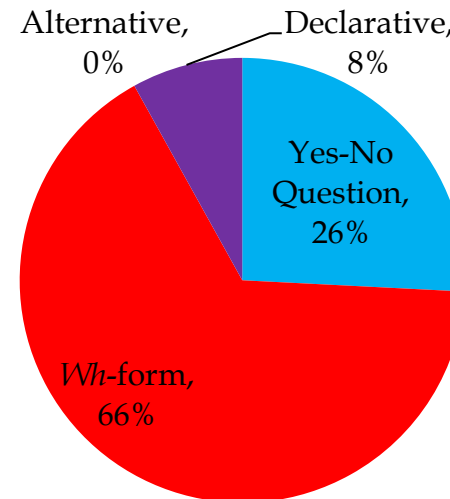
Democrat-safe states

- **Frequency and types of rhetorical questions:**



(Romney's 76 RQs)

Vs.



(Obama's 62 RQs)

- **Romney:** 31 **yes/ no** questions, 32 *wh*-questions, 6 **alternative** questions and 7 **declarative** questions:
 - Fewer **direct yes/no** questions
 - More **indirect and less face-threatening forms**
- ❖ More mindful of diverse opinions, and more tentative rather than forceful in his rhetoric, and hence more polite.
- **Obama:** 16 **yes/ no** questions, 41 *wh*-questions, and 7 **declarative** questions:
 - **Predominant use of the more open-ended *wh*-forms**
- ❖ Relatively low usage of the more forceful and direct yes/ no questions, indicating that Obama has little need to persuade his safe-state audiences.

Democrat-safe states (contd.)

- Functions of rhetorical questions

States \ Functions	Democrat-safe states		Swing states		Republican-safe states	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Self-Promotion	1	1%	5	11%	0	n/a
Persuasion	30	39%	10	22%	1	n/a
Doubt-Inducing	26	34%	11	24%	2	n/a
Challenge	19	25%	20	43%	0	n/a
Total no. of RQs	76		46		3	

(Romney's 76 RQs)

States \ Functions	Democrat-safe states		Swing states		Republican-safe states	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Self-Promotion	3	5%	7	5%	0	n/a
Persuasion	40	65%	64	50%	9	n/a
Doubt-Inducing	10	16%	28	22%	0	n/a
Challenge	9	15%	30	23%	0	n/a
Total no. of RQs	62		129		9	

(Obama's 62 RQs)

Note: The number of RQs for the Republican-safe states are too small for the percentages to make a meaningful distinction, hence n/a (i.e. not applicable) for analysis.

Democrat-safe states (contd.)

- **Functions of rhetorical questions**
 - **Persuasive RQs:**
 - served to synchronize speaker and addressee beliefs
 - e.g. “Wouldn't it be great if we could look back on the last four years with confidence that the crisis had been confronted and we'd turned the corner toward a brighter future?” (implicit persuasion)
 - **Doubt-inducing RQs:**
 - a more indirect strategy than persuasion RQs, often using impersonalization and passivization strategies
 - e.g. “It is often asked why is this recovery the slowest on record?”

Democrat-safe states (contd.)

And **what about**
his budget?

(Example 1: **Romney**'s speech made in **Iowa** on October 23, 2012)

- RQ1. "He promised to cut the deficit in half, but he doubled it. **And his budget?** It failed to win a single vote, Republican or Democrat, in either the House or the Senate. He said he would reform Medicare and Social Security and save them from pending insolvency, but he shrunk from proposing any solution at all."
- RQ2. "And then, **where are the jobs?**"
- RQ3. "**Where are the 9 million more jobs that President Obama promised his stimulus would have created by now?** They are in China, Mexico, and Canada and in countries that have made themselves more attractive for entrepreneurs and business and investment, even as President Obama's policies have made it less attractive for them here."

Note that politicians often follow up their RQs with *pre-determined elaborate answers*.

Democrat-safe states (contd.)

(Example 1: Romney's speech made in Iowa on October 23, 2012)

- The cascade of RQs produced a powerful verbal punch against President Obama:
 - After asking RQ1 *"And [what about] his [Obama's] budget?"*, Romney immediately provided his answer "It failed to win a single vote..."
 - He kept on his attack by asking *"And then, where are the jobs?"* (RQ2), and followed up with yet another rhetorical question *"Where are the 9 million jobs that President Obama promised ...?"* (RQ3).
- At the end of his 1st and 3rd rhetorical question, Romney chose to answer his own questions and eliminate the potential risks:
 - It may be risky for speakers to leave "the unspoken answer" to the addressee after asking a rhetorical question, therefore speakers often do not pause long before jumping in again "to interject their own answer" (Ephratt, 2007: 1922-3).

Democrat-safe states (contd.)

(Example 2: Obama's speech made in Iowa on October 17, 2012)

- RQ4. "I want to give more Americans the chance to get a great education and get the skills they need to compete in the 21st century. I tried to talk about education last night... But if you're talking about jobs and economic growth, **what's more important than making sure everybody has got the skills they need?** I'm only here because of a great education."
- RQ5. "But what you saw last night, even though we weren't able to talk about it as much as I would have liked, is a fundamental difference. Governor Romney says hiring more teachers won't grow our economy over the next 4 years. Well, you know what, yes, it will. But more importantly, **what about our kids over the next 40 years?**"
- RQ6. "**What about our economy for the next 40 years?** We could gut education, pay for Governor Romney's \$5 trillion tax cut, or we can recruit 100,000 new math and science teachers over the next decade ..."

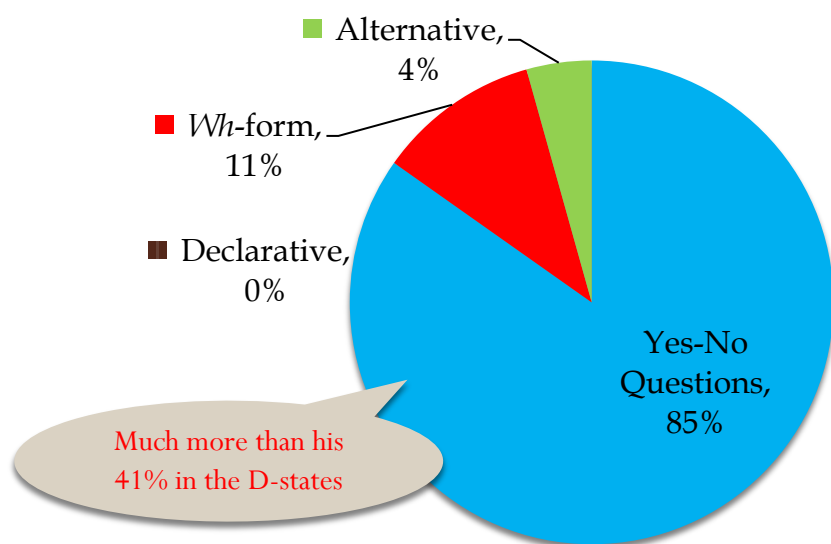
Democrat-safe states (contd.)

(Example 2: Obama's speech made in Iowa on October 17, 2012)

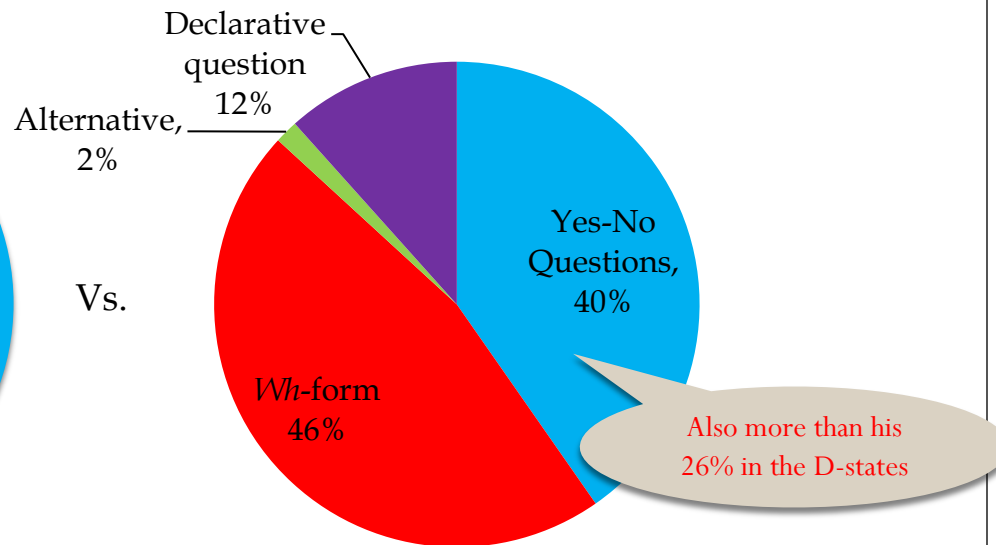
- The combination of persuasive and doubt-inducing RQs allowed Obama to unfold his grand vision and at the same time counter his opponent's criticisms:
 - After asking RQ4 "*What's more important than making sure everybody has got the skills they need?*", Obama immediately provided his answer "*I'm only here because of a great education*" to express his determination of improving the education system.
 - He then countered Romney's earlier criticisms against his proposal to hire more teachers, by asking "*what about our kids over the next 40 years?*" (RQ5), and followed up with yet another rhetorical question "*What about our economy for the next 40 years?*" (RQ6).
 - The comparison between "40 years" (said twice by Obama) and "4 years" (as earlier mentioned by Romney), implied that Obama is a more far-sighted president, while at the same time spotlighting Romney's lack of thoughtfulness of many important issues in the country.
- ❖ A strategic move in challenging Romney's political image as an economic whiz, while at the same time allowing Obama to sidestep the need to respond directly to his opponent's criticism of his policies in economic recovery.
 - ❖ Romney's original criticisms of Obama: "*We have watched the president for four years. There is almost nothing he has done that has helped get people to work or to increased incomes... He wants to hire more school teachers. We all like school teachers. It's a wonderful thing... But hiring school teachers is not going to raise the growth of the U.S. economy over the next three-to-four years.*"

Swing states

- Frequency and types of rhetorical questions:



(Romney's 46 RQs)



(Obama's 129 RQs)

- **Romney:** yes/ no questions dominated at 85% (39 tokens), while the *wh*-questions and alternative questions accounted for only 11% (5 tokens) and 4% (2 tokens) respectively.
- **Very high usage of yes/no questions**
- **Obama:** 52 yes/ no questions, 60 *wh*-questions, 2 alternative questions and 15 **declarative** questions:
 - **Relatively high usage of yes/no questions**

❖ The significant increase in the use of **yes/no** RQs is noteworthy. Generally, both candidates adopted this more combative strategy in the **swing** states to distinguish themselves as worthy challengers.

Swing states (contd.)

- Functions of rhetorical questions

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(Obama's 129 RQs)

Note: Romney engages in more self-promoting RQs in the swing states, while Obama slightly more in doubt-inducing as well as challenging RQs.

Swing states (contd.)

- **Functions of rhetorical questions**
 - **Self-promoting RQs**
 - enable Romney to gain support or agreement from the audience (by embedding an explicit message that he is the best candidate for U.S. president)
 - e.g. “Do you want a president who will celebrate success, not attack it?”
 - **Challenging RQs**
 - aimed at criticizing Obama with great **explicitness**
 - e.g. “Did he fix the economy?” (Romney pointed out Obama’s incapability directly)

Swing states (contd.)

(Example 3: Romney's speech made in Florida on August 30, 2012)

RQ7. “Does the America we want borrow a trillion dollars from China?
(AUDIENCE: No!)”

RQ8. “Does it fail to find the jobs that are needed for 23 million people and for half
the kids graduating from college?
(AUDIENCE: No!)”

RQ9. “Are its schools lagging behind the rest of the developed world?
(AUDIENCE: No!)”

RQ10. “And does the America we want succumb to resentment and division?
(AUDIENCE: No!)”

Swing states (contd.)

(Example 3: Romney's speech made in Florida on August 30, 2012)

- In RQ7, RQ8 and RQ10, Romney used the frame “**Does the America we want *do X?*”**:
 - X represents a socio-economic failing or socio-cultural breakdown which Romney subtly and implicitly attributed to Obama.
 - RQ3: “Are its schools lagging behind the rest of the developed world?”
 - similarly framed to “**Should the schools of the America we want *be in condition Y?*”**,
 - leads the audience to focus on some negative aspect of the state-of-the-nation under the incumbent President.
 - **Highly effective Yes/no RQ format:**
 - The audience 4 times promptly answered with an immediate “**No**”:
 - Romney's criticism on Obama was amplified, leaving a stronger negative impression of Obama in the minds of the audience and other swing voters.

Swing states (contd.)

(Example 4: Obama's speech made in Florida on September 8, 2012)

RQ11. "So, Florida, can you make some phone calls for me?"

RQ12. "Can you knock on some doors for me?"

RQ13. "Will you tell your friends and neighbors what's at stake in this election?"

RQ14. "Will you register?"

RQ15. "Will you vote? Because if you do, we will finish what we started. We'll create more good jobs. We'll generate more homegrown energy. We'll hire more great teachers. We'll send more young people to college. We'll bring home more troops. We'll take care of more veterans. We will open the doors of opportunity to everybody who's willing to work hard and walk through them."

Obama makes frequent use of pronouns such as 'we', 'our', 'me' and 'you' that are oriented more toward audience-engagement.

Swing states (contd.)

(Example 4: Obama's speech made in Florida on September 8, 2012)

- In RQ11 – RQ15, Obama frequently appeal to **grassroot sentiments** (e.g. “make phone calls”, “knock on some doors”, “register”, etc.) to motivate his supporters or swing voters to take immediate and concrete actions to support his presidential bid.
- After asking the 5 RQs, Obama also referred to his first term as a start of growing the country's economy (“...we will finish what we started.”), and asked for audiences' continued support to another 4 years so that he can get the job done:
 - “We will finish what we started. We'll create more good jobs. We'll generate more homegrown energy... We will open the doors of opportunity to everybody who's willing to work hard and walk through them.”
- ❖ Gradual increase in modality:
“Can you” (2 times) → “Will you” (3 times) → “We will” (8 times)
 - Obama makes use of his well-established image as an inclusive president in the consciousness of Americans.

Conclusion

- **Romney** and **Obama** tended to ask more RQs against each other in the **swing states** and the states that leaned more towards their opponents (i.e. **Democrat-safe** states for **Romney**; **Republican-safe** states for **Obama**) compared to their own safe states.
- Characteristics identified in their use of RQs:
 - (1) In the **swing** states: both candidates significantly increased their use of *yes/no* questions (more direct and forceful in generating audience involvement).
 - (2) In the safe states of their opponents, both candidates frequently adopted a relatively conservative approach by asking the more indirect and less face-threatening *wh*-questions (to induce doubt in the rival candidate in a more subtle and indirect manner).
- In this study we examined how skillful politicians effectively deploy rhetorical questions (RQs) to achieve their political goals.
- The two candidates' rhetorical skills provide us with a valuable opportunity to examine how politicians can effectively establish, negotiate and maintain common ground with the general public.

Acknowledgement

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