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Michael Higgins

Populism and security in political speechmaking: the 2008 US Presidential Campaign

Introduction

The issue of security has been a prominent feature of the US political landscape since the attacks of 9/11. Not surprisingly, then, issues of security, trust and credibility were raised throughout the 2008 US election presidential campaign. In the latter stages of his presidency, George W. Bush had been engaged in portraying his two terms as a successful period as national protector, keeping the US safe from further terrorist attack. Both the policy and the rhetorical strategies of the Bush administration coalesced around an emphasis on 'homeland security'. As well as producing a dominant way of asserting political legitimacy, this put in place an administrative framework within which elected legislators had to situate themselves, including the candidates for the 2008 presidential election. Although they engaged in these debates in quite different ways, it is significant that all but one of the candidates for 2008 participated in the policy framework of homeland security. Prospective Democrat President Barack Obama sat on the *Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, while his prospective Vice-President Joe Biden sat on the *Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security*. Outside of the committee setting, while Obama avoided supporting Bush's most controversial security measures, prospective Republican President John

McCain voted for the *Patriot Act* in 2001 and in 2006, and for the *Homeland Security Department Appropriations Act* in 2006 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2008). McCain's prospective Vice-President Sarah Palin's record on security is less established, through a simple consequence of having spent less time in political office and remaining in state governorship. We will go on to see, however, that Palin's contribution to the Republican tactic of articulating security with national self-interest offered some telling insights into the communication of politics.

While the overall rhetoric of security has been directed inward, prioritising a concern with 'home', it has included a significant exclusionary strand. Rees (2009: 108-9) emphasises that this concern with homeland security established a regime of shared practice that allowed Washington to strengthen some of its international partnerships (such as the UK) while temporarily marginalising certain, troublesome others (most notably France and Germany). In spite of the emphasis placed on Washington's short term squabbles with a number of longer-term allies, Rees (2009: 109) points out that implementation of the resultant policy initiatives on matters such as airport security and the pooling of intelligence, require a level of international cooperation at stretches beyond the rhetoric. However, the contention here will be that while the notion of 'homeland' holds out a virtuous arrangement for all national administrations that adopt similar codes of governance, the concentration on domestic well-being extends into the realm of economic and ideological interest.

In any event, security was a key selling point for the Republican ticket. This issue was framed, on the one hand, around personal credibility. The McCain campaign developed their approach to security and national safety, by drawing upon McCain's history as a prisoner of war in Vietnam and his image as a maverick politician that has shown a willingness to take uncompromising decisions. While these were selling points in McCain's campaign for the primary elections of 2000 (see Wallace, 2008), in 2008 they had been emphasised by the release of McCain's ghost-written commentaries of courageous decisions *Hard Call* (McCain and Salter, 2007). The assertion of a link between the capacity to deal with security issues and political and personal experience was not an argument confined to the Republican campaign. In the Democratic primaries too, Hillary Clinton ran an advert asking whether it is she or Barack Obama that has the understanding to deal with a 3am call to the White House concerning an urgent matter of security. Also significant, however, was Obama's response was that experience is of little use when it is disabled by dogmatism, in a strategy to assert a self-interested parochialism on the part of his opponents. As we will see, much of the election discourse of both sides centred on setting security concerns within various national or international parameters.

Where the relatively inexperienced Sarah Palin contributed to the Republican rhetoric on security was to draw upon the rhetorical force of the 'homeland' in 'homeland security'. Palin operated to place the experience and credibility of McCain in a particular context, and to emphasise the national self-interests involved. She performs this role using strategies associated with the traditions of political populism, and an understanding of the

modes of populist address in Palin's speeches help us to see how these boundaries of concern are established. What's more, these can be fruitfully compared alongside similar strategies in the speeches of Barack Obama, which we shall see are directed towards different ends.

Populism and leadership

References to populism routinely drive debates around political culture, both in the academy and more broadly. According to Margaret Canovan's (1981: 261) book-length treatment, populism as expressed by the political classes is the drive to tailor ideas so that they appear to spring from 'the people' rather than any political, economic or bureaucratic elite. This stems from a laudable in itself association between political power and subaltern collective action. As Hannah Arendt (1998: 201) remarks 'the only indispensable factor in the generation of power is the living together of people'. At least in principle, populism is the art of negotiating and implementing policies that appeal to these collectives. Populism also draws upon an equally admirable insistence that 'public will' should have a bearing on political policy. 'The people' are therefore presented as the foremost agents of political change.

Of course, populism is only one means of fostering an illusion of collectivity and representativeness. In its meaningful form, the expression of populism depends upon the presence of a 'charismatic leader' and their claims to represent this 'popular will' against

an unrepresentative system. Over the course of the presidential election, the main candidates were routinely assessed on their capacity to 'connect' with voters in particular ways: Obama through oratory skill, the promised change of mixed-race ethnicity and youthful vitality, and McCain by drawing upon his proven loyalty and courage, and maverick image. In her more recent work, Canovan (2002) acknowledges that populism is better understood as a series of political strategies than a political ideal, such that it offers a 'thin-centred' rhetorical basis for claiming political representativeness. What may be construed as the emptiness of the politician aligning themselves with the populace does not detract from the rhetorical force of its appeal, however, and even the most vacuous petitions to 'the people' offer what Abts and Rummens (2007: 408) describe as 'a central signifier which receives a fundamentally monolithic interpretation'. The populist address is simple and it tends to work. For all its emptiness, arguments against an effective populist strategy are positioned such that they seem to gainsay the popular will.

The effective populist address is also designed to avoid feeling especially political. The key terms of Obama's campaign, such as 'change', 'trust and 'hope', the latter also taken up in Obama's (2006) political writing, are designed to evoke shared human potentiality rather than disputable political values. Regis Debray writes that what is offered is not so much the rancorous posturing of political division, as 'a fraternity that keeps us warm' (Debray, 1983: 142). The promise is that if you listen and believe, you will never be alone. In the past, this emphasis on inclusiveness and belonging is what has lent populism some degree of elasticity. Ernesto Laclau (1977) uses the concept of

'articulation' to illustrate how populist discourses can be conjoined with established sets of political beliefs expressing a variety of contradictory interests. In Laclau's vision, one in which he draws heavily upon Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, the battle over populist legitimacy is more crucial to victory than any claim to political or ideological credibility. Populism therefore offers a means to forego acknowledgment of foundational political and economic interests. In short, populism presents an empty rhetorical style readily adaptable to whatever political agenda is at hand.

The analysis of populism

The focus of Regis Debray is on the use of pronouns in devising a populist address, and this has also guided the 'critical discourse analysis' of political language. Norman Fairclough (1989: 180) looks at the use of pronouns by Margaret Thatcher to claim solidarity with her listeners, 'to pass off her practices, perceptions and precepts as those of 'the people' in general'. Even elsewhere on the political spectrum, Fairclough (2000: 30) observes a strategy of inclusive pronominal usage in the speechmaking of ex-Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair that 'rests upon the constant 'commonsensical' equivalence of country, nation and business'. Higgins (2004), moreover, shows how the terms of even the most outwardly stable inclusive address can shift to accommodate whatever political agendas happen to be convenient. While pronouns are every bit as useful for potentially non-inclusive illocutionary acts of political discourse such as promising or requesting, the populist utility of the pronoun is largely in keeping with what Brown and Gilman (1972)

describe as their shift away from the expression of power differentials to that of a 'solidarity ethic'.

This analysis will look at the speechmaking of Sarah Palin, with a particular concentration on the acceptance speech for her nomination as candidate for the Vice-Presidency. The mechanism for looking Palin's speech will be the straightforward one of examining patterns of pronominal usage. The first suggestion to emerge from the analysis will be that the clustering of pronouns enables us to comprehend the structure of the speech, as well as allowing us to see how the speech discharges its various purposes; including accepting the nomination, McCain and selling Palin herself. Partly, Palin's speech will prove to be an exercise in managing different personae, and Drake and Higgins (2006) argue that successful political speechmaking draws upon an ability to shift between 'frames' (Goffman, 1986): speaking for oneself at one moment, and expressing party loyalty the next. The suggestion here is that analysis of pronominal usage can show us how these shifts are managed. The second suggestion will be that Palin's use of pronouns gives us an insight into a particular form of political populism, such that she embodies a shift in populist address from the inclusive address of old, to one centred on the self and the experiential

So if Sarah Palin embodies an interesting development of populism, in what terms is populism integrated into US political culture? In a history of the topic, Michael Kazin (1998: 12) gives the American brand of populism a number of characteristics. First, it is rooted in the Christian-protestant social mores of the US, drawing upon such metaphors

as 'Judas, sin and redemption' to offer emotive expressions of loyalty, error and repair. It is also founded on a timeless notion of 'Americanism', as a 'creed for which independence had been won and that all genuine patriots would fight to preserve'. This is a doctrine that presents America as 'an isolated land of virtue whose people were on constant guard against the depredations of aristocrats, empire builders, and self-aggrandizing officeholders both within and outside its borders' (Kazin, 1998: 12).

Yet from the beginning, the viability of 'the people' to whom this popular sentiment is addressed has been in doubt. Kazin suggests that the original notion of 'people' was 'more incantation than description', borne of political fervor mixed with the religiosity of such accomplished rhetoricians as Adam and Jefferson. Amongst 'the people' so-addressed, the effectiveness of this reading would wear off during the first round of tax hikes, and the Massachusetts farmers, to name just one group, set out to question in whose name executive power was being exercised (Kazin, 1998: 13). Yet, Kazin (1998: 14) is keen to emphasise, even these early rebellions were founded on an interest-based 'producerism', determined to assert the rights of the small businessman against the state. What was being addressed, in other words, was the effectiveness with which the populist ideal was being pursued rather than the integrity of populism itself.

Palin on Palin, and security

I turn now to the contribution Sarah Palin can make to our understanding of populism, and how she uses this in supporting the Republican agenda on homeland security. The

introduction has already discussed the ways in which Palin is distinguishable from both McCain and the Democratic candidates by her lack of experience in the national legislator: a factor that was incorporated into the Republican campaign as evidence of a critical distance from 'Washington elites' together with their perceived special interests. It is also commonly accepted that the addition of Palin to the Republican ticket was an attempt both to attract women voters that might have opted for Hillary Clinton and to introduce youthful vitality and allure into the McCain campaign. If not for the extent of her grasp of core principles, therefore, there is ample evidence that Palin was chosen for the forms of rhetoric made possible by the terms of what Street (2003) describes as a public personae. And in the event, her impact upon many core Republican supporters has been significant; with much of the resulting praise directed towards her campaign speeches.

There are a number of possibilities available for us to analyse Palin's speechmaking, many of them relevant to debates around political populism. As Steven Pinker (2008) recently wrote in the *New York Times*, one way of explaining Palin's appeal amongst the Republican base is the folksiness of her speech style. She talks of 'kids' rather than 'children', routinely drops her g's, and uses what Pinker describes as 'cutesy near profanities like 'darn', 'heck' and 'doggone''. While these qualities are important towards understanding the political personae represented by Palin, there are other patterns in Palin's speech that give more precise insights into what Pinker describes as Palin's 'governing philosophy'; in particular, the manner in which she draws upon, asserts and manages a set of personal and professional credentials.

The speech that is of immediate interest is the one that marked Palin's appearance on the national political stage, where she accepted the nomination as prospective vice-president on the Republican Party ticket. I want to begin my discussion of this speech by making two points. First, there is a notable series of thematic clusters in Palin's use of the first person singular, which correspond to different phases in the integration of the speaker's public persona and experiential competence into the speech. Tokens of 'I' are contained within four stages of the speech, leaving prolonged passages of the speech – one in particular – in which there are none. These four phases are 'formal acceptance', 'credential claim', 'simple soul fallen amongst politicians', and 'concluding formal support'.

The first and fourth stages of the speech can be examined together, which are 'the formal acceptance' and 'the concluding formal support' phases respectively. These are the bookends of the speech in which Palin enacts the ritual of accepting the nomination for the Vice Presidency. This extract is from the speech's opening:

> (1) I accept the call to help our nominee for president to serve and defend America. I accept the
> challenge of a tough fight in this election... against confident opponents ... at a crucial hour for our
> country. And I accept the privilege of serving with a man who has come through much harder
> missions ... and met far graver challenges ... and knows how tough fights are won - the next
> president of the United States, John S. McCain

As Max Atkinson (1984) points out, the art of political speechmaking is the choreography of applause, and even this formalistic opening uses well-worn techniques of political rhetoric. Specifically, Palin works 'I accept' into what Atkinson (1984: 57) describes as a 'three part list' designed to 'project' the name of her senior running mate, John McCain.

There follows a brief period in which Palin expounds upon the positive qualities of McCain. She uses what is still the developmental stage of the speech to assert the credentials of McCain as a guardian of national security. This is expressed first by means of an implicit claim on McCain's unstinting allegiance to nation, setting this against a mythical political establishment. Palin says: 'It was just a year ago when all the experts in Washington counted out our nominee because he refused to hedge his commitment to the security of the country he loves'. The theme is then developed through the affirmation of a direct link between McCain's innate qualities and his approach to current security policy: 'He's a man who wore the uniform of his country for 22 years, and refused to break faith with those troops in Iraq who have brought victory within sight'.

Palin then shifts into what can usefully be described as 'the credential-claim phase'. This is characterised by a period of switching between Palin evidencing her position as an 'ordinary' American in the 'just your average Hockey mom' mould, and Palin asserting her place as the engaged political advocate. Extracts 2, 3 and 4 function as assertions of ordinariness combined with feistiness on Palin's part; on the one hand, lending a tone of humility to her family status by deploying 'just' as a hedge designed to convey modesty

and ordinariness rather than downplay the message (extracts 2 and 3), while placing no such conditions on the description of her motive to action ('because I wanted to make my kids' public education better'). Extracts 4 and 5 demonstrate how Palin turns her claim of ordinariness into political advocacy, moving from the presentation of a 'message' to the quasi-contractual speech act of the 'pledge':

(2) […] that is exactly the kind of man I want as commander in chief. I'm just one of many moms who'll say an extra prayer each night for our sons and daughters going into harm's way. And in April, my husband Todd and I welcomed our littlest one into the world, a perfectly beautiful baby boy named Trig. I grew up with those people.

(3) I was just your average hockey mom, and signed up for the PTA because I wanted to make my kids' public education better.

(4) To the families of special-needs children all across this country, I have a message: For years, you sought to make America a more welcoming place for your sons and daughters.

(5) I pledge to you that if we are elected, you will have a friend and advocate in the White House.

A consistent characteristic of these claims to representativeness is the association between the experiences of Palin's background with the responsibilities of her political career. Extract 2, for example, calls explicitly upon the audience's knowledge of Palin's own special needs child. Similar links between down-home representativeness and the possibilities of political advocacy continues through these following extracts:

(6) When I ran for city council, I didn't need focus groups and voter profiles because I knew those voters, and knew their families, too.

(7) Before I became governor of the great state of Alaska, I was mayor of my hometown.

The bearing of Palin's experience might well be opened to debate – most notably the implication that techniques for encouraging citizen engagement in the capital of Alaska would function just as well at a national level – but the rhetorical force of the comparison stems from Palin's strategic separation of the technical and exclusionary lexicon used in extract 6 to describe the back-stage activities of political elites – referring to 'focus groups' and 'voter profiles' – and extract 7's positive framing of the elected positions that Palin has occupied.

The next section of the speech, which follows on almost immediately, may be described as the 'simple soul, fallen amongst politicians' phase. Having already constructed an opposition between the honest McCain and a craven political establishment, this is the section of the speech in which Palin draws upon her own homespun credentials to develop a contrast between her and those had previously named as 'experts in Washington' and that she and the Republican strategists describe as the 'Washington elite':

> (8) And I've learned quickly, these past few days, that if you're not a member in good standing of the Washington elite, then some in the media consider a candidate unqualified for that reason alone.

> (9) But here's a little news flash for all those reporters and commentators: I'm not going to Washington to seek their good opinion - I'm going to Washington to serve the people of this country. Americans expect us to go to Washington for the right reasons, and not just to mingle with the right people.

(10) While I was at it, I got rid of a few things in the governor's office that I didn't believe our citizens should have to pay for. That luxury jet was over the top. I put it on eBay. I also drive myself to work. And I thought we could muddle through without the governor's personal chef - although I've got to admit that sometimes my kids sure miss her. I came to office promising to control spending - by request if possible and by veto if necessary.

Palin expresses this, first, in terms of a conflict in political interest which, in extract 8 casts her as the naïve interloper and, in extract 9, as the outsider determined to hold fast to their own values. In extract 10, she goes on to express this role of the outsider in a mocking denial of the material excesses of central government. Taken together, all of these extracts draw upon what John Wilson (1990: 62) describes as the claim to sincerity implicit in the use of 'I' in political speeches. Also, by pretending to eschew the normal strategies of political research, not needing a 'focus group', Palin consolidates her claim to be an ordinary person having to engage with the political classes as a painful duty, but while remaining one of the people supposedly represented.

Outside the frame of her political speeches but within the professional contexts that Goffman (1971) would describe as 'front stage' and in public view, Palin expresses this role in a performance of easy and informal courtesy. An illustrative example of this was Palin's handshake with her Democratic counterpart Joe Biden prior to their televised debate, where she asked, in a pseudo-private exchange only just audible over the applause, 'Can I call you Joe?'. Also, the claim expressed in extract 3 that Palin is 'just your average hockey mom' proved to be a resilient item of political shorthand, successful in combining an apparently common touch with an investment in what Angela Smith

(2008) highlights as the moral grounding of the politicians' family. Much of the subsequent press coverage of Palin's speech picked up on and emphasised this 'hockey mom' sobriquet. Palin too returned to the description in a image-enhancing display of levity designed to mitigate her aggressive role in the Republican campaign, where she constructed a question and response joke around the name for the benefit of a Republican audience: 'What is the difference between a hockey mom and a pitbull? Lipstick.' Not only a genuinely ordinary and homespun representative, then, but feisty, determined and uncompromisingly protective as well.

Palin therefore engages in a mode of rhetoric carefully designed to generate sympathetic popular sentiment amongst what she and her party see as a core constituency. John Street (2003) discusses such political strategies as these in terms established by P. David Marshall's work on the operation of celebrity. The status of the celebrity, Marshall (1997: 204) argues, is built upon an 'affective function' with the audience – not only to appeal to the audience but to cultivate an emotive response and attachment within them. Street suggests that his drive for an affinity with the audience governs the selling of political personalities every bit as much as other public personalities. Accordingly, strategies are conceived across the realms of both politics and entertainment to market personalities as knowable and appealing. Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1996: 517) describes political advertising as an attempt to make candidates recognisable and distinctive, and 'expose their temperaments, talents and agendas for the future in a favourable light'.

Such that Palin asserts her position as the everywoman that chance and commitment has taken to the political stage, she represents a political personality that has been fashioned along populist lines. Palin's public persona is built around the contours of her own domestic background and concerns for the interests of those close to her. Her claims to ordinariness are concretised by references to her family (extract 2), her disabled child (extract 4) and what she presents as a gut empathy with the regular US voter (extract 5). All of this operates in parallel with an explicitly stated mistrust of the Washington-based system of government (extract 8) and a determination to visit the benefits of her common sense upon what she presents as a Washington elite (extracts 9 and 10). In this way, Palin's lack of experience in the administration of security is presented as lending a uniquely sincere dimension to her faith in McCain's competence to manage national security.

Where Palin's expressed concern with the interests of the US everywoman is most significant in policy terms is where she situates security within the context of a defined set of material interests. These are patterns that serve to emphasise the 'homeland' component of homeland security. The following two extracts are drawn from the latter part of Palin's speech, in which her patterns of pronominal usage shifts outward, extending first to an inclusive 'we' and then shifting again towards the listening audience as 'you':

> (11) To confront the threat that Iran might seek to cut off nearly a fifth of world energy supplies,
> or that terrorists might strike again at the Abqaiq facility in Saudi Arabia, or that Venezuela might

shut off its oil deliveries, we Americans need to produce more of our own oil and gas. And take it

from a gal that knows the North Slope of Alaska: we've got lots of both.

(12) What exactly does [Obama] seek to accomplish, after he's done turning back the waters and

healing the planet? The answer is to make government bigger, take more of your money, give you

more orders from Washington, and to reduce the strength of America in a dangerous world.

In extract 11, Palin draws upon the supposed folk-knowledge of the ordinary Alaskan

(albeit from her position as state governor) to respond to a series of asserted international

threats, from Iran, Venezuela and the enemies of Saudi Arabia. This 'we' that is under

threat is first named explicitly as the US electorate ('we Americans') and then reasserted

in terms of implied shared ownership ('we've got lots of both'). It is in extract 12's

direct address to this electorate that Palin expands upon the theme of a US-under-threat

(from a 'dangerous world'). She, on the one hand, lists a series of emaciating

developments that would inevitably result from an Obama administration (the growth of

external control and the lessening of personal wealth), while at the same time deploying

'you' to impose an opposition between electorate themselves and the order-givers of

Washington.

Having offered some reflections on the construction of Sarah Palin and its significance, it

is useful these populist strategies are common across the election campaign; in particular,

in the speeches of Barack Obama, since highlighted for their persuasive and inspirational

qualities (Sanders, 2009: 235). In a number of important respects, any comparison

between Palin and Obama will appear to be strewn with difficulties. For one thing, their

speeches are influenced by the different positions they hope to take within the executive,

with the differences in expressive freedom and power these bring. Palin is at least partially impeded from presenting herself as an agent of political change by her position as prospective Vice President rather than President, and we have seen that she ameliorates this by foregrounding her claim to be an outsider. Obama, on the other hand, is obliged to present himself as enactor of the Democratic political agenda. Yet, for all these key points of distinction, the relationship between Palin and Obama is an important one. Palin was recruited to the Republican ticket to give voice to the party's attacks on Obama, allowing McCain to retain the demeanour of the statesman he had established in the 2000 presidential primaries, generous to all and above politicking (see Wallace, 2008). Although McCain's avuncular detachment was to be compromised as poll ratings began to recede, specifically in the October televised debate, McCain's lines of attack had already been ventriloquised by Palin: in particular, that Obama had associates with terrorist and anti-American connections. Taking the role that Obama occupied for the Democrats, there is an important sense in which Palin was therefore used as a primary definer of the Republican campaign, setting the terms of the Republican agenda.

In common with Palin, a survey of the use of personal pronouns in Obama's nomination acceptance speech shows the extent of the emphasis on his own background and the competence his own experiences give him to serve. In that speech, Obama even acknowledges that the narrative behind this rhetoric is becoming well-worn with the line 'Four years ago, I stood before you and told my story'. Although the clusters of pronominal usage are less pronounced in Obama's speech than in Palin's, where they were separable into distinct phases, there are a number of similarities. Specifically, and

to use the terminology adopted for Palin, Obama includes a prolonged formal acceptance phase, and a brief 'simple soul fallen amongst politicians' phase. However, what distinguishes Obama's speech from Palin's is Obama's extensive use of the inclusive pronoun to refer to the American people.

But before we look at any extract from Obama's speech, it is worth dwelling on the terms and significance of this mode of inclusivity in Palin's speechmaking. While Palin overwhelmingly uses inclusive personal pronouns to refer to herself, her family, her administration, and those presumed to be in communion with the Republican Party, extract 11 highlighted the one passage in which she deploys 'we' in a manner that includes the US people. This is the passage that carries on that nationwide address:

> (13) Our opponents [the Democrats and media] say, again and again, that drilling will not solve all of America's energy problems - as if we all didn't know that already. But the fact that drilling won't solve every problem is no excuse to do nothing at all. Starting in January, in a McCain-Palin administration, we're going to lay more pipelines ... build more new-clear plants ... create jobs with clean coal ... and move forward on solar, wind, geothermal, and other alternative sources. We need American energy resources, brought to you by American ingenuity, and produced by American workers.

When it is viewed in the context of extract 11, it is clear that the final inclusive pronoun in this extract is designed to include the US electorate as a whole, having been established by the immediately-preceding specification 'we Americans'. The first two tokens of 'we' and the initial 'our' refer to a Republican administration – on the basis that

only they will have the power to act to 'lay more pipelines' – but are sufficiently

ambiguous to extend to the listening audience and US population (who are invited to

assent to the laying of such pipelines). On the basis of extract 13, it is also apparent that

the nation addressed has the common bond of material concerns, as in 'we need', as well

as the material possessions of extract 11's 'we've got'. Crucially, these are presented as

interests that are best served by the energy policy approved by Palin and the Republican

Party, thereby collapsing together national belonging, material interests, and an affinity

with core Republican beliefs.

This use of a strategic inclusivity to respond to environmental issues has not been

confined to the presidential campaign. This following extract is taken from a speech

Palin gave in October 2007 to a local chamber of commerce in her capacity as Governor

of Alaska:

> (14) More and more we're being challenged to balance the need for development with the need to
> protect our natural resources.

Just as in extract 13, where one of the pronouns refers to the administration, so there is

some ambivalence here in whether the 'we' is that of the nation, the Alaskan people, or

the competent authorities. While it is a plausible explanation to see this as an example

what Harvey Sacks (1992: 713) describes as an 'organisational pronoun' that has the

effect of both depersonalising action and emphasising institutional duty, what might be

read as a tactical uncertainty between an inclusive versus an exclusive 'we' results, in this

case, in nation, administration and Republican Party being presented as one.

Obama on America and safety

We can turn now to Obama's nomination acceptance speech for the Democratic presidential nomination. In this speech, Obama uses inclusive pronouns far more frequently than Palin, spreads them more evenly through the speech, and deploys them in a quite different way. These are two extracts:

> (15) Instead, it is that American spirit - that American promise - that pushes us forward even when the path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend.

> (16) America, we cannot turn back. Not with so much work to be done. Not with so many children to educate, and so many veterans to care for. Not with an economy to fix and cities to rebuild and farms to save. Not with so many families to protect and so many lives to mend. America, we cannot turn back. We cannot walk alone. At this moment, in this election, we must pledge once more to march into the future. Let us keep that promise - that American promise - and in the words of Scripture hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess.

What is again notable is the relative indeterminacy of this inclusiveness. The 'we' that pledges to 'march into the future' may either be interpreted exclusively (to mean Obama and his proposed administration), or inclusively (to encompass the whole American people) (Fairclough, 1989: 127-128). The most likely interpretation – aided substantially by the repeated invocation 'America, we cannot turn back' – is that this is a national 'we'. Even though, as John Wilson (1990: 33) argues, this warming embrace is routinely

predicated upon a more chilling threat to national and therefore 'our' well-being,

Obama's address is purposefully centred on an abstract and yet socially progressive idea

of American belonging, centred on his evocation of politically-inspired 'hope'; consistent

through the Democratic campaign merchandise and Obama's (2006) own political

writing. In terms of the shared techniques of choreographing audience response

(Atkinson, 1984: 108), and in a way that is consistent with extract 16's assertion of

political beliefs and shared morals over explicit material interests, Obama's mode of

inclusiveness can be placed in the oratory tradition of Martin Luther King. Obama's

style is partly that of a man seeking political converts, and who produces what

Montgomery (2000) describes as an unbounded 'we' designed, at least in terms of the

rhetoric, to reach across national boundaries.

However, when Obama turns to the issue of security, a set of concerns he recasts as

'threat' and 'safety', he uses pronouns in a quite different way:

> (17) That's not the judgment we need. That won't keep America Safe. We need a President who
> can face the threats of the future, not keep grasping at the ideas of the past

> (18) We are the party of Roosevelt. We are the party of Kennedy. So don't tell me that
> Democrats won't defend this country. Don't tell me that Democrats won't keep us safe. The
> Bush-McCain foreign policy has squandered the legacy that generations of Americans –
> Democrats and Republicans – have built, and we are here to restore that legacy.

In extract 17, 'we' is contained with the category of those within the political constituency of the American President, and operates as a direct appeal to the national body politic. Included in this is an implicit attack on his electoral opponents: they are, it is implied, grasping at the ideas of the past. In extract 18, however, Obama sets about defending his own security credentials by occupying a role as representative and defender of the Democrat Party, using an exclusive form of 'we' in order to express this illocutionary position. That is, the dominant pattern to emerge from Palin's rhetorical use of pronouns is to implicate the national body within her rhetoric on security, and to align this with a set of political beliefs and material concerns. Where Obama discusses security, on the other hand, the dominant theme is an evocation of his own party's history of trustworthiness and dependability. In sum, Palin's discourse on security is founded upon a mythical 'American people', and sets them against an aloof and wrong-headed state machine, whereas Obama seeks to defend the possibilities of the responsible and diligent state.

Conclusions

Palin and Obama pursue similar rhetorical strategies, such that they draw upon their own backgrounds to establish both the experiential credibility to speak, and to cultivate an affinity with the listening audience. As Willner (1984) points out, fostering the illusion of both of these characteristics and others are defining qualities of the charismatic politician across political traditions. Palin, however, deploys a populist approach to her treatment of security and other issues, one that articulates her down-home

representativeness with particular political and economic interests. Jeffrey Scheuer

(2001) argues that the easy simplicity of populism suits the right-wing more than other

points on the conventional political spectrum. Alain Badiou (2008), for example, argues

that the discourse of French President Nicolas Sarkozy depends upon a link between

right-wing political populism and the generation of irrational fear. Or to take a still more

pertinent example, Robert Putnam (2001) claims that the self-interested materialism often

associated with elements of the political right is better served by an unrelenting focus on

the self and the actual over the politics of possibility and the more abstract notions of

community that this entails. Sarah Palin embodies a style of political rhetoric that draws

vitality from her own material interests and beliefs, and who in turn projects her own

ordinariness and representativeness onto those very interests. The Republican version of

populism, manifest in the figure of Palin, is one that accords with Kazin's (1995)

historical description as setting the interests of the common folk at odds with those of the

governmental and business elites, but in this case channelled quite specifically through

the her own experience and homespun wisdom.

While the choice of Palin and her subsequent public profile was partly a response to the

perceived elitism of Obama – in her speech she says 'it's easy to forget that this is a man

who has authored two memoirs but not a single major law or reform' – the persona of

Palin draws deeply from a well of 'anti-intellectualism' in the US. However limited the

constituency for these innate suspicions of learning and the establishment, Richard

Hofstader (1964) traces them to the crafted simplicity and suspicion of central authority

embodied in the Founding Fathers, and that Jude Davis (2006) has mapped onto George

W. Bush and other contemporary political figures. But for all that, the rhetoric of Sarah

Palin offers important lessons for many of the established views of populism beyond the

future possibility of another major figure in the US executive perceived as lacking

intellectual weight. In turning the politics of personalisation towards a system of rhetoric

based upon the interests of the self, Palin represents a form of populism peculiarly suited

to the political right, and provides evidence of a need to think again about the strategies

of populism in communicating politics on those issues that draw upon broader concerns.

Acknowledgements

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