Identity, Political Adverts, and Media
Identity Representation in American Presidential Campaigns

Cristina Arizzi
Department of Political and Juridical Sciences
University of Messina
Piazza XX Settembre 4, 98122
Messina, Italy

Abstract

This paper explores how identity is represented in political communication, especially focusing on US Presidential campaign adverts produced for TV and the Internet. Basing on a diachronic analysis spreading over the last sixty years, the paper outlines how personal and collective identities converge in the process of identification with the leader and how the integration of visual and linguistic genres empowers the political message. Biographical adverts, in particular, with their emphasis on traditional values, recall the basic ideals on which the nation is grounded. The public's perception of the politicians' public image is thus guided by politicians themselves who, through positive and negative adverts, contribute to shape their opponents' public image as well as their own, in a virtual mass media battle.

Keywords: identity, political adverts, media**.**

1. "I am large, I contain multitudes": identities today

Defining identity is a difficult matter, as it is an interdisciplinary construct involving psychology, anthropology and linguistics among others. Identity is affected by the environment people live in, their capabilities, their beliefs and values. It describes what kind of person we are and is not defined once and for all, but is in constant change, being the result of continuous interactions with the environment, the people we meet and the experiences that shape our behaviours and perceptions. Identity is primarily transmitted through discourse (Clark, 2013; Edwards, 2009; Gumperz, 1982; Joseph, 2004; Norton, 2010) which encompasses the integration of language and visual elements. The search for identity is a characteristic issue in modern pluralistic societies, and it is complicated by the mediated reality of the contemporary social order, in which the identification process is deeply influenced by media and mass communication in general (Fitzgerald, 1993: 5).

The complimentary key concepts of sameness and difference that are at the core of identity imply the recognition of *self* as something special and at the same time different from *others.* Sameness allows individuals to imagine themselves belonging to a group, which refers to collective identity, while difference produces a social distance between those who perceive themselves as dissimilar, which refers to personal identity, and makes individuals and communities unique (Bucholtz & Hall, 2006: 369). The two contrasting aspects of sameness and difference specifically mark the American identity, which is imbued with two strong forces of individualism and sense of belonging. This contrast between centripetal and centrifugal forces applies both to the people and to the United States as a country, which has been alternatively driven by tendencies to focus exclusively on domestic issues and wishes to claim the role as one of the super powers on Earth. Being aware of the role of the medium in the construction of identity, politicians use media to impress people so to induce them to interpret politicians' identities in a favourable way. Especially during Presidential campaigns, television sends fast messages to large numbers of people without much effort and social media reach an even bigger number of users in a blink, through posts apparently provided by the politicians themselves which intend to reproduce direct and personal communication. On the role of social networks in political campaigns see Arizzi (2013), Bimber & Davis (2003), Foot & Schneider (2006), and Panagopoulos (2009). Television is the medium which allows politicians to enter into the private spheres of common people and send their message to people who are passively watching TV while having dinner or relaxing on the sofa.

Politicians talk and behave in a way that can persuade voters to identify with them, seducing them with appeals to their sense of belonging to broad and shared categories. Politicians have always insisted on the identification-with-the-politician process to gain electoral consensus, whether in presidential addresses, political adverts, TV political interviews and so on. All this implies a series of constraints (Eder & Spohn, 2005) as well as affordances that guide the use of any genre, political or otherwise. The process of inducing identification is complicated by the fact that societies are so multi-faceted that politicians must address many *selves* among their general public, especially in multi-ethnic and multicultural countries such as the US. Walt Whitman's quote from *Song of Myself*, "I am large, I contain multitudes" was originally composed referring to the individual self of an open-minded person, but can be easily extended to the entire country which is a kaleidoscope of different cultures and ethnicities, each of them with a well-defined identity. Accordingly, Section 2 discusses the issue of individual and collective representation of identity in presidential campaigns, Section 3 explores public image in negative and positive campaigns and Section 4 analyses biographical adverts as virtual spaces to create positive public images. Finally, Section 5 presents some conclusions on the importance of the identification process in political campaigns, highlighting how the process is guided by politicians themselves.

2. Personal and Collective Identity in Presidential Advertising

In the 18th century, John Locke affirmed the need to compete for individual welfare and to limit government interference with individual initiatives. This became one of the values on which the American political system is founded. The fear that a strong central government may limit individual rights is expressed in several ways, including polarity in the *Bill of Rights* that states what the government *shall not* do. This strong faith in individuals was later on reaffirmed in the 19th century by the Transcendentalist movement, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, with its emphasis on self-reliance as the basic value for American society. The American Founding Fathers were inspired by Locke's ideas while imagining the values at the core of the United States government which they were forging; however, they tempered them with a strong concern for public spirit and the desire for the common good of the entire Union.

The two souls of American identity, individualism and sense of belonging to the nation, emerge and merge in political communication, as ways of gaining support in crucial moments. Some frames from TV political adverts produced for presidential campaigns are presented below and analysed from a multimodal perspective (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). TV political adverts were first developed in 1952 when Dwight Eisenhower produced the first instances of the genre (Arizzi, 2012). Since then, the genre has flourished and evolved in many ways. It is noteworthy that the representation of American people has undergone deep transformation over the years, moving from individual representations of people talking about their personal ideas and experiences, to collective representations of American society at large.

Figure 1: Frames from Eisenhower's 1956 Presidential campaign

In the 1950s most adverts showed individual persons talking on a very personal basis about the candidate they supported, who never appeared with them. From a visual standpoint, the sense of individuality is thus emphasised by the presence of a single person at any one time, as shown in Figure 1 (*http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1956)*. The target of these adverts is evident because of the frequent presence of women expressing their support for Eisenhower, often in a household context. The style of the genre was popular, intended for a non-specialized public, made up mainly of housewives or elderly people at home.

The 1960's campaigns were characterized by an increasing awareness of collective identity as a result of the changed historical context: the mass protest movement against discrimination; the civil rights movement; shocking events, such as the assassination of political leaders, e.g. John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King. This helped raise a strong sense of community which also found expression in the way adverts were shot and people were represented in them. Following a period of uproar and protest, the 1968 campaign marked an important change. In particular, Richard Nixon's campaign focused on the need to stop domestic violence and disorder, the extreme offspring of the renewed sense of fighting for common rights, and showed crude images of crowds parading for the recognition of their political rights (Figure 2a).

Figures 2a and 2b: Frames from Nixon's 1968 and 1972 campaigns

The people in the advert entitled *the first civil right* (*http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968*) are mostly men with very grave facial expressions; some blood can even be seen on some of the protesters' faces to visualize the dangers that violent fights bring for national security. This is also emphasized by the presence of some police officers wearing helmets and arresting some of the violent activists. These frames seem to show that Nixon wanted to express and convey the fear that the collective need for recognition and fighting for rights was a menace for the nation itself. He wanted to show that the government was acting to secure public safety by blocking mass movements; as a consequence, the protesters' collective identity was in contrast with the government, which represented national identity. In the 1970s the atmosphere was more relaxed and TV adverts continued to represent the sense of community through images such as the one in Figure 2b (*http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/ 1972)* showing groups of people peacefully meeting.

Over the years, the individual element has become less prominent in political adverts, favouring the collective idea of the people. Individual persons in individual frames have almost completely been replaced by larger shots showing more people, possibly the politician himself meeting groups of citizens or crowds gathering for political events. The sense of collective identity is visually represented by groups of people fighting for a common goal or parading together to support a political party, as in Figure 3a. Figure 3b is taken from a TV advert, *What we're fighting for* (*http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2012)* in which Obama, meeting a group of people, asked who the teachers were, and they raised their hands. Considering the number of raised hands, the question was pleonastic, but functioned as a way to strengthen the sense of belonging. Politicians plague national identity and civic pride, national symbols and attachment to institutions. Reciprocal identification with groups of people helps merge collective and national identities. Political adverts increasingly become a special place where identities are traded; as persuasive texts, they rely strongly on negotiation of identities to create electoral consensus.

Figure 3: Frames from *What we're fighting for*, Obama's 2012Presidential campaign

In 2008 and 2012, Obama's campaigns relied heavily on collective identity, favouring the identification of ordinary people with him. However, the trend to represent collective identity rather than individual identities has apparently stopped in the 2016 presidential campaign which marked a step backwards. Hillary Clinton's campaign was supposed to rely on collective identity, as testified by the slogan *Stronger together*, but in the end the campaign became more and more focused on attacking the unfitness to serve of the opponent rather than expressing positive ideas about the implementation of policies for the American people. Indeed, the 2016 campaign was rather negative on both sides, with a huge number of adverts focusing on individual identity rather than collective identity. The adverts mostly show only one person on the screen, being seen as an individual even when representing a category. For instance, Clinton's advert entitled *Mirror* attacks Trump for his insults to women, and to do so it shows ten different young women, each of them seen alone on the screen, looking at herself in the mirror, cell phone camera or rear view mirror. This intensifies the feeling of women's loneliness but this also hints at the uniqueness of every single story that cannot be associated with others, even if the protagonists share the same collective identity of being women. Apparently, the individual component is stronger than the collective one (Figure 4).

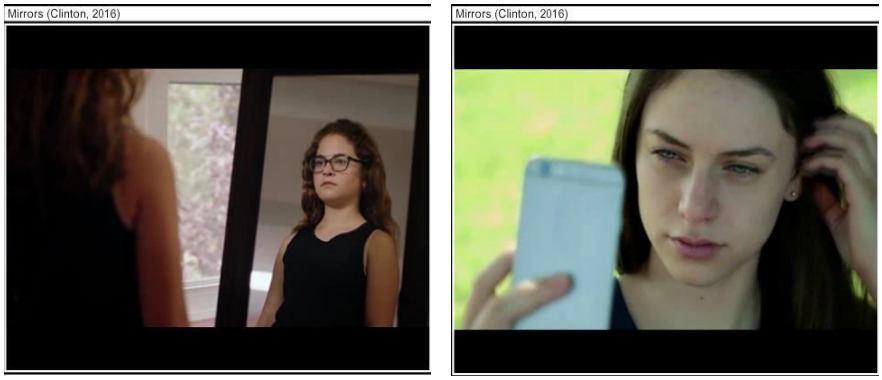

Figure 3: Frames from *Mirror*, Clinton's 2016 Presidential campaign
http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2016

3. Whose Image? Positive and Negative Campaigning

Is there a difference between identity (and identities) and image? What emerges from political adverts, identity or image? And what kind of identity? This section offers an effort to answer these questions. Firstly, some considerations must be introduced as regards identity, or rather, identities. Hekman (2004: 108) stated that every person has a personal identity that is the result of an array of influences and experiences that form them. In addition, every person also possesses an array of public identities, such as woman/man, white/non-white, middle class/working class and so on. Politics is one of the environments where the interface between public and personal clearly emerges, even though not all the aspects of personal identity converge into public identity. Even if politics is primarily concerned with public identity, the interface between public and personal identity cannot be neglected.

In the examples provided above, Heckman uses the expression *public identity* as a synonym of collective identity. Melucci, instead, links collective identity to action and affirms that it is determined by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientation of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place (Melucci, 1989). Identity – or rather identities – is what stays behind the public image of a politician. While identity is who people *are*, and so it is a type of intimate awareness, image is what others *perceive*, so it is an external representation of identity, often influenced by behaviours and lifestyles. Politicians are aware of the importance of establishing their public image, guiding the public in their appraisal. In political campaigns, every situation, e.g. public speech, political debate, rally and so on, contributes to create and strengthen the public image of politicians, who perform their part in search of visibility and compliance. Sameness and otherness are key concepts as regards identity construction, so politicians make a strong effort in emerging as individuals from the political backdrop. Establishing their public image is crucial to politicians who want to stand out and be singled out as different from other competitors. Politicians have a collective identity as members of a political party, which combines people who share the same political views and distinguishes them from other parties that have different political ideas. However, collective identity is not what makes a politician emerge as a candidate and possible president.

In fact, to gain the party nomination to run for the presidency, a politician needs a well-defined and strong personal identity, that is what allows people who share the same collective identity to single them out from the group. Being aware of the importance of letting voters appreciate their *image*, they try to create new spaces, both physical and virtual, to represent their identities, to be visible and express ideas, political views and values. Thus, the public is guided in the process of constructing politicians' public image, which however does not suffice. Establishing their own public image is only the first step in harsh presidential campaigns, which normally become battlefields where the contenders fight with virtually no holds barred. Studies on negative advertising have shown that negative adverts work better for Republicans than for Democrats, and better for men than for women; unfortunately, negative adverts also work better in general than positive ones, so attacking has become nearly universal (Ansolabehere, 1995). On the other hand, other studies question the assumption that pundits, journalists and people in general think that negative adverts can weaken the democratic system overall; apparently, voters and the democratic process can benefit from campaigns in which political candidates attack each other and raise doubts about each other's views and qualifications (Geer, 2008). In Geer's view, negative adverts are more likely than positive adverts to focus on salient political issues, rather than politicians' personal characteristics, and so they enrich the democratic process.

Usually the incumbent is free to deliver a positive campaign focusing on the good results of the previous term and on policies to implement what has been done. It is up to the opponent to do a negative campaign to attack the incumbent by showing their weaknesses. This was the case with the 2012 campaign, where Obama was strongly attacked by Mitt Romney for his past policies. The 2016 campaign will be remembered as one of the worst and toughest of modern times, based on the insults and attacks the two candidates addressed to each other and their supporters rather than on real policies and real visions of America's future

(*http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/20/opinions/worst-election-ever-ruiz/; https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/08/26/this-is-the-worst-presidential-campaign-in-modern-history/?utm_term=.89b2d82df6c0*).

Only four out of the 15 adverts by Hillary Clinton selected by the *Living Room Candidate* to represent the 2016 presidential campaign are positive, the rest of which are negative adverts strongly attacking Trump for his offensive language and his alleged unfitness to be President. On the other hand, ten out of the 15 adverts selected out of Trump's adverts attack the opponent or present biased comparisons of the two candidates; nonetheless, the rest of his adverts can be considered negative as well, because they convey feelings such as fear and distrust.
The public image in the spotlight was most time the opponent's, so each candidate preferred to construct a negative image of the other candidate rather than to focus on building a positive image of themselves. Thus, in the 2016 campaign the imbalance between positive and negative forces leaned towards negativity. Negativity triumphed in that destroying the other's public image was considered more effective that constructing something positive. The results of the elections showed that expressing negativity and conveying feelings such as fear were effective and successful.

4. Individualism, Identification and Exemplum in Biographical Adverts

The two souls of the American mind, the sense of self and the sense of the nation, are so intertwined that they are represented in the same texts as connected elements not to be presented separately. In every presidential campaign, a huge number of adverts are produced to discredit the opponents, attacking them without restraint, in which the politicians, even when not physically present in the advert, appear to be virtually present in a background/foreground contrast. However, a series of adverts are designed to tell the stories of the politicians involved in the ballots. (Auto)Biographical adverts made their appearance on TV sets as soon as the new medium was recognised as a significant support for politicians' campaigns as a multiplier of the political message which could reach millions of people in real time. The classification of biographical adverts as a subgenre of political adverts relies on the recognition of their recurrent characteristics, among them the peculiar use of time, presenting past and present in terms of cause and effect, which also affects the future (Arizzi, 2012). They all follow a similar pattern which often stresses the presidential candidates' humble origins, implying that the achievements they reached notwithstanding their initial difficulties were possible due to the exceptional nature of the American nation, which provides opportunities to whoever dares to have big dreams and is willing to honestly work hard and commit to big causes.

The purpose of the subgenre of biographical adverts can be found in the attempt to gain the audience's identification with the politician, who declares to have individual experiences not too different from those of common people, such as being born to a poor family, or being raised by a single parent, or having undergone financial problems or taken loans to study, just to mention some.

At the same time, the politician expresses their trust in values which anyone can agree with, such as love for the country, family ties, and hope for the future, which appeal to the best part of every citizen, eliciting their love for the country and their pride to be part of such an awesome nation. In fact, recalling widely-shared values, such as love of country, honesty, and family ties, functions as a glue to make politicians' personal identities converge with those of the general public and merge with the collective identity. They also appeal to national identity, eliciting pride and love for a nation which offers opportunities to anyone who works hard. These features have gained ground since the very first instance of the subgenre, *A man from Abilene*, 1952, in which a narrative voice said: "Out of the heartland of America, out of this small frame house in Abilene, Kansas, came a man, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Through the crucial hour of historic D-Day, he brought us to the triumph and peace of VE Day [...]" (*www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1952*). Barack Obama's autobiographical advert, *Country I love*, 2008, is entirely in this vein. In Obama's own words: "America's a country of strong families, and strong values. My life's been blessed by both. I was raised by a single mom and my grandparents. We didn't have much money, but they taught me values straight from the Kansas Heartland where they grew up. Accountability and self-reliance. Love of country. Working hard without making excuses. Treating your neighbour as you'd like to be treated. [...]". McCain's autobiographical advert was of a different type, saying nothing personal but expressing strong attachment to the country and showing loyalty and love: "I've served my country since I was 17 years old and spent five years longing for her shores [...]" (*www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2008*).

In 2016, Hillary Clinton produced an autobiographical advert which is very similar in style to Obama's *Country I love*. It starts with cataphoric references to Clinton's mother, using personal adjectives and pronouns, i.e. her, she; the referent is revealed only in the following sentence where she mentions her mother. "Her parents abandoned her when she was just eight years old. She was mistreated but she never gave up and she taught me to do the same. My mom's life and what she went through are big reasons why standing up for kids and families became such a big part of my life [...]". The advert effectively links past to present, showing how the present is affected by the past which has forged character and provided the values necessary to be a good politician. Then a narrative voice talks of Clinton's youth, saying that after college she refused important jobs to work for child defence and goes on reminding American people of what she has done in the various positions she has held. The advert finishes as it started, with a reference to family, adding a sign of hope by presenting Clinton's grandchild, who symbolizes expectations and future possibilities in all walks of life.

In any case, (auto)biographical adverts have two main functions. Their primary aim is to introduce the candidate to the public, especially when a new entry in national politics runs for important positions, e.g. Obama in the 2008 presidential elections. Even when a politician is well known in the country, biographical adverts are used to present the candidate in a new light, highlighting their good qualities and telling again their own story, guiding the public to appreciate their values and work and consequently to revise previous images of the politician they might have; this is the case of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential campaign, who was well known for having been First Lady and having served as Secretary of State and senator for many years. The second aim of biographical adverts is to show that the world of politics, that apparently is so distant from ordinary people, is made up of man and women with personal stories, feelings and values that make them look very similar to the rest of the American people. The goal to reduce the distance between ordinary people and politicians is often carried out through direct speech, with politicians directly telling their own stories without the mediation of a narrative voice. In this way, the public is directly addressed and feels involved in the story, as the politician usually looks right into the camera, i.e. into the eyes of people watching TV, simulating a face-to-face conversation. Each viewer has the impression of being individually involved and even of entering the private space the politicians live in, which often can be seen as a background (Figure 4).

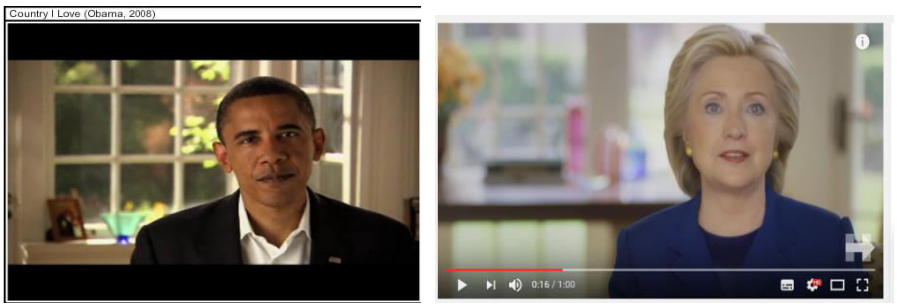

Figure 4: Frames from Obama's 2008 and Clinton's 2016 autobiographical adverts

The two main functions of biographical adverts concur to boost the process of identification with the politician, which is necessary to build any relation based on trust, such as the one that links politicians and voters. The genre of biographical advert has evolved over time, reaching high levels of quality in style, rhetoric and visual representation.

5. Conclusions

Identification between political leaders and citizens functions as a shortcut to obtaining appreciation and votes, so political messages rely on the sense of belonging to a group, i.e. collective identity, to reach their real goal of creating consensus. Political adverts contribute to build the public image of politicians by reaching out to the personal and collective identity of the people who feel involved and lead to identification with the politicians. The construction of a positive public image of the politician seems to be primarily linked to the production of positive adverts that appeal to the collective identity of the public. They usually present policies to implement general welfare and deal with national problems; people have the impression of being included in those policies from which they can benefit. Another way to help build a positive public image of the politician is through biographical adverts which show the positive sides of politicians presenting their values, love for the country and their resilience in overcoming personal and family problems.

In so doing, they elicit similar strength in people and also demonstrate that the United States is an awesome country that supports anyone in search of improvements in life. The construction of a negative public image is related to a defence strategy based on attacking the others. The production of severe attack adverts highlight the ambiguities, changes of mind and arrogant behaviours of the opponents, with the goal of interfering with the opponent's campaign. Negative adverts function by reversing the trend and destroying the positive image that their opponents have created through their positive campaign. Presidential campaigns are fights fought with adverts, and the battlefields are television and the Internet. However, the media is more than the mere virtual space that hosts battles, as it helps to shape the forms of the battles themselves. Not only are the affordances of the media different, but the public that can be addressed through different media have different levels of interest in the political scenario, so the type of aggression differs. Political campaigns thus exploit the generalized need to search for self, identity, and recognition and try to guide the public in the process of identification with politicians to create the bonds that fortify the relations between the layman world and the magic world of politics.

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