TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN A
POSTMODERN WORLD: THE PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA

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ABSTRACT

On November 4, 2008, America celebrated a historical event as Barack Obama was elected as the 44th President. This paper examines a historical event by exploring how Trait, Postmodernism, and Transformational Leadership theories provide insight on the election of President Obama and discusses the specific leadership concepts that influenced the electorate to make such a cultural shift in this postmodern era. Contemporary theorists posit the relevancy of Trait Theory in predicting the characteristics of successful leaders and some of these principles can be applied to successful political candidates. This study is significant because it presents an applied theoretical framework for interpreting the 2008 presidential election and the influence of leadership competencies in the postmodern period.

INTRODUCTION

“Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other,” explained Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States. Yet, not even Abraham Lincoln could imagine the remarkable 2008 presidential election as it unfolded. It was unpredictable and historical in many ways. This paper examines this important historical event through the lenses provided by Trait, Postmodernism, and Transformational Leadership theories. These approaches provide insight on how the perception of leadership attributes influence voting behavior. Additionally, insight from this investigation may generate insight on leadership perception in other settings including business and the nonprofit sectors. Siegel (2001) suggested that business executives can learn a great deal about leadership by analyzing the campaign management practices of American presidents. Therefore, both researchers and practitioners can benefit from the results of this analysis.

The election was the longest presidential campaign and the most expensive in history (Deutsche Press Agentur, 2008). Additionally, the event marked the first time that two US senators would run against each other. Furthermore, New York Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton was the first serious female presidential candidate, and Senator Barak Obama was the first African American nominated by a major party for president. For the Republican Party, Arizona Senator John McCain had hoped to become the oldest person elected president to a first term in
America. His running mate Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was the first woman vice president candidate for the Republican Party (Green, 2009).

Throughout this historical presidential race, a key question discussed in the media and among experts was whether a multiracial candidate could win. The media continued to remind the public about the significance of race and social class in the presidential election. Some observers argued that Obama may not win because of his racial background (Weisberg, 2008a). Conversely, other observers viewed him as a post-racial candidate (Steele, 2008). Would white citizens vote for a black man in America? Could Obama redraw the electoral map with a new energized segment of the population that included young voters, independents, and minorities? Other opponents mentioned that Obama was too inexperienced, untested, and unready to become the president. Nevertheless, his political savvy, innovative election strategy, and charismatic personality was enough to make him victorious (Green, 2009). On November 4, 2008, Obama became the first African American elected to the US Presidency.

METHOD

This study utilizes the application of leadership theories in analyzing the election of President Obama in 2008. Leadership Theory provides researchers an opportunity to understand the dynamic leader-follower relationships in a cultural framework. Hackman and Johnson framed (2004) the leadership definition in several themes which were (a) the ability to influence others, (b) influence as a group context, and (c) the emphasis on collaboration. Bass and Riggio (2005) argued that leadership is not just about the province of people at the top. In fact, leadership can happen at all levels and by any person. Therefore, leadership involves human (symbolic) communication which modifies the followers’ attitudes and behaviors so that the group can meet shared goals and needs. Northouse (2006) further supported Hackman and Johnson’s leadership premise. He suggested that there several some commonalities about leadership despite the varying definitions. They include the following: (a) leadership is a process, (b) leadership involves influencing, (c) leadership occurs in a group context, and (d) leadership involves goal attainment. Schmidt (2006) further argued that leadership definitions reflect the viewpoint of an industrial society, and a new era begat a new definition for leadership. Yet, Prewitt (2004) further noted that the current leadership theories are based on modernist assumptions and are out of date with leading postmodern organizations. Nevertheless, this paper defines leadership as a contextual influence that has an impact on subordinates’ attitudes and performance through effects on the subordinates’ perceptions of their job characteristics (Northouse, 2006). Bass (1990) argued that leadership has a significant bearing on an organization’s performance. In fact, most social, political, and cultural movements require an effective leader to sustain any noticeable success. Therefore, leaders have the capacity to influence the values needed in a changing organizational environment (Ferguson, 2003).
This investigation provides exploratory data by utilizing an extensive literary review of over 20 documents including scholarly opinions and practitioner discussions. The documents were selected based upon a review of the popular press and academic literature. Given the contemporary and recent nature of the topic, most of the sources selected are from the popular press. In effect, this is a convenience sample of relevant, timely, and credible sources that enhance and support the scholarly discussion of Trait, Postmodernism, and Transformational theories as applied to the 2008 Presidential election. These sources included practitioners, management consultants, columnists, and political pundits. Collection and critical analysis of secondary data from relevant publications were conducted for the results of the 2008 presidential elections. Various organizational behavior theories were reviewed to identify the related leadership attributes that may influence on political campaigns. The contributions made by well-known leadership researchers such as Northouse were investigated.

The primary objective of this review of literature is to increase depth of knowledge in this field in order to make a relevant analysis of each theory. Electronic databases such as ABI/INFORM Global and the Internet were searched using key words ‘leadership,’ ‘presidential elections,’ and ‘postmodernism.’ There was a significant absence of literature related to how various leadership theories can help explain the perceptions of the electorate. Consequently, there is an opportunity to address key research gaps.

2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The chronology of how a relatively little known and young politician would become the 44th president is well known. However, Obama’s background was not characteristic of a traditional path to the US Presidency. Obama grew up as the only son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya (Asim, 2009). Additionally, Obama’s diverse background and multiracial identity generated confusion regarding his placement in society and made some Americans uncomfortable (Green, 2009). Prior to his election as Senator and his keynote address and the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama was relatively unknown Illinois state legislator. The Democratic frontrunner was New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. The vast majority of the pundits and prognosticators predicted a Clinton victory (Belfast Telegraph, 2008). Some analysts posited that Obama was “too black.” Other observers proclaimed that he was just “not black enough.” Todd and Gawiser (2009) argued that Obama transformed the Democratic primary from a bland political race to a clash of two cultural titans, Clinton and Obama. Clinton’s strategists were nervous about Obama’s potential as he was the “darling” of Democratic activists and the blogosphere (Todd & Gawiser, 2009). Unlike the campaigns of his principal rivals, Clinton and McCain, Obama remained on message throughout the campaign with his message of change while his opponents could not disassociate themselves from the political establishment.
The individual state races were more unpredictable as controversial matters continued to surface about the presidential candidates. For Hillary Clinton, it was President Clinton’s unscripted comments about Obama (Belfast Telegraph, 2008). For Obama, it was his associations with perceived radicals such as William Ayers or Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Obama took an early lead in Iowa and held his advantage in spite of later losses in Ohio and Pennsylvania. On July 24, 2008, Obama defeated Clinton by sealing the presidential nomination with wins in South Dakota and Montana (Belfast Telegraph, 2008). The race was historic with both Clinton and Obama receiving over 17 million votes during the nomination process. In August of 2008, Senator Barack Obama became the first biracial candidate in United States history to represent a major political party. On the other side of the aisle, McCain secured the Republican presidential nomination. It was obvious to pundits and researcher alike that the growing diversity of the US population would contribute to the outcome of the election. Obama attempted to rewrite conventional wisdom by attacking traditional red states Republican strongholds. Obama sought to electrify young and diverse voters as part of his strategy. For example, the number of Blacks and Hispanic undergraduate students enrolled in colleges and universities nationwide had increased by 32% and 98% respectively over the decades while the number of White students had decreased by 1% (Perna, 2000). The result was positive for Obama given that the college age cohort supported Obama at a much higher rate than older citizens). Additionally, McCain could not overcome the legacy of one of the most unpopular presidents in US history and a faltering economy aggravated by a serious financial systems crisis. On November 4, 2008, Obama was elected the United States president. The results were startling for many political junkies as well as the average voters. Obama won 365 Electoral votes compared to McClain’s 173 (46%).

TRAIT THEORY

Many Obama loyalists would propose that President Obama was a “born” leader, thereby subscribing to the direct application of Trait Theory on the presidential election (Berland & Schoen, 2009). As the 2008 presidential election began, there were significant differences between Senator McCain and Senator Obama. Being an ex-Air Force pilot and officer, McCain was known for his ‘take charge’ style and decisiveness in leading others to consensus. On the contrary, Obama was celebrated as a charismatic leader who sought to build bridges, not “burning” them (Green, 2009). To some observers, leadership is defined by the age old question of nature or nurture, genetics versus learning and culture, “Are leaders born or made?” Trait Theory suggests that humans possess innate qualities that predetermine the identity of an effective leader. Qualities, such as height, intelligence, extroversion, and other noble traits are components of Trait Theory (Northouse, 2006). Therefore, leadership resides in select individuals. Despite its inherent plausibility and anecdotal experience, extensive leadership research in business and other settings confirms that Trait Theory lacks predictive validity.
Yet, this theory is relevant to the discussion of presidential leadership because it identifies the characteristics that followers desire in a leader thereby influencing voting behavior. Both candidates possessed positive and negative leadership qualities that support the application of Trait Theory. However, the question must be posed “Which candidate best benefited from the outward perception of what a leader should look like?”

Physical characteristics are what most individuals first perceive. In this presidential election, some of the physical traits included height, age, and race. The Great Man Theory was largely centered on the premise that leaders possessed special qualities for leadership positions. Cherulnik (1995) acknowledged the possibilities that physical attractiveness and other traits could influence the leadership selection process. This decision making factor is readily viewed in athletics and other activities that require great physical ability. Obama towered over McCain in terms of physical stature. Obama is 6 feet 1 inch while McCain was 5 feet 9 inches (Sargent, 2008). Obama, being tall and lanky, would overshadow a much shorter and frail McCain. In some people’s minds, the election was more about optics than policy content and ability. For example, the popular media endorsement of Obama was perceived to be due to his charisma, energy, and youthful nature (Bligh & Kohles, 2009). In fact, presidential debates often emphasized showmanship and how the prospective voters view the candidates from a physical characteristics perspective. Therefore, the style of the debates was a strategic consideration for both candidates. Given that Obama was noticeably taller, two of the three presidential debates in the fall were seated debates, perhaps to neutralize Obama’s height advantage (Sargent, 2008).

Furthermore, the role of race in the election was a very problematic factor. There was no consensus on the role of race, with some experts concluding it would have a significant impact (the Bradley effect) (Weisberg, 2008a) while others predicted that Obama’s race would aid his candidacy given the guilt, sympathy and compensatory factors for the legacy of racism (CNN, 2008c). Some political strategists observed that Obama’s race contributed to more positive media coverage (Journalism.org, 2008b). However, many people felt it was a negative characteristic for Obama given the historical absence of a major black president challenger (Green, 2009).

Would voters vote for him? In the Democratic campaign between Clinton and Obama, the issue of race was more profound. Newsweek columnist Jacob Weisberg (2008) argued that race shapes this year’s presidential campaign: “…let’s be honest: the reason Obama isn’t ahead right now is that he trails badly among one group, older white voters. He lags with them for a simple reason: the color of his skin.” According to a New York Times/CBS News poll in July, 24% of voters said the country is not ready for a black president (Weisberg, 2008). Others thought that Obama’s race gave him a superior advantage over other White candidates. Former Democratic vice-presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro's argued that Obama’s treatment in the media was unfair. Clinton had the most experience. Therefore, Obama’s lead was borne out of racial preference: “If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position," she said. "And if he was a woman of any color, he would not be in this position. He happens to be very lucky to be who he is. And the country is caught up in the concept.” Consequently, his racial appearance
was a political advantage (Younge, 2008). Additionally, age was also a consideration. According to a CNN Exit Poll (16,000 participants) of the presidential election, twice as many of those polled said age was an important factor in their vote as those who indicated race (CNN, 2008a). Specifically, 78% went for Obama to 21% for McCain among voters who thought age was important. However, individuals who said race was an important factor voted 55% to 44% in favor of Obama. However, Obama also was the winner for people who said race was not important (CNN.com, 2008a).

Second, intrinsic character attributes are significant factors in Trait Theory. Both candidates attempted to frame their opponent in a character framework. Feeding on the perceived eloquence of Obama, McCain’s strategy was to paint Obama as a celebrity and elitist. Additionally, McCain tried to generate a perception that Obama’s articulate speech and his charisma with his followers was devoid of substance. Obama utilized his own methods for framing McCain. Obama attempted to portray McCain as a third term successor to unpopular President Bush. Therefore, Obama tried to tie McCain to the establishment thereby producing “guilt by association” in the minds of postmodern, anti-establishment voters. Research validated the effectiveness of some of the strategies. Prior to the presidential election in November, Fields and Bocarnea (2008) conducted an Internet survey with 687 responses which asked respondents to rate McCain and Obama separately on 30 attributes, using a five-point scale (Fields & Bocarnea, 2008). Each candidate was rated on the same attributes and that these were the four highest factors for each candidate separately versus a pooled assessment. This convenience sample consisted of registered voters who were party affiliated as Republicans (45%), Democrats (24%), and Independents (31%). The sample consisted of equal number of men and women, predominately White, and older with 55% in the 41-60 age group. The online survey included individuals from 47 states and 14 countries outside of the US (Fields & Bocarnea, 2008). The results showed that McCain across all voters was rated highest on the traits of purposeful, decisive, intelligent, and informed while Obama rated highest on charismatic, intelligent, dynamic, and communicative. Additionally, the major difference between the candidates was in the following attributes: charismatic (Obama higher), decisive (McCain higher), dynamic (Obama higher), and trustworthy (McCain higher). Even though this sample was heavily favored toward Republicans, Obama tended to rate higher than McCain on being more motivational, inspiring, charismatic, dynamic, and visionary regardless of party affiliation. Fields and Bocarnea (2008) indicted that prior research demonstrated that leadership perceptions of presidential candidates directly impacted how individuals will vote.

Political strategists seek means to showcase their candidate while highlighting any character flaws in the opposition. The results of the survey are consistent with the hypothesis that voter character perception influence voting behavior. Obama was viewed as the agent of change while McCain was viewed as an extension of the failed Bush Administration and Republican establishment, hence “guilt by association.” Given the fact that Obama won every major
demographic in the election, Trait Theory seems to have played a role in the outcome of the election.

**POSTMODERN EFFECT**

The significant demographic changes within the 21st century have made postmodernism a major factor in the 2008 presidential journey. Data clearly indicates that younger generations in the US (Barna Group, 2005) and throughout the developed world (Inglehart, 2000) possess a more postmodern and post-materialist value system. Even though some post-modernists reject the efficacy or validity of social science empirical categorization frameworks, they do provide a good proxy indicator of the possession of a postmodern worldview. For the first time in American history, there are four generations co-existing in the workplace. They are the Greatest Generation (1922-1945), the Baby Boomer (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), and Millennial (1981-2000) groups. According to Hammell (2005), each generation has distinct attributes, behaviors, expectations, and habits. The Greatest Generation (1922-1945) progressed through the hard times of American History. Characterized by its activism, the Baby Boomer Generation is associated with involvement and optimism and a commitment to work within existing organizational structure to achieve goals. Next, Generation X, known for its cynicism, moves through organizations as modern day mavericks; they are mobile, adaptable, and career savvy (Green, 2007). Growing up in the Information Age, the Millennial Generation has a value-based lifestyle; they are diverse, gender neutral, technology savvy, and confident in their abilities. Additionally, Winograd and Hais (2008) maintained that this emerging generation is situated to become a political powerhouse. However, connecting with a postmodern generation presents problems to the traditional politician. American politics are often polarizing, generating and emphasizing political fault lines across issues related to religion, race, gender, ethnicity, and social class. Therefore, finding a common ground is difficult. Thompson (2004) argued that the current cultural climate impedes politicians from discerning a moral center. He further maintained that that this pluralistic stakeholder environment creates significant challenges for leaders who hope to unite people in a shared identity from widely divergent value and belief systems. Therefore, the strategy of least resistance for a presidential candidate is to energize the base and hope to attract a sufficient number of independents with a centrist viewpoint.

Obama’s campaign communication methods and message appealed to the Millenial’s sense of community involvement. Obama seized the opportunity to connect with his generation and younger voters. The Millennial generation is driven by a new set of values and expectations. Schultz (1992) argued this generation manifests a postmodern world view which challenges the very assumptions of the merits of traditional organizational culture. Keough and Tobin (2001) maintained that postmodernism influences most organizations. Key postmodern traits include challenging authority, attacking conventional wisdom, tolerating ambiguity, accepting diversity, and building constructive reality. Consequently, postmodernists find themselves distrustful of
institutions and hard facts. These postmodern premises attack the heart of traditional organizations, thus providing an avenue for organizational conflict between leaders and followers. Therefore, this sets the stage for disagreement between postmodern Generation X and Millennial voters and their older counterparts. Some individuals assert that the value differences between these generations are small. It is true that there are many shared values such as being goal-oriented and confident. However, there are some critical value traits that are divergent. For example, Baby Boomers’ leadership style is characterized by an autocratic mentality while Millennials are governed by a democratic approach. These divergent generational leadership traits inspire some followers while inhibiting others. By blending modern and postmodern values in organizations, incongruent and conflictual values are generated (Green, 2007). Therefore, presidential candidates who understand the cultural differences of this postmodern generation will best position themselves to win this campaign. For example, President Obama’s inclusiveness regarding the issue of religion was consistent with postmodern assumptions that reject mutually exclusive truth claims. President Obama, though nominally Christian, embraces a more unitarian and pluralistic view of religion based upon his multicultural life experiences with Islam and Christianity. His public pronouncements on religion embrace general references to faith issues with no specific links to established Christian theological or denominational perspectives. His general policy commitments to world peace, a greater degree of international cooperation, higher levels of social justice, enhanced poverty eradication efforts, greater environmental policy emphasis, and the reduction of human misery resonates with the younger postmodern mindset across the political spectrum President Obama explicitly reached out to evangelicals, but also capitalized on the generational schism and the dissatisfaction of younger evangelicals with the traditional religious right’s focus on morality based social issues such as abortion and gay rights to the exclusion of a broader array of social justice and environmental policy areas (Broder, 2008).

**TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL**

As the November of 2008 election approached, voters had grown tired of the same political rhetoric. Leadership theories encompassed this presidential election. Transformational leadership places intrinsic motivation on their followers, thereby creating a massive appeal to supporters. Bass and Riggo (2005) suggested that transformational leadership assist followers to grow and develop into leaders by responding to individual followers’ needs, by empowering them, and aligning the goals of the individual followers. During the 2008 presidential election, there were a strong desire for many citizens for change in leadership. America was growing weary fighting multiple wars with no end in sight. The housing market had imploded and the economy was in a shambles. Both President Bush and Congress had achieved some of the lowest approval ratings in history. In the presidential election, there was a cry for change (Asim, 2009). Younger voters desire a leader who inspires and possesses a clear vision. Whereas a bureaucratic
leaders works within the framework of the system’s best interest, transformational leaders seek to promote the best interest of all stakeholders (see Table 1). Gill, Levine, and Pitt (1998) suggested that the challenges of this new millennium require a paradigm shift in leadership style that is transformational and forward thinking. Historically, transformational leadership made a significant contribution to electing candidates. Transformational leaders attempt to raise the consciousness of followers while facilitating the achievement of lower order needs. Rada (1999) argued that transformational leadership is a dynamic process which engages both the leader and the follower. In contrast to transactional leadership, transformational leadership is not position dependent. Leaders and followers under a transformational leadership model can influence each other. This leadership attribute works well with postmodern citizens. Similar to other leadership theories, Transformational Leadership possesses limitations and weaknesses in relation to postmodern thinking and values. Transformational leaders are social organizational architects that develop and promote unified mission, vision and values. Transformational leaders who possess a clear and compelling vision can impose their views of reality on followers violating the foundational principle of individual and collective knowledge creation autonomy characteristic of the postmodern value system.

At the extreme, the transformational leader can embrace the tactics of manipulation and pseudo participation designed to control behavior (Northouse, 2006). This tactic places transformational leaders in conflict with their postmodern constituents. Schmidt (2006) explained that the postmodern leader should have the following characteristics: (a) adaptable, (b) spiritual-focus, (c) tolerance for ambiguity in life, (d) entrepreneurial in his approach, (e) service-oriented, (f) accountable for action, (g) life-long learners, (h) upgrading performance, and (i) participatory. Burns (2003) further suggested that leaders shape the course of history by transforming their followers. Obama’s campaign strategy was constructed for postmodern voters (see Table 1). The Obama team devised a presidential strategy on the following three strategies: (a) increasing voter registration in traditionally underrepresented groups (minorities and youth), (b) assisting ‘down ballot’ Democrats to win elections, and (c) build a grassroots organization in each state (Trygstad, 2008). Most observers readily acknowledged that Obama had “star power” attracting record crowds to his rallies. As previously stated, Obama was viewed as a transformational figure. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell supported Obama and broke from his Republican Party. "He has both style and substance. I think he is a transformational figure” (Walls & Pitney, 2008). However, this transformational quality was not confined to the United States. Across the globe, individuals were fascinated with Obama’s political campaign. During his first official trip abroad, he was greeted by over 200,000 people in Berlin (Zeleny, 2008). Obama represented a different type of leader because his strong, charismatic personality appealed to a postmodern generation seeking change. Additionally, Stagich (2001) argued that leaders manifesting a collaborative spirit possess an advantage in improving performance and motivating individuals in a global community.
Table 1: Obama’s Strategy for the 2008 Presidential Campaign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50 State Strategy</td>
<td>Obama set up office in every state regardless of the likelihood of winning in the state. This strategy enhanced his visibility and prepared the way for greater post-election governance support and understanding.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simple Message</td>
<td>Obama stayed on message with his theme of change congruent with the Postmodern and transformational elements. These include increasing the openness, transparency and responsiveness of government, reducing the influence of lobbyists and promoting genuine bi-partisan consensus consistent with the marketplace of ideas and the absence of a central unifying ideology. For example, Obama appointed several well-known Republicans to key cabinet positions including Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Advantage</td>
<td>The campaign set financial records for any presidential election by raising over $650 million. He was successful at raising funds from a wide-spectrum of the electorate. This fundraising success reflected Obama’s charismatic and transformational appeal to varying age, gender and ethnic groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology Savvy</td>
<td>Obama used modern technologies to connect with voters through the Internet such as Facebook and MySpace. The techno savvy approach was adroitly contrasted with McCain’s inability and reluctance to use even the “first generation” electronic communication method of email.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics &amp; Behavioral Analysis</td>
<td>Obama grasped the demographic and behavioral shifts in America and was able to gain strong support from multifaceted groups of voters, especially among young and minority voters. The Obama campaign adroitly identified the value differences and targeted campaign messages according to key age group value differences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographics &amp; Change Agent</td>
<td>Obama was able to position himself as a change agent and overcome the doubts raised by critics concerning his relative lack of administrative and foreign policy experience. Obama’s message infused a combination of Messianic and transformational themes and a Kennedy-like amalgam of personal responsibility for growth consistent with postmodernism (make your own reality).</td>
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Additionally, McCain could not overcome the legacy of one of the most unpopular presidents in US history in conjunction with a faltering economy aggravated by a financial systems crisis. As already stated, strong support from multifaceted group of voters, especially among young and minority voters, propelled Obama to the White House (CNN.com, 2008b).

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The consequences from the 2008 presidential election are significant and will manifest long lasting effects. Political analysts from across the globe have begun to dissect how the 2008 presidential election was won. When the political contest began, there were two frontrunners in the major political parties, Senator Clinton and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Both possessed “brand name” recognition and influence within their individual parties. Political pundits and conventional wisdom at the early stages of the 2008 campaign declared them the eventual winners. However, many factors were undermining this assumption. Therefore, the
strategy of least resistance for a presidential candidate is to energize the base and hope to attract more independents from outside the party with a centrist viewpoint. In contrast, Obama felt he could change the outcome of the election by appealing to Millennial’s sense of community involvement (The American Prospect, 2008).

How did Obama manage to win against the political odds? Obama’s strategy was perfectly adapted for this period of time. Lister (2008) argued that Obama was largely untested, inexperienced, and relatively unknown before the 2004 Democratic Convention thereby lending credence to the perception that he was a Washington outsider. Another key element was his superior campaign financing and implementation strategy. With over $650 million for his campaign, Obama dominated the political landscape compared to McCain’s federal funds of $85 million (Lister, 2008). Another factor was the favorable media coverage and the skill of the Obama campaign in positioning Obama within the media. According to media research organizations such as the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Others, dominant personal narratives influenced the election campaign. Additionally, Bligh and Kohles (2009) suggested that the role of charismatic attribute and delivery style played an important part in Obama’s win. They further argued that political messages are influenced by the messenger and delivery. Obama positioned himself as the candidate of hope and change. Other observers emphasized the role of race in black pride and white guilt.

However, Younge (2008) maintained that the results of the election affirmed the democratic process rather than the product of an affirmative action artifact or syndrome. In the end, character counted more. Obama was perceived to be a more charismatic and dynamic presidential leader. Obama seized the opportunity to connect with his generation and younger voters. Voters had grown tired of the same political rhetoric. In the presidential election, there was a cry for change. Transformational leaders attempt to raise the consciousness of followers while facilitating the achievement of their needs. This leadership attribute works well with postmodern voters. As already mentioned, Obama was viewed as a transformational figure. This trait influenced some conservatives and many independents to vote for him. Obama’s transformational quality was not confined to the United States. Across the globe, individuals were fascinated with Obama’s political campaign. Obama represented a different type of leader because his strong, charismatic personality appealed to a postmodern generation seeking change.

As already stated, strong support from a diverse coalition of voters, especially young and minority voters, propelled Obama to the White House (CNN.com, 2008a). The excitement generated by the Obama win was reflected by how House and Senate offices were overwhelmed with requests for inauguration tickets. Obama was sworn in on the steps of the U.S. Capitol and approximately 2 million people were on the Mall at to view inauguration festivities (Nakamura & Wilgoren, 2009). This attendance level was five times as many as attended each of President Bush's two inaugural events and twice as many as President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in 1993. Historically, the largest crowd ever recorded (estimated 1.2 million people) was for President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 inauguration (Coile, 2008). Looking to the future of his presidency,
Obama has already begun his benchmark efforts. From his campaign promises, Obama pledged to be a unifying force under extreme economic and political times. Obama has taken Abraham Lincoln’s presidency as the benchmark for his success (Thomas & Wolffe, 2008). Both supporters and critics will also make other presidential comparisons related to his presidency. The following are long term implications for researchers and practitioners as a result of the Obama win:

1. Voter identification with Obama as a representative of change and of today’s culture resonated with the postmodern generation. Some experts would argue that Obama was not the first pioneer to use the Internet as a digital connection. In fact, Howard Dean used his online fundraising in the 2004 Democratic presidential race (Cobb, 2008). Yet, the Obama political team used information technology to redefine the election process by interacting with voters in a variety of ways (Greengard, 2009). Obama adroitly used the next generation of internet technology to craft grassroots efforts on Twitter, Facebook, and other social network mediums that clearly connected to Internet savvy and younger voters (Boucq, 2008). The Obama internet strategy will set a standard for future political campaigns. The more multi-faceted media forms and outlets require a diverse and sophisticated understanding of candidate image management. It is risky for candidates to assume the content and delivery of techniques that are effective in television and radio translate to the internet based media.

2. Social factors such as postmodernism tend to influence the behavior of voters. Most presidential candidates who entered the 2008 race did not understand the overarching theme of change. Candidates such as Clinton founded their campaign on experience and stability (Journalism, 2008). Future candidates and researchers must study the short and long term influence of postmodern values on political decisions and attitudes.

3. Candidates will need to more dynamically and proactively shape media coverage. During the 2008 financial crisis, media coverage of McCain grew more negative (Journalism, 2008b). He was viewed as erratic and unpredictable. Yet, McCain stubbornly attempted to portray himself as a political maverick. However, McCain could not separate himself from President Bush in the media. Therefore, many voters viewed him as representing another term of the same failed Bush administration policies. It is critical to study how the media’s value orientation shifts over time and how this influences political campaigns.

4. Leadership traits such as height and presidential image played a critical factor in voting outcomes. Obama was able to successfully overcome his perceived inexperience by using the media to project an image of a charismatic and powerful leader and communicator (Journalism, 2008). Ongoing research on the influence of trait theory and its interface with postmodern values and perceptions is an important topic.
5. Transformational leadership is still seen as a valuable commodity to voters. Although transformational leadership has its limitations, it is an attractive trait in motivating followers who are diverse and young (Northouse, 2006). Future research is needed to address the conflicting influence of postmodernism with its greater degree of individualism and the unifying influence of transformational leadership.

Consequently, the 2008 campaign clearly was a generational watershed in relation to leadership approaches, and the long term implications will shape US politics and culture for years to come.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP THEORY**

The election of 2008 does provide several key lessons for organizational leadership theory and practice in non-electoral based management settings. One of the essential elements in transformational leadership theory is the ability to use symbols and visual images to consistently reinforce key policy and management goals and objectives. The election of President Obama demonstrated how physical appearance, personality, and the use of electronic media can be carefully crafted to reinforce a central theme of change. Transformational organizational leaders demonstrate this same ability when they cultivate a mission, vision and values agenda that recognizes and acknowledges the positive and productive elements of the past while charting a new course for the future. Transformational leaders adopt the principle of multi-method communication campaigns and skillfully blend images using sight, sound and context to influence perceptions related to the possession of key desirable traits such as decisiveness, wisdom, integrity, strength, confidence, empathy and interest.

The postmodern emphasis lends itself to the interface of several leadership theories including servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). In a postmodern leadership paradigm, truth is mutually defined in a joint process of discovery. This lends itself to many forms of electronic empowerment including the virtual workplace, self-directed work teams, job enlargement and job enrichment. The transformational leader helps shapes the values, but the implementation of the vision is shared with line employees through various types of delegation strategies noted above. As a complement to the more active forms of organizational leadership implementation strategies noted in the previous sentence, the use of the various types of social media in terms of blogs, wikis, and twitter are means for engaging employees in the process of “mutual discovery” of key organizational truths including “what works” (increases efficiency and effectiveness) in mission achievement and customer satisfaction. In addition, these forms of communication when formally and informally sanctioned and supported, provide means for expressing dissent and suggestions for improvement. Hence, it is another powerful form of voice as reflected in the works of Hirschman (1970) to avoid unwanted exit and other forms dysfunctional disengagement and apathy.
A final leadership theory linkage relates to the use of the media by leaders and managers. Clearly transformational leaders must craft a clear, consistent and compelling narrative that links the past, present and future. Without a lucid association, incumbent employees are likely to perceive that their past contributions and merit are being questioned leading to a loss of dignity and respect. Hence, it reinforces one of the cardinal rules of transformational change that there must be a clear assignment of responsibility for performance problems, but in a fashion that emphasizes the dignity of individuals with the majority of attributional accountability assigned to either the management system (as with Total Quality Management), or to past leadership failures. It is always more convenient to assign responsibility for performance problems to the past administration.

CONCLUSION

“That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age…Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real, they are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this America: They will be met.” (CNN.com, 2009)

Obama proclaimed this reality at his record breaking inauguration that transformed the electoral map (CNN.com, 2009). Obama captured majorities among women (56% to 43%), voters under 30 (66% to 32%), Blacks (95% to 4%), Latinos (66% to 32%), Asians (63% to 34%), and first-time voters (68% to 31%), according to CNN Exit Polls. Clearly, voters were looking for a special type of leader during the unsteady days of globalization. The 2008 presidential election will be remembered for its historical significance as Obama became the first of African heritage. This paper argues that Trait Theory and Transformational Leadership help to explain many of the election dynamics as a new generation of voters seek a different type of leader in this postmodern period.

Furthermore, Fields and Bocarnea (2008) noted that the factors of charisma and great political skills have consistently been related to electoral success and contributed to outstanding leadership among US presidents. In order to fix the complicated problems in America, voters deemed it was time for a change in leadership. Consequently, the impact of a postmodern generation responded to Obama as a transformational leader. Political strategists guiding future presidential campaigns must understand the social climate beyond red and blue states. Therefore, an understanding of transformational and postmodern leadership theory will prove prudent for future presidential elections as the demographic continue to shift.
REFERENCES


