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.
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 Millennial’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
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


