

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Obama And The 2011 Debt Ceiling Crisis: The American Citizen And The Deliberative Power Of the Bully Pulpit

Abstract: During the summer of 2011, Obama was faced with the difficult task of breaking the partisan stalemate in Congress that threatened to plunge the world into another recession. This study examines President Obama's rhetorical strategy during the debt crisis and discusses his extensive use of the bully pulpit. This paper argues that in the case of the debt ceiling crisis the bully pulpit served as a means to restore deliberation to Congress.

Keywords: [Bully Pulpit, Debt ceiling debate, Presidential rhetoric, Rhetoric].

1. Introduction

During the summer of 2011, President Obama was confronted with a debate that economists labelled as "insane" and dangerous (Jackson, 2011). The issue of raising the debt ceiling, an event that had for years been a formality, became a thorn in the President's side that threatened the economy of not just the U.S., but the world as well. Many experts argued that if the debt ceiling was not raised it could cripple the U.S. economic recovery and plunge the world into another recession (Isidore, 2011).

During the final weeks of July the negotiations between the parties over the debt ceiling reached a breaking point, with both President Obama and House speaker John Boehner walking away from the negotiation table multiple times. Between July 19th and the 29th, at the height of the crisis, President Obama addressed the American people numerous times concerning the debt ceiling debate. During these remarks, President Obama attempted to sway public opinion in favour of a compromise between the two parties. Obama's remarks were by all accounts successful in gaining public support; shifting public opinion away from Republicans who were viewed as hold outs on the debt ceiling (Feldmann, 2011).

Citizens' outrage over the issue went so far that many Congressional members' offices were flooded with calls and letters about the debate (Memoli, 2011).

In this essay, I argue that President Obama's rhetoric during the debt ceiling crisis accomplished two things. First, President Obama used constitutive rhetoric to cast American citizens as fundamental elements of decision making concerning the debt ceiling debate, in order to apply pressure on Congress for a resolution for the debt crisis. Second, Obama's use of the Bully Pulpit during the debt debate was aimed at returning the debate to a rational dialog between the two parties. To support these claims, I will first visit the existing literature concerning constitutive rhetoric and the debate surrounding the role of the rhetorical presidency. Next, I describe the context of the debt ceiling. Finally I demonstrate how Obama positioned the American people during the crisis

2. The rhetorical presidency

Over the last hundred years, the role of the president has fundamentally changed from a leader of the government to a "leader of the people" (Bessette, Ceaser, Thurow & Tulis, 1981). An example of this change can be seen during the Carter administration when he attempted to address the issue of "malaise" surrounding the nation. Carter believed he needed to take action, and rally the nation as the "leader of the people," in order to revive America's morality (Bessette, Ceaser, Thurow & Tulis, 1981). Though Carter inevitably went back to being what he defined as the "head of the government" later in his presidency, his speech and actions demonstrates how the role of the President has changed over the years. The advent of the Bully Pulpit as a tool for a President can also be traced to the rise of the "Rhetorical Presidency."

The Rhetorical Presidency is a departure from what has been called the "old way" of presidential rhetoric, in which a President would address their rhetoric to Congress almost exclusively in order to pass policies (Bessette, Ceaser, Thurow & Tulis, 1981;Saldin, 2011). With the rise of the Rhetorical Presidency, the presidency now takes a different route that uses rhetoric to sway the public at large in order to pressure Congress (Ivie, 1998; Saldin, 2011; Stuckey, 2006). The emergence of the Rhetorical Presidency began a heated debate in the academic community about its impact on democracy and public deliberation. Some critics argue that the Rhetorical Presidency may derail rational deliberation and discussion through demagoguery (Tulis, 1998). Other critics claim that the Rhetorical Presidency has led to a simplification of debate concerning public

policy (Ivie, 1998). Tulis argued that the Rhetorical Presidency threatens to undermine the deliberative role of Congress in favor of appeals to public opinion (2007).

While Tulis (1996) warned that the Rhetorical Presidency has the potential to undermine rational discussion, he acknowledged that the “Bully Pulpit” does have a place in Presidential rhetoric. In particular, Tulis (1996) proposed that the “Bully Pulpit” could be used to break partisan deadlock and restore deliberation. Tulis (1996) explains that recent political times have been gripped with a complete lack of discussion and debate, a conclusion that certainly was an accurate description of the situation that President Obama faced during the debt ceiling crisis. In such a context the president might employ the “Bully Pulpit” in order to pressure Congress so that deliberation could be restored. At the same time, it is possible that a president could use the “Bully Pulpit” to stymie or prevent deliberation.

In recent years, critics have decried extremism in public debate as it promotes “otherization.” In particular, the danger that those with different opinions will be labelled as evil or outside of the bounds of democracy itself (Ivie, 1998, 2002). This clearly happened in the stalemate that occurred during the debt ceiling debate. Where neither side was willing to negotiate, reasoned debate was precluded and those that call for compromise were labelled as soft. Parties were willing to engage in the “nuclear” option of letting the debt ceiling not pass and possibly plunging the world into another economic crisis. In this crisis, however, President Obama was able to sway public opinion in favour of compromise and debate. Through the use of constitutive rhetoric Obama tapped into underlying national and cultural narratives of the American citizen in order to apply pressure on congress to resolve the debt crisis.

3. Constitutive rhetoric

One of the avenues that a president has for changing public perception is through the definition or redefinition of terms. Zarefsky argued that presidents have historically created and defined terms that they deem important as a method for shaping public perceptions (2004). One example of this is the use of the term “war” after September 11th by President Bush. President Bush claimed we were at “war” with the terrorists. Technically, such a thing did not occur since war is defined as a conflict between nations and the terrorists had no sovereign nation or what many would define as a military force (Zarefsky, 2004). By redefining the

situation as a “war”, President Bush was able to create a perception of a war mentality and set the stage for military conflict.

The President’s rhetorical power to define is a fundamental part of how constitutive rhetoric functions to form an audience’s identity. Zagacki noted that “constitutive rhetorics are crucial during “founding” moments when advocates try to “interpellate” or “hail” audiences, calling a common, collective identity into existence.” (2007, p. 272). Using the power of definition, Presidents can attempt to unite their audiences using narratives that touch cultural, ideological, and national identities in order to move them to action (Stuckey, 2006; Zagacki, 2007). In the case of the debt ceiling debate, I argue that Obama used constitutive rhetoric to cast the American people as a key part of the deliberation process. Using different historical American narratives and values such as self-sacrifice, hard work, and compromise, Obama united American citizens in order to pressure congress towards rational discussion and a resolution of the debt ceiling crisis.

4. Debt ceiling debat

The debt ceiling was originally created in 1917 to allow the Treasury Department to pay expenses for government activities through borrowing without having to submit requests to Congress to approve already allotted spending (Kessler, 2011). Since then, the debt ceiling has been used to pay for government programs ranging from wars to Medicare (Kessler, 2011). However, failure to extend the debt ceiling could cause the government to default on its debt; an action that could drastically affect the world economy.

During the crisis Republicans wanted a debt ceiling deal consisting of spending cuts only, without revenue increases such as taxes being included. Part of the reason Republicans were unwilling to compromise was because many of the freshmen Republican representatives had campaigned on a platform of no new taxes. In addition, some did not believe in the economic doomsday scenarios that many experts were claiming would occur if the ceiling was not raised (Fahrenthold, 2011). This created a crisis for Republican leaders. If a deal was authored with increased revenue provisions, it risked splintering the Republican caucuses. Such a possibility forced the leadership to take a hard line stance on excluding new taxes in the deal. Democrats took a contrasting position, willing to cut spending, but unwilling to accept a deal that didn’t include at least some increase in revenue.

Obama gave four separate speeches between the 19th and 29th of July that focused exclusively on the debt situation. It was during these speeches that Obama made his case to the American citizen for the need to take action and make their voices heard concerning the debt ceiling debate. Obama's success in swaying public opinion was noted by many pundits (Benen, 2011; Feldmann, 2011; Mason, 2011). These addresses occurred at the height of the debt ceiling debate and, I argue, are examples of Obama's use of constitutive rhetoric and also demonstrate how the Bully Pulpit can be used to restore rational debate and discussion.

5. The debt ceiling and the role of the American citizen

While Obama's use of constitutive rhetoric in relation to the American public reached its height during his address on the 25th of July, the groundwork for the address was laid days before on the 19th and 22nd. Two key rhetorical moves were made during these addresses. First, Obama attempted to place the American citizen as an active part of the political landscape and not a passive spectator, stating "If both sides continue to be dug in, if we don't have a basic spirit of cooperation that allows us to rise above immediate election-year politics and actually solve problems, then I think markets here, the American people, and the international community are going to start reacting adversely fairly quickly" (Obama, July 19, 2011). This rhetoric placed the American people as active members of the discussion.

This trend of invoking the American citizen as a check on Washington politics emerges again during Obama remarks on July 22nd where he stated: "Now, I'll leave it up to the American people to make a determination as to how fair that is. And if the leadership cannot come to an agreement in terms of how we move forward, then I think they will hold all of us accountable." (Obama, July 22, 2011). This section demonstrates that Obama was using the threat of the Bully Pulpit to bring the parties back together in a deliberative discussion in order to find a compromise on the debt ceiling. The use of the Bully Pulpit to restore deliberation is in line with what Tulis (1996) discussed. Specifically, Tulis argued that Presidents might use the Bully Pulpit to revitalize congressional debate and deliberation (1996).

Second, Obama appealed to shared values to create the communal identity of the American citizen. Obama's rhetoric discusses numerous values ranging from hard work to fairness, but the value that became the core of his definition of the

American citizen is that of compromise. Obama states: "What the American people are looking for is some compromise, some willingness to put partisanship aside, some willingness to ignore talk radio or ignore activists in our respective bases, and do the right thing." (Obama, July 22, 2011). In this instance, compromise doesn't seem to meet the criterion established by Charland (1987) for constitutive rhetoric. Constitutive rhetoric generally creates a narrative around ancestral ideologies and cultural values (Charland, 1987; Zagacki, 2007). While in this address compromise was not fleshed out in such a way to show how it is endemic to the American citizen's identity, it was a foreshadowing of Obama's constitutive rhetoric to come.

The July 19th and 22nd remarks were followed by a negotiation breakdown that occurred early on the 25th. This led Obama to deliver an address to the nation during prime time television to discuss the debt crisis. It is in this address that constitutive rhetoric is clearly used by President Obama in order to unify the American public in the call for a return to negotiations. In particular Obama used his address to create a shared narrative of hardship and ancestry for the American people to reinforce the value of compromise. Through the value of compromise, Obama called on American citizens to take action against partisan politics and resolve the debt ceiling debate. He did this in two distinct ways. The first appeal defined "compromise" as distinctly American. Second, the American public were cast as having a role to play in the resolution of the debt ceiling debate. We can see these arguments begin to develop in the following passage:

They're fed up with a town where compromise has become a dirty word. They work all day long, many of them scraping by, just to put food on the table. And when these Americans come home at night, bone-tired, and turn on the news, all they see is the same partisan three-ring circus here in Washington. They see leaders who can't seem to come together and do what it takes to make life just a little bit better for ordinary Americans. They're offended by that. And they should be. The American people may have voted for divided government, but they didn't vote for a dysfunctional government. (Obama, July 25, 2011)

Obama attempted to cast the frustration felt by the American people as a direct result of the lack of compromise in American politics. He also contrasted the daily grind of the average citizen, a grind that forces citizens to compromise between leisure and work, to the political process. Finally, he provided an outlet for the public's frustration by suggesting that they inform their legislator of their

opinions on the crisis.

By linking compromise with the daily life of an American citizen, Obama cast compromise as central to both American politics and what it means to be a citizen. In his view, to be an American is to work together and compromise. President Obama connected compromise to the daily grind and hard work in order to bridge any political barriers in his audience. To reinforce the narrative, Obama drew upon American history to prove why compromise is distinctly American:

America, after all, has always been a grand experiment in compromise...we have put to the test time and again the proposition at the heart of our founding: that out of many, we are one. We've engaged in fierce and passionate debates about the issues of the day, but from slavery to war, from civil liberties to questions of economic justice, we have tried to live by the words that Jefferson once wrote: "Every man cannot have his way in all things without this mutual disposition, we are disjointed individuals, but not a society. (Obama, July 25, 2011)

Obama used the Founding Fathers, and the history of the country, in order to illustrate how compromise is at the heart of the American identity. This connection between compromise and American history is a prime example of how constitutive rhetoric forms a narrative around cultural and national ideologies (Charland, 1987; Zagacki, 2007). Obama created a narrative that placed the American citizen in a group identity transcending political party identities (Charland, 1987). Constitutive rhetoric creates a feeling of belonging to something that possesses meaning. This transcendence bridges political and ideological differences that might normally create rifts in the audience.

Obama argues that a commitment to compromise is at the core of America, something he highlights in the final two paragraphs of his address:

History is scattered with the stories of those who held fast to rigid ideologies and refused to listen to those who disagreed. But those are not the Americans we remember. We remember the Americans who put country above self, and set personal grievances aside for the greater good. We remember the Americans who held this country together during its most difficult hours; who put aside pride and party to form a more perfect union. That's who we remember. That's who we need to be right now. The entire world is watching. So let's seize this moment to show

why the United States of America is still the greatest nation on Earth not just because we can still keep our word and meet our obligations, but because we can still come together as one nation. (Obama, July 25, 2011)

Two key arguments come into focus here. First, Obama connects the past greatness of America with compromise. This is evident with his comment about setting grievances aside and how Americans help each other in times of need. Here, President Obama takes the value of compromise and places it at the heart of the identity of the American citizen. The rise of America had been interwoven into Obama's view of compromise as an integral part of national identity. While Obama's use of compromise becomes the central theme of his narrative about the role of the citizen, he also relies on historical examples. In doing so, Obama counters the political narrative of the Tea Party and others on the right.

5.1 Contemporary historical examples

President Obama's narrative about compromise and its relationship to American identity faced a difficult obstacle during the debt ceiling debate, the counter narrative proposed by Republicans. Many Republicans argued that the debt ceiling represented an expansion of government and irresponsible spending which violated American values. In order to combat this, Obama needed to demonstrate that raising the debt ceiling was not against American values and fit with his narrative of compromise.

Obama relied on historical argument for two reasons. First, historical evidence such as quotations from former Republican leaders, like Ronald Reagan, and statistics that spanned multiple Republican administrations made it difficult for the House Republicans to argue against Obama without seeming disconnected from the American public and the Republican Party. The second reason Obama chose these specific pieces of evidence was because they resonated with the Republican base. Reagan and Eisenhower are still seen as heroes by Republicans. If Obama could convince Republicans that the officials they elected were not following Reagan's own directions, he could spur real negotiations. We can see Obama begin to align himself with some of the Republican Party's great leaders in the following example. "The first approach says; let's live within our means by making serious, historic cuts in government spending. Let's cut domestic spending to the lowest level it's been since Dwight Eisenhower was President. Let's cut defence spending at the Pentagon by hundreds of billions of dollars (Obama, July 25th, 2011)."

Here, Obama compares his proposed budget to the policies enacted by Eisenhower. Contrasting his budget proposal with the actions taken by the Eisenhower administration, by association, strengthened his position with Republicans. Moreover, this argument strengthened the narrative created by Obama that compromise is an integral part of American History, by demonstrating that compromise has been a part of past Republican administrations. Obama's attempt to cast the House Republicans as disconnected from the American people is further demonstrated when he discusses the need for a balanced approach to the debt ceiling debate:

The first time a deal was passed, a predecessor of mine made the case for a balanced approach by saying this, "Would you rather reduce deficits and interest rates by raising revenue from those who are not now paying their fair share, or would you rather accept larger budget deficits, higher interest rates, and higher unemployment? And I think I know your answer." Those words were spoken by Ronald Reagan. But today, many Republicans in the House refuse to consider this kind of balanced approach an approach that was pursued not only by President Reagan, but by the first President Bush, by President Clinton, by myself, and by many Democrats and Republicans in the United States Senate. (Obama, July 25, 2011)

Obama turns the iconic figure of the Republican Party, Ronald Reagan, against the House Republicans, thereby casting doubt on whether Republicans in the House truly represent the American people. The contemporary examples cited by Obama are part of a two pronged argument that shows that compromise is not only a basic American value, but also an approach that has been followed by Democrats and Republicans alike.

In sum, Obama used historical evidence to create a wedge between the Republican leadership and the American people in an attempt to pressure the Republicans to return to negotiations. This wedge helped to reinforce the constitutive narrative used by Obama concerning the American citizen. The use of historical evidence created a discontinuity in the narrative put forth by Republicans concerning the debt ceiling and made it look as though Republicans were going against their own values and past leaders. This strengthened Obama's constitutive narrative about the value of compromise.

6. Conclusion

For any narrative to resonate within a group of individuals there must be a sense of shared identity and values that connect the members together. In the case of the 2011 debt ceiling debate, President Obama created a narrative for the American citizen that centered on the values of compromise and deliberation, a narrative he grounded in American history. Through the value of compromise, Obama constituted the American citizen as champions of rational discussion and placed the American citizen in a position to restore those values to Congress.

The 2011 debt ceiling debate also shows that President Obama's use of the Bully Pulpit was not an attempt to disrupt reason as some theorists might contend, but was instead an attempt to restore deliberation and discussion to Congress. Similar to what Tulis (1996) had described as a possible role for the rhetorical Presidency, Obama's use of the Bully Pulpit attempted to break the partisan gridlock that had prevented deliberation on the debt ceiling. Throughout the addresses, Obama stressed the need for discussion and negotiation with both sides. It is important to recognize that Obama did not limit compromise to only one side of the political spectrum, but instead asked for both Democrats and Republicans to be willing to sacrifice in order to pass the Debt Ceiling.

Obama's rhetoric during the debt ceiling crisis is an example of an effort to transcend the bounds of party politics and invoke the national identity of the American citizen as a tool for political reform. President Obama used the Bully Pulpit, not to derail deliberation and rational thought, but instead to reinforce them. Obama's support of compromise reflected a view of democracy based in public opinion.

In this study I demonstrated how the Bully Pulpit can be a tool in restoring deliberation and reason to policy making discussions. There is evidence that Obama's message, at minimum, moved the public to apply pressure on Congress to return to the negotiating table and is possibly partly responsible for helping find a compromise to raise the debt ceiling in 2011. The debt ceiling debate, as an example of partisan politics at their peak when all other negotiation strategies have failed, indicates that the Bully Pulpit can be used to restore deliberation and rational debate instead of stifling it as some scholars feared.

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