

False Choices: Barack Obama's Balance Rhetoric

By

Andrew Mitchell Bare

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Political Science and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Chairperson Donald Haider-Markel

Alesha Doan

Mark Joslyn

Date Defended: May 25, 2011

The Thesis Committee for Author Andrew Bare
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Donald Haider-Markel

Date Approved: May 25, 2011

Abstract

Barack Obama's speeches have been analyzed by journalists and academic researchers from countless angles. There remains a hole in the literature, however, as few researchers have systematically noted the President's use of "balance rhetoric." In this paper I define that term and quantify President Obama's use of it by examining 20 speeches and comparing them to 20 speeches given by President Bill Clinton's. I find that President Obama was more reliant on balance rhetoric than President Clinton. I then lay out potential avenues for future research in this vein.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to all the members of my thesis committee. I thank Professor Alesha Doan for her willingness to serve on this committee. I thank Professor Mark Joslyn for reading what surely were some of the weirdest reaction papers he had ever seen and not demanding my expulsion from the department. And I thank my adviser, Professor Donald Haider-Markel, for the invaluable advice he provided during the writing of this paper. He has been a true mentor during my time at the University of Kansas.

I also thank my fellow graduate students, who have constantly challenged me as a thinker and student.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my undergraduate *alma mater*, the University of Florida, for providing me with all the academic tools needed to survive in a graduate setting. I will always hold a special place in my heart for the university.

And finally, I must sincerely thank my family for their years of love and support. To my sister, Jessica, my father, James, and my mother, Joan, I can only express my gratitude for everything you have provided me in my life.

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False Choices: Barack Obama's Balance Rhetoric

Barack Obama was angry, and he was angry with his friends.

A few days before, in early December, 2010, the President's negotiators had struck with a deal with Republican lawmakers. The White House agreed to extend for two years tax cuts passed in 2001 and to slash the estate tax. In exchange, the Republicans had agreed to extend federal unemployment benefits for another year and to pass a series of small business tax breaks and other stimulative measures.

Progressives protested, often fiercely. Repealing the Bush tax cuts on individuals earning over \$250,000 had arguably been the central economic pillar of the Obama presidential campaign. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman denounced the “hostage deal” President Obama had cut (Krugman 2010). Many Congressional Democrats voiced displeasure and vowed to vote against the proposal (Herszenhorn and Stolberg 2010).

The President's press conference on December 7 was dedicated to the tax cut deal, and his performance at the event was a microcosm of the rhetorical strategy he had employed throughout his presidency.

He sharply criticized the Republican position on the high-end Bush tax cuts. He accused the GOP of holding middle class Americans “hostage” with their insistence on extending the high income cuts, which the President derisively labeled “their holy grail.” He vowed to fight another extension of the high income tax cuts when they came up for expiration in two years.

But it was the President's words and tone toward his liberal allies that garnered headlines. At the end of the press conference, the President labeled as unreasonable “purists” those progressives who had urged him to wage a protracted battle over the Bush tax cuts.

He referred back to liberal critiques of health care reform, rejecting complaints that the bill lacked the

public option, a priority for progressives.

Obama drew an implicit comparison between intransigent Republican lawmakers and angry progressives: both sides, in his formulation, were willing to let average Americans suffer in order to make a more abstract political point. In the press conference, the President thus set himself up as a man at the center of a political whirlwind, a man beset on all sides by obstreperous extremists unconcerned with the well-being of the American people. Obama's message in the press conference was simple: the extreme right is wrong. The extreme left is also wrong. I am the man brave enough to be moderate. I care about the American people, not the abstract political questions.

This press conference was the culmination of the first two years of President Obama's administration, but it was also the culmination of two years of presidential rhetoric. This balance rhetoric, in which the President criticized both sides of the political divide while setting himself up as the reasonable middle, was perceived by many commentators as a central thread of the administration's rhetorical strategy.

But was it?

In this paper, I strive to fill a hole in the academic literature on President Obama by examining his use of balance rhetoric in the first two years of his administration. While Obama's oratory has been a popular subject for researchers and journalists, no one has taken a systematic look at the concept of balance rhetoric.

I do that here by looking at 20 of the most important, consequential speeches from the first two years of the Obama White House. I compare President Obama's addresses to to President Clinton's. The similarities between those two Presidents presents a challenging test for the theory that President Obama is uniquely prone to the use of balance rhetoric. That challenge is important for the validity of case studies, even one as extensive as this (George and Bennett 2005). I also include a brief examination of 10 speeches from the Obama presidential campaign in 2008.

After reviewing the literature on President Obama, as well as triangulation and other important, related concepts, I lay out my methods and define the concept of “balance rhetoric.” I then proceed with a qualitative analysis of three Obama speeches that best exemplify this rhetorical approach; by doing so, I provide concrete, real-world examples for the reader's benefit. After revealing the results of my 40-speech study, I present my conclusions and lay out paths for future research on this question.

The Authorship Question

In performing the analysis outlined above, I remain cognizant of the fact that other researchers have raised numerous issues with the idea of examining political speeches for insight into the speaker. There is a rough consensus in the literature (Schafer 2000 for a review) that such an analysis has value when performed correctly. However, researchers have yet to achieve anything resembling a consensus on what exactly the “correct” method is.

Margaret Hermann is one of the trailblazers in the textual analysis sub-field, and argues for largely restricting that analysis to unprepared, off-the-cuff remarks. 30 years ago, Hermann focused on impromptu statements in her paper examining conceptual complexity in the foreign policy views of political leaders (Hermann 1980a).

Researchers in this camp are worried about the “ghostwriter effect.” With the rise of executive staffs throughout the 20th century, speechwriters have become important members of the presidential “team” (Cohen 2008). Every presidential address, and certainly every important presidential address, is painstakingly crafted by at least one person who, most importantly, is not the President. As a result, when examining prepared addresses, a researcher could be examining the speechwriter's attitudes, and not the speaker's (Hermann 1983, 1984). There is also the inter-departmental dynamic affecting the speechwriting process; presidential speeches are vetted by the various executive departments,

as well as the military and intelligence communities, all of which make changes. Those edits can include relatively minor linguistic changes, the exclusion of potentially embarrassing or classified information and even substantial policy shifts.

Given enough time after a President has left office, it is possible for researchers, given access to presidential papers, to disentangle exactly who was responsible for a given speech. We know, for example, that President Ronald Reagan, in spite of his “hands-off” reputation, played a large role in shaping his famous weekly radio addresses (Sigelman and Whissell 2002; Rowland and Jones 2002). President Bill Clinton was also an active architect of his own speeches. Just two years into President Obama's administration, we do not yet know the speechwriting dynamic in the Obama White House. Though the President has a reputation as a talented wordsmith in his own right (he wrote two books without the aid of a ghostwriter), that knowledge is not sufficient to make a learned hypothesis on his input into the speech-building process.

When Dille and Young (2000) analyzed impromptu remarks made by Presidents Jimmy Carter and Clinton, they said Hermann's position on the issue was “sage advice.” While President Carter's off-the-cuff conceptual complexity scores remained consistent throughout his time in office, President Clinton opted for simpler language as his tenure wore on, a finding that cast some doubt on the idea that “conceptual complexity” was a temporally stable trait. Other authors (Weintraub 1986; Schafer 1999) have also examined presidential interviews, implicitly embracing the argument that unprepared remarks provide the most fertile soil for researchers.

This is still contested territory. Speechwriters work for the politician, and not the other way around. No matter how “engaged” a President is reputed to be with the day-to-day activities of his staff, he is likely to have substantial input into any important speeches he gives. Crichlow's analysis of idealism and pragmatism in the speeches of Israeli prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres (1998) operated on the principle that the speaker had some say in what he was saying. In other words,

prepared remarks, especially the truly important addresses, are shaped significantly by the speaker (Winter and Stewart 1997; Rosati 1988).

When Hermann and other writers argue for largely limiting textual analysis to impromptu remarks, implicit in their claims is the assumption that the analysis in question is being used to glean insight into the personalities of speakers. For the researcher interested in determining the conceptual complexity of a President's language, by this (reasonably compelling) logic, it makes sense to focus on his off-script remarks, as they more adequately reflect his true mindset and modes of speech. His prepared remarks, whatever his role in shaping them, inevitably reflect the psychologies and linguistic skills of every individual who aided in their construction.

Obama and His Words

In many ways, the literature on President Obama is impressively extensive. Though Obama has been a national figure for only six years, researchers have found in him a productive vein to mine, beginning with his famous speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Much of that literature has focused on Obama's speechmaking prowess; unsurprising, considering the praise that has been lavished on Obama's oratory (Holmes 2008). There has even been learned discourse on the similarities between Obama's rhetoric and the classic poem *Beowulf* (Clark 2010).

Somewhat more surprisingly, few contributors to the academic literature have focused on, or even acknowledged at any length, the balance dynamic I have identified here. This trope has not been lost on reporters, however. As early as the President's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in October, 2009, an otherwise sympathetic progressive journalist was already writing, "The Obama speech was about what I expected: on the one hand/on the other hand, I reject false choices, needle-threading 'pragmatism'. I have to say I find this rhetorical approach increasingly wearying (Hayes 2009)." Less than a year into the President's administration, an editor at *The Nation* already considered this

“balance rhetoric” from Obama a tiresome cliché.

The work most directly relevant to my research is the Coe and Reitzes paper (2010) chronicling Obama's campaign remarks in 2008. Their paper was one of the first to analyze Obama's speeches in a methodical, quantitative fashion. In their analysis of 183 speeches and debates (ranging from February 2007 to November 2008), the two found that Obama's appeals tended to vary by “speaking context, geography and poll position.” Then-Senator Obama tended to de-emphasize bitter culture war issues.

While Coe and Reitzes did yeoman's work on the quantitative end, they did not examine the kind of approach chronicled above by Hayes. That said, academic researchers have not completely ignored this element of Obama's presidential narrative. The closest any author has come to detailing the balance rhetoric I examine here is Murphy's article on campaign responses to the financial crisis (2009). As part of a qualitative approach to speeches on the topic by Obama, Hillary Clinton and John McCain, Murphy said of Obama, “For Obama, there is *always* a transcendent place of agreement above two opposing theses.” That concept of “transcendence” figured heavily in Murphy's analysis of Obama's speech. Murphy also, and somewhat prophetically, wrote that this approach tends to “frustrate even the most committed of” Obama's supporters. Dorsey and Barriga (2007) approached Obama's rhetoric on immigration reform and saw it as “both...and” instead of “either...or.”

The 2009 article, while primarily interesting in this context for the idea that Obama tends to transcend two stark competing visions of America, also focuses in some detail on the then-Senator's fitting of the financial crisis into a larger narrative of American history. This allows for a smooth transition to most of the literature on Obama's speechmaking, which deals in large part with his supposed skill at fitting the classic American narrative into a modern setting.

For Obama, it all started with his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, when he was merely a state senator with a clear path to the US Senate. If that speech inspired the convention crowd, it also clearly inspired academics, who saw in it a wonderful research opportunity.

Conley (2008) in a larger survey of Obama's campaign performance hearkened back to the '04 convention speech and observed the candidate's "juxtaposing and then surpassing the extremes of US political debate." However, the first word that comes to mind when thinking of that address is, of course, "hope." And writers have not been shy in focusing on that one word (Clayton 2007; Caesar, Burch and Pitney 2009; Holloway 2009). Atwater (2007), writing three years after the speech and at the beginning of Obama's presidential campaign, saw "hope" as the central theme of Obama's life narrative. This was drawn not only from the convention speech, but also from his two books and his various other official addresses. Obama's also relied heavily on "hope" in the convention speech to recast his personal story as the quintessential American immigrant narrative (Elahi and Cos 2005). That speech has been seen as a liberal re-casting of the classic "American Dream" mythos (Rowland and Jones 2007).

Not all authors viewed it kindly. Mark Lawrence McPhail (Frank and McPhail 2005) called the convention address a "failure," seeing in Obama's consilience rhetoric a dangerous attempt at reaching "racelessness."

Obama is quite skilled at tying his personal life story in with the classic mythology of America itself (Darsey 2009). Nowhere was that more evident than the famous "More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia in March 2008. I go into more detail on that speech below, but its prominence in the Obama literature makes it an important consideration here.

In the so-called "race speech," Obama extolled the "double consciousness" his unique background gifted him and presented a racial philosophy based on the famous Golden Rule (Terrill 2009). The literature on the speech is wide-ranging and varied. Obama was able to speak to the shared resentments of blacks and whites (Dumm 2008). It was a speech that followed in the prophetic tradition of "Africentric theology" (Frank 2009). The Philadelphia oration was both a wise strategic maneuver and a failure to seriously address the looming specter of white racism in America while also

reenforcing certain racial stereotypes (Utley and Heyse 2009).

There has also been work on Obama's attempt to reclaim spiritual language for the liberal cause (Schmidt 2005). And some writers have expressed surprise at Obama's willingness to strike conservative notes in his acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic Convention (Smith 2009). Obama is also a fine example of the appeal of charismatic leadership in presidential elections (Bligh and Kohles 2009).

The President and His Words

This paper does not directly address the question of the effectiveness of presidential rhetoric. However, it would seem to be incumbent on anyone performing a close examination of the chief executive's speeches to review some of the literature on the topic of precisely how much effect those speeches might have had on the real world.

In many ways, the man elected to sit in the Oval Office is given a strange position. He is “the most powerful man in the world” and “the leader of the free world.” He acts as the head of state for the world’s lone superpower and is commander in chief of the most lethal military force since the Roman legion. And yet, his constitutionally enumerated powers are limited. He is constantly fighting a war of attrition with Congress over which branch is the most powerful. Surveying the scene, many have asked where the President’s true power lies.

In speaking of the “bully pulpit,” Theodore Roosevelt provided an answer that resonates more than 100 years later. Public attention, by Roosevelt’s reasoning, is the currency of the office. By definition almost everything the President says is “newsworthy.” He thus owns the rhetorical high ground over his opponents, who are not as blessed. They are forced to respond to the President’s statements.

The idea of the “bully pulpit” thus seized the imagination of many observers of the presidency.

Richard Neustadt (1960) most famously argued that the power of the presidency is “the power to persuade.” Neustadt’s larger point was somewhat obscured by that clever alliterative phrase. He did not argue that the president’s primary power was his ability to speak to the people; instead, he offered a perspective on the presidency that included, but was not limited to, that public appeal. In Neustadt’s telling, the president has varied power to persuade Washington elites, media figures and party bosses *as well as* the average voter. Governing is an exercise in bargaining, and the president has more bargaining power than the other players.

Nevertheless, it is the president’s ability (or lack thereof) to speak to the mass public that has garnered the most attention. Numerous pieces concluded that presidential speeches could positively influence approval numbers (Ragsdale 1984) and sway group attitudes (Ragsdale 1987). Some authors theorize that the focus of a president’s address can tell us a great deal about the focus of a president (O’Loughlin and Grant 1990). A study on perceptions of charisma and greatness found that Presidents who engaged in “image-based” rhetoric and painted a picture with words were considered more charismatic than other Presidents (Emrich et. al, 2001).

There is little consensus in the literature on the effectiveness of presidential speechmaking, and as yet there has been little scholarly research on President Obama's ability to “move the needle” of public opinion with his speeches. In the decades following Neustadt’s seminal work many skeptics raised questions about a president’s ability to sway public opinion. Using poll numbers and longitudinal analysis, they found little difference in the statistics pre-speech and post-speech (Edwards 2006). In that work, Edwards distilled the skeptic’s argument in one passage:

This finding poses a direct challenge to the faith that many have in the broad premise of the potential of presidential leadership of the public. At the very least, it is appropriate to rethink the theory of governing based on the principle of presidential success in exploiting the bully pulpit to achieve changes in public policy.

Presidents should not base their strategies for governing on the premise of substantially increasing the size of their public support.

Edwards' work was influential, but unsurprisingly it has not quelled the debate surrounding presidential influence on the public. "Agenda setting" has proven to be a popular response. It is, perhaps, shortsighted to focus on approval numbers or legislative results post-speech. The bully pulpit does not guarantee the President success in his seduction efforts, but it does guarantee that his preferred issues are placed high on the public agenda. Numerous authors (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998) purported to prove the argument. Behr and Iyengar (1985) found that presidential speeches tend to place issues on the national media agenda. In turn, national media reports tend to place issues on the public agenda. While a President may not be able to change the public's mind on an issue, he may indirectly influence their view of what an issue *is*.

Triangulation and The Third Way

President Obama largely defined his initial campaign for the Oval Office as a repudiation of the supposedly cynical governing strategy of former President Bill Clinton. That has, to an extent, carried over into Obama's time in office, as he has been seen to clearly reject a "Clintonian" approach at certain key moments in his tenure (Sanger 2010). Ironically, however, President Clinton is an ideal comparison point for Obama because of the former's fondness for "triangulation," that political strategy in which he found solid ground both between and above the calcified positions of the two major parties (Galvin 2008). The relevance to Obama's "balance rhetoric," as detailed here, is obvious. First popularized, if not invented, by Clinton's former adviser Dick Morris (Morris 1997), triangulation is more about policy than rhetoric, and much of the extant literature on the topic deals with its implications in the field of public policy (see O'Connor 2002 for one example). It can be seen as an

attempt to reach the famous Downsian “median voter” (Shugart 2003). However, to the extent that rhetoric reflects policy (or vice versa), we might be able to see some traces of triangulation and Clinton's famous “Third Way” in the former President's speeches.

Triangulation was a way of governing by “merging divergent interests into triangulated solutions” (Althouse 2005). It was also a fairly consistent aspect of Clinton's rhetorical approach during his time as President (Durant 2006), not a sudden response to the disastrous 1994 mid-term elections. This tendency to “speak left, but move right” (Giardina 2004), though wildly successful as a device to win re-election (Mouffe 1998) and to “drag the Democratic Party to the center” (Murphy 1999), could frustrate supporters who wanted a more openly progressive presidential administration and were upset to see the President unwilling to defend the left (Campbell and Rockman 2001). Again, the similarities with President Obama's tenure are compelling.

Methods

Defining and Operationalizing Balance Rhetoric

As noted in the previous sections, there is little guidance in the extant literature for a writer who is trying to define the concept of Obama's "balance rhetoric;" it remains a largely unexplored and undefined rhetorical approach. As such, there is no readily available code or word choice that is widely accepted in the academic community.

However, as tempting as it would be to adopt Potter Stewart's strategy for identifying pornography ("I know it when I see it"), that approach is not tenable or transparent. Some definition is required.

We can start by briefly exploring what balance rhetoric *isn't*. Every President, perhaps every politician of any importance, speaks of the desire to work in a bi-partisan fashion. There is nothing unique in a call for the coming together of Democrats and Republicans for the good of the nation. An

analysis of Presidential addresses would undoubtedly reveal extensive bi-partisan rhetoric, and the analysis would undoubtedly be of little value. So the standard bi-partisan bromides are not included in the concept of balance rhetoric.

There are a few pieces in the literature that are helpful here. Murphy's (2009) observation, already quoted in this paper, that "For Obama, there is *always* a transcendent place of agreement between two opposing theses," gets at the heart of the President's rhetorical approach. Dorsey and Barriega (2007), in the context of immigration reform, observed in the then-Senator's immigration rhetoric a tendency to emphasize a "both...and" approach, as opposed to the more typically partisan "either...or" tack. Further, the literature on, and traditional conception of, triangulation provides important clues; moving "above and between" the traditional left-right dichotomy and presenting a third way for the voters' consideration seems a key element of any rhetorical strategem based on balance rhetoric.

"Balance rhetoric," then, can be defined as any language designed to convey the message that the speaker stands at the reasonable center of an ongoing debate or controversy. The same message is also frequently applied to a policy proposal being sold by the speaker during the address. We can conceive of balance rhetoric as an attempt to portray a given individual or policy as occupying an ideological ground between and above traditional Republican-Democrat, liberal-conservative dichotomies. While appeals for bi-partisanship are not included, arguments that the policy is the product of bi-partisan ideas are. The speaker, in this case Obama, makes an effort to see the validity of both sides' arguments and synthesize the contrasting worldviews into a coherent, reasonable alternative.

But while defining balance rhetoric is an important step, operationalizing it for the purpose of academic research is another question altogether. The simplest method, and the one with the longest history in content analysis research, is to establish a set of words or phrases as indicative of the concept in question and search a set of speeches for them. This presents two challenges: first, language is

complicated and unpredictable, especially in the political arena. Words widely considered conciliatory or balanced, and used that way in most contexts, can be deployed in such a way as to harshly criticize opposing politicians. Second, and more importantly, the literature provides no real guidance on the language of balance rhetoric.

There is still room for such linguistic coding in this analysis, but it would be unwise to reduce balance rhetoric to a set of words or phrases. The concept also encompasses wider, less easily quantified concepts. One of those is the perspective shift, a rhetorical tactic in which the speaker places himself in the shoes of a different observer or set of observers. Such a tactic is not automatically an example of balance rhetoric; to use just one extreme example, the infamous Florentine preacher Savonarola used perspective shifts in his sermons to set up straw men which he would then righteously strike down (Martines 2007). But when used as Barack Obama used it in addresses like his "More Perfect Union" speech from the campaign, the perspective shift is a powerful way of proving to an audience that the speaker is a balanced thinker and policymaker.

The other tactic within the balance rhetoric strategy was on display in the tax deal press conference detailed earlier. By criticizing one's political and ideological allies at the same time he criticizes his opposition, the speaker shows himself to be a balanced, courageous politician who has transcended the normal bounds of partisan politics.

These three elements will thus serve as the operational core of the research performed for this paper. After detailing the methods used in this research, I present brief qualitative analyses of three Obama speeches. This allows me to provide the reader with concrete examples of in-context balance rhetoric. The qualitative analyses also demonstrate what I look for when analyzing and coding balance rhetoric.

Methodology

Case studies predominate in the literature dealing with Obama's rhetoric. The vast majority of these papers are qualitative in nature and most analyze just one or two speeches. There is thus room for a slightly more rigorous approach.

I have settled on a case study methodology that attempts to go beyond the limits of research focusing on a limited number of speeches. A purely quantitative approach to the question asked in this paper is problematic at best and unworkable at worst, for reasons explained in the previous section. The solution, then, is to find a middle ground between individual textual analysis and comprehensiveness.

I have decided to analyze 20 addresses from the first two years of the Obama administration. The exact list of speeches can be found in Table 1 below. The sampling is skewed toward 2009, as 13 speeches are taken from that year, and only seven were chosen from 2010. 17 of the 20 were fully prepared, pre-written remarks. Two are press conferences. And one, the President's January, 2010 foray into the GOP Caucus Retreat, is a combination of both. The goal in choosing these addresses was to find a cross-section of remarks that included different formats and audiences while also reflecting some of the most important and meaningful moments of the Obama administration.

There is, of course, no meaningful measure of "importance," and so I can make no claim that this list contains the 20 most important speeches President Obama has delivered. Reasonable people can certainly differ on the inclusion or exclusion of a given speech. But on a whole, the list contains the kind of important, notable addresses that both drew extensive media coverage and would be key elements in any attempt to craft an overarching narrative of a presidency.

While case studies are invaluable tools for a political scientist, it is important to conduct a case study within an environment that presents the strongest possible challenge for the researcher's theory (George and Bennett 2005). A positive finding has greater validity for being tested in a rigorous fashion. So it is not enough to analyze 20 of President Obama's speeches and draw conclusions from them. We need some context.

2009		2010
Inaugural Address		First State of the Union
Joint Address to Congress		Speech to GOP Caucus
First Primetime Press Conference		Pre-vote Speech to Democratic Caucus
Speech at university in Cairo		Post mid-term elections press conference
Speech on National Security/Civil Liberties at National Archives		February speech to Business Roundtable
Joint Address to Congress on Health Care		Speech on Signing Health Care Reform
Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech		Oval Office speech on BP Oil Spill
Afghanistan Surge Speech		
Speech on Signing of Stimulus Bill		
Speech on Auto Bailout		
Speech to National Academy of Sciences		
Speech at AMA on Health Care Reform		
Education Reform Speech to Hispanic Chamber of Commerce		

Table One

That context is provided by the second stage of my research, an analysis of 20 meaningful speeches from the first two years of the Bill Clinton presidency. The complete list of speeches can be found in Table 2. The group of speeches is temporally balanced, as 10 were drawn from 1993 and 10 from 1994. Clinton's list features four press conferences. One address, a speech announcing NATO's willingness to conduct airstrikes in Bosnia, features an exchange with reporters after the prepared remarks.

This presents a challenging test of the idea that Obama is unique in his use of balance rhetoric.

The comparisons between the first two years of the Clinton and Obama presidencies are intriguing. Both men took over after a lengthy period of Republican rule. Both men had the benefit of impressively large Democratic majorities in Congress. The first two years of both presidencies were dominated by debates over the economy and healthcare reform; President Clinton's healthcare reform failure was one of the dominant stories of his presidency, while President Obama's success will undoubtedly be one of the dominant stories of his. And both men spent the second year in the White House facing down the oncoming trains that were the midterm elections.

Most importantly, there is an undeniable echo of President Clinton's infamous triangulation in the way I have described President Obama's balance rhetoric. As such, if an analysis of both men's speeches finds that Obama relies on balance rhetoric more than Clinton, it will go a long way toward demonstrating the importance of such language to President Obama.

I also include a similar analysis I previously performed on 10 speeches from Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. While not directly relevant to the question of Obama's rhetorical approach as President, this will help paint a clearer picture of Obama the speaker, and provide an interesting point of comparison and contrast. Those 10 speeches are:

- Obama's announcement of his candidacy in 2007
- His speech at the Iowa Jefferson-Jackson dinner the same year
- His victory speech after the Iowa caucuses
- The concession speech after the New Hampshire primary
- The speech on race in Philadelphia during the primary campaign
- Obama's victory speech after the last primaries
- The Democratic National Convention acceptance speech
- A speech on energy in August
- His first debate with John McCain
- His general election victory speech

I have searched these speeches for the three balance rhetoric pillars defined above and presented a detailed breakdown of their usage. Certain phrases such as "on the one hand" and "that said"

were considered key indicators of the presence of balance rhetoric, but not, in and of themselves, absolute evidence thereof. The research method employed here allowed me to forgo reliance on keyword searches and instead subject each speech to rigorous content analysis.

Before presenting results I continue on to the qualitative analysis described in the previous section.

1993		1994
Inauguration Address		First State of the Union
First press conference		Health care townhall in Kansas City
First joint address to Congress		Speech/Q&A announcing NATO air strike policy in Bosnia
Announcement of Don't Ask, Don't Tell Policy		Speech on Assault Weapon Ban Legislation
Joint address on health care reform		Speech at Democratic Governors Association Jefferson-Jackson Dinner
Oval Office speech announcing Economic Program		Welfare reform speech in Kansas City
June 26 Oval Office speech on air strikes in Iraq		August primetime press conference
July 21 Rose Garden speech on economic program		Oval Office speech announcing potential military action in Haiti
August 11 speech announcing anti-crime program		Speech to the Knesset
Announcement of climate change plan		Post-midterms press conference

Table Two

Qualitative Content Analysis

"A More Perfect Union"

In March of 2008, Senator Obama faced a difficult moment in his campaign for the presidency.

His was not a short-term political problem. While he had lost important primaries in Ohio and Texas, the delegate count in his nomination battle with Senator Hillary was tilted heavily in his favor. He occupied the pole position in the race.

Far more troubling than the immediate electoral calculus, however, was the resurrection of Senator Obama's Chicago pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, as a campaign issue. Reverend Wright's sermons had come up before; the Senator had refused to allow his long-time pastor to give the benediction at his 2007 campaign kick-off event. But an ABC News report on March 13 brought Wright back into the public eye by publishing reports of his inflammatory language. In his sermons, Wright preached that African-Americans should sing "god damn America" and said that the September 11 terrorist attacks were "America's chickens...coming home to roost." Thousands viewed Reverend Wright's sermons on YouTube. Obama's previous attempts to address Wright's sermons and end the controversy had proven inadequate.

Though Senator Obama likely could have muddled through the controversy without crippling his hopes for the nomination, he and his advisers likely believed that Reverend Wright had the potential to torpedo his chances in a general election. Obama had to address the controversy head on. He did so on March 18 with his "A More Perfect Union" speech.

While the "More Perfect Union" speech obviously does not fall within the parameters of this paper's study, this address is probably the first example of Obama's balance rhetoric in action. It is certainly one of the clearest. It contains balanced word choices, perspective shifts and the friend-on-friend criticisms detailed above. As such, it is a worthy endeavor to briefly analyze the speech as a demonstration of what to look for in Obama's other addresses.

Senator Obama started his speech, as he often did during the campaign, by re-telling his life story and casting it as an affirmation of the traditional American Dream narrative.

The success of his campaign, Obama argued, provided some evidence of Americans' ability to reconcile racial differences for a larger cause.

It is here that Obama first mentions Reverend Wright and it is here that we see his first use of balance rhetoric in the speech. Quoting:

"On one end of the spectrum, we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. **On the other end**, we've heard my former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation, and that rightly offend white and black alike." (*emphasis mine*)

We see here two key aspects of balance rhetoric. The first is the manifestation of this approach in specific language. The bolded portions display a favorite Obama formulation and a favorite formulation for anyone attempting to demonstrate his understanding of an issue and his position at the center of the controversy. This is an insignificant variation from "On the one hand...on the other hand" language. Secondly, the Senator establishes the extremes of the debate: those on the far right who unfairly denigrate liberal support for a black candidate and Reverend Wright on the far left, "widening the racial divide" with his extreme language. Obama implicitly places himself between these extremes, beset by both.

Obama would go on to condemn Wright's language but explain his deep connection to the controversial pastor. And then came the most famous passage from the speech, the words that most television news stations ran in their coverage of the address:

"I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother — a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men

who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe."

The Senator had previously set up Reverend Wright as a figure who represented the complexities of the African-American community. In this passage, he implicitly argues that his grandmother represented to him something of a personification of the complexities of the white community in America: loving, compassionate, fundamentally good and decent, but possessed of an unfortunate view of other races. By finding fault in both sides, Obama removes the stigma of blame from either. This established, the Senator can move on, both sides content in the knowledge that Obama sees their points of view.

Obama then launched into a lengthy recitation of the tragic realities of racial discrimination faced by African-Americans throughout the nation's history. From slavery to Jim Crow to discrimination in housing and employment, Obama powerfully and painfully chronicled the ways these forces affected the black community. He spent three paragraphs on the anger and resentment such racism engendered in African-Americans.

And he concluded this passage by saying, "In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. "

So began another perspective shift in the Philadelphia speech. After laying out the anger of African-Americans, Obama empathetically did the same for white Americans. Where black anger at the legacy of racism was "not always productive," so white anger at the perceived biases of affirmative action "proved counterproductive." Just as black Americans frequently did not express their anger in front of "white co-workers or white friends," white anger was not usually given voice "in polite company."

White anger, Obama said, helped get Ronald Reagan elected. And counterproductive

demonstrations of that anger, obsessive focus on quota systems and affirmative action, distracted from more pressing concerns such as a corrupt corporate culture and a Washington dominated by lobbyists.

It is, Obama said forlornly, a "racial stalemate." The many paragraphs Obama devoted to the grievances of white and black Americans served a crucial purpose for him: he showed both sides that he understood their plight. To the blue collar white voters of Pennsylvania and other swing states, Obama showed that he recognized their "resentments" were legitimate, not merely the product of racism. And he did all of that while detailing at length the struggles of the black community. This impressive display of empathy gave Senator Obama the moral high ground and the credibility required to support the fundamental message of this passage: both sides of this controversy, whatever their legitimate grievances, have expressed their worries counter-productively. It was time, he urged, for both sides to "move beyond the old racial wounds."

Before the lengthy peroration that ended the speech, Obama laid out the steps whites and blacks needed to take to heal the country's racial wounds. The address to African-Americans began with "For the African-American community..." while he began his advice to white Americans by saying "In the white community..." The parallelism there is striking. Blacks were urged to fight for equal rights and remember the past while remembering that their calls for social justice needed to be couched in the language, and understand in the morals, of universal values. Senator Obama asked white Americans to realize that black advancement did not harm them, that African-Americans still carried the burden of centuries of racial animus on their shoulders and that investments in the community were still needed.

The Balancing Act in Cairo

The President had campaigned extensively on a promise of revitalizing American relations with the Muslim world. He had pledged to give a speech in a major Muslim city early in his presidential tenure. President Obama would keep that promise with his "A New Beginning" speech, delivered in Cairo on June 4th, 2009.

The speech required something of a deft touch: the President had to follow through on his pledge to dramatically change the tone of America's relations with the Muslim Middle East without appearing to apologize for recent US actions. On the specific question of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the President would have to express solidarity with the cause of Palestinian self-determination while re-assuring domestic constituencies that were already anxious about the new administration's harder line on Israeli settlements.

Unlike the Philadelphia speech from the campaign, "A New Beginning" was counted in this paper's larger study. But like "A More Perfect Union," "A New Beginning" features all three of the balance rhetoric pillars I am examining in this paper. The speech shows the President claiming the rhetorical middle ground between Israelis and Palestinians and the US and the wider Muslim world.

The President began the speech by examining the tension between the US and the Muslim world. Obama lavishly praised the history of scholarship and tolerance in Islam, and noted that the Muslim country of Morocco was the first to recognize the nascent United States. He defended the Islamic faith against the hostility many in America felt after the September 11 attacks. "America and Islam are not exclusive," the President said. However, the President transitioned into a new phase of the speech with this:

And I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear. (Applause.) **But that same principle** must apply to Muslim perceptions of America. (Applause.) Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire.

We see in this passage two key balance rhetoric elements. First, Obama criticizes both sides in the controversy and finds fault with both. This is not precisely an example of friend-on-friend criticism, as the President made a concerted effort in this speech to avoid a friend and enemies dynamic.

But Obama is deploying a classic balance rhetoric trope nevertheless. Second, we see balance rhetoric language in the bolded "And I...But that same..." portion of the passage.

After discussing the American war effort in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq, the President transitioned into what would be deemed the most newsworthy section of his speech. Obama re-affirmed the "unbreakable" nature of the US bond with Israel. He chronicled the history of Jewish suffering and sharply castigated the strain of Holocaust denial that infected much of the Arab world. And then he said, "On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people -- Muslims and Christians -- have suffered in pursuit of a homeland."

This was, in part, an attempt to draw a parallel between both sides of the conflict and establish their shared aspirations. But it's also a clear example of balanced word choice: "On the other hand." We can also see a perspective shift in this example: the President began from the Jewish perspective before shifting to the Palestinian and chronicling their own historical injustices. The balance rhetoric on the topic of Middle East continued with this passage:

For decades then, there has been a stalemate: two peoples with legitimate aspirations, each with a painful history that makes compromise elusive. It's easy to point fingers -- for Palestinians to point to the displacement brought about by Israel's founding, and for Israelis to point to the constant hostility and attacks throughout its history from within its borders as well as beyond. But if we see this conflict only from one side or the other, then we will be blind to the truth: The only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security. (Applause.)

The message of this paragraph is simple: both sides are right. Both sides are wrong. Both have legitimate grievances. This is similar to his formulation in the Philadelphia campaign speech. I see both arguments, the President says, and I understand them, but it's time to move on.

Obama then laid out the steps the Palestinians needed to take to help secure a peace. The Palestinians, the President said, needed to recognize the validity of Israel's existence and needed to renounce violence.

The Palestinian Authority had to build democratic institutions and Hamas had to stop acting as a terrorist organization.

The President transitioned into Israel's commitments by saying, "**At the same time**, Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's." The bolded words act as a key example of balance rhetoric being manifested in specific language, as opposed to general concepts.

Finally, Obama dealt with the issue of American relations with Iran, largely within the context of concerns over nuclear proliferation. Before calling for a new engagement with the Iranian regime, the President said this:

In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has played a role in acts of hostage-taking and violence against U.S. troops and civilians. This history is well known. Rather than remain trapped in the past, I've made it clear to Iran's leaders and people that my country is prepared to move forward.

This is a similar rhetorical approach to what I have already observed in both this speech and the "More Perfect Union" speech from the campaign. We can see Obama finding fault in both sides: the US overthrew a democratically elected government, Iran had taken hostages and committed violence against Americans. The President sets himself apart from and above and between the history of the Iran-US conflict. Both of us have been wrong, the President said here. It's time to move on .

Healthcare Reform: A Joint Address

A systematic reform of the American healthcare system had been the central element of the Democratic Party platform for approximately 60 years.

And yet Democratic Presidents from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton had seen their efforts at reforming the system stymied by Congress. So the party glimpsed a once-in-a-lifetime political opportunity in 2009: not only was there a newly elected Democratic President, but the party controlled a massive majority in the House and, most importantly, 60 votes in the Senate.

But by September, what had seemed an inevitable victory had ground to a near-halt. Neither chamber had passed a bill, and the Senate looked especially torpid. Though Senate leadership and the White House had spent the summer trying to work out a compromise with Republican legislators, the GOP caucus was unanimously opposed to the reform efforts being pushed through their chamber. Thus forced to rely strictly on their own members, the Democrats struggled to win over every member of their caucus, as was required by the Senate's super majority rules. The Democrats were torn over the question of the "public option," which had become a matter of extraordinary importance to both progressive activists and reluctant moderate Senators.

Perhaps most troublesome, Obama and his allies were losing the battle for public opinion. At first supportive of the general concept of health care reform, the American people had grown increasingly hostile as the details of such reform were worked out in the agonizing grind of the legislative process.

The President began his speech to a joint session of Congress by running down the dismal statistics that had become so well-worn in the already lengthy debate over healthcare reform. He then started on the question of solutions with this language:

There are those on the left who believe that the only way to fix the system is through a single-payer system like Canada's -- (applause) -- where we would severely restrict the private insurance market and have the government provide coverage for everybody. On the right, there are those who argue that we should end employer-based systems and leave individuals to buy health insurance on their own. I've said -- I have to say that there are arguments to be made for both these approaches. But either one would represent a radical shift that would disrupt the health care most people currently have.

Since health care represents one-sixth of our economy, I believe it makes more sense to build on what works and fix what doesn't, rather than try to build an entirely new system from scratch.

We can see here both balanced word choice and equal time criticism. Obama actually uses the word "radical" to describe both options he lays out here, and that descriptor applies no less to the single-payer system preferred by his ideological allies than it does to the approach of his conservative opponents. The President does allow for the "arguments to be made" for both ideas, setting himself up as a balanced, fair-minded thinker who sees the wisdom of even those arguments he rejects. And the President rejects them in a profoundly balanced way: these are radical ideas that would disrupt the American people. He stands at the center of the conflict, unaffected by the ideological battles raging around him.

The President then turned to the public option, which had become one of the flash points in the debate. He strongly defended the measure, which he described as an excellent method of bringing competition to an insurance market that was too often monopolistic. The President emphasized that the public option was not a "government takeover of health care," as alleged by its critics, and said no Americans would be forced to join the government plan. But liberals who were hoping Obama would make the public option a deal breaker were disappointed by what he said next:

Now, it is -- it's worth noting that a strong majority of Americans still favor a public insurance option of the sort I've proposed tonight. But its impact shouldn't be exaggerated -- by the left or the right or the media. It is only one part of my plan, and shouldn't be used as a handy excuse for the usual Washington ideological battles. **To my progressive friends**, I would remind you that for decades, the driving idea behind reform has been to end insurance company abuses and make coverage available for those without it. (Applause.) The public option -- the public option is only a means to that end -- and we should remain open to other ideas that accomplish our ultimate goal. **And to my Republican friends**, I say that rather than making wild claims about a government takeover of health care, we should work together to address any legitimate concerns you may have. (Applause)

There's a lot at work in this passage. You can see the concept of equal time criticism in the bolded portions; Obama scolds both sides of the ideological divide for their extreme, outsized focus on one relatively minor aspect of the healthcare reform plan. These ideological extremes, Obama argues, lose the forest for the trees and allow the situation to devolve into "the usual Washington ideological battles." The President, of course, is quite above such things. He is concerned about results, not ideology.

In another portion of the speech, the President sought to portray himself as open to ideas from both sides:

Now, finally, many in this chamber -- particularly on the Republican side of the aisle -- have long insisted that reforming our medical malpractice laws can help bring down the cost of health care. (Applause.) Now -- there you go. There you go. Now, I don't believe malpractice reform is a silver bullet, but I've talked to enough doctors to know that defensive medicine may be contributing to unnecessary costs. (Applause.) So I'm proposing that we move forward on a range of ideas about how to put patient safety first and let doctors focus on practicing medicine. (Applause.) I know that the Bush administration considered authorizing demonstration projects in individual states to test these ideas. I think it's a good idea, and I'm directing my Secretary of Health and Human Services to move forward on this initiative today. (Applause.)

As noted in the definitions portion of this paper, bi-partisan appeals are not unique and thus do not qualify as balance rhetoric. But the rhetorical tactic we see here, while a distant cousin of the standard bi-partisan bromides, is distinct and worthy of inclusion in this study. And President Obama clearly used such an approach in this passage: by publicly embracing an idea proposed by Republicans and a specific policy considered by an administration he had sharply criticized, the President sought to show himself a man who did not care about the origins of ideas. He would embrace Republican proposals if they helped the American people.

Results

The President, it seems, is a fairly balanced man.

Of the 20 Obama addresses analyzed for this research, 14 contained balance rhetoric. Six did not. Those were the President's February, 2009 address to a joint session of Congress, his 2009 speech announcing the troop surge in Afghanistan, the speech delivered upon signing the stimulus package, a 2009 speech announcing new developments in the bailout of automakers, a 2009 speech at the National Academy of Sciences and the 2010 Oval Office address to the nation on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion.

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the 14 addresses that did contain balance rhetoric. The table explores the speeches in greater detail by breaking down balance rhetoric into the three elements explained in the previous section. However, certain findings are important enough to note at some length here.

Most notable is the dominance of balanced word choice and relative paucity of friend-on-friend criticisms and perspective shifts. Of the 14 Obama speeches that contained balance rhetoric, all 14 featured the sort of balanced language that was so obvious in the three speeches examined in the qualitative analysis section. And while many of the speeches are addresses one might assume would contain some outreach to Republicans (the speech at the GOP caucus retreat, the speech at the Business Roundtable), the balanced language found its way into some unusual places. The most interesting example is the President's attempt to rally congressional Democrats before the climactic vote on healthcare reform. An observer might predict that the speech would be strongly partisan in nature, as the President was speaking to Democrats.

Obama did, indeed, include a stirring, strongly partisan peroration at the end of the speech. But the language he used to describe the healthcare law was likely the most obviously balanced of his first two years in office.

	Balanced Language	Friend-on-Friend Criticism	Perspective Shift
Inaugural Address	Y	Y	N
First Primetime Press Conference	Y	Y	N
Cairo Speech	Y	Y	Y
National Security/Civil Liberties Speech at National Archives	Y	N	N
Nobel Prize Acceptance	Y	N	N
Healthcare Reform Speech at AMA	Y	Y	Y
Speech on Education Reform	Y	Y	N
First State of the Union	Y	Y	N
Speech/Q-&-A at GOP Caucus/Retreat	Y	Y	N
Pre-healthcare vote speech to Democrats	Y	N	N
Post-midterms press conference	Y	N	N
Speech to Business Roundtable	Y	Y	N
Speech on Signing of Healthcare Reform	Y	N	N
Speech to a Joint Session of Congress on Healthcare Reform	Y	Y	N
Total:	14	9	2

Table 3: Obama's Speeches

It'll turn out that this piece of historic legislation is built on the private insurance system that we have now and runs **straight down the center of American political thought**. Turns out, this is a bill that tracks the recommendations not just of Democrat Tom Daschle, but also Republicans Bob Dole and Howard Baker, that this is a **middle-of-the-road bill** that is designed to help the American people in an area of their lives where they urgently need help.

The passage features an attempt to portray the bill as the product of recommendations from both political parties, a true bi-partisan piece of legislation. However, it is the bolded portions that are truly noteworthy. These are classic examples of balanced language; “straight down the center” and “middle-of-the-road bill” are perfect encapsulations of the concept. The President is rarely so explicit in his attempts to portray his policies as balanced.

There is another speech worth highlighting here. The President's address on national security and civil liberties at the National Archives also contains excellent examples of balanced word choice. Obama describes the “delicate balance” between transparency required of a democracy and the secrecy often required to keep a country safe; there is an “on the one hand, on the other hand” construction in this passage. That construction re-appears when the President describes his thinking on the question of releasing memos from the Bush years while fighting the release of photographs that show American soldiers mistreating prisoners. Obama says that these decisions strike the “right balance between transparency and national security.”

Later, the President rejected the “absolutist” nature of the debate over national security. He criticized those on “one side of the spectrum” who did not appreciate the unique challenge of terrorism, and then criticized those “on the other end of the spectrum” who advocated an “anything goes” approach to national security. The President, of course, rejected such “rigid ideologies.”

But while President Obama was a frequent user of balanced word choice, he was less fond of the other two balance rhetoric pillars.

The President did not criticize his ideological and political allies quite as often as anticipated; as noted in Table 3, he engaged in this “friend-on-friend” criticism nine times in the 20 speeches analyzed. Based on the prevalence of this sort of criticism in the qualitative analysis, I expected to see much more of it in the President's speeches. But while friend-on-friend criticism shows up less than I might have expected, the nine addresses containing such language do represent approximately 64 percent of the speeches in which the President used any form of balance rhetoric.

Perspective shifts, on the other hand, show up all too rarely in Obama's rhetoric. Only two of 20 speeches contained such shifts. This is surprising, considering how important these perspective shifts were in the three speeches previously analyzed in detail. The number is low enough to cast doubt on the wisdom of continuing to include perspective shifts in our conceptualization of balance rhetoric.

We have established that President Obama used balance rhetoric in exactly 70 percent of the selected speeches. On the surface, that's an impressive figure. But without additional context, the number is more interesting than insightful. The second part of this research methodology is subjecting 20 speeches delivered by President Bill Clinton to the same type of analysis. Is President Obama more reliant on balance rhetoric than President Clinton?

The short answer is yes.

Of the 20 Clinton addresses chosen for analysis, only eight, or 40 percent, contained any forms of balance rhetoric. Table 4 shows the breakdown of rhetorical tactics for the seven speeches featuring balance rhetoric.

President Clinton balance rhetoric patterns were broadly similar to President Obama's. While Obama opted for balanced language in every speech containing balance rhetoric, adding friend-on-friend criticisms occasionally on top of that balanced word choice,

President Clinton used balanced language in six of the eight flagged speeches. Four of those speeches (or 50 percent) featured criticism of ideological and political allies; as noted previously, Obama's figure is 64 percent.

Like President Obama, President Clinton was reluctant to utilize the perspective shifts overall; only three of 20 speeches were coded as containing a perspective shift. On the other hand,

	Balanced Language	Friend-on-Friend Criticism	Perspective Shifts
February 1993 Joint Address to Congress	Y	Y	N
Announcement of Don't Ask, Don't Tell	Y	Y	N
Address to Joint Session of Congress on Healthcare Reform	Y	Y	N
First State of the Union	Y	Y	N
Speech and Q-and-A announcing air strikes in Bosnia	N	N	Y
Assault Weapons Ban Address	Y	N	N
Post-midterms press conference	Y	N	Y
Kansas City Townhall on Healthcare Reform	N	N	Y
Total	6	4	3

Table 4: Clinton's Speeches

that does mean nearly 38 percent of President Clinton's balanced speeches contained perspective shifts.

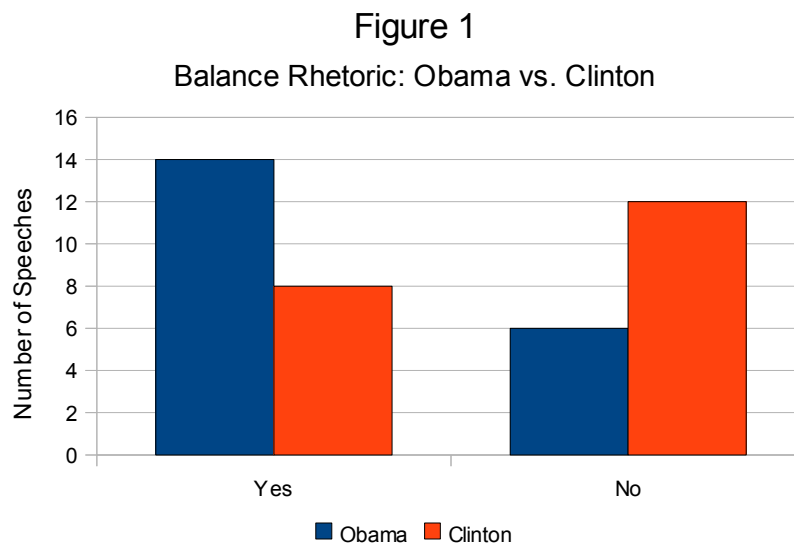
Perhaps the clearest example of balance rhetoric in President Clinton's oratory comes from his

speech on healthcare reform to a joint session of Congress in late 1993. The President, presaging the type of argument raised by his Democratic successor some 17 years later, described his health care reform plan as a balance between the extreme options proposed by left and right.

Rather than looking at price control or looking away as the price spiral continues, rather than using the heavy hand of Government to try to control what's happening or continuing to ignore what's happening, we believe there is a third way to achieve these savings.

We can see here a classic example of a speaker using balance rhetoric to establish his preferred policy as residing above and between the two extreme poles of American politics. Those on the right prefer to “look...away as the price spiral continues” and to ignore the crisis in the American health care system; those on the left want price controls or “the heavy hand of Government.” The Clinton health care plan, on the other hand, represents a “third way,” a bravely moderate option.

However, while there are clear examples of balance rhetoric in President Clinton's speeches, the numbers paint a picture: President Obama relied more heavily on this rhetorical tactic than President Clinton. Figure 1 presents a simple graphical representation of the basic findings.



What about Obama the campaigner? Exactly half of the 10 examined addresses contained balance rhetoric; the five that did not were the Jefferson-Jackson speech, the victory speech delivered after the Iowa Caucuses, the concession speech delivered after the New Hampshire primary, the speech delivered after Obama had clinched the Democratic nomination and his general election victory speech. Table 5 shows the breakdown of the other five, the speeches that did contain balance rhetoric.

	Balanced Language	Friend-on-Friend Criticism	Perspective Shifts
Announcement of Candidacy	Y	N	N
“A More Perfect Union”	Y	Y	Y
Convention Acceptance Speech	Y	Y	N
August Energy Speech	Y	N	N
First Debate with McCain	Y	N	N

Table 5: Obama Campaign Speeches

The general pattern observed in Obama's presidency can also be seen in the campaign. Every speech that contained balance rhetoric contained balanced word choice, while only two contained friend-on-friend criticism. There was only one perspective shift.

Discussion and Conclusion

Before exploring the potential for research focusing on balance rhetoric, it's worth briefly considering what exactly we have discovered with this research. Viewed narrowly, this paper has merely demonstrated that in 40 speeches from the first two years of the Clinton and Obama administrations, President Obama used balance rhetoric far more often than President Clinton.

Obviously, a case study approach such as this one lacks the kind of analytical rigor associated with comprehensive quantitative methodologies. But even within the context of this case study, there are certain issues worth acknowledging here.

First, despite President Clinton's reputation as a notably loquacious public speaker, Obama's speeches are slightly longer than Clinton's. There are approximately 97,000 words in the 20 Obama speeches selected here, while the Clinton addresses contain about 81,000. When considered within the context of 20 addresses, that's only 800 additional words per speech, and is, perhaps, not significant. But it is worth noting that in the speeches analyzed for this research, President Obama simply had more opportunities to utilize rhetorical tactics than President Clinton.

Second, speech selection is an interesting element to consider. I remain confident that the 40 speeches selected for this study were, in fact, significant moments in the Presidents' rhetorical history. However, every speech has a different setting and a different immediate audience, and both can affect the messaging.

Presidents Obama and Clinton are ideal subjects for comparison because of the broad similarities of their early years in office. As such, there were a handful of addresses the two shared in common: the inaugural address, first press conference, first address to a joint session of Congress, speech on healthcare reform to a joint session of Congress, first State of the Union message and press conference after a midterm election defeat.

In those six addresses, President Obama used balance rhetoric in five of them. Interestingly, President Clinton used such an approach four times. In other words, in the most similar speeches, Obama and Clinton used balance rhetoric at roughly the same rate. The sole difference between the two came in the inaugural address; where President Obama utilized both balanced language and friend-on-friend criticism, President Clinton did not employ any balance rhetoric.

That raises the question: to what extent is the apparently significant difference between the two men a reflection of genuine difference in rhetorical approach? Can it, instead, be explained by a difference in the selection of speeches for this study?

The only way to answer that question is to engage in a rigorous, comprehensive analysis of presidential addresses. That is clearly the next frontier for research into balance rhetoric: moving beyond a case study approach to a methodology that can lay claim to greater generalizability. A paper that examines every speech from the first two years of the Clinton and Obama presidencies, for example, could probably lay serious claim to having answered the question of which man relied more heavily on balance rhetoric.

But these doubts, though legitimate, should not force us to ignore some of the insights generated by this study. The fact remains that President Obama did, in this selection of speeches, utilize balance rhetoric far more often than a President widely known as a “triangulator” and a practitioner of Third Way politics. While this does not prove that Obama is unique among politicians or even Presidents as a group, it is an important first step and it does lend some empirical support to the thesis.

How can this study aid researchers in moving forward on the topic of balance rhetoric? First, it casts serious doubt on the proposition that perspective shifts are an important element of balance rhetoric. While President Obama used the perspective shift extensively and to great effect in both the “More Perfect Union” address and the Cairo speech, he did not make the tactic an important element of his rhetorical approach. President Clinton, a man known for his eloquent displays of empathy (“I feel your pain”), employed the perspective shift only thrice in two years. At this point, it seems the wise course would be to seriously consider eliminating the perspective shift as a research topic, at least in the context of balance rhetoric.

The friend-on-friend criticism, however, should make the cut, at least into the next round of

research. While neither President used the tactic in even 50 percent of the speeches analyzed here, President Obama did come close to that figure. Further, of the Obama speeches containing balance rhetoric, 64 percent featured this criticism of ideological and political allies, while exactly 50 percent of Clinton's flagged speeches did the same. These numbers, while hardly overwhelming proof of the importance of such criticism, do, to my mind, provide reasonable justification for future research.

Perhaps most importantly, this research can shed some light on the kind of balanced language that forms the foundation for balance rhetoric. At the beginning of the study, I had hoped to find some key words or phrases that were repeated throughout various speeches. Those phrases could then be utilized in future quantitative research, sparing writers the need for lengthy human analysis of each address.

There are some intriguing possibilities here. Phrases such as “both sides” come up often in balance rhetoric, as do formulations based on the ideological spectrum such as “on the one end...and on the other end.” President Obama is also fond of “having said that,” which can be used in unbalanced ways, but should be viewed as a flashing red siren indicating the possibility of balance rhetoric nearby. Certainly “false choices” is an important phrase for President Obama.

Generally, however, this study suggests that such keyword searches would be difficult, which is not to say impossible. The balanced language used by both President Obama and President Clinton is frequently subtle and dependent on context. It does not easily lend itself to simple data mining. This is not to say there's no room for quantitative work in the balance rhetoric field, but for the moment, approaches like that employed here, utilizing human analysis of individual speeches, seem like the most profitable. This might change with future research examining a larger number of speeches; such work could conceivably provide us with the kind of specific words and phrases needed.

Having examined two Democratic Presidents, it is important to broaden the scope of balance

rhetoric research by making it bi-partisan. As we move forward with this research, arguably the most fascinating question will be how partisanship affects the use of balance rhetoric. Are Democrats more “balanced” than Republicans? The purpose of this paper was merely to gain some insight into President Obama’s rhetorical choices, and as such, it was important to provide a difficult test by choosing a broadly similar President as a point of comparison. However, future research into balance rhetoric should take partisanship into consideration and attempt to make some statement on that variable’s role in the deployment of this rhetorical weapon.

It is difficult to look into the far future and predict the outcome of research that hasn't yet been conducted. But if future investigations into balance rhetoric, focused on partisanship as the key independent variable, found a consistent, significant difference in the language used by Republicans and Democrats, it would be a fascinating finding. This could then open the way for intense, interview-centric qualitative methods in which researchers questioned Republican and Democratic politicians on the rationales for their rhetorical approaches.

Further, the nature of this methodology could allow researchers to examine a broad collection of speeches. By going back in time and combing through remarks from the earliest days of the 20th century, we can collect and code a massive amount of balance rhetoric. The further we extend this research, and the more Presidents we study, the wider the range of circumstances and variables we collect. Are Presidents more likely to engage in friend-on-friend criticism if they won bruising nomination fights? Is he more inclined to be balanced if he won a close election? And does his environment affect his use of balance rhetoric? Perhaps an economic crisis or a war act as spurs to the use of balance rhetoric. We are merely at the opening stages of balance rhetoric research, and we lack independent variables. Future studies can focus on finding those, thus making rigorous quantitative work more plausible.

Finally, it is important to briefly acknowledge and discuss the authorship question raised in the literature review. A researcher who is attempting to gain some insight into the true personality of a politician would be well-advised to eschew prepared addresses and focus instead on press conferences, interviews and other impromptu remarks. However, that is not the only legitimate goal of textual analysis. In the specific case of this research, the focus is not on establishing that President Obama personally considers himself a balanced President. Instead, the question is more akin to asking whether the Obama administration has attempted, through the President's spoken remarks, to portray him as a balanced, moderate politician, rejecting the extremes of both left and right.

In answering this question, the precise authorship of any given speech is largely irrelevant. Whether the President played a significant or insignificant role in crafting his rhetorical strategy, it is enough to demonstrate that the White House speechwriting operation consistently placed balance rhetoric in the President's speeches. Such a finding would demonstrate that the administration was attempting to create a certain image of the President.

There is still no consensus as to how effective political rhetoric really is at moving public opinion. Quite a bit of evidence shows that the President's voice has surprisingly limited reach. The President might have a bully pulpit, but the acoustics of his cathedral are awful. However, this does not mean that there is no value to the analysis of rhetoric.

Our methods of communication are important. Our words matter; they tell us something about ourselves, about both the speaker and the listener. Rhetoric is important because the study of politics is the study of persuasion. Politicians cannot win office without persuading voters to elect them. Legislators cannot pass laws without persuading their colleagues. To observe politics in action is to observe the ways in which individuals or groups persuade other individuals or groups to follow on a given course of action.

This is a study of how human beings connect with one another: through fear, through intelligence, through a shared sense of similarity, through any of a dozen possible avenues. By studying the rhetorical approaches utilized by politicians, we can determine how they are attempting to connect with voters. We can determine what the speaker thinks about his audience by analyzing the words he uses to persuade it.

This paper takes the first, tentative steps toward answering that question for Barack Obama. And I believe it lays a foundation for future research that can provide more concrete insight into that most fundamental of political questions.

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