



The Age of Aquarius: Bill and Hillary Clinton's Use of Narrative in Empowering the Boomer Generation



Sabrina Elson, COL '22

Advised by Annenberg professors David Eisenhower and Dr. Kimberly Duyck Woolf

Introduction

- The essence of American presidential leadership is storytelling (Cornog, 2004; Skowronek, 1997)
- Narrative is an effective tool for persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000; Fisher, 1984; Hamby, Brinberg, & Jaccard, 2018)
- Historical events in adolescence shape generational identity (Mannheim, 1972; Stewart & Healy, 1989; Duncan & Agronick, 1995; Hazlett, 1992)
- Therefore, Boomers' adolescence in the 1960s had significant impact on their identity
- Divisions resulting from the Boomers' anti-Vietnam-War stance led to doubts on the Boomers' ability to lead (Lyons, 1996)
- Boomer narrative is distinct from Boomer rhetoric in how it assigns meaning

Research Questions

RQ1: How do politicians employ narrative within political and electioneering speech?

RQ2: How do Bill and Hillary Clinton use Boomer narrative within their political and electioneering speech?

Methodology

Three-pronged analysis:

1. Narrative Structure
2. Explicit References to Boomers
3. Implicit References to Boomers

Sample, includes 8 speeches and 3 interviews:

Table 1: Sample

Bill Clinton	Hillary Clinton	Both
1992 <i>Nightline</i> interview, in which the Colonel Holmes letter is discussed	1995 "Women's Rights are Human Rights" Beijing speech – speech drafts and memoranda included	1992 <i>60 Minutes</i> interview, in which the Gennifer Flowers affair is discussed
1992 DNC nomination acceptance speech (including precursory "Man From Hope" video)	1996 DNC speech	
1993 Inaugural – speech drafts and memoranda included	1998 <i>Today Show</i> interview, in which the Monica Lewinsky affair is discussed	
1993 Mason Temple Church speech – speech drafts and memoranda included	2016 DNC nomination acceptance speech (including precursory video)	
2016 DNC speech	2016 Concession	

Results

- Explicit and Implicit References to Boomers (Savoy, 2018)
 - Plentiful references to generation and important 1960s events (see table 2)
 - Implicit references include: unity rhetoric, humble-roots narrative, references to youth, renewal rhetoric, etc.

Table 2: 1960s Events

The Cold War	The Vietnam War	Civil Rights Movement / Martin Luther King Jr.	Counter-culture social movements
Second-wave Feminism	The Kennedys	"Yuppie" critiques	

- Narrative structure (Hanska, 2012; Ryan, 2004)
 - Both speak on Boomer-centric experiences using personal narrative (self-referential language, personal pronouns)
 - Storytelling-like speech
 - Usage of master plotlines (Tobias, 1993)
- Bill Clinton's Boomer narrative often hinges on his use of humble-roots narrative to (1) counter "yuppie" critiques and (2) elicit support from Black Americans and the labor movement (both Boomers and non-Boomerg alike) who were divided from the primary anti-war, white, affluent, collegiate Boomer narrative
 - Bill Clinton's emphasis on his biography makes it clear he uses his identity as a political strategy
- Hillary Clinton's Boomer narrative centers on second-wave/Boomer feminism, as her career validates the agenda of women's equality and exemplifies "the personal is political" 1960s feminist slogan

Implications & Conclusions

- By naming narrative as a key persuasive marker in the Clintons' speech, this study has implications for politics, persuasive speech, and generational change
- This paper stands alone in offering a full analysis of both Clintons as Boomers and how they utilize Boomer narrative within political speech
- As the Boomers remain the nation's leaders, it is necessary to understand their generational narrative
- The Clintons as validating figures
 - Bill validates Boomers as the first Boomer president
 - Hillary validates Boomer women
- Strategic use of narrative
 - Boomer narrative allows each Clinton to address the concerns of the generation while highlighting their positive qualities as well
 - Narrative persuasion succeeds in eliciting attitude change by suppressing critical thinking
 - Transportation theory and deictic shift theory (Green & Brock, 2000; Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004)
 - Important for suppressing criticisms of the Boomers' leadership abilities

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the CURF Fall 2021 College Alumni Society Board of Managers and Presidents Undergraduate Research Grants as well as the Annenberg School for Communication for generously providing grant money towards the execution of this research.