

An Exploratory Qualitative Analysis of the 2008 Presidential Campaign

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Computerized content analysis has been used in previous studies to assess leadership capabilities (Bligh, 2004). The researchers in the present study conducted a computerized content analysis using Hart's DICTION program. The analysis was performed on the speeches of the 2008 presidential campaigns of Barack Obama and John McCain. It was found that the content of the speeches varied over time on the DICTION dimensions of certainty, activity, optimism, realism, and commonality. Obama consistently demonstrated higher levels of commonality throughout the campaign. Implications for dynamic, time series content analyses are discussed.

Keywords: Leadership, Text Analysis, Longitudinal Research, Content Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The success of political candidates depends partly on whether their constituencies perceive them as leaders. There has been a recent push in developing qualitative methodologies for analyzing leadership (Bryman, 2004). Organizational scientists have begun using computer-assisted content analysis in understanding qualitative data such as customer reviews (Nieman-Gonder et al, 2018). Studies have used content analysis programs to analyze the speeches of American presidents and other political figures (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; Seyranian & Bligh, 2008; McCann, 1992). Rarely, however, do these studies use dynamic, longitudinal analyses of a candidate's speeches.

Leadership is often viewed as a communication process (Flauto, 1999) and responsibility for leadership outcomes often rests on the leader's ability to communicate effectively. There have been some attempts to separate leadership communication from leadership psychology (Fairhurst, 2008). However, the traditional definition of leadership in psychology includes communication.

There have been some attempts at tracking social change through charismatic leadership and other communication channels that political leaders have used (Seyranian & Bligh, 2008). Some research has used interviews to assess feelings before and after cataclysmic events (Bligh & Hess, 2007). Rarely do researchers look at the interplay between events and the influence of language over time, especially in a

political context. Much of the qualitative leadership research that uses text analysis evaluates the entire corpus of a leader's speeches rather than a dynamic presentation of leader's language (Bligh & Robinson, 2010).

Work by Pennebaker (2008) has attempted to address this deficiency in the leadership literature through a running blog: <http://wordwatchers.wordpress.com/> about the 2008 American Presidential election. On this blog, he and his colleagues analyzed several different leadership variables such as pronoun usage and word count. Pennebaker's analyses focused on moments such as debates or single speeches but they did not address the longitudinal nature of the campaign nor did they address the variations in language as historical events occurred. Prior longitudinal research on leadership in the 2008 election focused on crisis perception and leadership attributions (Williams, Piali, Deptula, & Lowe, 2012).

Barack Obama and John McCain presented unique contrasts in the 2008 election. Obama's leadership style was defined by positivity and optimism (Greenstein, 2009) characterized by his "Yes We Can" rallying cry. Obama presented a clearly transformational leadership style that was remarked upon by numerous pundits and reporters (Green & Roberts, 2012). McCain, on the other hand was known for his contrasting temper and congenial persona. McCain was viewed as someone who was prone to 'flying off the handle' (Rehnson, 2001). Given McCain's military experience, previous research has shown that McCain's support increased when fearful reminders of death were provided (Vail, Arndt, Motyl, & Pyszczynski, 2009). Thus, McCain's base was truly a conservative one driven mostly by fear of change.

The present research was an exploratory study not of an individual but of competing campaigns during the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama vs. John McCain. Unlike previous qualitative studies of presidential campaigns (Enli, 2017), the present study addresses the interaction between these two campaigns as they progressed over time. It is predicted that Obama would consistently score higher in optimism and activism over time. Since John McCain presented an image of military leadership and a record of conservative voting, it is predicted that McCain would score higher on realism, commonality, and certainty scales. We also expected to see fluctuations around the times of major political events.

Hypothesis 1: Obama will score higher than McCain on activism and optimism over time.

Hypothesis 2: McCain will score higher on realism, commonality, and certainty over time.

Research Question 1: What effect will major political events play on the language used in speeches by Obama and McCain?

METHOD

The campaign speeches of Barack Obama and John McCain were gathered from websites such as "The American Presidency Project," [Johnmccain.com](http://johnmccain.com), and obamaspeeches.com. A total of 222 Barack Obama speeches and 67 John McCain speeches were analyzed using the content analysis program DICTION 5.0 developed by Roderick Hart for the purpose of analyzing political rhetoric (Hart, 1984). DICTION uses word list dictionaries to compute scores for five qualitative attributes: certainty, activity, optimism, realism, and commonality within a given text.

DICTION assesses speech for five qualities: (a) certainty (b) activity (c) optimism (d) realism and (e) commonality. Certainty is defined as "language indicating resoluteness, inflexibility, and completeness." Activity is defined as "language featuring movement, change, the implementation of ideas and the avoidance of inertia." Optimism is defined as "language endorsing some person, group, concept or event, or highlighting their positive entailments." Realism is defined as "language describing tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives." Commonality is defined as language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement" (Hart, 1984). Text from the speeches was analyzed by DICTION and scored for each of these characteristics. The texts were organized by date for longitudinal analysis.

RESULTS

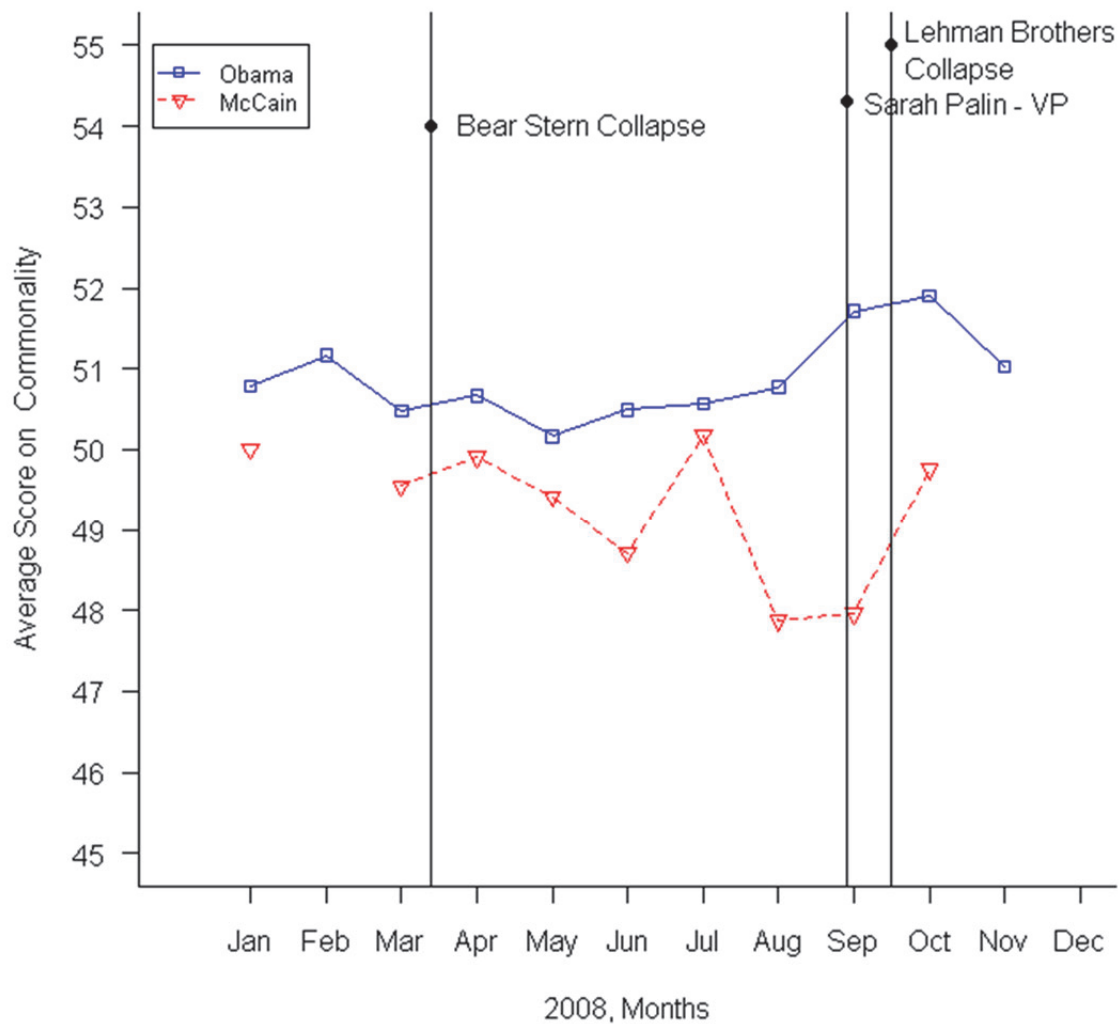
The monthly average of content scores was recorded and plotted longitudinally alongside markers of significant events such as vice-presidential nomination. Table 1 contains the average score sby month for Obama and McCain. DICTION uses raw counts to calculate statistically adjusted scores based on the program’s norms. Higher scores reflect a greater use of language that reflects each DICTION sub-dimension.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF DICTION SCORES BY CANDIDATE

DICTION Score	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Activity	McCain	9	49.98	1.175	0.392
	Obama	11	50.60	0.387	0.117
Optimism	McCain	9	51.41	1.092	0.364
	Obama	11	50.50	0.989	0.298
Certainty	McCain	9	48.23	1.190	0.397
	Obama	11	47.41	0.865	0.261
Realism	McCain	9	51.26	1.401	0.467
	Obama	11	52.82	0.745	0.224
Commonality	McCain	9	49.26	0.873	0.291
	Obama	11	50.89	0.532	0.160

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 show scores on commonality, optimism, activity, realism and creativity over time, respectively. Hypothesis 1 received partial support with regards to activism scores. Obama scored higher in activism across most months with a notable crossover change occurring after the financial crisis in September 2008. However, McCain’s optimism score spiked and then crossed over after the financial crisis. During June & September, an interaction occurred between the scores, with McCain crossing over Obama in June then Obama crossing over McCain in September. This crossover pattern was consistently seen for all five of the attribute scores.

FIGURE 1
SCORES ON COMMONALITY OVER TIME



Examination of Figure 2 showed that hypothesis 2 received partial support. Obama only scored higher in optimism a few times in comparison to McCain. Computerized content analyses indicate that John McCain scored higher on certainty after July 2008. However, prior to July 2008 the candidates had very similar scores in this category. The second hypothesis was not supported with regards to commonality. Obama scored higher on realism throughout the campaign. However, after the financial crisis, McCain’s realism scores showed a significant drop.

FIGURE 2
SCORES ON OPTIMISM OVER TIME

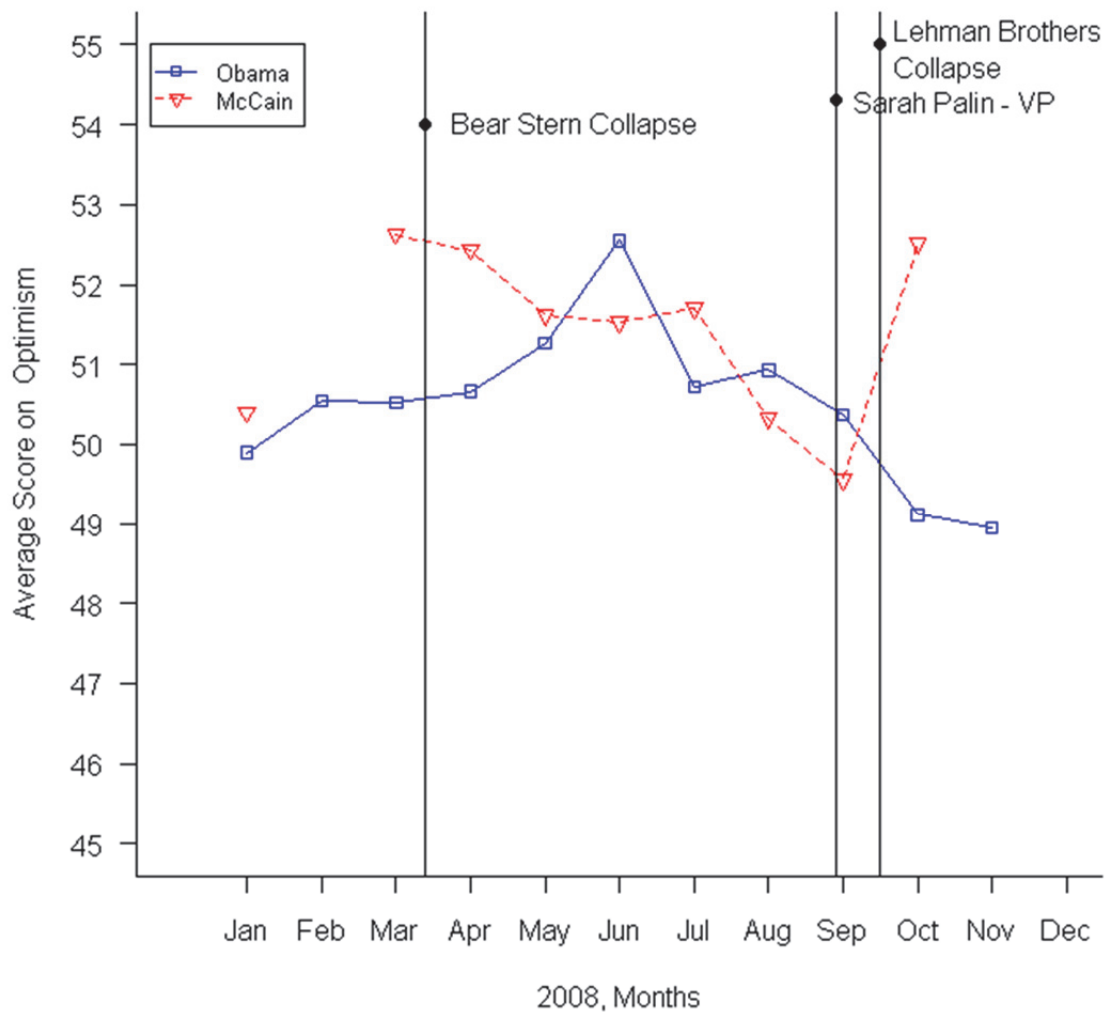


FIGURE 3
SCORES ON ACTIVITY OVER TIME

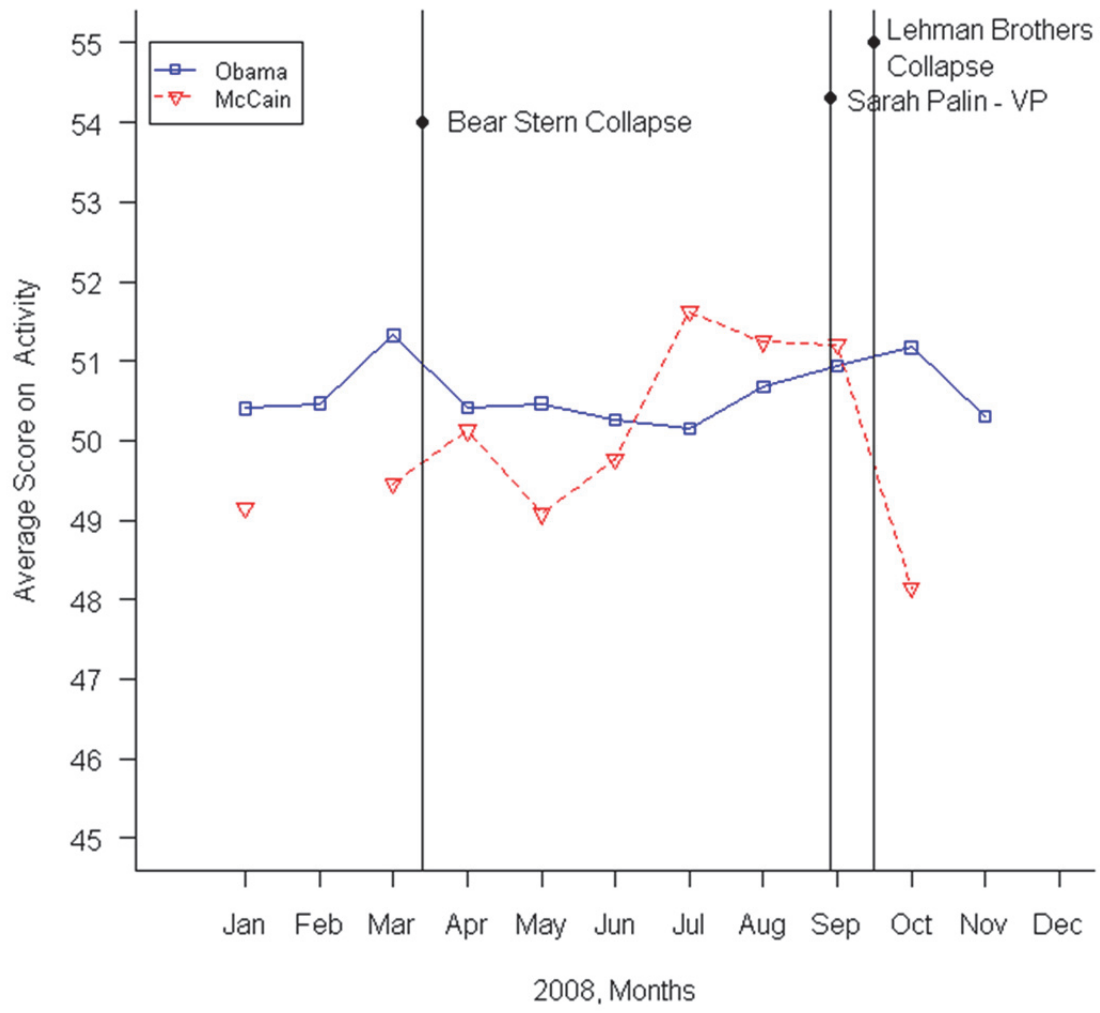


FIGURE 4
SCORES ON REALISM OVER TIME

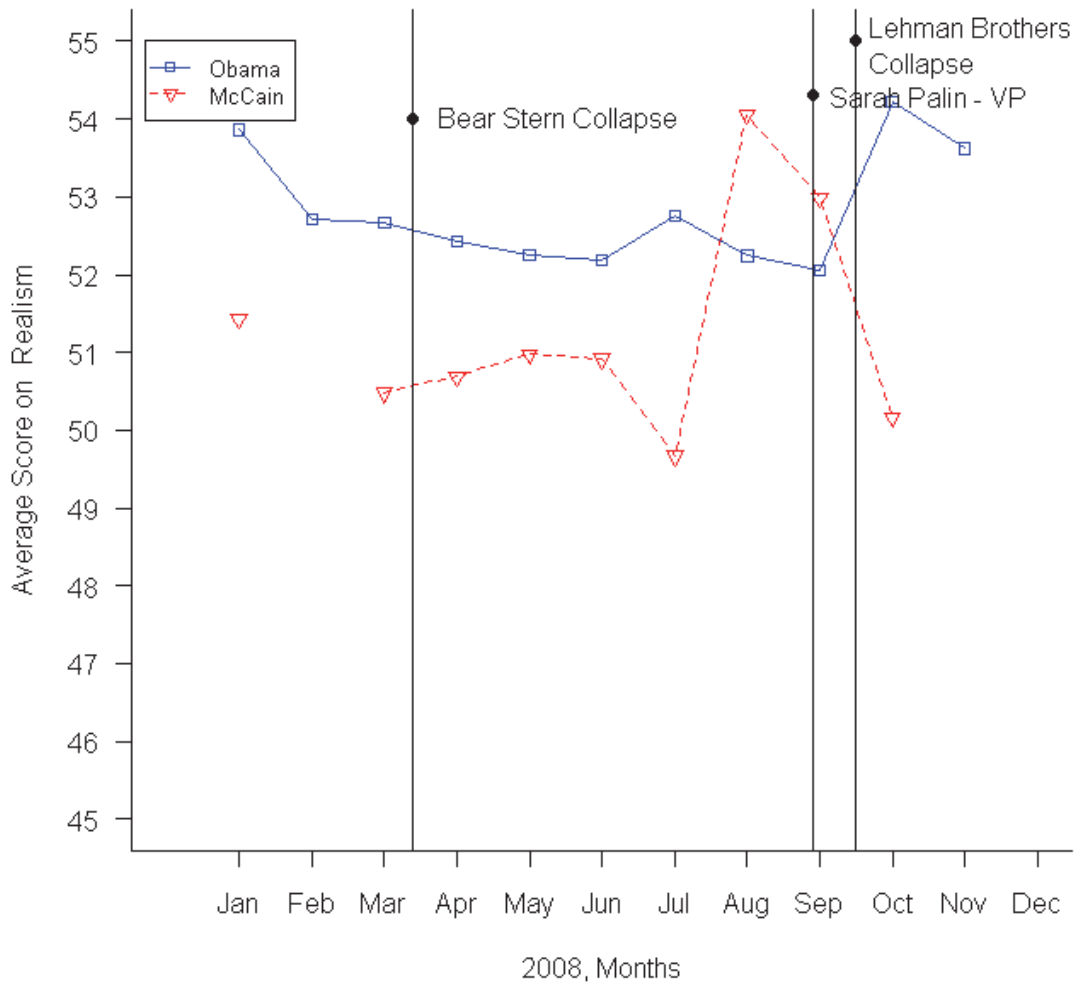
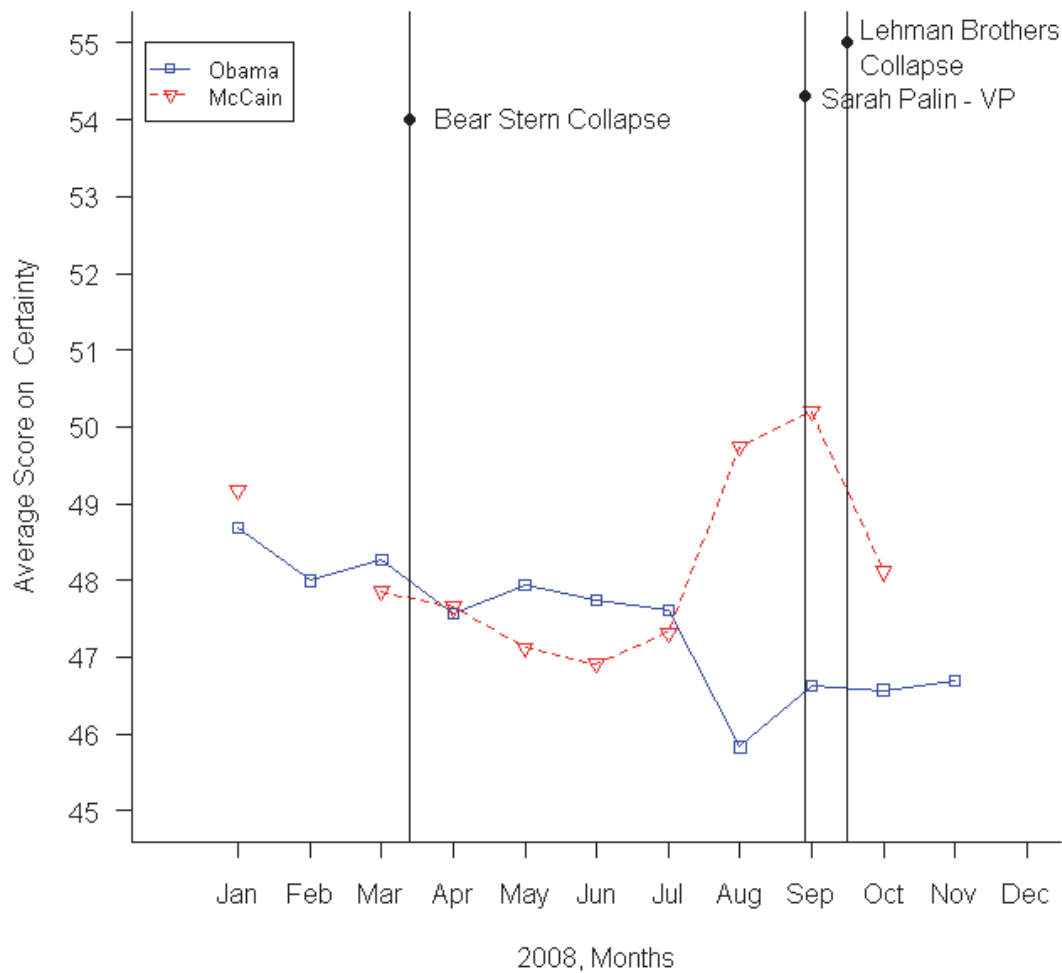


FIGURE 5
SCORES ON CREATIVITY OVER TIME



The hypothesis that the candidate's scores would fluctuate with regards to historical events is supported by each figure. There were significant shifts across categories after the financial crisis. It appears that the candidates switched positions in their use of language. Scores on activity dropped after the financial crisis. Surprisingly Obama's scores on creativity were lower than McCain's, especially at the end of the campaign.

TABLE 2
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST FOR OBAMA AND MCCAIN DICTION SCORES

	Test	Statistic	df	p
Activity	Student	-1.654	18.00	0.115 ^a
	Mann-Whitney	31.000		0.175 ^a
Optimism	Student	1.956	18.00	0.066
	Mann-Whitney	70.000		0.131
Certainty	Student	1.787	18.00	0.091
	Mann-Whitney	67.000		0.201
Realism	Student	-3.186	18.00	0.005
	Mann-Whitney	18.000		0.016
Commonality	Student	-5.130	18.00	< .001
	Mann-Whitney	1.000		< .001

^a Levene's test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the equal variance assumption

Tables 2 and 3 show the results of a t-test and a Mann-Whitney sum test between the Obama and McCain scores on the DICTION variables. The t-test conducted showed non-normal results and a Mann-Whitney was conducted in response to the violation of normality. The Mann-Whitney was used conducted to analyze the differences between the scores for each of the five categories. Levene's test was nonsignificant for the Mann-Whitney test. P-values indicate that there were significant differences between the scores of Obama and McCain on commonality scales. These results indicate that Obama consistently used more consensus-seeking terms. Although the overall levels on the other DICTION variables varied over time, the average levels were similar for both candidates.

TABLE 3
MANN WHITNEY U TEST

	W	p	Rank-Biserial Correlation
Activity	31.000	0.175	-0.374
Optimism	70.000	0.131	0.414
Certainty	67.000	0.201	0.354
Realism	18.000	0.016	-0.636
Commonality	1.000	< .001	-0.980

Note. Mann-Whitney U test.

DISCUSSION

The results of this exploratory study indicate the importance of considering the effects of major political events in candidate's language. These candidates responded by changing their language. Our initial hypotheses regarding the differences in overall messages of each candidate were not strongly supported. However, we did find that there were dynamic shifts over time that seemed to be in response to major political events. We can draw conclusions about the content of each campaign and the campaigns' respective strategies based on these speeches.

It appears that while many political observers (e.g. Maureen Dowd, David Brooks) felt that Obama was the more optimistic candidate, this characteristic was reflected less and less as his campaign progressed. Instead, it appears that the use of language of commonality was important to Obama's success. Whereas most commentators felt that McCain would try to connect with the populace's common values (e.g. Dowd, Brooks), Obama was consistently scoring higher in this area. This may be true of the scores in the area of realism. Obama's mantra may have been "change" but an understanding of the grounded and the realistic nature of his rhetoric tempered it. Finally, the importance of the financial crisis to both parties cannot be underestimated. Each campaign shifted their language drastically after the collapse of Lehman brothers. This event altered the language of the election and the results of the election significantly. It appears that after a contentious eight years of the Bush presidency Obama's focus on commonality lead to his victory.

There were several limitations in the present study. The most prominent was the number of speeches from Obama versus McCain. The results for Obama's speeches may have been more robust because of the number of speeches collected. A second limitation is that general polling results were not used in the current analysis. Including polling data along with computerized content analysis scores might provide more context between the communication of candidates with the public and the public's response as well as their opponent's response. A richer dataset of text may provide an even more dynamic understanding of leadership communication.

Future research should address limitations of this preliminary study. One might investigate the cross-correlations between candidates across time series on each content variable. Alternatively, an investigation of lagged cross-correlations would be of great interest. Future research should look at whether one candidate might be responding to the other candidate in terms of speech content. While this study included time markers for a significant event, it does not include important media factors. Media commentary and qualitative analysis of media comments should be included in future studies. A validation analysis may also be conducted to see whether DICTION scores match scores from other content analysis dictionaries such as Pennebaker's *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* (LIWC, (Pennebaker, 2007) or Martindale's *Regressive Imagery Dictionary* (Martindale, 1990), and other dictionaries that are freely available such as the 'bing' dictionary. In addition, the relationship of these scores to polling data and other criteria should be assessed.

Social media is also a landscape where leadership is studied in a variety of settings from religious leadership (Narbona, 2016) to public relations (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011). As presidential candidates use the platform more often (Ahmadian, Azarshahi, & Paulhus, 2017; Anderson, 2017), researchers should move towards analyzing the dynamic interaction between leaders and followers on social media. The recent 2016 election and the presidency of Donald Trump should allow for an intriguing dataset for future researchers.

Political writers have long viewed the language of leadership as an important feature of presidential campaigns. More researchers in the organizational sciences should study the language of leadership, especially the interaction between a leaders' language and their followers as well as their opponents. Dynamic analysis of language will lead to a deeper understanding of communication as a key leadership skill.

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