

# AN INVESTIGATION OF AMERICAN OPPOSING POLITICAL CULTURES IN THE SPEECHES OF BARACK OBAMA AND JOHN MCCAIN

Marta Degani  
(*University of Verona, Italy*)

## Abstract

This paper investigates American political discourse in line with Lakoff's (1996) interpretation of American political reality. According to Lakoff, Republican and Democratic political thought is guided by two opposing value systems. Against this background, the current study examines elements of McCain's and Obama's speeches during their presidential election campaign in 2008. The analysis explores how highly frequent lexical items characterizing the rhetoric of the Republican and the Democratic candidates can be indicative of distinctive ideologies that affirm the existence of two contending political cultures. As such, the paper proposes an investigation of political discourse across two different political cultures in the context of the US.

## 1. Introduction

In a book that was particularly influential in the 1990s, Hunter (1991) described the opposition between American conservatives and progressives in terms of a “culture war”. According to the sociologist, a “values divide” is what fundamentally distinguishes “Red” (Republican) from “Blue” (Democratic) Americans. This idea has caused heated discussions both in academia and beyond (e.g. Di Maggio *et al.* 1996; Wolfe 1998; Fiorina *et al.* 2005; Bowman 2010). Most significantly, however, at least from a linguistic point of view, Hunter's intuitions appear to be reiterated in Lakoff's work (1996) on political morality. The linguist sustains the existence of two competing idealized cognitive models which he claims underlie American right-wing versus left-wing political rhetoric. According to Lakoff, these cognitive models reflect two opposing worldviews, each of them relying on a different notion of morality and consisting of a set of metaphors<sup>1</sup>. One is described as the Strict Father (SF) model and is associated with the Republicans. This model draws on a traditional type of family with a hierarchical power structure. The

<sup>1</sup> Each of the models proposes a metaphorical interpretation of political reality by drawing a comparison to stereotypical family roles. While Lakoff (1996) relied on conceptual metaphors to describe the models, recent research has shown that the metaphorical family values are often realized in non-metaphorical language (see Degani 2015).

father, i.e. the president, is the main authoritative figure, the one who knows and makes decisions for other family members, i.e. the citizens. The other worldview, which is closer to Democratic values, is expressed in the Nurturant Parent (NP) model. This suggests an understanding of family as based on horizontal power relations where family members work together as a group to reach common goals. Here, governance is achieved by common involvement and not by imposition of authority. Each of the two models entails a different set of moral priorities. SF morality supports values such as strength, authority, order, hierarchy, obedience, self-discipline, self-reliance and individual responsibility. For NP morality the core values are care, nurturance, cooperation, equality, community, service, opportunity, protection and social responsibility (cf. Lakoff 1996)<sup>2</sup>. Altogether, the SF and NP models can explain why American Republicans and Democrats think and talk differently about (political) reality. As such, Lakoff's work reinforces Hunter's description of divided American political cultures based on different moral value systems.

Against the background of these observations, this paper sets out to explore whether the speeches of the Republican and the Democratic frontrunners in the 2008 American election campaign cohere with the view of separate political cultures. In order to test this, a selection of speeches from the opposing presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, will be analysed according to how they use highly frequent lexical items which can be indicative of diverse values of political morality. This analysis will also help to understand how the candidates constructed their public image during the election campaign. Overall, the paper is intended to contribute to the study of American political discourse through a comparative analysis of political cultures.

## 2. Corpus and methodology

Two different corpora have been used for the present study. One consists of 30 significant speeches delivered by Barack Obama during the 2008 election campaign and obtained from his website (<http://www.barackobama.com/speeches/index.php>, last accessed in August 2010; cf. Degani 2015 for more details). The other corpus is made up of 20 representative speeches by Obama's rival, John McCain. These speeches were downloaded from the Presidential Rhetoric website (<http://www.presidential-rhetoric.com/campaign2008/mccain/11.04.08.html>, last accessed in January 2014). The Obama corpus counts 78,679 words, while the size of the McCain corpus is 42,961 words. The time span considered includes the primary phase up to the general election (the Obama corpus ranges from February to November 2008, the McCain corpus from March to November of the same year).

All the speeches were downloaded as Microsoft Word documents, converted into txt files and processed using *Wordsmith Tools* 4.0. For each corpus, wordlists were created for the identification of highly frequent lexical items. These wordlists were taken as the basis to extract all the nouns that occurred among the 100 most frequent words. After lemmatization, the raw frequency of these words and their relative frequency of occurrence were automatically calculated. Relative frequencies were normalized by

<sup>2</sup> As pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers, similar observations were also made in 1991 by Christopher Matthews, who was the first person to refer to the Democrats as the "Mommy Party" and to the Republicans as the "Daddy Party" in a newspaper article of *The Baltimore Sun*.

multiplying with a factor of one thousand. Since the study is aimed at analysing Obama's and McCain's rhetoric in light of their supposed opposing political cultures, each of the selected nouns was investigated in their usage contexts with the help of *Wordsmith* concordances.

### 3. Analysis: preliminary observations

As lucidly pointed out by Bourdieu (1991), in their role as mediators between people and social reality, politicians have the power to construct meanings for the electorate. Politicians' framing of reality provides people with pre-packed interpretations of reality (*doxa* in Bourdieu's terminology) and creates assumptions that subliminally guide the political orientation of the electorate as well as their decisive choices at the ballot.

As a powerfully persuasive means, framing relies on the principle of reiteration: the more a concept is repeated, the more likely it is to be accepted as such and unwaveringly supported (cf. Lakoff 2004). Expert politicians and political campaigners work hard on the manufacturing of *ad hoc* political framings, especially in the context of American presidential campaigns where the candidates generally compete in hard-fought races.

Given the psychological effects of rhetorical insistence and its social repercussions, when analysing political discourse it is particularly useful to consider how highly frequent terms are indeed employed by competing politicians. Accordingly, the analysis of McCain's and Obama's potentially opposing political cultures starts with the identification of the nouns among the 100 most frequent words occurring in each of the investigated corpora. Table 1 provides this type of information as well as the details concerning raw frequencies and relative frequencies for each of the words considered.

McCain			Obama		
Nouns	Raw frequency	Relative frequency (normalized)	Nouns	Raw frequency	Relative frequency (normalized)
<i>country</i>	199	4.6	<i>year</i>	290	3.7
<i>tax</i>	193	4.5	<i>America</i>	269	3.4
<i>American</i>	147	3.4	<b><i>time</i></b>	268	3.4
<b><i>government</i></b>	133	3.1	<i>country</i>	258	3.2
<i>America</i>	132	3	<i>job</i>	256	3.2
<i>job</i>	129	3	<i>tax</i>	230	2.9
<i>people</i>	128	2.9	<i>people</i>	202	2.5
<i>president</i>	124	2.9	<i>change</i>	200	2.5
<i>care</i>	98	2.2	<i>American</i>	195	2.4
<i>year</i>	93	2.1	<i>president</i>	171	2.1
<i>economy</i>	88	2	<b><i>family</i></b>	171	2.1
<i>health</i>	71	1.6	<i>economy</i>	156	1.9
<b><i>veteran</i></b>	70	1.6	<b><i>war</i></b>	136	1.7
<b><i>crisis</i></b>	70	1.6	<i>health</i>	126	1.6
<b><i>world</i></b>	68	1.5	<i>care</i>	122	1.5
<b><i>campaign</i></b>	58	1.3	<b><i>children</i></b>	117	1.4
<i>change</i>	47	1.1	<b><i>education</i></b>	113	1.4
<b><i>fight</i></b>	9	0.2	<b><i>work</i></b>	62	0.7

Table 1. List of nouns among the 100 most frequent words in each of the two corpora

### 3.1. *An analysis of McCain's and Obama's different lexical preferences*

In order to start investigating potential differences in McCain's and Obama's lexical choices, the analysis first of all takes into consideration the nouns that uniquely characterize the frequent lexical items used by each of the two candidates. In Table 1 all the nouns which do not overlap among the candidates' most frequently used terms are printed in bold. For McCain these terms are *government*, *veteran*, *crisis*, *world*, *campaign* and *fight*, whereas Obama's speeches show a preference for *time*, *family*, *war*, *children*, *education* and *work*.

To start with McCain's lexical preferences, the term *government* represents a concept that has been under attack over the last few decades, particularly among Republicans. Political scientists have observed that Americans have progressively lost confidence in the government and that this form of political distrust has become more acute from the 1990s onwards (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). McCain advocates this aversion towards government, and, in his speeches, he presents himself both ideologically and rhetorically as a promoter of Small Government. By doing so, his view of the government's role in American society appears in line with Strict Father morality and conservative values. His rhetoric about it conjures up a picture that is highly emotional and capable of raising anguish at the idea of Big Government, which is described as a threat to American people and their well-being<sup>3</sup>. McCain does not merely complain about the excessive size and the growth of the US government. More pervasively, he conveys the idea of a country doomed to paying debts ("government cannot go on forever spending recklessly and incurring debt", McCain, 16 July 2008). Due to reckless government expenditure, the next generations will be indebted ("That's a debt our government plans to leave for your children and mine to bear", McCain, 1 August 2008), and America will also be indebted to other countries. In his criticism towards Big Government, McCain also promotes a view of government as an enemy to be fought against for a number of reasons. Government does not act in people's interest ("I'm running for President to fight for you, to make government stand on your side, not in your way", McCain, 29 August 2008), it reduces people's freedom and independence ("make our decisions for us", McCain, 3 June 2008), it deprives good people of their material resources ("before government can redistribute wealth, it has to confiscate wealth from those who earned it", McCain, 22 October 2008), and it misuses their money ("stop government from wasting taxpayers' money", McCain, 29 August 2008). Still coherent with SF ideology is McCain's emphasis on the government's moral obligation and responsibility to support strong national defense ("it will fall to the next commander in chief to make good on the obligation our government accepts every time any man or woman enters the military", McCain, 18 August 2008) and to restrict its outreach to cases of natural calamities ("when Americans confront a catastrophe they have a right to expect basic competence from their government", McCain, 3 June 2008).

McCain's militaristic attitude resonates in his electoral speeches. His backing of the

<sup>3</sup> The notions of Small Government and Big Government are pervasive in American political debate. Republicans (and conservatives, more broadly) are generally seen as supporters of Small Government, while Democrats (and liberals) tend to be associated with the idea of Big Government. Briefly, the two concepts refer to the degree of Government intervention in the lives of American people. The preference of American citizens for either a limited (i.e. Small) or a wide-ranging (i.e. Big) Government is one of the factors why they opt for a specific political party.

“war on terror” and of military operations in the Middle East neatly define his profile as an interventionist. The rhetoric of this military ‘hero’ who bravely fought for his country during the Vietnam war is therefore, unsurprisingly, characterized by frequent mentions of the greatness of American veterans. In his speeches the term *veteran* is woven in a discourse that celebrates the strength of the American military and honors all the people who served their country. These Americans are worthy of respect and care: “In Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, America’s veterans have faced different enemies, but they have always found the same friend and ally in the Legion, the VFW, and other veterans’ service organizations”, McCain, 26 August 2008.

McCain’s political culture and the values through which it is nurtured are also portrayed in his discourse about the impending crisis. In 2008, the globe was hit by the most terrible economic crisis after the Great Depression of the 1930s. For the US that was a particularly tough time: being right at the core of this global crisis, the US had the obligation to intervene. Politicians were faced with the urgency of fixing a financial and economic system that was broken and seriously ill. At this time of utmost global uncertainty and instability, the two American politicians running for the presidency had to develop their own rhetorical strategies to talk about the crisis. Here, the Republican frontrunner followed in G.W. Bush’s footsteps and heralded a paralysing rhetoric of fear. Americans were alerted to the dangers and threats lurking beneath the shaky ground. They were warned against the enemies hidden behind every corner. In contrast to Obama’s encouraging message of renewal based on the optimistic belief in American people’s capacities to overcome the most difficult situations and stand tall (which was encapsulated in one of the most important election campaign slogans: “yes, we can”), McCain’s rhetoric cast doubts on the perception of one’s security and reinforced the idea of the world as a difficult and dangerous place. The following passages exemplify this strategy:

America is a great country but we are at a moment of national crisis that will determine our future. Will we continue to lead the world’s economies or will we be overtaken? Will the world become safer or more dangerous? Will our military remain the strongest in the world? (McCain, 14 October 2008).

These are hard times. Our economy is in crisis. Americans are fighting in two wars. We face many enemies in this dangerous world, and many challenges here at home (McCain, 17 October 2008).

In line with McCain’s overall portrayal of the world as dangerous and menacing, his use of the term *world* is chiefly embedded in a type of argumentation supporting the *us* vs. *them* dichotomy that is typical of SF reasoning. In this binary, America stands as the ambassador of freedom, leadership and democracy, which is willing to ‘liberate’ occupied countries from the tyranny of America’s enemies:

In times of trouble, free nations of the world still look to America for leadership because they know the strength of America remains the greatest force for good on this earth (McCain, 26 August 2008).

This framing of foreign and security policy entails that America by virtue of its own moral superiority is indeed entitled to set the world free from oppression by ‘introducing’

its model of democracy. Furthermore, these acts of liberation are seen as enacted for the sake of global security and the defence of America's dearest values.

In contrast to the words so far analysed, the term *campaign* does not appear to be used in markedly different ways by the frontrunners of the Republican and Democratic parties. Both McCain and Obama show a preference for the syntactic construction *in this campaign* and they mostly employ the word *campaign* to refer to their presidential race.

Conflict is a notion that is ubiquitous in political discourse and regularly surfaces in the speeches of political leaders, irrespective of their party affiliations (see e.g. Goatly 2007: 72-83; Howe 1988). On the battleground of politics, candidates compete against each other and fight their personal battles. Obama's electoral speeches, for instance, speak of struggles fought at the service of others for improving people's living standards by securing their most basic needs: health coverage, good education and decent jobs. Obama's social engagement with fixing problems that afflict the ordinary American citizen is frequently expressed in terms of metaphorical struggles. Conversely, in McCain's speeches it is most often the case that the term *fight* is used in its literal meaning, especially to indicate America's military action against terrorism ("Sunnī insurgents have joined us in the fight against Al Qaeda", McCain, 3 June 2008; "America is at war in two countries, and involved in a long and difficult fight with violent extremists who despise us, our values and modernity itself", McCain, 5 March 2008).

After having discussed some of McCain's distinctive lexical choices and pointed out how the words he uses evoke a clear SF view of reality, we can now consider Obama's typical lexicon and reflect upon the political culture it endorses.

The word *time* features among the most frequent nouns used by the Democratic candidate, and it is instrumental to construct a powerful message of *candoism*, which is mostly encapsulated in the expression *it's time to/we*. Seizing the time means changing America by: protecting social security for future generations, making health coverage affordable to every American, providing every child with a world-class education, restoring balance and accountability in Washington, promoting gender equality and revealing the real cost of the war in Iraq. These are some of Obama's promises to his electorate and they are all coherent with a NP worldview. As a metaphorical nurturing parent, the would-be president rhetorically shows how he would take care of all his metaphorical children (i.e. the nation).

Obama's use of the term *family* underlines his nurturant message. On the one hand, he shares with his audience his personal story by referring to the affectionate love he received from his own family. On the other hand, he presents himself as the caring politician whose role is that of protecting and sustaining *American families*, *working families* and *average families* who are facing difficult times and do not know how to cope with the impending economic crisis.

Considering Obama's rhetoric of care and empathy, the presence of the term *war* among his most frequent nouns might appear unexpected if not surprising. This word, however, occurs in a context that defines Obama's fierce opposition to the war in Iraq and to the general mindset that brought his nation into war. Obama complains against this misguided war and stresses the need to bring it to an end ("a war that should've never been authorized and should've never been waged", Obama, 12 February 2008). His repeated condemnation of the human and material costs of the Iraq war are linked to an overarching criticism towards Republican foreign policies and Bush's security

plans in particular. The real danger Obama talks about in his speeches is that of McCain being given the chance to run for Bush's third term. In his opinion, this would lead to "four more years of a war with no exit strategy" (Obama, 22 April 2008).

The way Obama talks about American children provides additional evidence of a political discourse centred around the notion of nurturance. Thus, his use of the term *children* is in line with the overall nurturant message of his campaign. His concern for children regards different and related aspects of their lives. Obama presents himself as a caring parent when he refers to the government's responsibility to invest in childhood education by providing children with more teaching support and better infrastructure ("crumbling schools are stealing the future of black children and white children", Obama, 5 February 2008; "we owe it to our children to invest in early childhood education", Obama, 3 June 2008). Following the same line of reasoning, he emphasizes the government's moral duty to "provide more children with health coverage" (Obama, 3 June 2008). He also reveals his emphatic attitude when pointing out that children should follow their inclination and be able to "fulfill their God-given potential" (Obama, 6 May 2008). Closely connected to this is the interpretation of fairness that he conveys, for instance, when he stresses the importance that children are granted equal opportunities ("And together, we will begin to change the odds for our at-risk children by providing quality, affordable, early childhood education for all our children", Obama, 13 July 2008). As a nurturant and foresighted leader, his action is depicted as being in the interest of future generations ("we can lead the world, secure the nation, and leave our children a planet that is safer and cleaner and healthier than the one we inherited", Obama, 5 August 2008). Furthermore, the electorate is often reminded of the fundamental role played by the family as the most immediate space of children's socialization ("We know that we need to take responsibility for ourselves and our children – that we need to spend more time with them, and teach them well, and put a book in their hands instead of a video game", Obama, 4 March 2008). Parents are encouraged to love, protect and guide their children.

Obama's framing of education reinforces his concern for children: in his speeches, children appear as the major beneficiaries of his proposals for investing in *quality/word-class education*. Next to it, his attention is devoted to college education. In his position as the Democratic frontrunner of the most powerful country in the world, Obama skillfully defines the promotion of education in terms of the dearest value of capitalism, success: "our success as a nation depends on our success in education" (Obama, 9 September 2008).

The use of the term *work* contributes to construct a public image of Obama as the politician who honours the quintessentially American value of *hard work* as a key to success. Hard work and sacrifice are celebrated not just for the realization of people's individual dreams, but for the broader and communal objective of transforming the nation into a better place ("Let us begin the work together. Let us unite in common effort to chart a new course for America", Obama, 3 June 2008). Obama's discourse around work is also a discourse that speaks for gender equality and focuses on the respect and recognition that America owes to its working women ("we won't truly have an economy that puts the needs of the middle class first until we ensure that when it comes to pay and benefits at work, women are treated as the equal partners they are", Obama, 10 July 2008). Furthermore, Obama's interest in American workers instead of work for

work's sake is voiced in his promises for more jobs and better salaries as well as in his advocacy for "an economy that honors the dignity of work" (Obama, 28 August 2008).

### 3.2. *A comparison between McCain's and Obama's shared lexical preferences*

While it is interesting to analyse how opposing political cultures can be transmitted through different lexical preferences, it might be even more revealing to explore how competing politicians employ the same high frequency lexicon to potentially divergent aims. In order to investigate this aspect, the study will shed light on McCain's and Obama's use of shared lexical preferences. For the sake of clarity, the full list of these terms is reported in Table 2.

Shared nouns	Relative freq. in McCain	Relative freq. in Obama
<b>country</b>	4.6	3.2
<b>tax</b>	4.5	2.9
<i>American</i>	3.4	2.4
<i>America</i>	3	3.4
<i>job</i>	3	3.2
<i>people</i>	2.9	2.5
<b>president</b>	2.9	2.1
<b>care</b>	2.2	1.5
<i>year</i>	2.1	3.7
<b>economy</b>	2	1.9
<b>health</b>	1.6	1.6
<b>change</b>	1.1	2.5

**Table 2.** List of shared nouns among the 100 most frequent words in the two corpora

After having checked each of the words listed in Table 2 for their use in context, the discussion will concentrate on the words that have revealed more significant patterns. These are highlighted in bold and comprise *country*, *tax*, *president*, *care*, *economy*, *health*, and *change*.

What is the idea of country that McCain and Obama promote in their speeches? To answer this question, it is important to start from a few general observations. First of all, it is well known that the US has struggled for the definition of its national identity since its foundation. Cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversities made this an arduous task. Secondly, and rather paradoxically, even though Americans can be seen as the most diverse people on earth, they seem to have always clung to the idea that American fellow citizens are pretty much the same. Habits and customs apart, this sense of shared belonging has been spurred by the strong belief that they live in the best country on earth. American politicians cannot but remind their people of this belief: they live in a great country and it is a country that all of them deeply love. Both McCain and Obama rely on this type of emotive connection when they talk about the American country to their electorate. Obama, however, sounds more elaborate and persuasive in that he relates this nationalistic feeling to the overarching celebration of the American Dream. The conveyed authenticity of his message makes it even more captivating. Obama presents himself as tangible proof of the American promise by referring to his position as an African-American running for presidency. He ties his privilege to the possibilities given to his grandparents to enjoy a world-class education and to the opportunities that his mother was given in order to send her children to school. Besides similarities, the major differences between the two candidates can be found in the way they describe

what needs to be done for the country. McCain depicts himself as invested with the responsibility to get the country “moving again”, to lead the country “in a new direction” and to pass on to children a “stronger” and “better” country. These will be his duties if elected president. On the other hand, Obama crafts a more empowering message in which all Americans have a role to play and an aim to achieve. Together, people can “change” the country, “move it forward” and “forge a new and better future”. The centrality of people in Obama’s plan is also transmitted by the fact that he focuses on these actors in the political scene. When he uses the term *country*, what he actually talks about are the men, women, families, communities and workers who live and whom he has met “in/across this country”. The two politicians also suggest different forms of engagement with one’s country. McCain emphasizes people’s responsibility to “defend the country from its enemies”, “serve” it, “protect” it and “fight” for it. By doing so, he also presents himself as an exemplary citizen who has long fought for his beloved country. Obama’s discourse, instead, revolves around a type of logic that involves more reciprocity. People are asked to invest in the country so that the country can invest in them. They are offered coverage of their tuition fees in exchange for service to their country.

The distribution of wealth and the treatment of taxes represent areas of heated debate between Democrats and Republicans. As Lakoff (1996) explains, the discourse around taxes clearly shows the existence of two competing ideologies. According to the SF worldview, people who are morally strong and whose discipline is reflected in their prosperity should be rewarded with a reduction of taxes. On a general level, taxes are seen as an affliction by Republicans. In contrast to this, NP morality supports taxes since a liberal government is in favour of social programs and welfare. Furthermore, in NP terms, a fair distribution of money entails that the wealthiest citizens will contribute the most to the general well-being of the nation (and this translates in higher taxes). McCain’s and Obama’s rhetoric about taxes fits their expected orientation. McCain speaks of reducing business *tax rates* and providing people with a *tax credit* to buy their insurance. He also complains about the *tax dollars* that are wasted because they are given away to the people who do not pay taxes. On the contrary, Obama is in favour of *tax breaks/cuts* for the people with lower income, for those who cannot make ends meet. Significantly, Obama also suggests a reframing of the concept of *tax relief* that was first introduced by President Bush (see Lakoff 2004). What he offers is *real tax relief* for all the people who have been struck by the economic crisis (see Degani 2015).

Referring to past presidents is common practice among American political leaders. It helps creating a sense of rootedness and historical continuity. Thus, both McCain and Obama evoke the great deeds of past commanders in chief. In addition to this, each of them also makes promises about what they would do if elected president. In this respect, their proposals show significant differences. McCain’s suggested future action focuses on reforming and cutting government, obtaining energy independence from the Middle East, providing benefits to the veterans who served the country, and protecting investors and businesses by reducing their taxes. McCain also likes to draw an image of himself as the promoter of national security:

The next president will have many responsibilities to the American people, and I take them all seriously. But I have one responsibility that outweighs all the others and that is to use whatever talents I possess, and every resource God has granted me to protect the security

of this great and good nation from all enemies foreign and domestic (McCain, 18 August 2008).

Obama's suggested policies appear to consist of a more varied range. Like McCain, also the Democratic candidate shows his concerns for troops and veterans in need of care and his worries about oil dependence on Middle Eastern countries but, on top of this, his preoccupation includes more people and more issues. He constructs a public image of himself as a future leader who will stand with workers, fix a broken health care system, invest more in education, struggle for gender equality, reduce taxes for the least wealthy, care for the environment by investing in renewable energy sources and fight against bio-terrorism. Above all, he portrays himself as the president who will provide opportunities on "Main Street" by giving people a chance to live the American Dream: "That's why I'm running for President of the United States – because America is supposed to be the place where you can make it if you try" (Obama, 1 August 2008).

The analysis of the words *care* and *health* shows that both candidates tend to use them in combination. The compound *health care* is crucially employed by McCain to express his wish to give assistance to veterans. His favorite phrases include *mental/veterans/VA/high-quality/broad-spectrum health care*. Obama, instead, talks more extensively about *universal health care* and about his intentions to "make health care affordable" for everyone and to "lower the cost of health care for families". Another difference can be observed in their use of the compound *health insurance*. While McCain offers people a tax credit to buy their health insurance, Obama promises his electorate that they will get the same kind of health insurance that Members of Congress have.

McCain's and Obama's opposing political cultures are indeed perceivable in their framing of each issue. This became clear in the analysis, which considered the selected lexical items in their usage context. So, while the candidates agree that the economy is in trouble and needs to be put back on track, they do not share the same vision of how to make it strong again. In McCain's view, keeping taxes low is a way to strengthen the economy. As he claims, "raising taxes makes a bad economy much worse" (McCain, 17 October 2008). For Obama,

we measure the strength of our economy not by the number of billionaires we have or the profits of the Fortune 500, but by whether someone with a good idea can take a risk and start a new business, or whether the waitress who lives on tips can take a day off to look after a sick kid without losing her job – an economy that honors the dignity of work (Obama, 28 August 2008).

Obama's emphasis remains on the people damaged by an economy in turmoil. In his opinion, the economy must be rebuilt "from the bottom-up" so that it can "work for working Americans". For him, saving the suffering economy means helping struggling people.

The 2008 election campaign is sometimes remembered as the 'change election' and the reason for that has to do with the fact that Obama made the notion of change into a leitmotif and the expression "change we can believe in" into his motto. Throughout the different phases of the presidential race, Obama made American citizens aware of the multiple meanings with which he had endowed the apparently vacuous term *change*. His oratory is characterized by phrases like "change means ..." or "change is ...", where he reinforces his political message, his promises and his commitment to the American

cause. This ‘appropriation’ of the word *change* made it extremely difficult for Obama’s competitor to talk convincingly about any type of change. The word simply appeared not to belong to McCain’s rhetoric. Notwithstanding this, McCain used the term *change* in a way that was coherent with a SF worldview made up of marked contrasts, profound dichotomies and conflicting binary relations. Meaningfully, he warned Americans of their crucial choice between “wrong change” and “right change”. As he states, “The right change recognizes that many of the policies and institutions of our government have failed”; “The wrong change looks not to the future but to the past for solutions that have failed us before and will surely fail us again” (McCain, 3 June 2008).

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has explored American political discourse through a comparative analysis of its major political cultures. It has investigated a set of highly frequent nouns used by Obama and McCain during the 2008 election campaign. These nouns have been taken as potential indicators of opposing political cultures that can be expressed in terms of Lakoff’s SF and NP morality systems.

The analysis has moved beyond the selected nouns to consider their collocational patterns, their contexts of use and, more broadly, the general discourse in which they occurred. The investigation has revealed that both candidates frame their discourse in a way that is consistent with their expected ideological leanings. Thus, Obama appears as a nurturant politician, whereas McCain can be seen as a metaphorical strict father. Their divergent orientations can be observed not just in their different lexical preferences, but also in the way they employ the same lexical items. All in all, Obama’s rhetoric revolves around the notions of care, nurturance, empathy, protection and social responsibility. Conversely, McCain’s speeches chiefly evoke the values of strength, authority, order and individual responsibility.

The analysis has also shown Obama’s comparatively greater ability to put the American Dream logic at the service of his personal cause. Among his different rhetorical strategies, Obama’s insistence on the shared belief in the American promise and his trumpeting of change as a panacea for all sorts of problems afflicting the country appeared as useful tactics for gaining advantage over his adversary. One of America’s foundational myths and a captivating notion like that of change were skillfully incorporated into a well-woven discourse to support the political culture of the Democratic candidate.

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