

## **Does Complex or Simple Rhetoric Win Elections? An Integrative Complexity Analysis of U.S. Presidential Campaigns**

**Lucian Gideon Conway III**  
*The University of Montana*

**Laura Janelle Gornick**  
*The University of Montana*

**Chelsea Burfeind**  
*The University of Montana*

**Paul Mandella**  
*The University of Montana*

**Andrea Kuenzli**  
*The University of Montana*

**Shannon C. Houck**  
*The University of Montana*

**Deven Theresa Fullerton**  
*The University of Montana*

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*Research suggests that the integrative complexity of political rhetoric tends to drop during election season, but little research to date directly addresses if this drop in complexity serves to increase or decrease electoral success. The two present studies help fill this gap. Study 1 demonstrates that, during the Democratic Party primary debates in 2003–2004, the eventual winners of the party nomination showed a steeper drop in integrative complexity as the election season progressed than nonwinning candidates. Study 2 presents laboratory evidence from the most recent presidential campaign demonstrating that, while the complexity of Obama's rhetoric had little impact on college students' subsequent intentions to vote for him, the complexity of McCain's rhetoric was significantly positively correlated with their likelihood of voting for him. Taken together, this research is inconsistent with an unqualified simple is effective view of the complexity-success relationship. Rather, it is more consistent with a compensatory view: Effective use of complexity (or simplicity) may compensate for perceived weaknesses. Thus, appropriately timed shifts in complexity levels, and/or violations of negative expectations relevant to complexity, may be an effective means of winning elections. Surprisingly, mere simplicity as such seems largely ineffective.*

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Mitt Romney wants to round up 12 million illegal immigrants and deport them. John Edwards wants to put an end to lobbyists. All the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates rail against the ways of Washington. The question is not whether we agree with these views: Politicians stake out such positions precisely because they strike a chord with many voters. The question is why we like our bromides so simple—especially when the same promises have been offered to us time and again in previous elections.

—Shankar Vedantam of *The Washington Post* (2008)

People seem to like simplicity. Simplicity requires less effort to both produce and understand than complexity; simplicity is reassuring; simplicity motivates us to action. Few people have ever marched under the complex banner “I may be right, I may be wrong, but here are five possible solutions, none of which may work, but one of them might.” Rather people march under simple banners like “put an end to all lobbyists!”

The primary question of the present article is: What sort of candidate rhetoric wins elections? Based on the above reasoning, it has been an assumption of many researchers (e.g., Thoemmes & Conway, 2007) that the voting populace prefers simple to complex rhetoric. And, indeed, the available evidence suggests that elections tend to reduce the level of complexity in the candidates (Tetlock, 1981; Thoemmes & Conway, 2007). For example, one study (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007) found that complexity of a president’s State of the Union (SOTU) speech tends to decrease during the election season year (fourth year in office). Other researchers have also found in a parallel fashion that successful leaders are defined by their ability to shift their complexity at the right time, such as the fact that successful revolutionary leaders have low complexity while seeking power, but higher complexity immediately after achieving that goal (Suedfeld & Rank, 1976).

However, this and other evidence of the complexity-reducing effect of elections (and other attempts to gain power) does not illuminate *why* candidates for electoral office might have lower complexity during the campaign season. One of the possibilities—the possibility with which we opened this article—is politicians are merely responding to what works; simplicity sells, and those that sell it win elections. However, many other possibilities exist (such as cognitive fatigue; see Thoemmes & Conway, 2007). And indeed, some initial evidence on the actual effectiveness of complex rhetoric is only partially consistent with the notion that simple rhetoric is effective at winning elections. In particular, in the U.S. presidents’ State of the Union study, Thoemmes and Conway (2007) compared the rhetoric of presidents who ran for reelection and won (“winners”) versus those who ran for reelection and lost (“losers”). They found no main effect difference on complexity, either overall or for the fourth-year (election season) speech. However, they found a significantly different *pattern* between winners and losers over their four years in office, such that winning presidents showed a steeper and later drop in complexity as the election season approached, whereas losers dropped earlier in their tenure, and, if anything, slightly increased during the election season. This suggests that the mean level of complexity is less important than the timing of a complexity shift: Late drops in complexity may be the most effective means of winning elections.

While this research provides a starting point for understanding the impact of complex or simple rhetoric on election outcomes, it leaves many unanswered questions. First, while everything a president does in the modern era is relevant (and known to be relevant by the president and his/her advisors) to elections—and this pressure increases as elections near—yet it is still true that the “election season” State of the Union speech used in Thoemmes and Conway (2007) is not technically a campaign speech. Thus, although that speech is almost certainly viewed as important in the run for reelection (and more important than prior SOTU speeches in terms of its impact on reelection), it is both fairly distant from the actual campaign outcome and not directly tied to campaigning. As a result, it is desirable to look at materials more directly relevant to the campaign season. To fill this

gap, in the present two studies, we look at campaign debates in 2004 (Study 1) and the effect of rhetoric on voter's direct likelihood of voting for presidents in the 2008 campaign (Study 2). Second, this more focused comparison also will allow us to not only expand prior research to different and more applicable election-based materials, but also help us better explain the exact nature of the relationship between complex rhetoric and electoral success. It is perhaps surprising that very little research directly addresses this question, so we are still in the early phases as a science of collecting data to understand the phenomenon itself.

To accomplish these goals, the present studies explore two pieces of evidence from presidential elections: (1) 2004 Democratic primaries and (2) an experimental study using the 2008 Presidential elections. In both studies, the level of complexity was determined by a measurement known as *integrative complexity*.

### **Integrative Complexity**

Integrative complexity is scored on a 1–7 scale that represents the degree that a paragraph (1) uses differentiated dimensions and (2) subsequently integrates those dimensions into a larger structure. Integrative complexity is the most widely used scoring system for measuring cognitive complexity and thus has a long history in political science and psychology. See, for example, Conway & Gornick (2011); Conway, Suedfeld, & Clements (2003); Conway, Suedfeld, & Tetlock (2001); Conway et al. (2008); Conway, Dodds, Hands Towgood, McClure, & Olson (2011); Porter & Suedfeld (1981); Streufert (1997); Streufert & Streufert (1969); Streufert, Suedfeld, & Driver (1965); Suedfeld (1985, 1994); Suedfeld & Bluck (1988); Suedfeld, Conway, & Eichhorn (2001); Suedfeld, Corteen, & McCormick (1986); Suedfeld, Guttieri, & Tetlock (2005); Suedfeld, Leighton, & Conway (2006); Suedfeld & Piedrahita (1984); Suedfeld & Streufert (1966); Suedfeld & Tetlock (1976); Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Ramirez (1977); Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Streufert (1992); Suedfeld, Wallace, & Thachuk (1993); Tetlock (1984, 1985, 1986); Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant (1985); Thoemmes & Conway (2007); Wallace, Suedfeld, & Thachuk (1993).

#### *Dialectical and Elaborative Complexity*

In the present two studies, we also coded each paragraph for two subconstructs of integrative complexity known as *dialectical complexity* (complexity achieved by giving legitimacy to two opposing viewpoints) and *elaborative complexity* (complexity achieved by using complex reasoning to defend a singular viewpoint; see Conway et al., 2008; Conway & Gornick, 2011, for descriptions of the subconstructs). For the most part, these subconstructs showed similar patterns across the results presented here as the overall complexity score. Thus, while we present some analyses on the subconstructs in tabular form and in footnotes, we focus our narrative here on the overall *integrative complexity* score.

### **Study 1: 2004 U.S. Democratic Primaries**

In 2004, a large number of candidates (10) ran in the U.S. Democratic primary with hopes of occupying one of the two spots on the Democratic presidential ticket. Due to the wavering support of the military's actions in Iraq in 2003 and the government's struggle to provide more jobs for the American people under the leadership of President Bush, the outlook for the Democratic Party appeared to be a bright one. Senator John Kerry remained ahead in the polls until Howard Dean took the lead in early 2004, forcing Kerry to reevaluate and invest more money into his campaign. Perhaps due to questions about Dean's temperament and past decisions as governor, the front-runner of the previous polls found himself coming up short in the primaries. After several crucial victories on

the part of John Kerry and John Edwards in the primaries, the other candidates chose to drop out of the election. In the end, John Kerry (presidential nominee) and John Edwards (vice presidential nominee) emerged as the winners of this political struggle (“Kerry’s long march,” 2005). Leading up to the primary vote, 10 presidential debates were held. The last primary debate occurred three days after the first Iowa primary in January of 2004. In this study, we compare the pattern of complexity across these 10 debates for the two winners in the primary with those from the remaining “losers.”

One of our research questions pertains to the pattern in the Thoemmes and Conway (2007) study: Do “winners” differ from “losers” in their tendency to more steeply drop in complexity during the election season? Would we see the same strategically timed drop in complexity among winners that was found in previous research? By comparing findings from past research with the present study, we may be one step closer to understanding the role of both simplicity and complexity in the context of politics.

## Study 1 Method

### *Integrative Complexity Scoring and Reliability*

Debate transcripts were obtained from common Internet sources (<http://www.vote-smart.org> and <http://www.washingtonpost.com>). From these debates, up to 10 paragraphs per candidate per debate were chosen at random and were used as the source materials to code for integrative complexity. All possible identifying information (e.g. names, dates, etc.) was removed and replaced with generic language (e.g., “1941” replaced with “date”). The resulting set of paragraphs was scored by four trained coders who had previously obtained a reliability rating of .85 with an expert coder on *integrative complexity*.

As previously described, integrative complexity is determined based on the levels of differentiation and integration present in a given paragraph. The total number of coded paragraphs was 779. Interrater reliability was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .68$ ). In order to further hone this integrative complexity score, we additionally removed a coder’s specific score for any paragraph that differed greatly ( $>2.0$ ) from the average of the other coder’s scores for that paragraph and then replaced it with the mean of the other coders. Although these are infrequent cases (average across coders = 3%), this technique essentially removes any score for any paragraph that is an outlier score. These adjusted complexity scores showed increased reliability ( $\alpha = .78$ ). This same technique was applied to both elaborative (raw  $\alpha = .63$ , adjusted  $\alpha = .78$ ) and dialectical (raw  $\alpha = .44$ , adjusted  $\alpha = .61$ ) complexity codings. Final scores used in analyses were the average of the four coders’ adjusted scores for integrative complexity, elaborative complexity, and dialectical complexity.

### *Correcting for Overrepresentation of Some Persons*

Not all candidates participated in every debate. In order to ensure that our results were not due to overrepresentation of particular persons in some time frames, for all analyses we computed a separate set of analyses that only included persons for whom all 10 debates were available. As will be seen below, these results showed the same pattern as the primary results reported; thus, our results are not easily directly attributable to some persons be overrepresented in some time frames.

### *Proximity to Election and Unit of Analysis*

Because of the large number of debates involved, we present below a correlation between the complexity of debate rhetoric and proximity to the primary elections. This election proximity score was a simple rank order based on debate number (so the first debate = 1, second = 2, last debate = 10,

and so forth). Higher scores on the proximity measure thus indicate closer proximity to the primary election in a sequential fashion that is not affected by small temporal differences in the time between debates. Thus, higher scores on the proximity-complexity correlation mean that, as the election season progressed, complexity increased; negative scores mean that complexity tended to decrease over the course of the election season. We computed this correlation (1) for all candidates together, (2) for each candidate separately, (3) for the average of the two *winners*' complexity (as a group), and (4) for the average complexity of the *losers*.

Our unit of analysis, consistent with a lot of past research on this topic (e.g., Conway, Suedfeld, & Clements, 2003; Conway, Dodds, Hands Towgood, McClure, & Olson, 2011; Suedfeld & Rank, 1976; Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Ramirez, 1977; Thoemmes & Conway, 2007), is the paragraph. In essence, each paragraph is randomly sampled from the total body of paragraphs in each cell for each person, analogous to the population sampling of individuals in a typical study. Because these paragraphs are independent of each other from a methodological point of view, we opted to follow the principle outlined by Cohen (1990) that, unless there is a compelling statistical reason to do otherwise, one should use the unit of analysis that provides the highest available  $N$  and thus avoids unnecessarily lowering power. In this case, no statistical assumptions are violated by using the paragraph as the unit of analysis.<sup>1</sup>

## Study 1 Results

### *Overall Complexity Differences between Winners and Losers*

There was no overall difference on complexity between winners and losers (winners  $M = 1.72$ , losers  $M = 1.67$ ,  $p > .30$ ), but (as illustrated below) their pattern over time differed dramatically.<sup>2</sup>

### *Overall Tendency for All Candidates to Change as Elections Neared*

To better understand the overall tendency of all the candidates over time, we correlated proximity to the upcoming primaries with integrative complexity for all candidates' scores together. Consistent with prior work suggesting that elections reduce the complexity of electoral candidates (Tetlock, 1981; Thoemmes & Conway, 2007), temporal proximity to the upcoming election was significantly negatively correlated with integrative complexity ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

### *Differences in the Pattern of Winners and Losers Over Time*

However, as in Thoemmes and Conway (2007), additional analyses revealed that winners and losers showed a marked difference in their tendency to drop in complexity as the election got closer. As Table 1 reveals, the two winning candidates both showed significant negative correlations between temporal proximity to an election and integrative complexity, while almost none of the other candidates showed this same relation (we return in the discussion to the one exception, Clark).

<sup>1</sup> Preliminary analyses using the person/debate as the unit of analysis yielded nearly identical results, both descriptively and inferentially, as those reported here. For example, using this more conservative method, "winners" still showed a significant drop in integrative complexity as the election neared ( $r[10] = -.67$ ,  $p = .033$ ), whereas losers did not ( $r[10] = -.12$ ,  $p = .735$ ). Thus, it appears that the unit of analyses does not affect the overall picture that emerges from these results.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, one main effect difference did emerge for the subconstructs: Although winners and losers were identical overall on their dialectical complexity ( $M = 1.22$  for both), winners showed significantly more elaborative complexity than losers ( $M$ 's = 1.54 and 1.44, respectively,  $p < .05$ ). This suggests that winners may use more complexity in defense of specific arguments than losers. However, this finding is independent of the main storyline suggested by this manuscript about changes in complexity over time (and indeed, in spite of this main effect difference, as Table 1 reveals, winners showed a significantly steeper drop in elaborative complexity over time than losers did). As a result, we opt not to focus on it here.

**Table 1.** Study 1: Relationship Between Proximity to Final Election and Rhetoric Complexity by Type of Candidate in 2004 Primaries

	Integrative Complexity	Dialectical Complexity	Elaborative Complexity
All Candidates ( <i>n</i> = 779)	-.09*	-.07*	-.06 <sup>^</sup>
<b>Winners Only (<i>n</i> = 185)</b>	<b>-.25***</b>	<b>-.16*</b>	<b>-.21**</b>
Kerry ( <i>n</i> = 93)	-.26*	-.08	-.20*
Edwards ( <i>n</i> = 92)	-.25*	-.27**	-.21*
<b>Losers Only (<i>n</i> = 594)</b>	<b>-.03</b>	<b>-.04</b>	<b>-.01</b>
<b>Losers/10 debate (<i>n</i> = 274)</b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>-.00</b>	<b>.01</b>
Dean ( <i>n</i> = 94)	.00	-.10	.03
Clark ( <i>n</i> = 70)	-.27*	-.29*	-.17
Lieberman ( <i>n</i> = 98)	-.00	.15	-.05
Sharpton ( <i>n</i> = 75)	-.12	-.26*	.10
Kucinich ( <i>n</i> = 82)	.03	-.04	.05
Gephart ( <i>n</i> = 85)	.08	-.10	.11
Graham ( <i>n</i> = 37)	.13	-.14	.11
Braun ( <i>n</i> = 53)	-.18	-.06	-.19

Note. \*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05; <sup>^</sup>*p* < .10; all *p*-values are two-tailed; “Losers/10 debate” includes only those losers for whom all 10 debates were available.

**Table 2.** Study 1: Integrative Complexity by Candidate and Debate Number

Debate Number:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Winners</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.3</b>
Kerry	1.8	1.8	2.0	2.0	1.7	1.6	2.4	1.4	1.6	1.3
Edwards	1.8	1.8	2.3	1.9	1.8	2.1	1.5	1.8	1.4	1.3
<b>Losers</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.4</b>
<b>Losers/10 Debate</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.4</b>
Dean	1.5	1.6	2.1	1.8	1.4	1.7	2.1	2.1	1.5	1.4
Lieberman	1.7	1.6	1.6	2.1	1.7	1.7	2.4	1.9	1.9	1.4
Kucinich	1.3	1.6	1.9	1.6	1.5	1.9	1.9	2.0	1.7	1.5
Sharpton	1.6		1.6	1.9	1.5	2.1	1.7	1.4	1.2	1.6
Gephart	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.4	2.1	
Braun	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.3	2.0	2.1			1.5	
Clark				1.9	1.9	2.0	1.6	2.1	1.6	1.3
Graham	1.8	1.4	1.5	2.0						

Note. “Losers/10 debate” includes only those losers for whom all 10 debates were available.

To capture this overall pattern, we summed the “winners” and “losers” scores for each debate and computed correlations between the average winners’ scores and temporal proximity on the one hand and the average losers’ scores and temporal proximity on the other. Consistent with the individual candidate analyses, winners in this summary analysis tended to drop in complexity as the election neared ( $r = -.25, p < .001$ ), while losers showed almost no effect over time ( $r = -.03, p > .40$ ).

What accounts for these discrepancies between the winning and losing pattern? A descriptive look at Table 2, where each candidate’s complexity scores are presented for each debate, helps offer some clues. In particular, it appears as if these discrepant correlations are driven more by the fact that winners had higher complexity scores in the earlier debates, more so than by lower scores in the later debates. To more clearly evaluate this idea, we created some ad hoc debate groupings by lumping debates 1–3 in the “early” category and debates 8–10 in the “late” category. Then we ran a 2 (Candidate Success: Winner versus Loser) × 2 (Debate Time Frame: Early versus Late) ANOVA. Consistent with the correlational analyses presented earlier, these results showed a significant



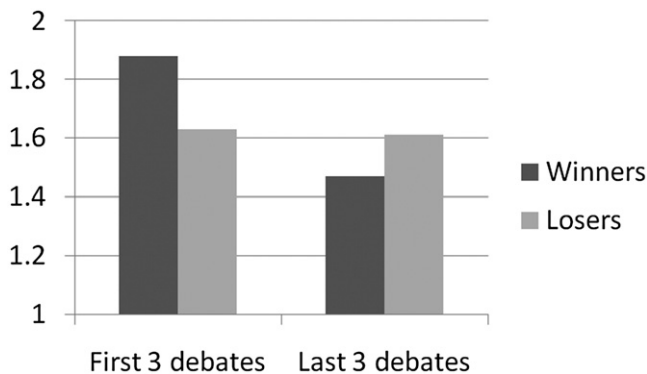


Figure 1. Integrative Complexity by Electoral Success and First/Last Three Debates.

Table 3. Study 1: Relationship between Proximity to Final Election and Integrative Complexity by Topic Type in 2004 Primaries

	Foreign Only	Domestic Only
All Candidates	-.10	-.08
<b>Winners Only</b>	<b>-.28*</b>	<b>-.21*</b>
<b>Losers Only</b>	<b>-.04</b>	<b>-.04</b>

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; ^ $p < .10$ ; all  $p$ -values are two-tailed.

interaction between Time Frame and Success: Winners showed a large drop from early to late time frames (early = 1.88, late = 1.47), while losers showed almost no drop (early = 1.63, late = 1.61),  $F(1,497) = 9.91$ , Success x Time Frame interaction  $p = .002$ .

More importantly, this categorical approach allows us to also test if the different patterns over time between winners and losers are driven more by early or late differences. As can be seen in Figure 1, these results are consistent with our descriptive analyses of the candidate speeches: While winners showed both more complexity early *and* less complexity late than losers, the former tendency was much stronger. And indeed, using a very liberal Fisher’s *Least Significant Difference post hoc* comparison, winners showed significantly *more* complexity during the first three debates ( $p = .005$ ), but only approached showing significantly *less* in the last three debates ( $p = .109$ ). Because of these ad hoc groupings and the over-liberal nature of the Fisher’s test, we do not want to overinterpret these findings. We offer them here primarily as an illustrative point: The significant difference in the pattern between winners and losers appears more driven by early differences than late differences.<sup>3</sup>

It is noteworthy that we also ran analyses breaking down those statements by candidates that only dealt with foreign (e.g., Iraq war) versus those that only dealt with domestic (e.g., economy) topics. These results are presented in Table 3. As can be seen there, although the difference between winners and losers was stronger overall for foreign topics, the same basic pattern held across topic type.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> We also computed all analyses using the more stringent criteria for inclusion that excluded persons who did not participate in every debate. These analyses are essentially identical, both inferentially and descriptively, to those we do present. Thus, we do not discuss this issue further.

<sup>4</sup> We had originally intended to tie the present results directly to changing polls pre- and post-debate at a very micro level. However, these analyses yielded inconsistent results: Complexity at each debate did not consistently significantly predict (using various indicators) a shift in popularity occurring as a result of a given debate. We suspect that this lack of finding occurred in part because (1) these microlevel analyses use polls that are days apart, and we suspect this is simply too short a time to pick up on larger changes in candidate preference. Further, (2) our original idea that simplicity would win elections

## Study 1 Discussion

First and foremost, these results suggest that winners and losers in elections show a different pattern over time in terms of the complexity of their rhetoric. Interestingly, the results of this study dovetail somewhat with prior research on presidential State of the Union speeches (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007). Despite involving radically different groups (40 presidents versus one Democratic primary), different speech contexts (SOTU versus debates), and different time comparisons (large-scale, year-by-year versus small-scale, week-to-week), in both cases the group of “winners” showed a steeper drop in complexity later in the election process, where as the “losers” did not show this same tendency. Given the large differences between the studies, such similarity across them on a fairly complicated pattern is rather remarkable.<sup>5</sup>

These data thus suggest that a larger “shift” downward in complexity as the election nears is a more effective rhetorical device than (relatively) more stable complexity levels during the election season. Thus, it may be something about *changing* complexity levels that indicates success, as opposed to just considering absolute levels at any one point in time. This is consistent with a lot of research across multiple domains showing that changes in complexity levels over time (as opposed to just absolute levels of complex thinking) predict various phenomena (e.g., Suedfeld & Bluck, 1988; Suedfeld & Rank, 1976; Tetlock, 1985; Thoemmes & Conway, 2007; see Conway, Ryder, Tweed, & Sokol, 2001, for a review).

But why would a change matter in this case? Here we limit ourselves to two broad brushstrokes; we return to this issue in the general discussion. One set of explanations would pertain to the rhetorical value of shifting complexity levels as elections neared. There may be something about such a shift that provides a “signal” to the electorate that indicates positive leadership potential. This could be for multiple reasons; we offer one specific rhetoric-based theory in the general discussion section.

A second set of explanations pertains to complexity as an indicator of individual cognition (as opposed to as it being a purely rhetorical device). For example, one possibility is that effective leaders—those most likely to manage and run effective campaigns, for example—actually shift their private thinking more during the election season than do ineffective leaders (for relevant discussions on rhetorical versus cognitive explanations, see Conway et al., 2001; Thoemmes & Conway, 2007). Perhaps, for example, effective leadership involves clear phases of (1) deciding what one’s position is (i.e., more open-mindedness early on, thus increasing complexity) and (2) making up one’s mind and thus starting to talk about implementation (thus lowering complexity). Maybe this style of leadership is simply more effective, and complexity thus taps into this effectiveness by capturing private thoughts. Although the public and private explanations are not mutually exclusive, some evidence does suggest complexity captures private thoughts, even for public speeches (see, e.g., Conway et al., 2001; Tetlock & Tyler, 1996).

Our current data, though interesting, are not completely clean in the story they tell. For example, although in the main losers do not show significant drops in complexity over the course of the

was itself perhaps too simple, and these microlevel analyses do not easily account for a larger pattern over time. However, this lack of a finding from actual polls further suggests additional caution in interpreting the current data as a clear indicator of a direct causal link between complexity and electoral success, as well as suggesting that candidate complexity in the current study may be impacting success, not because people are directly influenced by the debates, but rather because the debates represent one slice of a larger picture (e.g., either the candidate’s private thoughts or a larger campaign strategy that involves changing complexity levels).

<sup>5</sup> There are differences as well. In particular, in the Thoemmes and Conway (2007) data, both groups showed a drop in complexity, but winning presidents showed a drop that occurred later (year three to year four) than losing presidents (year one to year two). This does not exactly match onto the pattern here. One could argue that our pattern for winners actually shows a pattern closer to the SOTU losers, if we focus *only* on the last three debates in our data, where winners show an “earlier” drop (see Table 2). However, given the vast differences in time (one year between speeches in SOTU, weeks or days in our data set), we hardly think that this microlevel of interpretation is justified. Still, it is worth noting that, although a remarkably similar pattern across studies emerges here, how well they map onto each other is not entirely clear.



debates, there is one exception: Clark. Why might this be? Obviously we can only speculate, but it is worth noting that Clark entered the debates later in the process than other candidates, and it is thus possible that we simply did not capture for him the early speeches that our own analyses suggest are partially driving the effect. (In other words, perhaps if he had participated in the first few debates, his early comments would have been lower in complexity, thus possibly ameliorating the correlation). Of course, it is possible that late entries entail a different dynamic altogether, or that Clark is just an anomaly (after all, complexity is a proportionally small factor in determining electoral success, so naturally our results are not going to fit every candidate).

Finally, though interesting and meaningful, these results nonetheless have some additional obvious problems. Foremost among them: We have inferred that complexity conceptually *preceded* electoral success. Although this makes sense, it is also possible that politicians who lead electoral polls differ in their complexity pattern *because* of the awareness of their impending victory. After all, politicians are generally aware of where they stand in the electoral pecking order, and the psychology of leading an election may differ from the psychology of believing one is behind.

To account for this directly, we ran an experimental study that makes such a conclusion impossible. However, it is worth noting before we start that this method yielded quite a different result that led us to propose a different explanatory theory (which we discuss later on).

## Study 2: Experimental Study on 2008 Presidential Election

On November 4, 2008, the 56th United States presidential election was held as President George W. Bush ended his second term as president. Running for office were the junior senator from Illinois, Barack Obama (Democrat), and senior senator from Arizona, John McCain (Republican). As the election year heated up, many believed that health care would be a major issue in the 2008 election. However, health care gave way as the focus shifted to economic troubles. In the end, the predominant issues included in this election were economics, foreign policy, the continuing war on terror and the war in Iraq, and to a lesser extent than expected, health care.

At the beginning of the election cycle, polls suggested that McCain was being hurt by his steadfast support of the largely unpopular Iraq war (see, e.g., <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/helpobama/>). And indeed, although some polls suggested that McCain won high marks for standing behind an unpopular policy (Wallsten, 2008), the weight of the evidence overall suggests that this issue likely hurt rather than helped McCain (see e.g., Greenwald, 2008). Further, McCain's association with the unpopular President Bush was clearly a constant burden on his campaign.

Results of the election designated Obama as the substantial winner, holding 365 electoral votes and 53% of the popular vote. McCain received 173 electoral votes and 46% of the popular vote.

We were interested to what degree each candidate used complex versus simple rhetoric effectively in their campaign. In particular: How would people respond to simple rhetoric from each candidate? How would they respond to complex rhetoric? Would people come away from simple or complex rhetoric more likely to vote for the author of the statement? Thus, rather than using *ultimate* success in the campaign as the measurement, the present study uses a more direct measurement of the effect of rhetoric, one individual human mind at a time.

To do this, we took rhetoric from the campaign season from each candidate and parsed it into paragraphs. We then coded those paragraphs for how complex they were and gave them to participants (in the two months leading up to the general election) unaware of this complexity score (or indeed, the purpose of the project). We measured, among other things, how likely participants were to vote for the author of the paragraph both before and after reading it.

Based on our initial simplicity-wins-elections starting point (and given that all paragraphs were given to participants fairly late in the election season), we hypothesized that, for both can-

didates, simple rhetoric would be more effective. In particular, we hypothesized that people would be more likely to shift their vote towards the paragraph author if the paragraph was simple (versus complex).

## Study 2 Method

### *Overview of Paragraph Sources*

For this research, three different sources for collecting paragraphs were used. Each source included rhetoric from both candidates at different times in the presidential campaign. The three paragraph sources were party convention speeches, the presidential debates, and a convenience sample of additional campaign rhetoric. These source materials and selection criteria are described in more detail below. Paragraphs from each source were broken down into lengths of four or more lines each, and all source types were coded for *integrative complexity*. We further broke down these paragraphs into two broad topic types (domestic versus foreign policy).

### *Overview of Participant Samples and Procedure*

Four-hundred and forty-nine undergraduates at the University of Montana participated for course credit. Participants were given a single paragraph from one of the three sources. Questionnaire packets consisted of a survey of general political attitudes followed by the selected paragraph. The author of the paragraph (McCain, Obama) was always identified. Following the paragraph was a set of questions regarding the participant's perception of the paragraph itself. Participants were asked about the likelihood of their voting for McCain and Obama both before and after they were presented with the paragraph and were further asked to rate the candidates on various valenced traits (these trait measures only occurred after reading the paragraph). Some participants received the questionnaire as part of one of several large mass-testing sessions, while other participants received it in small groups. Assignment of paragraphs within-source was random. Experimenters were blind as to which packet each participant received.

In all cases described below, the selected paragraphs were coded for integrative complexity by coders unaware of the purposes of the project and blind to the author of the paragraph.

### *Description of Three Source Materials*

*Party Conventions: Paragraph Source One.* One-hundred and seventy-seven participants received paragraphs from either Obama's or McCain's speeches at their respective national party conventions. To select the paragraphs to be presented later to participants, all paragraphs from the speeches were first separated into four sets following a 2 (Candidate: Obama vs. McCain)  $\times$  2 (Topic Type: foreign versus domestic economy) approach, resulting in four categories of paragraphs that qualified for selection (Obama on foreign policy, Obama on economics, McCain on foreign policy, and McCain on economics). A random number generator was used to select five paragraphs from each of the four groups, totaling 20 paragraphs. Each participant got one of these 20 paragraphs in the packet described above.

*Presidential Debates: Paragraph Source Two.* Ninety-eight participants received paragraphs collected from the three presidential debate transcripts. Each transcript was again separated into smaller paragraphs, separated by topic (economics and foreign policy). Once again the paragraphs were separated into four groups (Obama on foreign policy, Obama on economics, McCain on foreign policy, and McCain on economics) and numbered. A random number generator was again used to

select five paragraphs from each of the four groups, totaling 20 paragraphs. Each participant got one of these 20 paragraphs in the packet described above.

*Additional Campaign Rhetoric: Paragraph Source Three.* One-hundred and seventy-four participants received paragraphs collected from speeches given while on the campaign trail. Unlike the other campaign-relevant speech/interview segments, these additional pieces of rhetoric were not randomly selected from an available pool: Rather, they were gathered from preexisting convenience sources on the internet (e.g., <http://www.ontheissues.org/2008/>) with the goal of providing a sample, for each candidate, of both simple and complex paragraphs.

### *Topic Types*

Across all source materials, we divided topics into two broad types: foreign and domestic. *Foreign topics* were defined as those explicitly dealing with foreign policy or issues in other nations and *domestic topics* as those explicitly dealing only with issues constrained to U.S. borders. Thus, the Iraq War, Afghan War, and other Middle East issues were defined as foreign topics, while the economy, jobs, education, and other specifically U.S. issues were defined as domestic topics. As previously described, for Sources One and Two, this was done through the selection process in advance, so all paragraphs cleanly fit in one or the other category. In the case of Source Three (where these judgments were made ad hoc), paragraphs that did not clearly fit into either category were dropped for this analysis.

### *Integrative Complexity Coding*

These selected paragraphs were scored for *integrative complexity* by sets of trained coders, each of whom had previously achieved a reliability of .85 with an expert coder. In the present study, three coders scored the debates ( $\alpha = .70$ ), and five coders scored the convention and other campaign rhetoric ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

In our analyses, we computed an average complexity score for each paragraph. When participants received that paragraph, this average complexity score was used as the key independent variable.

### *Dependent Measures*

*Candidate favorability measures.* Conceptually, the key measure for our purposes was the shift in attitudes towards the candidate giving the paragraph, relative to his primary opponent. Thus, to accomplish this, we asked participants prior to reading the key paragraph what their likelihood of voting for McCain and Obama was (this entailed two separate questions, numerically anchored by 1 and 5). We then repeated these same questions after they read the paragraph (we changed the numerical anchors to 1 and 7 for the postparagraph measure, in order to reduce the likelihood they would give the exact same numerical answer because of rote memory).

To capture our key variable in a single measure, we first computed the relative likelihood that participants' favored the candidate who authored the paragraph they would ultimately read by subtracting the initial (preparagraph) opponent candidate's "likely to vote for" score from the paragraph author's score (note that participants were not aware of which candidate they would read about at that point). Higher scores thus mean they were more likely to vote for the author of the paragraph, while lower scores mean they were less likely to vote for the author of the paragraph. Then we computed the same score after participants had read the paragraph. Finally, both of these were converted to z-scores (this was done within-paragraph author, to account for general differences across authors) and the preparagraph score was subtracted from the postparagraph score. The

resulting score thus represents the likelihood that participants shifted their voting preferences in favor of the author of the speech they wrote: Higher scores mean they were more likely to vote for the author after reading the paragraph than his opponent, while lower scores mean they were more likely to vote for the author's opponent after reading the paragraph. This *voting preference* score served as a key dependent measure in our analyses.

We also asked participants, after they had read the paragraph (note that in this case we have no preparagraph measurement) to rate both candidates on a 1–7 scale on a series of clearly valenced traits: Honest, kind, attractive, flexible, thoughtful, liar, attractive, smart, tough, consistent, strong leader. For each candidate, we reverse-scored “liar” and computed the average favorability score. We then subtracted the author of the paragraph's score from his opponent's score. The resulting *relative positivity* score reflects the degree that participants viewed the author of the paragraph as more favorable on this list of traits than his opponent.

We further averaged the *voting preference* and *relative positivity* score into a larger composite score, referred to as the *candidate favorability* score.

*Paragraph favorability measures.* We additionally had participants make several ratings of the paragraph itself, independent of the author of that paragraph. We focus here on two directly relevant to participants' view of the favorability of the paragraph (both on 1–7 scales): Participants were asked to rate how much they agreed with the paragraph and how persuasive they thought the paragraph was. We then averaged these *agreement* and *persuasiveness* scores into a single composite, referred to as the *paragraph favorability* score. (Note that for all of the paragraph favorability measures, we had no preparagraph ratings).<sup>6</sup>

## Study 2 Results

### *Descriptive Analyses: Candidate's Complexity*

Although not central to our present purpose, we first analyzed the overall complexity of each candidate using a 2 (candidate)  $\times$  2 (topic type: foreign or domestic) design. (For these analyses, we threw out nonrandomly selected materials and thus used only the convention speeches and debates.) Overall, Obama was more complex than McCain, and this effect was marginally significant,  $F(1,80) = 2.782$ ,  $p = .099$ . However, this pattern was clearly driven solely by Obama's higher complexity scores on domestic issues—for domestic issues, Obama was substantially higher than McCain (Obama  $M = 2.04$ , McCain  $M = 1.58$ ,  $p = .011$ ), while the candidates were virtually equal on foreign policy complexity (Obama  $M = 1.79$ , McCain  $M = 1.80$ ,  $p > .80$ ), candidate by topic-type interaction  $p = .088$ . This pattern was even more pronounced when looking only at the debates, thus honing in on the heart of the election season (for debates only, candidate  $\times$  topic-type interaction  $p = .043$ ).

### *Primary Results: Candidate Preference*

To capture the overall pattern of results, we here present summary analyses performed on all three source materials. These analyses are presented in Table 4. As can be seen there, no consistent

<sup>6</sup> We also had participant self-reports for their own political affiliations. Preliminary analyses suggested that this variable, while of course having a direct effect on voter preference, mattered little to the *pattern* of results we report: For both democrats and republicans, McCain showed stronger positive complexity–candidate-preference correlations than Obama. Further, participants also completed several other measurements related to their views of the paragraph: Whether it seemed truthful, consistent, complex, pandering, whether or not participants could understand it, whether or not it provoked thought, and ratings of attitude strength such as topic importance. These measurements are mostly beyond the scope of this article and are not discussed largely for the sake of space.

**Table 4.** Study 2: Relationship of Paragraph Complexity to Participant’s Views of Candidate and Paragraph

	Obama			McCain		
	All Topics (n = 229)	Foreign Only (n = 63)	Domestic Only (n = 130)	All Topics (n = 218)	Foreign Only (n = 42)	Domestic Only (n = 115)
<i>Candidate Favor. (Total)</i>	-.01	-.04	-.01	.17*	.37*	.04
Voting Likelihood	-.05	-.02	-.06	.15*	.47**	.07
Relative Positivity	.02	-.08	.05	.10^	.14	-.04
<i>Paragraph Favor. (Total)</i>	.09	.20^	.07	-.05	-.05	-.09
Agreement	.14*	.22^	.19*	-.07	-.16	-.04
Persuasiveness	.02	.14	-.07	-.03	.06	-.11

Note. ^p < .15; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01.

support emerged for the “simplicity is effective” hypothesis. Instead, a more complicated pattern emerged that showed sharp differences between the candidates in terms of the effectiveness of complex rhetoric. For Obama, there was little relationship between the complexity of his rhetoric and participants’ favorability ratings (summary  $r = -.01$ ). However, for McCain, more complex rhetoric was associated with *increasing* favorability (summary complexity-favorability  $r = .17, p < .05$ ). It is noteworthy that, of the two effects contributing to this summary score, the largest was the more precise (and practically relevant) “voting likelihood” score which reflects pre- to postparagraph shifts in participants’ candidate views ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ).

Table 4 also reveals, however, that this pattern is almost entirely accounted for by McCain’s successful use of complexity for *foreign* topics. When talking about foreign topics, McCain’s complexity–candidate-favorability correlation was fairly robust ( $r = .37, p < .01$ ), and this is again especially true for the key *voting preference* measure ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ). As Table 4 reveals, McCain did not show much effectiveness with complexity on domestic issues ( $r = .04$ ).

On the other hand, the complexity of Obama’s rhetoric seemed to matter little whether talking about either foreign ( $r = -.04$ ) or domestic ( $r = -.01$ ) topics. Thus, overall, McCain showed a stronger complexity–candidate-preference link than Obama, but this was largely driven by the success of McCain’s complexity for foreign topics.<sup>7,8</sup>

*Secondary Results: Paragraph Favorability*

Given our goal of understanding the relationship between candidate complexity and electoral success, the primary purpose of our research was to view the impact that the complexity of rhetoric had on voting intentions and candidate favorability. However, we also had participant ratings of how they viewed the paragraph itself. We focus on two of these most directly relevant to the favorability of the paragraph: Agreement and Persuasiveness.

<sup>7</sup> Paragraphs were also coded for the two subconstructs of integrative complexity: elaborative complexity and dialectical complexity (see Conway et al., 2008; Conway et al., 2011). Interestingly, both dialectical and elaborative complexity showed the same overall pattern as the larger integrative complexity measurement. This suggests that persons are impacted by any kind of complexity to view McCain more positively, not just complexity focusing on multiple sides of an issue.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to the three sources discussed here, we also gathered paragraph materials from a fourth source: A *Parade Magazine* where both Obama and McCain responded to the question “What does patriotism mean to you?” The method for this study differed from the present method in multiple ways. For example, rather than using the exact wording of the two candidates, these paragraphs were strategically manipulated by the researchers to change the complexity level. Further, none of these paragraphs clearly fell into the “foreign” or “domestic” categories and so are not relevant to that analysis. Although in this study complexity was more generally negatively related to voting preference for both candidates, the relative pattern was similar to that reported for the other studies here: Obama ( $r = -.30$ ) was less successful with complex paragraphs than McCain ( $r = -.11$ ). Inclusion of these results into an overall analyses does not change the pattern of results presented in the manuscript. We exclude it here largely for convenience—it has nothing to do with the key topic type storyline and differs substantially enough in terms of method to justify its exclusion.

Interestingly, as Table 4 reveals, these paragraph favorability ratings often showed a pattern in a somewhat different direction than the candidate ratings. This was especially true for the agreement rating. For example, for Obama, participants tended to agree with him more when he was complex ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ), but if anything the opposite was true for McCain ( $r = -.07, ns$ ).

### Study 2 Discussion

Taken as a whole, these results clearly offer no direct support for the “simplicity sells” view that is a common assumption in political psychological theory (e.g., Thoemmes & Conway, 2007) and in common parlance (Vedantam, 2008), and with which we started this article. In contrast, they suggest a more complex story: To understand the relationship between the complexity campaign rhetoric and electoral success, we must consider (among other things) the interaction of complexity with the candidate using said complexity. McCain was most effective when he used complexity, while for Obama it did not matter whether he used simplicity or complexity.

One interesting, unintended contribution of Study 2 is the disconnect between voter agreement with the paragraph content and their voting intention (in fact, these things were almost entirely uncorrelated across the whole sample,  $r = -.03$ ). For Obama, even though complexity made participants more likely to agree with the paragraph itself, the agreement inspired by this complexity did not make them more likely to vote for him. For McCain, the reverse was true: Complexity did not make people more likely to agree with him, but it did make them more likely to vote for him. This disconnect between voter perceptions of the candidate and of his or her performance on a specific issue has been observed before in other domains (e.g., Suedfeld, Rank, & Borrie, 1975; Voeten & Brewer, 2006), but never to our knowledge with respect to complexity. These results suggest that complexity is having an effect on voter preference that is largely outside agreement with the specific content of the paragraph—something about just *being complex* on foreign policy seems to trigger more favorable responding towards McCain, whether or not it triggers agreement.

Like all studies, Study 2 has some limitations. First, we are only assessing electoral success based on self-reports of a single paragraph. While this unique approach has many strengths that allow us to understand participants’ reactions to specific pieces of rhetoric, in no way are we arguing that one can draw a direct line from this approach to actual voting behavior. You cannot. Our research presents an important piece of the psychological puzzle of voting behavior, but needs to be supplemented by additional work on actual voting behavior.

Also, an interesting quirk of these results is that the key result for McCain is at least partially dependent on not only increases in McCain’s favorability, but also decreases in Obama’s favorability (remember our main “voting likelihood” measurement is a “relative” measurement). We largely have glossed over this issue because we feel the relative measure is the more conceptually important and methodologically sound measure and because of space issues. Nevertheless, this limitation is worth noting: We have spoken of the results largely in terms of the impact rhetoric had on the focal candidate, but the effects we report are due as much to (and in some cases, more to) the impact of rhetoric on views of the opponent.

### General Discussion

Looking at the larger picture, on the surface the discrepancies across studies seem almost irreconcilable—in Study 1 and prior research (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007), decreasing complexity over time led to better electoral success, while in Study 2, increasing complexity (for one candidate) led to a greater likelihood of voting for the candidate. Clearly at this point we can only speculate. However, these results are suggestive of a different theory of the complexity–electoral-success relationship: A compensatory theory.



*A Compensatory Theory of Complexity and Electoral Success*

“Seek simplicity, and distrust it.” —Alfred North Whitehead

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not one bit simpler.” —Albert Einstein (attributed)

One possible view of the complexity–electoral-success relationship is that the strategic use of complexity might *compensate* for perceived weaknesses that are relevant to a complexity-related dimension. After all, despite the fact that people in many ways like simplicity, they also (as the above quotes imply) distrust it. Few people would likely agree with the following statement: “I want a president that is simple-minded and stupid, unable to think complexly.” So perhaps what people want is a good *balance* of complex and simple thinking. Presidents perceived to drift too far in one direction, then, might *compensate* for this perceived weakness by using a complexity level that implies the other direction.

How does this potentially help us understand the current set of results? Let’s start with Study 2. It is possible that McCain was pictured as possessing traits associated with simple-mindedness. For example, McCain was largely pictured as a “hothead” with a quick temper (see Immelman, 2007; Kane, 2008). Also, McCain was dogged by associations with President Bush, himself viewed as overly simple-minded. Finally, McCain was known for his uncompromising (read: simple-minded) support of the Iraq War, a largely unpopular issue.

Thus, one possible explanation for our results is that his use of complexity *compensates* for these perceived weaknesses. Using complex rhetoric might make people view McCain as less hot-headed (complexity = “measured”) and more flexible. The impact of this complexity might be especially likely to occur for domains on which he clearly holds an unpopular view, as listeners think he might be willing to consider alternative viewpoints or at least think more deeply about such topics. In the present case, it thus might be particularly effective for McCain to talk complexly about the Iraq War specifically and foreign policy more generally. The reason this complexity–voting-preference link might occur is because this complexity helps offset previously held views that McCain is a “hot-headed, simple-minded hawk.”<sup>9</sup>

Now let’s consider Study 1. It is noteworthy that in the 2004 election season, especially for Kerry, the Democratic candidates were often considered “wishy-washy” in their views (see the famous *Saturday Night Live* episode on Kerry and flip-flopping), and it is possible that lowering complexity over time served to offset this perceived weakness.

For example, during his run in the democratic primaries, Kerry allegedly changed his position on the Iraq War. When questioned about his vote against an \$87 billion dollar appropriation for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kerry stated, “I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it” (“Kerry discusses \$87 billion dollar comment,” 2004). Statements such as this haunted Kerry throughout the Presidential election.

Indeed, that this was a perceived weakness of his could clearly be seen later during the general presidential election (suggesting that although Kerry overcame it enough to win the primaries against

<sup>9</sup> In the present study, two of the measurements in our relative positivity score were potentially relevant to a “complex” personality: “Flexible” and “Thoughtful.” Although when McCain used complexity he was viewed as higher on these traits (using a relative difference score with Obama) than when he used simplicity ( $r_s = .24$  and  $.13$ ), these effects nonetheless did not account for the key complexity–voting-preference link. Thus, an initial test of the reasoning presented in this article does not validate this speculation. Yet, these self-report measurements may not capture a key aspect of the “hot-headedness” dimension mentioned here, or the effect may be specific to perceptions of McCain’s view of (say) the Iraq War (measures we did not have). Alternatively, these self-reported measures may not pick up on a possible subtle shift in attitudes about the candidate. Thus, no direct evidence for this proposed causal path exists in the present article, but it is possible that future research may find such evidence.

other candidates who were perceived to have somewhat the same problem, he did not overcome it enough to beat a candidate who was not perceived to have that problem). A large part of the Bush/Cheney campaign portrayed Kerry as a “flip-flopper” and “wishy-washy.” This tactic seemed to work. A *Washington Post*-ABC news poll indicated that voters did, in fact, see Kerry as someone who is “wishy-washy” and someone that they could not trust (Balz & Williams, 2004). Additionally, an Associated Press poll, taken seven weeks before election day, indicated that only 37% of voters described Senator Kerry as “decisive,” whereas 75% assigned this trait to then President George Bush (Fournier, 2004). Although Kerry may have compensated by adopting more simplistic rhetoric during the primaries, late polls suggest that Kerry’s seemingly “wishy-washy” tendencies hindered his success in the presidential election overall—thus shifting to simplicity might have been (as the present results suggest was the case in the primaries) in his best interest as the campaign wore on.

Of course, this focus on specific candidates does not explain why, in prior work on SOTU speeches and Study 1, shifting complexity levels downward—regardless of party affiliation—prior to elections is predictive of electoral success. One interesting implication of this work is that *neither* low nor high complexity is effective, as such. Rather it suggests that starting with higher complexity and then “shifting” relatively late in the process, towards lower complexity, is predictive of winning elections. Why might such a shift work independent of the mean complexity levels for each candidate? One possibility involves the compensatory view: It is possible that this approach maximizes the benefits of complexity and simplicity in the minds of the populace. For example, starting with higher complexity might suggest an *ability* to weigh options (certainly a necessary ability for such a powerful leader), but a late shift towards simplicity suggests that this ability is not going to lead to flip-flopping or indecisiveness. However, having low complexity levels *too* early appeared devastating for candidates in Study 1 and in prior work (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007).

Finally, we do not claim that the compensatory theory clearly and neatly covers all the facts presented here. It obviously does not. This pattern of results is interesting and sometimes contradictory, and not all of them fit into a neat theoretical model. This is what we ought to expect as we pursue the rhetoric complexity–electoral-success relationship across multiple levels of analysis and is a problem seen in a lot of work in other domains across different levels of analysis (for discussion in the area of cultural psychology, see Conway et al., 2001). So, although we have tried to tie these results together under a larger rubric here, it may be (for example) that those things that predict a temporal psychological shift in candidate preference are simply different from those things that ultimately predict who wins an election, and this may occur for reasons that have little or nothing to do with “compensatory” mechanisms. We offer the compensatory theory here as a starting point for understanding how complexity may impact electoral success; future research will tell how robust its explanatory power is across different levels of analysis.

#### *What Drives the Complexity Effects? Perceived Ambivalence versus Perceived Mastery*

Indeed, pinpointing the exact psychological meaning of a potential compensatory mechanism is perhaps limited by the broad nature of the integrative complexity construct itself. Integrative complexity captures virtually all forms of complexity in its measurement rubric. For example, in the integrative complexity system, it is more complex to express ambivalence or uncertainty than it is to express (simple) belief or surety. Saying “I’m not certain whether A or B is best” necessarily means keeping more of an open mind than saying “I’m certain A is correct” (see Baker-Brown et al., 1992).

This raises the question: What does higher complexity mean in the context of these speeches? Might these effects be capturing something like perceived ambivalence, as opposed to the development of complex policy opinions? And does it matter to our interpretation?

First, it is important to make a larger methodological point. While ambivalence or uncertainty does warrant a complexity score  $>1$  in the integrative complexity system, it alone does not achieve

a very *high* score. Mere expressions of doubt or qualification are rather worthy of only a score of 2, whereas *true developments* of complex policies will necessarily get scores of 3 or higher. So, in a sense, although uncertain thinking does achieve *some* degree of complexity, more *truly* complex development does, in fact, receive a higher score.

So, for example, the following statement from the debates was given a score of no more than 2 by all scorers:

But, look, the nature of the challenges that we're going to face are immense and one of the things that we know about the presidency is that it's never the challenges that you expect. It's the challenges that you don't that end up consuming most of your time.

This score represents that he is aware of future uncertainties (which is more complex than claiming certainty in the future). However, the above paragraph did not receive as high of a score as the following paragraph from the debates, which was scored at least a 3 by all coders in the present set:

Depends on how we respond to Russia and it depends on a lot of things. If I say yes, then that means that we're reigniting the old Cold War. If I say no, it ignores their behavior. Obviously energy is going to be a big, big factor. And Georgia and Ukraine are both major gateways of energy into Europe. And that's one of the reasons why it's in our interest. But the Russians, I think we can deal with them but they've got to understand that they're facing a very firm and determined United States of America that will defend our interests and that of other countries in the world.

Thus, the difference between truly developed complexity and mere expressions of uncertainty are already numerically captured in the present dataset. Nevertheless, the issue has theoretical implications for how to interpret our data. Let's take the effect in Study 2 for McCain. Does the effect mean that voters like ambivalence on foreign policy for McCain, like him to show mastery/ownership of the material by demonstrating complex policies, both, or something else entirely? We simply cannot answer this question definitively here. However, two brief comments are in order.

First, although not the focus of this article, it is worth noting that the effects here are in general equally driven by both elaborative and dialectical complexity (see Table 1 and footnote 7). This is important because only dialectical complexity would show an increased score for ambivalence or uncertainty. The fact that similar effects emerge for elaborative complexity suggests that, at the very least, something in addition to ambivalence is driving the observed effects.

Second, politicians rarely say "I don't know" without discussing possibilities. It isn't good politics to admit ignorance and leave it at that. And indeed, a qualitative glance at some of the paragraphs from this data set suggests that very few statements receive complexity for *mere* ambivalence. Even among low-scoring complexity paragraphs (2's), more typical complexity scores occur for qualification (e.g., "my opponent's plans are altogether bad, though I admire his intentions"). Although in public comments American politicians do not often produce long, complex developments of policy, the complexity attained here appears (at a qualitative glance at least) due to complexity that goes beyond mere ambivalence or uncertainty.

In summary, we do not know *exactly* why complexity had the particular effects it did in the current dataset. It is possible that if we could better tease apart the psychological effects of *perceived ambivalence* versus *perceived mastery*, we might understand these data better (for example, maybe decreasing ambivalence is driving the effects in Study 1, whereas increasing mastery is driving those from Study 2). But it seems unlikely that these effects are driven *primarily* by uncertainty or ambivalence alone.

### Conclusion: Words (and Their Linguistic Properties) Matter

What drives electoral success? In addition to the extensive amount of research on the macroscopic effects of political and economic climate in regards to presidential electoral success, there is also some research demonstrating direct links between a political candidate's rhetoric and that candidate's success/popularity come election time. For instance, some research (Zullo, Oettingen, Peterson, & Seligman, 1988; Zullo & Seligman, 1990) demonstrates that the candidate who has a more pessimistic explanatory style and who ruminates about bad events is more likely to lose the election. Similarly, messages of hope in campaigns have been found to be imperative for stimulating voting and keeping constituents interested (Brader, 2005; Just, Crigler, & Belt, 2007), and other work suggests that eliciting emotional responses, personal connections, or future focus can be important in electoral success (e.g., Gross, 2008; Marcus & Mackuen, 1993; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Stevens, 2005; Redlawsk, 2007; Slatcher, Chung, Pennebaker, & Stone, 2007). Similar but less direct research implies that the use of metaphors (Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese, 2005) or the specific placement of language (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986) can impact audience response to rhetoric.

These and other studies demonstrate not only that words matter to electoral success, but they matter in sometimes nonobvious ways. However interpreted, the present studies clearly bolster this conclusion. The complexity of rhetoric is not something directly tied to the content of a given communication, but rather is a structural feature that lies *in the background* (see, e.g., Conway et al., 2008). It is indeed rather remarkable that this structural variable, hidden in the background of rhetoric, predicted winners and losers in Study 1 and a shift in candidate favorability (after being given to participants in only one paragraph) in Study 2. And while we cannot as yet fully explain the exact nature of this shift, we hope that this encourages future researchers to continue the pursuit of understanding what kind of rhetoric is most likely to win elections in democratic societies.

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