

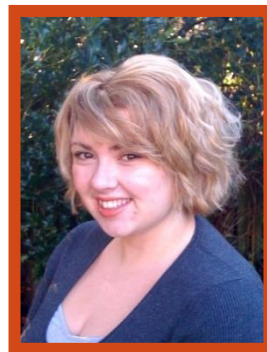
“RESPECT. EMPOWER. INCLUDE.”

**BARACK OBAMA AND THE
LIMITATIONS OF UMBRELLA
LEADERSHIP**



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THIS PAPER IS WRITTEN IN MEMORY OF



**William Luther King, II
Virginian Volunteer and Friend
1942-2010**

“RESPECT. EMPOWER. INCLUDE.”

BARACK OBAMA AND THE LIMITATIONS OF UMBRELLA LEADERSHIP

Martin Parlett and Lydia Graves assess the Obama strategy of inclusion and its potential lessons for globalized organization, from their unique perspective as campaign office directors in Virginia 2008.

INTRODUCTION: ICON AND STRATEGY

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Barack Obama’s organizational and electoral success marked a two tiered victory for the model of ‘diversity and inclusion’. First, the entire subtext of the movement was informed by the candidate’s own marked difference from the norm. This was an African American with the potential to arrive at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue as resident and Commander-in-Chief. And thus second, with his own potential to realign the axis of a nation haunted by slavery, he became the metaphor for a larger organizational project to eradicate general forms of injustice, inequality and political impasse.

The individual’s status, as a mixed race child of Hawaiian and Kenyan parents, signaled a *prima facie* triumph of a black

man against a tradition of racial exclusion from ultimate power – the American presidency. In a single event, the bus ride of Rosa Parks, the dreams of Martin Luther King, and the hopes of the African American community became manifest in an immediately historicized moment and man. In this sense, Barack Obama became the *icon of diversity* and the visual proclamation of change. But as Andrea Tapia has stated:

“True inclusion begins with a deliberate proclamation but it can’t end there. It must then be followed by relentless intentionality at every level of the organisation.”¹

And indeed, this iconicity became the organizational principle of the campaign proper. Obama’s individual ‘atypicalness’ was the figurehead of a corporate movement founded upon the tenet of unlimited outreach. The words:

“Young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled”²

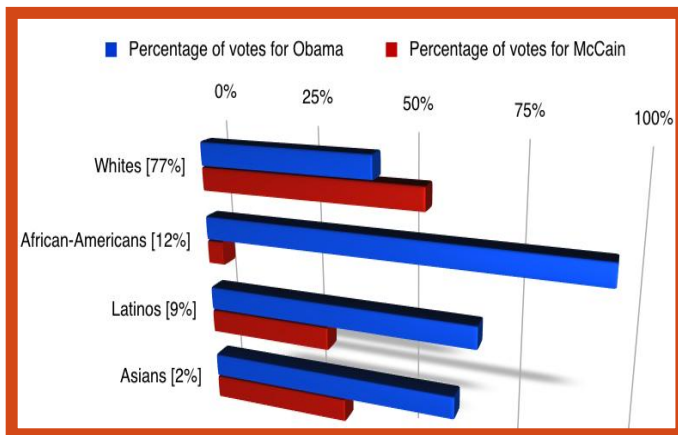
¹ Andrea Tapia, ‘The Inclusion Paradox: The Obama Era and the Transformation of Global Diversity’, Hewitt 2009, p. 5.

² President-elect Barack Obama, Acceptance Speech, Grant Park, Chicago, USA, November 4th 2008.

became the melting pot mantra which worked to democratize the Senator's potential base of support. The strategy was by no means new – politics is a game of extending appeal – but its efficacy was undoubtedly assisted by the presence of an icon who himself validated the concept of inclusion. It was a marketing tool of exceptional skill, through which the specific 'difference' of the leader was expanded to appeal to the disenfranchised 'differentials' from the white-male status quo of a presidential 'elite'. Obama was aware of the all-encompassing strategy years prior to his candidacy. In *The Audacity of Hope*, the then-Senator illuminates:

"I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views"³

This blank-canvas-strategy was to become the underlying principle of one of the world's most effective projects of leadership. His appeal was as diverse as his background, as exemplified by the exit poll data of his eventual victory⁴:



³ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, Crown 2006, p. 11

⁴ Graph extrapolation of exit poll data recorded by pollster.com. Left hand percentages record voter turnout within each category.

Since Kerry vs. Bush in 2004, Obama had increased his share of the vote within every racial category. The white and Asian vote saw modest increases (2% and 6% respectively) whilst the African American and Latino vote demonstrated a genuine sea change, with increases of 7% and 14%. Conversely, Senator McCain witnessed attendant losses in each of these categories. Obama was also the first Democrat since Jimmy Carter to garner the support of over 38% of the white male vote. Obama's victory was due, in no small part, to a diverse appeal in virtually all electoral categories.

Further still, despite accusations of Messianic symbolism, or simple arrogance during the campaign, Obama continued to expand the application of his iconicity beyond the shores of his political ambition. In the capacity of the 'outsider', Obama was the natural ally of the foreign community. He was not only the potential icon of a new America but, radically, of a new world:

"I know that I don't look like the Americans who've previously spoken in this great city...People of Berlin, people of the world, this is our moment. This is our time"⁵

In marketing terms, this is the over exposure of a limited product. His foreign visit, a televised encounter of bright lights and applause, conjured the image of a competitive foreign market

⁵ Barack Obama, Speech: 'The World that Stands as One', Berlin, Germany, July 24th 2008.

which bought into the Obama-icon. And whilst the Berliner's vote was irrelevant, it once more enhanced the campaign's foundational ideal of inclusion, and exaggerated the *E pluribus unum*⁶ (out of many, one) ethic of his leadership.

AND THIS IS WHERE OUR STORY BEGINS

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During a seemingly average August evening in 2008, Obama's call to universal action, to create the perfect union, cascaded into the ears of two unsuspecting British students. Within moments we had contacted the campaign Headquarters, pledged our international allegiance, and booked flights to Washington Dulles. Clothes and hope were packed hurriedly in a suitcase, whilst family members looked on in befuddlement. In a matter of hours we had become an extreme manifestation of the Obama strategy and would later unknowingly become the leaders of our own campaign offices which propagated the ideal of diversity at the grass root level.

The moment we walked through the campaign doors of 261 Cambridge Street, Fredericksburg, Virginia, we encountered a hitherto unreported phenomenon. A campaign population infiltrated by fellow outsiders, nomads, and foreign citizens. British, Australian, Irish and German accents collided – and even the American members were not local. Boston, Maine, Maryland,

Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Hawaii had sent foot soldiers into the electoral battlefield. And true to Obama's mantra, staff and volunteers spanned the entire spectrum of social, sexual, racial, physical, religious and political situations. We were not alone.



Virginia campaign office staff, from England, Australia and Maine, under a sign reading 'Virginia is Your Country'. (Martin front left, Lydia second right)

In essence, the icon of Obama had proliferated into a series of demi-icons of diversity. The strategy was more than just words – though they were important as we shall later explore– it was a thorough and meaningful project of acceptance. A hand was a hand, and a mouth was a mouth. If you could speak – you could make calls, if you could walk – you could knock on doors, if you could fold – you did mailings, if you were shy – you dealt with administration, and if you were hopeless at the above – you could provide lunch.

⁶ 'One out of Many', unofficial motto of the United States. The codified motto is in fact 'In God We Trust'.

It was our responsibility not only to recruit and retain volunteers, but to harness the particular symbolic qualities of each individual. Whilst being inclusive, the campaign made no apologies for subdividing their volunteers into miniature taskforces covering specific political, racial and gender issues. 'Women for Obama Wednesdays', used female volunteers to personally contact female voters, on specifically 'female issues'. Veteran affair canvassing drew upon the unique resources of the nearby Quantico Marine Corps Base for volunteers and rally venues, through which military families were contacted to set out Obama's policy for Afghanistan and Iraq. 'Republicans for Obama' revealed their own stories of political conversion to those who had expressed only leaning support for John McCain.

In other words, we were involved – at the mid-organizational level – with the temporary iconization of volunteers to inspire wider participation and electoral interest.

The campaign framework was built upon a highly complex information database, called *Votebuilder*, created by the national Democratic party. Each 'contact' with an individual voter was recorded on their personal log, and the technology allowed the campaigner to append to that log seemingly extraneous details of that conversation: "likes Hillary", "owns a dog", "anti-war", "pro-life", "gun ownership" were common enough epithets. And yet surprisingly, when we arrived on the campaign, such information was lying dormant like

undiscovered diamonds. Lydia and I recognized its potential immediately.

We developed a mailing strategy which converted the concerns of the doorstep into targeted responses from the campaign. Within 24 hours of a telephone or threshold conversation with our office volunteers, a personal letter, fact sheet, and specific item of literature (according to their issue of concern) was distributed in the mail. This was then followed up in the next 48 hours to confirm delivery and open up dialogue about the nature of their indecision, and the details of Obama's plans. As efficient as it was effective, Barack Obama wrote to us in a personal letter commending our strategic successes. We were informed that the initiative had been rolled out as a blueprint for national application, before he concluded his letter with a further message of affiliation:

"Together, we are sending the message that ordinary people can still do extraordinary things"

At the macro level, this was a campaign of blanket inclusion – a workplace for all – inspired by a political 'CEO' who authenticated diversity. And yet at the micro level, we were observers of, and contributors to, the strategy which discriminated, celebrated and deployed difference. It is this paradoxical, but winning, formula that sought mass incorporation as an organizational ideal but which achieved this ideal through a sensitivity to uniqueness. The campaign

was inclusive in membership, but effectively discriminatory in its method.

6 MILLION VARIABLES⁷ AND THE RISK OF INCLUSION

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Whilst the Obama structure outsalaried McCain's - almost three times over - it was also a movement unparalleled for its ubiquitous grass root or voluntary membership. As unpaid British volunteers, placed in positions of relative authority, we ourselves were evidence of the 'open door' policy of recruitment. We ascended from ordinary volunteers, to deputy field organizers, to hub directors, and finally to campaign office managers in a matter of weeks. But such unchecked promotion raises a number of organizational concerns, and one question remains: did Barack Obama calculate the risk?

Volunteers presented the campaign with organizational opportunities as well as problems. They were free, numerous, willing, and furthermore, advertised the inclusive ethic of the campaign by demonstrating its internal ordinariness.

Yet whilst in ordinary commercial circumstances, volunteers do not equate to inherently high risk factors, in the case of a national campaign, their sheer number posed an unusual hazard - not only to the effectiveness of the leadership, but also to themselves. In our own experiences, canvassing was a dangerous occupation. Guns were drawn on doorsteps, car tyres were slashed,

blades were thrown at vehicles, signs were defaced with racial slurs and then set alight. One particular inflatable campaign sign, was the victim of countless knife attacks - and there was concern that evening shifts posed a realistic threat to volunteer safety. But even with this larger question of insurance risk set aside, the quality, professionalism, reliability and consistency of a largely untrained and un-interviewed workforce, posed axiomatic risks to campaign standards.

So what was the price of volunteer inclusion?

On a national level, some volunteer decisions caused major diplomatic crises. In one particular event, startlingly relevant to this discussion, campaign volunteers broke the third pillar of inclusion by asking two Muslim women to evacuate their seats to avoid being seen on camera with the candidate⁸. Their actions caused a furor in the local and national media, forcing the campaign to distance themselves from their volunteers, and by extension, their anti-Islamic gestures:

"This is of course not the policy of the campaign. It is offensive and counter to Obama's commitment to bring Americans together and simply not the kind of campaign we run...We sincerely apologize for the behavior of these volunteers"

During our direction, the campaign office was infiltrated by an investigative journalist, who ingratiated himself within the diverse family of the Obama project, only to betray it. Inclusion had its limits,

⁷ Figures taken from Brian Mooney, Boston Globe *Obama's paid staff dwarfing McCain's*, July 20th 2008.

⁸ <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0608/11168.html>

and it was becoming clear at certain moments that the campaign was forcing them.

But in many ways, the virtue of the campaign was that it was bigger than any specific individual, including its leader. The quality and quantity of the volunteer movement dwarfed the rare incidents of serious risk.

Six million separate volunteering psychologies could have descended into organizational chaos. But Obama's communication strategy purposefully attempted to sustain ideological unity.

A POLITICAL LINGUA FRANCA

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The peculiar extent of diversification in this campaign was matched by a linguistic strategy of maximal relevance – a political *lingua franca*, if you will, that found resonance with the greatest number of voters, in the largest number of contexts.

Political slogans are models of linguistic brevity which attempt to supply a defining phrase for a political candidate, party or organisation. In the context of the proliferation of radio, television and online media, succinct summarisations of political campaigns are essential to the method of penetrating the public consciousness economically. The American presidential election campaign of 2007-2008, illuminated the transcendent power of the slogan. The declarative, or exclamative (as it often appears)

Yes We Can (!)

communicates an ambiguous phrase of a positive perception and collective action. The elliptical structure of the phrase, in the omission of a corresponding verb (Yes We Can *Win*, for example) increases the appropriateness of the slogan in a variety of contexts. Accordingly, the indistinct reference of the central pronoun 'we' and the imprecise nature of the action described 'can' succinctly amplifies the relevance of the slogan as a strategy for mass incorporation of political participants. The use of the affirmative adverb 'yes' presupposes the existence of an unknown question, so that any criticism or doubts levelled against the candidate, are met with a single, unifying positive answer, which stresses the truth of the represented political cause and the unified ethic of his organisation.

Testament to the phrase's inclusivity, the slogan itself is a campaign 'borrowing' from the 1972 Spanish version "Si se puede" (Yes it can be done) of the United Farm workers of America. The intertextuality was acknowledged by Obama's campaign, in the effective



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reapplication of the Spanish original in large Hispanic communities of Texas.

However the phrase's extreme ambiguity has led to interpretational problems. In 1997, the Scottish Nationalist Party used the trisyllabic slogan as the abbreviated title of their manifesto document to appeal directly to the 'we' of the Scottish people whom support the nationalist agenda of Scottish independence. More recently President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad deployed the phrase during his 2009 campaign to argue for his re-election as a conservative leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, the 'Yes We Can' example demonstrates that whilst the vague referent of language enhances the Obama icon as 'many things to many people', it is also prone to confusion, and manipulation, in its usage in very different political contexts. Once more, the Obama campaign was finely in tune with the power of inclusive rhetoric, and yet often skirted very closely to its limits of flexibility. Whilst the phrase tapped into a universal utopia, the promise of 'Yes We Can' was soon broken by the political realities of presidential authority.

DIVERSITY AND DELUSION

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For Obama the Campaigner, an ethic of absolute inclusion was central to the organizational principle of his successful political campaign. His idol status was exaggerated as the key asset for validating his candidacy, as he converted his specific challenge to racial

inequality into a metaphor of universal 'change'. His life story provided a subtext, and his language a rhetorical emphasis, on the significance of this idol status in effecting realistic diversification of the American political system. This was the Obama of 'can' and 'will', the Obama of seemingly limitless definition. But necessarily from November 4th 2008, Obama the Campaigner, had to give way to Obama the Leader. The sudden assumption of a new symbolic role – or in other words the transfer to a different department or division – did not allow time for a parallel transformation of his supporters. Political reality had tempered the man into the Obama of 'can't' and 'won't', whilst many of his followers remained with the previous icon. The attempted translation of campaign supporters into post-election activists, via the *Organizing for America* project, has yet to find form or influence.

The effect is painfully tangible for both sides. The President's popularity has recently dropped to below 50% for the first time since his election⁹. And whilst political commentators struggle to identify the source of this general decline in popularity, it is the tentative suggestion of this study that Obama's strategy of inclusion was a model for eventual delusion. Obama's strategy was to present himself as a blank canvass onto which individual voters could project their own ideals; he was the President who would confront immigration for the Hispanics, withdraw troops from Iraq for the anti war protesters, and abolish income tax on

⁹ <http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/presidential-approval-tracker.htm>

seniors earning below \$50,000. Promises, to date, that he has failed to fulfill.

There were 65,182,692 projected 'Obamas' imagined in the minds of his 65,182,692 voters, each with their own needs and desires, each with their own ideal vision of what the Senator from Illinois could, and would, become.

When Peggy Joseph spoke to reporters on November 4th 2008, she emotionally discussed how Obama's successful election *would* change her life,

"I wont have to work to put gas in my car. I wont have to work to pay my mortgage. If I help him he's gonna help me"¹⁰

Of course Peggy will still have to work for all of these things. But the delusion is viral. Obama's iconic Berlin visit raised expectations for the President's European consciousness. His inability to deliver on the plethora of domestic manifesto promises is equaled by a sentiment of the jilted lover on the European continent. Following his wooing tour of Europe in an unprecedented excursion for a presidential candidate, his refusal to attend the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and his withdrawn promise of a missile shield system in Poland and

the Czech Republic marked the end of Europe's love affair with Obama.

Thus, despite the contextual uniqueness of a political campaign, lessons can be learned for effective worldwide leadership. Inclusion works in the short term. But the grander the scale of inclusion, the greater exposure to disappointment and disillusion.

The thesis then stands that the most efficient, diverse, and inclusive campaign in political history does not necessarily equate to effective governance and leadership. As his political opponent, Hillary Clinton once warned him:

"You campaign in poetry, but you govern in prose".

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P36x8rTb3jI>