

Spring 2018

“So how Reaganesque exactly are these Republicans?”: Strategic invocations of collective memory about Ronald Reagan during the 2015-2016 Republican Primary Presidential debates

Rachel Moss
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019>

 Part of the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moss, Rachel, "“So how Reaganesque exactly are these Republicans?”: Strategic invocations of collective memory about Ronald Reagan during the 2015-2016 Republican Primary Presidential debates" (2018). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 613.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/613>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

“So How Reaganesque Exactly Are These Republicans?”: Strategic Invocations of Collective
Memory about Ronald Reagan During the 2015-2016 Republican Primary Presidential Debates

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Rachel Ann Moss

May 2018

Accepted by the faculty of the School of Communication Studies, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Project Advisor: Matthew P. Brigham, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor, School of Communication
Studies

Reader: Lindsey A. Harvell-Bowman, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor, School of Communication
Studies

Reader: Paul E. Mabrey III, Ph.D.,
Instructor, School of Communication Studies

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,
Dean, Honors Colle

PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the JMU Honors Symposium on April 18, 2018, and it will also be
presented as part of the Advocacy Communication Concentration Panel at the 40th Annual School of Communication Studies
Undergraduate Research Conference on April 11, 2018.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Abstract | 4 |
| Chapter One: Introduction | 5 |
| Chapter Two: Standing Out to Get Noticed: An Analysis of the Undercard Debates..... | 25 |
| Chapter Three: Performing in Primetime: An Analysis of the Mainstage Debates..... | 39 |
| Chapter Four: An Analysis of the Mainstage Debate Showdown at Ronald Reagan’s Presidential Library (Simi Valley, CA) | 57 |
| Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion | 78 |
| Bibliography | 92 |

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for all of the support I received while completing my Honors Thesis. First, I would like to thank Dr. Matthew P. Brigham for serving as my thesis advisor. His guidance and valuable insights were essential to the completion of this thesis, and I am very grateful for his willingness to assist me throughout this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman and Dr. Paul Mabrey for serving as members of my thesis committee, reviewing my thesis, and providing advice that made a great difference in the final product. Additionally, I thank Dr. Eric Fife for allowing me to complete this thesis within the School of Communication Studies at James Madison University (JMU). I would also like to thank my parents, William and Michele Moss, for supporting me during my time at JMU, providing me the ability to study and work towards completing this thesis. Finally, I would like to thank the staff of the JMU Honors College for giving me the opportunity to work on this thesis.

Abstract

My thesis explores the implications of the references to President Ronald Reagan in the 2015-2016 Republican presidential primary debates. I conducted a rhetorical analysis of the references to Reagan throughout these debates, while also considering their relation to public and collective memory theory. In order to analyze the different ways in which Reagan was mentioned, I divided the analysis into the undercard debates, mainstage debates, and the mainstage debate that occurred at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. In the undercard debates, candidates often utilized attention-grabbing strategies in order to aid their chances of moving up to the mainstage debates. The mainstage candidates referenced Reagan to support different goals than the undercard candidates, often focusing on policy rather than personal qualities. In the Simi Valley debate, or “Reagan debate,” the candidates were inspired by the location at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, and competed to claim Reagan’s legacy. Through my analysis, I discovered that the candidates referenced Reagan in order to support a wide range of ideologies and goals. Therefore, due to the prevalence and centrality of references to Reagan in the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates, and the way in which his name was utilized to support candidates’ arguments, I concluded that Reagan’s legacy had affected and will likely continue to affect the communication of the modern Republican Party in primary debates, which scholars, candidates, and campaign teams would benefit greatly by systematically analyzing and exploring.

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

Ronald Reagan was President of the United States from 1981 to 1989. Even though his term ended 28 years ago, Republican politicians still reference his presidency in their campaign speeches, including in particular primary debates. In 2015 and 2016, Ronald Reagan was repeatedly mentioned in the Grand Old Party (GOP) Presidential Debates being held as part of the 2016 Republican National Convention presidential nomination process. Moderators often asked candidates about how they embodied Reagan’s values, and many candidates compared their policies to legislation Reagan enacted during his presidency. Due to the prevalence of Ronald Reagan’s name in the 2016 GOP Presidential primary debates, and the potential impact that references to Reagan could have on the Republican Party, the 2016 GOP presidential candidates’ attempts to claim Reagan’s legacy should be studied, particularly in light of their competition to personify Reagan, which shaped the communication and messaging of the Republican Party throughout the 2016 presidential election.

The candidates who ran for the 2016 GOP nomination discussed Reagan’s legacy during debates, and they often connected his beliefs or policies to their message. Many of the candidates who attempted to portray themselves as being like Reagan held different views, so each reference to Reagan held particular motivations and contributed to a framework for unique aspects of their campaign. Therefore, the ways Reagan was referenced in the debates served various purposes for the candidates’ differing campaign strategies. Even when they did not draw a convincing connection to Reagan, the candidates would still invoke Reagan’s name; thus, it is important to discover why they saw these references as aiding their campaign strategy. When referencing Reagan, the candidates relied on public and collective memory in order to influence

the audience and lay claim to Reagan’s legacy. The many references to Reagan throughout the 2015- 2016 GOP presidential debates reveal that the candidates utilized Ronald Reagan's legacy for campaigning purposes, and their competition to own Reagan's legacy affected the communication and messaging of the present-day Republican Party.

Justification

Reagan’s legacy in relation to GOP communication should be studied due not only to the significant number of times Ronald Reagan was strategically mentioned by Republicans during the debates, but the importance of those references in aiding the purpose of advancing their messages. Since politicians were constantly discussing Reagan, efforts should be made to discover the specific types and ways in which he was such a central political focus. Throughout the second Republican Debate hosted by CNN at the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California held on September 16, 2015, candidates vying for the GOP nomination mentioned Reagan’s name a total of 23 separate times (Snyder, 2015). While the candidates were likely encouraged by the Reagan Presidential Library location to discuss the former president, Reagan was also referenced multiple times throughout the other 11 debates. According to Snyder (2016), “Reagan’s name was mentioned for a number of reasons, including when the candidates mentioned they voted for him, during a discussion of immigration, Reagan’s tax cuts, and more.” By studying these various mentions, I will attempt to decipher the reasons motivating the high number of Reagan references, leading to a better understanding of Reagan’s importance in forming the messaging of the Republican Party. The large number of mentions, coupled with the strategic purposes they serve, demonstrate that Ronald Reagan was important to candidates who ran for the 2016 GOP nomination. Therefore, research should be conducted to discover Reagan’s importance and the extent of his influence on the candidates for many reasons, including that

these candidates may advance (or work against) Reagan’s values if they are elected to high office.

A second reason why studying the competition to claim ownership of Reagan’s legacy is important is that the GOP message shows the direction in which many American leaders want to move the United States. According to Zelizer (2016), it “seems like almost all of the Republican nominees, with the exception of Jeb Bush and John Kasich, are borrowing from Reagan’s 1976 campaign.” For example, just as Reagan attempted to establish himself as the conservative candidate in 1976, Ted Cruz tried to set himself apart from the other candidates due to his conservatism. Ritter (1968) analyzed some of Reagan’s pre-presidential campaigns and concluded that Reagan used strategies of image manipulation and reputation building to aid his campaign. Many GOP candidates followed Reagan’s example, citing his values, beliefs, and strategies during their runs for President. Since President Donald Trump and Republican senators like Ted Cruz compared their policy platforms to Reagan’s during the GOP debates, future legislation in the United States may follow Reagan’s policies. Additionally, Republicans hold the majorities in Congress in early 2018, so the values of the Republican Party will be integral while forming legislation the next few years. Therefore, it is valuable to understand the message of the Republican Party and how party leaders arrived at pursuing the values for which they advocated during the debates. Doing so enables us to comprehend a possible political future for the United States. The last reason why Ronald Reagan’s legacy should be studied in this context is because Reagan is considered one of the best Presidents in United States history. Gallup released a poll in 2011 that rated Ronald Reagan as the greatest United States President with 19% of the vote (Newport, 2011). Since Ronald Reagan is still considered a beloved figure by many Americans, a large number of people would likely be interested in seeing how his legacy continues to shape

the message and communication of the Republican Party today, and how Reagan can be used as a rhetorical tool by Republican politicians. Additionally, Reagan was known as the “Great Communicator,” so his legacy is especially pertinent in this area (Gold, 1988, p. 159). By analyzing speeches given by the 2016 GOP presidential candidates during the primary season and connecting their mentions of Ronald Reagan to his values and beliefs, I can explore the extent to which Ronald Reagan’s legacy helped form the foundations of the Republican Party, or at a minimum the 2016 expression of the Republican Party.

Literature Review

In order to discover how Ronald Reagan’s legacy influenced the 2015-2016 Republican debates, Reagan’s ideology must be studied. Republicans running in the 2016 presidential election have mentioned Reagan in a variety of contexts. Therefore, in order to match their references to the former president’s ideology, it is helpful to review past literature concerning his ideals, oratorical skills, foreign policy, and domestic policy. Additionally, studying debate strategies will serve as a comparison between Reagan’s approaches to debate speeches and those used in the 2015 and 2016 GOP debates. Literature on Reagan’s popularity and relevance, primary debates, and public memory will also be discussed.

Popularity and Relevance of Reagan

Based on constant mentions of Reagan by modern day politicians, Reagan is still a very relevant figure in American society. CNBC found that Reagan has been mentioned once in every Republican presidential primary debate since 1999 (Fahey, 2015). In comparison, mentions of Bill Clinton, John F. Kennedy, and Franklin Roosevelt combined in Democratic presidential primary debates do not total even a quarter of Reagan’s mentions in Republican debates (Fahey,

2015). In addition, Reagan was even invoked and valued by Democrats, with some calling themselves “Reagan Democrats.” Reagan is still a relevant figure in the United States today.

During his presidency, Reagan’s popularity was average; a half dozen modern presidents had higher ratings than he did throughout his two terms (Bunch, 2010). In fact, research shows that one in three Americans wanted Reagan to resign while he was in office (Fahey, 2015). At the same time, Reagan developed a reputation for being able to reach out across party lines, as “Reagan Democrats” became a common term to describe Democrats who voted for Reagan in 1980 and 1984. Therefore, Reagan was fairly popular among both parties. However, Reagan’s popularity has markedly increased since he served as president, jumping to its highest point after the former president’s death (Fahey, 2015). Further studies show that Reagan was a polarizing president politically, but the psychological effect of his presidency was not polarizing (Thomas, 1993). According to Schwab, Reagan’s popularity is a myth that resulted from many modern political commentators comparing current politicians to the conservative president (2017). Americans are fonder in hindsight in regards to Reagan, one of the presidents they regard as most iconic.

Uptake of Reagan’s Beliefs

As American citizens and politicians remember Ronald Reagan, many only remember certain parts of his presidency and legacy, and some choose to highlight only some of his policy positions. For example, most people who discuss Reagan’s tax viewpoints today mention the major tax cut he issued in 1981 (Fahey, 2015). In the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primaries, Bush, Cruz, and Kasich all cited Regan’s economic plans to increase their policy credibility (Plant, 2015). However, CNBC reported that, in 1982, Reagan had signed into law what had been at that time the biggest tax increase outside of active wartime (Fahey, 2015). According to

Plant (2015), candidates referenced Reagan’s policies in a way that did not accurately reflect their original intent (p. 36). In the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primaries, Carly Fiorina and Rand Paul both cited Reagan’s foreign policy positions in conflicting manners (Plant, 2015). While Paul referenced Reagan’s actions in the Cold War to support his position of continued negotiations with enemies of the United States, Fiorina referenced Reagan’s views as a reason to stop negotiations (Plant, 2015). In addition, many candidates ignored Reagan’s position on amnesty when they advocated stricter immigration reform. Modern Republican politicians draw selectively from Reagan’s policy positions in order to support their own agendas.

Reagan’s Policy and Public Memory

Phillips (2004) describes public memory as “both attached to a past (typically an originating event of some sort) and acts to ensure a future of further remembering of that same event.” Quint (2016) found that speaking of public memory from a rhetorical perspective shows that some memories become more prominent while others are forgotten (p. 8-9). In addition, Quint (2016) cites Goodnight and Olson in saying that how collective memory is utilized is also critical. The collective public memory of Reagan has been primarily used by American Republicans in the past decade. Plant (2015) found that the collective public memory of Reagan has often been contradictory, and that politicians remember him in whichever way best serves to boost their credibility. The sometimes inaccurate recollections about Reagan can be attributed to the tendency of collective public memory to be reconstructed over time (Quint, 2016). In addition, scholars who wrote accounts of Reagan’s life and politics, on topics such as his values, rhetoric, foreign policy, and domestic policy, are working off and themselves making use of a certain set of public or collective memories of Reagan. Therefore, while scholars base their work partially off of specific public or collective memories of Reagan, they are at the same time

contributing to building up other collective and public memories of the former president. When reading scholarly works about Reagan, one is dealing with layers of collective and public memory. For this reason, some accounts may be more or less accurate than other accounts in regards to who Reagan actually was. Reagan can be represented in many different ways, as well as be referenced for many different strategic purposes, as the continued review of the literature will show.

Values. Scholars have identified Ronald Reagan’s values as expressing classical American sentiments that allowed him to connect with his constituents. Jones and Rowland (2005) found that Reagan conveyed classic American ideals such as inclusiveness and freedom. One of Reagan’s main principles was the importance of the inclusive family. For example, in his acceptance address, Reagan frequently appealed to the family, expressing qualities like unity, prosperity, honor, and opportunity (Scheele, 1984). When advocating for family values, Reagan expressed a strong morality to be of great importance (Fisher, 1982). As a Christian, Reagan was able to promote morals and family values to a largely Christian nation who was able to relate to him, making his messaging more effective.

Reagan’s rhetoric also praised and valued work, appealing to ideals such as growth, progress, and productivity (Scheele, 1984). Since the United States is an immigrant nation, Reagan’s appeals to work were attractive to many who had to labor long and hard for their place in the free nation. The former president also referenced a strong America throughout his speeches, conveying ideas such as unity, rebirth, efficiency, and that the old government was weak (Scheele, 1984). In addition, Reagan expressed peace as an important value by illustrating the importance of protecting the world and defeating weak enemies, as well as promoting qualities like honor, pride, and virtue (Scheele, 1984). Finally, Reagan appealed to the value of

freedom throughout his speeches; he used this appeal to place emphasis on limiting corruption in both the United States and the world (Scheele, 1984). Every value Reagan emphasized in his speeches reflected qualities that were relatable to the American people and thus, as scholars have continually noted, allowed Reagan to connect with his constituents on a deeper level.

Rhetoric. As an actor and politician, Ronald Reagan became famous for his effective rhetoric, being deemed “the great communicator” (Jones & Rowland, 2005, p. 159). Reagan utilized many strategies in order to be seen as a strong orator, including inventional metaphors, emotional appeals, and strong formulas and themes. According to Aden (1989), Reagan’s strategy of using inventional metaphors in his speeches aided in his status as an admired communicator (p. 385). An inventional metaphor is a communication tool that functions as an underlying metaphor of the literal language of a speaker (Aden, 1989). Specifically, Reagan utilized both entrapment and escape as inventional metaphors that contained “up” and “down” clusters of language (Aden, 1989, p. 385). The up clusters of language in the entrapment metaphor promoted images of barriers, while the down clusters illustrated moods of depression, deprivation, low status, and pressuring forces (Aden, 1989).

Reagan’s rhetoric was considered visionary, because it contained many emotional appeals and stories that encouraged change (Drury, 2014). The images Reagan created to enthrall his audience were strong emotional appeals that served to help the audience relate to his words. According to Gold (1989), making his message relevant to each audience, especially when discussing political topics, was what made him very successful. This rhetoric allowed Reagan to relate to a community with shared values and help the people move towards changing their circumstances (Drury, 2014). Reagan also utilized the down clusters of language to relate to his audience. The down clusters of escape suggested images of walls falling and breaking while the

up clusters promote the ideas of building confidence and moving forward (Aden, 1989). Reagan effectively performed inventional metaphors in order to relate to his audiences whilst using their values.

Aden (1989) discovered that the two major consequences of Reagan’s use of metaphors were that they generated pride for Americans but also, over time, produced a rigidity in his responses to new circumstances. Formula and theme were the two main components of orality that Reagan utilized in discourse, which helped him develop as a successful communicator (Gold, 1988). Reagan drew many materials and anecdotes from other sources and compiled these resources into a dependable formula that he was able to use for most of his life (Gold, 1988). The formula was rigid yet consistent, as he was unchanging in the way he structured his speeches even when change may have been more effective. However, the lack of changes in his structuring provided consistency that allowed the American public to better comprehend his meanings. His themes were also consistent over time, assuming a very historical and familiar tone (Gold, 1988). His themes increased relevance to the American people as they reflected classic American values. Overall, Reagan’s command of formula and theme, essential elements to communicating in an oral culture (Gold, 1988), provide one compelling reason for Reagan earning the title of “the great communicator.”

Another popular aspect of Reagan’s rhetoric was that it delivered feelings of hope. Drury (2014) argued that when Reagan redefined American national security during his campaign, his visionary rhetoric expressed renewal. Likewise, Reagan’s inventional metaphors often expressed messages that demonstrated hope for the future. Fisher (1982) similarly found that romanticism was at the center of Reagan’s rhetoric, as he relied on the mythos of heroism and glory. Therefore, Reagan’s rhetoric was presented for the purpose of activism (Fisher, 1982). Feelings

of romanticism and hope presented a positive message that was more appealing to the American people, creating an effective rhetorical strategy. Reagan’s rhetorical strategies were powerful in maintaining his popularity throughout elections, his presidency, and current times.

Foreign policy. Previous scholarship has explored how Ronald Reagan utilized a blend of many approaches when forming his foreign policy. For instance, Reagan followed a pragmatic worldview when dealing with United States-Soviet relations or United States-Chinese relations (Hantz, 1996). Reagan’s practical approach to foreign policy concerning the Soviets was seen when Ronald Reagan was asked to speak at Moscow State University. The major strategies Reagan used there included convincing the audience to reject Marxism, presenting a positive alternative to communism, illustrating the United States as a great nation, and democratizing the diplomatic process to allow the students to appeal to their government for a system other than communism (Howell, 2003).

Reagan considered the enemy as anyone who was against the values of a free society (Jones, 2005). Therefore, he disliked values such as those common in the Soviet Union. He also presented himself as one seeking truth, adapting language commonly used to describe Marxism to illustrate the capitalism of the United States as a preferable methodology to communism (Howell, 2003). Reagan was successful because he anticipated hostility and was able to maintain a rhetoric that was both flexible and subtle in its subversion (Howell, 2003). By taking advantage of the Soviet Union’s new openness, he was able to craft a worldview where students would become discontent with the current state of the Soviet Union so they would rise against their government without him appearing as an agent actively attempting to create an uprising against Marxism-Leninism. Reagan did not consent to allowing other nations to carry on with and

embrace socialist values. Accordingly, Reagan maintained an activist foreign policy, remaining in favor of interventionism (Jones, 2005).

However, according to Hantz (1996), Reagan maintained an ideological worldview with United States-El Salvadorian and Nicaraguan relations and United States-Third World relations. While Reagan’s work with the Soviet Union and China focused on practical solutions, Hantz (1996) found that Reagan’s relations with El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Third World nations fixated on sets of beliefs. These findings show that Ronald Reagan’s worldview was not strictly pragmatic or ideological. Rather, Reagan was fluid in his approach and responded with what he saw as the appropriate worldview depending on the situation. One way he adapted was in working with Margaret Thatcher to govern a transatlantic area shared by both the United States and the United Kingdom. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher exercised conviction politics, the practice of working off one’s own values and positions rather than appealing to the popular opinion, when combining their foreign policies (Holmes, 2010). Focusing on conviction allowed the United States and United Kingdom to rely on individual responsibility, trust, and respect (Holmes, 2010). Overall, Reagan’s value system was respected and strong from the point of view of most other countries, and his blend of approaches created a greater likelihood of success in each foreign arena (Scheele, 1984).

Domestic policy. Ronald Reagan primarily maintained a peaceful and simple approach in the domestic forum (Scheele, 1984). Reagan’s main principle concerning domestic policy was the defense of limited government (Jones, 2005). Therefore, he advocated for minimal government action, to be used only when necessary to ensure the protection of society. Reagan’s inaugural address solidified his stance on limited government, as he was able to redefine how Americans saw the government (Jones, 2005). He utilized “ultimate definition,” a strategy that

relies on a worldview that promotes limited government as well as classical liberalism and the American Dream (Jones, 2005, p. 696). He advocated for limited government, the individual, and progress from an ideological perspective. Additionally, Reagan sought to promote capitalism and diminish socialism (Ritter, 1968). By keeping his message simple and direct, Reagan was easily able to communicate his message to audiences in an effective manner.

Campaign Speech Strategies, and the Use of Reagan in Campaigns

While running for office, presidential candidates employ rhetorical strategies that aid in the effectiveness of communicating their message to an audience. One major strategy used in campaign speeches is the emotional appeal (Jerit, 2004). Emotional appeals are a popular strategy because the audience often decides and votes with their feelings. Emotional appeals promote shared values and also provide effective sound bites for the media (Jerit, 2004). Another strategy many candidates utilize is priming, which occurs when greater emphasis is placed on certain issues to motivate the voters to consider those issues more than others when casting their ballot (Druckman, 2004). Priming is unique because it has the ability to influence both the public agenda and the media agenda (Iyengar, 2000). Therefore, the candidates must convince the voters that they are the best candidate in managing the primed issues in order to solidify their advantage (Druckman, 2004).

Murphy (1992) found that presidential primary debates should be viewed differently than the rest of campaign speeches. Primary debates often feature bigger audiences and more diverse publics than individual rallies or campaign events. Murphy (1992) wrote that candidates participating in primary debates must carefully choose their speech strategies because the ways that arguments are advanced are critical in a presidential election.

During the past few Republican primary cycles, Republican candidates continually fought for ownership of Reagan’s legacy. In the 2007 GOP primary debates, the final four Republican candidates all fought to prove they were worthy of Reagan’s legacy. Mitt Romney repeated what he thought Reagan would do over and over throughout his debates and would explain how he would be the one to carry out Reagan’s visions (Bunch, 2010). John McCain, Ron Paul, and Rudy Guiliani also all referenced Reagan throughout their campaigns and debates. McCain notably attacked Romney for misremembering Reagan, releasing ads saying, “If we can’t trust Mitt Romney on Ronald Reagan, how can we trust him to lead America?” (Tucker, 2012, p. 134). McCain’s ads demonstrate how essential a candidate’s stance on Reagan has become to Republican voters. In addition, Tucker (2012) cites Broder, who noted that candidates were all trying to find ways to identify themselves with Reagan. Candidates recognized identification with Reagan as a campaign strategy, which likely encouraged their uses of Reagan’s name (a shorthand for collective memories about Reagan) as a rhetorical tool in debate speeches.

Additionally, Plant (2015) found that many candidates in the most recent presidential primaries cited Reagan in a random manner. Throughout the 2015-2016 primary debates, Republicans continued to cite Reagan’s policies and viewpoints in contrasting manners. Smith (2016) wrote that these differing views of Reagan led to a fragmentation of his legacy. The 2015-2016 GOP presidential debates may have contributed to the construction of new public memories of Reagan. According to Smith (2016), only John Kasich accurately represented Reagan’s beliefs and policy positions. However, Smith’s assessment of the debates only represents one set of collective memories about Reagan. Additionally, many candidates continued mentioning Reagan without backlash due to inaccurate views held by voters. Thus, the truthfulness behind references

to Reagan was less important to voters than the candidate’s positive view of Reagan and attempts to identify with him. Even though the conflicting views of Reagan were apparent, the Republican candidates continued to mention Reagan through every primary debate.

Conclusion

Scholarship surveyed in this chapter regarding Reagan’s ideals, rhetorical strategies, and domestic and foreign policies offers insights into his overarching ideology. For instance, such work suggests that Ronald Reagan exemplified classic American ideals, promoting values such as family and hope throughout his time as president. Many aspects of Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric showcased in his domestic and foreign policy messaging were deemed innovative and unique in his time and have become commonplace strategies for present-day Republicans. For instance, Reagan’s emotional appeals were effective when he was attempting to relate to an audience. Likewise, Jerit (2004) found that emotional appeals are an effective campaign speech strategy. Reagan’s fluid rhetorical strategy, in regards to foreign policy, was also impressive, as he successfully adapted his approach to every nation he worked alongside. His domestic strategy was also simple, direct, and powerful, allowing a strong connection with his constituents. Even though he was a great communicator, Reagan was only a mildly popular president. Reagan’s ideology can be represented by his American values, adaptive policy approach, a simple limited government stance, and respect for the ideals of the public. However, his popularity increased in the years following his terms as president, and the collective public memory of his policies and beliefs were reconstructed; many of Reagan’s faults were forgotten, and Reagan has been remembered as a conservative ideal.

In the Twenty-First Century, Reagan is constantly but inconsistently cited among Republican politicians. Specifically, Reagan is discussed among candidates most often in

Republican primary debates. The past two GOP primary cycles specifically showcased many candidates attempting to claim Reagan’s legacy. Taking ownership of Reagan’s legacy can function as an emotional appeal or a credibility appeal, which can help candidates advance their goals in primary debates. President Donald Trump referenced Reagan constantly throughout the primary debates in 2015 and 2016, attempting to claim Reagan’s legacy while the other candidates did the same. Many comparisons have been drawn between Reagan and Trump, including their ability to reach out to the “common man” and their unconventional pre-presidential careers. In addition, “Reagan Democrats” were once again considered to have defected to the conservative side when voting for Trump in the past election (Bolton, 2016). Claiming Reagan’s legacy has real effects on how candidates communicate, and that communication influenced the 2016 election.

Methodology

In order to study how the 2016 presidential candidates utilized Ronald Reagan’s legacy for their campaign communication purposes, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of the references to Reagan in the 2015 and 2016 GOP Presidential Debates. Rhetorical analysis involves analyzing a text in parts and revealing how the text performs certain functions. Rhetorical analysis is an appropriate method for this study because each piece of discourse was analyzed to discover how the candidates were attempting to claim Reagan’s legacy for the purpose of their campaign. To accomplish this, I collected transcripts of every mainstage and undercard GOP Debate from the 2016 presidential election cycle from *The American Presidency Project* website. The artifacts analyzed are the 12 debate transcripts, ranging from August 6, 2015 to March 10, 2016. After collecting the sources, I used the Microsoft Word find function to discover each reference to Reagan. Following this search, I analyzed the references, searching for overarching

themes throughout the texts. References typically related to Reagan’s policy positions on foreign or domestic policy, his status as a conservative ideal, or his values. Subsequently, significant references to Reagan were chosen to be examined in-depth. References were considered significant if they contained a candidate’s opinion about the former president or one of his positions, and if they related to a larger point the candidate was making. From there, references were organized by the way in which the candidate referenced Reagan, such as for the purpose of boosting their credibility, or for showing they had a connection to the former president, thus crafting a typology of Reagan appeals.

Each section chosen to be analyzed was also approached through a public and collective memory lens. According to Noon (2004), collective memory is drawn from a place of longing, but can also be utilized for political purposes. Much of what was said about Reagan throughout the GOP primary debates was influenced by collective and public memory. In this essay, public memory refers to the memory of the public in general, the thoughts of all Americans. Collective memory refers to the invocation of memory by a community that is only a subset of the public. At the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates, the primary “collective” I examine is composed of the Republican Party, its leaders, and its voters. Since the public, and particularly self-identified Republicans, had a positive memory of Reagan, most candidates chose to constantly reference Reagan throughout the debates. Noon (2004) also notes that collective memory contains an aspect of a shared past that is repeated for the purpose of motivating a people group at a later point in time. When the candidates drew upon the positive collective public memory of Reagan, they were seeking to inspire their listeners to vote for them and see their vision of the United States by relating themselves to Reagan. Candidates were also seeking to instruct voters to select them as the Republican nominee, once again comparing themselves to

Reagan in order to prove themselves worthy of the vote. Because of the important role collective public memory played in the candidates’ communication choices, theory surrounding collective and public memory must be considered in the rhetorical analysis of the texts.

Often, drawing on public and collective memory allowed candidates to boost their credibility by creating a connection to Reagan. Noon (2004) wrote that the construction of public memory of a specific person can make it harder for people to later critique that person because they have become something like a “myth” (p. 341). Aspects of Reagan’s legacy were constantly used throughout the primary debates and affected how the candidates communicated their message. It is relevant to this study to discuss potential motivations behind why the candidates chose to reference Reagan in order to communicate with the audience. Noon discussed President George W. Bush as an example of someone who drew on public memory to serve his own purpose. Bush constantly referenced World War II throughout his campaign in 1999 for the purpose of justifying his plans for foreign policy and “as an ongoing gesture of self-making” (Noon, 2004, p. 340). Bush used public memory to his advantage; in the same way, candidates competing in the 2016 Republican presidential primary were attempting to use public (and, more directly given their context, collective) memory to further their chances of clinching the Republican nomination. They, like Bush, were engaging in a form of self-making, composing an image of themselves as powerful, competent leaders, while using references to Reagan as a means to do so. By analyzing the debates through a lens of public and collective memory, I am able to draw broader conclusions about how the candidates’ invocation of Ronald Reagan’s legacy shaped campaign communication of candidates throughout the GOP presidential primary debates.

Preview of Subsequent Chapters

Referencing Reagan in the 2015-2016 GOP primary debates served different purposes for those debating in the undercard versus those in the mainstage debates. Therefore, Chapter 2 of this thesis will focus on the analysis of the GOP undercard debates. Due to the large volume of Republican candidates in the last presidential primary election, most networks hosting debates decided to split the 17 candidates into two debates. The undercard debates featured the lower-ranked candidates, while the mainstage debates featured the top candidates. For example, the second GOP debate only allowed candidates ranking in the top 10 between August 7 and September 10 to take part in the mainstage debate. The other candidates were given the option to participate in the undercard debate. The undercard debates were advertised as a means for the lower-ranked candidates to prove themselves, and fight for the chance to move up to the mainstage debates. Carly Fiorina gained attention after the first undercard debate for her strong and competent answers, and was the only candidate to move up to the next mainstage debate (Tumulty, 2015). Since candidates were encouraged to prove themselves during the undercard debates, references to Reagan were often used as a chance to get noticed, give credibility to their policy positions, and help them move up to the mainstage debates.

Chapter 3 of this thesis will address the references to Reagan throughout the mainstage debates. Many of the candidates participating in the mainstage debates felt more comfortable about their position in the election; therefore, candidates' references to Reagan did not appear to be for the purpose of gaining attention, but for the purpose of comparing themselves to Reagan. Due to the strong, positive public (and, among Republicans, collective) memory of Reagan, candidates likely felt the need to claim Reagan's legacy and showcase how they would be the “next Reagan.” Thus, many of the references to Reagan in these debates directly compared a

belief or policy position of a candidate to a belief or policy position Reagan once held. Further, the candidates often compared qualities about themselves, their attitudes, or their visions to Reagan. Additionally, candidates referenced Reagan for the purpose of giving credibility to their policy plans, just as those participating in the undercard debate had.

In order to gain further insight into the competition to claim Reagan’s legacy and its use as a debate strategy, Chapter 4 of this thesis will focus on the mainstage debate held at the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. This debate has been chosen for deeper analysis because it contains the most references to Ronald Reagan out of all of the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates, and because its references emphasizes personal ties in ways that the other did not. The undercard debate also contained multiple references to Reagan, but it did not feature the direct prompting to speak on Reagan as did the mainstage debate, so it was not chosen for analysis in this chapter. The undercard Simi Valley debate will be discussed in Chapter 2, along with the other undercard debates.

In the second mainstage GOP presidential primary debate, moderator Jake Tapper asked what will from here be known as the “Reagan question:”

Ronald Reagan, the 40th President, used the plane behind you to accomplish a great many things. Perhaps, most notably, to challenge Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the wall, and ultimately, to make peace with the USSR. How will the world look different once your Air Force One is parked in the hangar of your presidential library?

This question provoked most of the mainstage GOP candidates to directly reference Reagan, either discussing their relationship with the former President or comparing themselves or their policies to Reagan and/or his policies. The answers to this question illustrate the clashing

images of Reagan that the candidates created to further their chances of victory in the debate, as well as the necessity of utilizing Reagan in any contemporary Republican presidential campaign.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I will distill the most important findings from each chapter, discuss the broader implications of this study, and offer some prescriptive advice and judgments on debate strategies utilized by candidates.

Chapter Two: Standing Out to Get Noticed: An Analysis of the Undercard Debates

Since there were 17 candidates at the start of the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary season, networks decided to split candidates into two debates, an undercard debate and a mainstage debate.¹ The cutoff point for making the mainstage debate varied for each network, but the undercard debates regularly featured the candidates who were lowest in the polls, while the mainstage debates featured the top candidates. The undercard debates were viewed as chances for the lower-polling candidates to prove they could move up to the top tier of candidates, so references to Reagan were often made more boldly in undercard than in mainstage debates. When mentioning Reagan, the undercard candidates primarily utilized strategies such as building credibility, comparing themselves to Reagan, and pointing out a connection they have with the former president. These three overarching strategies, often used in some combination, were utilized in diverse ways to promote bipartisanship, conservative standards, foreign policy positions, and the importance of being a political outsider. The undercard debates showcase how candidates were able to use references to Reagan to promote issues important to their campaigns.

Reagan as Bipartisan Broker

Throughout the undercard debates, the candidates were very open in the way they compared themselves to Reagan, often claiming they could be the next Reagan, which allowed them to advance prominent issues from their campaigns. Comparing themselves to Reagan in this way allowed the candidates to draw upon the audience’s collective memory of the former president. Senator Lindsey Graham (2015) utilized collective memory when he reminded the

¹ Though beyond the scope or focus of this project, future scholarship might consider the metaphorical clusters suggested by “undercard” and “mainstage” (predominant particular for fighting contexts, such as boxing) and how those replicate notions of combat already ingrained in our political discourse.

audience of Reagan’s relationship with former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill: “We’re going to lose Social Security and Medicare if Republicans and Democrats do not come together and find a solution like Ronald Reagan and Tip O’Neill. I will be the Ronald Reagan if I can find a Tip O’Neill.” Graham strategically brought up a specific situation from Reagan’s presidency before proceeding to argue that Americans needed to find a solution now, and that he could be the next Reagan that would make that solution possible. Graham’s reference was the most explicit out of any candidate in saying that he could be the next Reagan. Graham’s answer in the debate worked well with collective memory because his answer started with a return to Reagan’s time in office, reminding the audience of how necessary Reagan and O’Neill’s deal was, and then saying that he could replicate Reagan’s success. With Graham’s guidance, the audience was invited to recall a time in Reagan’s presidency that was successful and they were then shown how they could recapture bipartisanship through a Graham presidency. As Noon (2004) stated, once a candidate is portrayed as similar to a subject of collective memory, it is harder to critique that candidate (p. 341). Additionally, Graham was able to advance the importance of bipartisanship within an extremely polarized political environment by referencing Reagan’s name. Significantly, when candidates compared themselves or their plans to Reagan, they had the ability to advance an issue important to them.

Graham compared himself to Reagan for the purpose of stressing the importance of bipartisanship once again in the Simi Valley undercard debate in order to appeal to an audience that loved Reagan. Significantly, the Simi Valley debate was hosted at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, so candidates had a greater motivation to mention Reagan. Possibly inspired by the location, Graham referenced Reagan in order to discuss the importance of bipartisanship, once again mentioning Reagan’s willingness to work with O’Neill. Graham then shared how he

would be willing to work with the other side just as Reagan had. As before, Graham referenced Reagan because he wanted to be seen as someone like Reagan, who could potentially be the next Reagan. Graham (2015) maintained his habit of bold comparisons to Reagan during the Boulder debate, when he said, “The purpose of my presidency is to save this country and to save Social Security by working across the aisle just like Ronald Reagan. This is the biggest issue facing this nation.” This statement was very strong, because Graham was saying that part of the purpose of his presidency would be to be like Ronald Reagan. Significantly, Graham was not provoked or invited to speak about Reagan.

When talking about Reagan in the Boulder debate, Graham appeared to simply be drawing another parallel between himself and the former president, but the reference worked to repeat the theme of bipartisanship he had been building throughout his campaign. In both the Simi Valley and Boulder debates, Graham largely mentioned Reagan for the purpose of emphasizing that his campaign stood for bipartisanship and working across the aisle. At the end of his answer in the Simi Valley debate, when talking about the condition of the United States, Graham said, “I want to save it, just like Ronald Reagan did.” Graham mentioned Reagan the most out any candidates throughout the undercard debates, and the majority of his references were comparisons between Graham and Reagan. Graham’s strategy held an advantage for being consistent and repetitive. Graham was not only appealing to those who approved of Reagan, but he was continually reminding them that he was like the former president they so admired. Graham’s strategy was unique among his competitors, but his strategy had the most potential to take advantage of the Republican collective memory of Reagan so that they would see the value of bipartisanship as Graham did.

Reagan as an Ideal Standard for Conservatives

Candidates other than Graham were less bold in the ways they compared themselves to Reagan, but most commonly, these candidates reminded the audience of how they could be strong leaders by emphasizing Reagan as a conservative ideal. During the September 16, 2015 Simi Valley, California debate, former New York Governor George Pataki said,

You know, when I think of Ronald Reagan, I think of his tremendous smile, a smile that reflected his optimism and his unending belief and faith in America and in Americans. And it was that belief in America that led to a great presidency, a presidency that led to decades of safety, security and prosperity for America. That's exactly the type of leadership we need in Washington today and that's why I'm running for President of the United States.

Pataki started his answer by communicating all the qualities he saw in Reagan that he believed a strong president should possess and then explained that these qualities were what brought Reagan's success. The structure of Pataki's answer worked to remind the audience of Reagan by bringing up his smile, something non-political that would mostly evoke feelings of joy from those who supported Reagan, like a large portion of the audience. The beginning of this answer had the potential to draw out positive feelings and emotions from the audience, supported by their collective memory of Reagan. Then, Pataki proceeded to share how the United States needed a president who would lead in the same way as Reagan, and that he could be that president. Therefore, Pataki was able to lead the audience from a potential space of nostalgia to a means by which they could have a strong leader in the White House once again (namely, by voting for him). Pataki strategically compared himself to Reagan, increasing the credibility of his

answer, in order to show how he saw Reagan as a conservative standard that he strived to emulate. As he compared himself to Reagan, Pataki, unlike Graham, was not explicitly saying he could be the next Reagan, but he was implying that he could be. With his reference to Reagan, and his clear point that the need for a president like Reagan inspired his presidential run, Pataki did not need to outwardly say that he could be the next Reagan, because a viewer could understand it as the underlying message of his debate response. While both Pataki and Graham were advancing different concepts with their rhetorical strategies, both attempted to show audience members and voters that they could recapture the Reagan days if they were elected president.

Pataki presented Reagan as an ideal conservative standard for leadership, but Carly Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, referenced Reagan as representing a different kind of ideal standard. During the August 6, 2015 Cleveland, Ohio debate, Fiorina reminded the audience of the context surrounding Reagan’s campaign. When asked about her low position in the polls, she said, “Well, I would begin by reminding people that at this point in previous presidential elections, Jimmy Carter couldn't win, Ronald Reagan couldn't win, Bill Clinton couldn't win, and neither could've Barack Obama.” While her reference to Reagan did not specifically stand out, as she mentioned his name amongst many other former presidents, she was still able to appeal strongly to a Republican audience. Fiorina’s goal in the undercard debates was to make enough of an impression to move up to the mainstage debates, but as the moderator noted, she was low in the polls and winning did not seem realistic. By providing examples of former presidents, especially a president like Reagan who was beloved among the largely Republican audience and who overcame doubt, she was increasing the likelihood that she could still be viewed as a potential winner. One collective memory of Reagan held among

Republicans was his comeback in the 1980 election, and this idea of working against the odds became an inspirational message delivered by Fiorina’s campaign.

While Fiorina’s answer could strongly affect those who collectively remembered Reagan’s good times in office, she drew attention away from the reference by naming multiple Democratic presidents in the same breath. By doing this, she was decreasing the chance that the audience would see her as the kind of “Reaganesque” candidate that would likely help her to gain more votes. Former Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal also referenced Reagan in an unconventional manner. During the Boulder debate, he said:

I wanna quote you a president. Our previous president said this: he said, "the problem is, is that tax rates are too high, government income revenues are too low." He said, "paradoxically, lowering tax rates now is the best way to produce higher government revenues later." No, that wasn't President Reagan, as many are probably guessing at home. That was President Kennedy. I see you know the answer. That was President Kennedy. Imagine if he were alive today — and if he was at that last Democratic debate, imagine if you tried to say that in a party that's veering towards socialism. That wouldn't be welcome in today's Democratic party.

Jindal’s main point in his answer was to show how the Democratic Party had become radically socialist and had shifted so dramatically over the years that even a beloved Democratic president would not fit in with the modern Democratic Party. Significantly, he cited Reagan as the person who most people would assume articulated the conservative position, suggesting how Jindal viewed Reagan as an ideal conservative standard. Like Fiorina, Jindal mentioned Reagan, but the focus of his answer was not on the former president. Neither Fiorina nor Jindal talked about Reagan in a way that gave them an advantage in appealing to the collective memory of Reagan.

Instead, their answers served as little reminders of Reagan, such as that he was a conservative standard, or that he was not taken seriously during his campaign. These minor appeals to Reagan nostalgia did not do enough for the candidates to strategically court voters who fondly reminisced of the days of Reagan, but they did help the candidates accomplish other tasks. For Fiorina, referencing Reagan helped make the point that she still had a chance in the election even though she was currently behind, because Reagan had once been in the same spot. Jindal was able to show how radical the Democratic Party had become by sharing how a quotation attributed to a Democrat that could be mistaken for something Reagan might have said. Fiorina and Jindal demonstrated that Reagan can be referenced in a supporting role in an argument and still be effective for accomplishing for some goals. However, Fiorina and Jindal could have made greater use of their references to Reagan that would have allowed them to appeal to those who positively remember the former president.²

Some candidates participating in the undercard debates referenced Reagan for the purpose of both decreasing someone else’s credibility and advancing one of their campaign positions. Most commonly, candidates attacked mainstage candidate and frontrunner Trump by explaining how different he was from Reagan. During the Simi Valley debate, Jindal (2015) contrasted Trump and Reagan, utilizing Reagan as the conservative standard: “We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to rescue the idea of America, the choice for conservatives. Do we depend on proven conservative principles like Ronald Reagan did, or do we turn this over to a narcissist who only believes in himself?” By contrasting Trump with a figure beloved to a Republican

² In Chapter 5, I more systematically lay out a series of prescriptions and points of advice for candidates and campaign teams seeking to compete in contemporary Republican primary debate cycles, based on the insights offered by this thesis.

audience, Jindal was diminishing Trump’s credibility. Jindal explained how Reagan believed in something outside of himself, like solid, conservative principles, while Trump only believed in himself. Similarly, Graham contrasted Obama against Reagan in order to illustrate how destructive Obama had been in office. In the Boulder debate, Graham said,

Here's the problem. We're being walked all over because our commander in chief is weak in the eyes of our enemies. Do you think Putin would be in the Ukraine today if Ronald Reagan were president? Why are the Chinese stealing our intellectual property, hacking into our system? Why are they building islands over resource-rich waters? Because they can get away with it. At the end of the day, ladies and gentlemen, the foreign policy of Barack Obama needs to be replaced.

Like Jindal, Graham was referencing Reagan as a conservative standard for the purpose of lowering then-President Obama’s status and credibility. Graham was able to paint Obama as weak by arguing that another person could successfully fulfill the job Obama failed to do. Similarly, Jindal made Trump look self-absorbed by contrasting him to a caring president like Reagan. These candidates demonstrated that referencing Reagan as the ideal conservative standard for leadership could be useful for the purpose of attacking and thus lowering the viability of another opponent, rather than just uplifting one’s own status. However, by referencing Reagan in this way, Jindal lost out on an opportunity to compare himself to the former president and appeal to the collective memory of Reagan. Graham, on the other hand, ended his answer by saying, “Make me commander-in-chief and this crap stops.” Though indirect, Graham implied that he could be like Reagan if he were elected president, as he believed he could undo the work that Obama did in office, just as Reagan would have prevented it in the first place if he was president. By lightly comparing himself to Reagan, Graham had the

potential to persuade audience members who liked Reagan to vote for him, as he could be similar to the president they admired. Overall, when candidates compared themselves to Reagan while promoting Reagan as an ideal conservative standard, they were demonstrating how they would also be the ideal conservative candidate to have in office.

Reagan and Foreign Policy

Graham also referenced Reagan in order to advance his foreign policy positions. In order to add credibility to his foreign policy platform, Graham continued to follow his same strategy of showing how he could replicate a Reagan presidency in the Cleveland debate and the October 28, 2015 Boulder, Colorado debate. Graham (2015) referenced Reagan the most out of all the candidates throughout the 2015-2016 Republican presidential primary undercard debates, and also invoked Reagan to advance a variety of issues important to his campaign, including during the Simi Valley debate:

And in that quest, I have an uncompromising determination to win this war, just like President Reagan had an uncompromising determination to destroy the evil empire, and win the Cold War. Above all others on both sides of the aisle, I'm most qualified to be commander and chief on day one -- 33 years in the Air Force, 35 trips to Iraq and Afghanistan, I understand this war. I have a plan to win it, and I intend to win it.

Graham compared himself to Reagan, but he did not rely solely on Reagan to establish his credibility. He pointed out a quality he had that Reagan also possessed before proceeding to share how he had the capability to perform as Reagan performed. With this mention, Graham continued his theme of communicating that he could be the next Reagan; this time, the reference to Reagan served as a vehicle to share Graham's foreign policy. Graham needed to convince the audience that he could be trusted as commander-in-chief, and the comparison to Reagan allowed

him to easily advance the idea that he could be a strong military leader. The rhetorical strategy of pointing out how one knew Reagan or felt connected to the former president also helped Graham to continue to advance his foreign policy. Graham (2015) said, “I’m the only candidate tonight who served in the military while Ronald Reagan was our president and our commander in chief. It was one of the highlights of my life.” Graham then transitioned from talking about his time serving Reagan to how he planned on winning the war against radical Islam.

Graham’s reference to his connection to Reagan was wise because it helped him segue to an issue that was important to his campaign, the war against radical Islam, while also connecting him to a figure beloved by the audience. Through this reference, Graham gained the advantage cited by Noon (2004) that once a candidate seems to be more like a mythic figure like Reagan, he becomes harder to critique by admirers of Reagan (p. 341). Additionally, if the audience was convinced by Graham’s arguments that he would be like Reagan in his foreign policy, and if they collectively remembered Reagan’s presidency in a positive light, they would be more likely to support that candidate in order to recapture the success of the Reagan Administration’s foreign policy decisions. Therefore, comparing oneself to Reagan for the purpose of demonstrating that one could be the next Reagan would be the strongest way to strategically mention Reagan in a debate because it would help a candidate gain support and advance an issue important to their campaign.

Reagan as the Outsider

During the Cleveland debate, former Senator Rick Santorum explained his connection to Reagan, but he advanced a different issue, illustrating himself as the outsider the United States needed. He said, “I stood up to the old-boy network in Washington, D.C. because I believed that Washington was not the solution, that Washington was the problem, just like Ronald Reagan

said. I was a child of Ronald Reagan” (Santorum, 2015). Santorum’s statement was similar to those made by other candidates who compared themselves to Reagan, but Santorum (2015) made an extra connection to the former president when he said, “I was a child of Reagan.” Santorum was communicating that he was inspired by Reagan, and that the things he believed in were likely very similar to what Reagan did while in office. Santorum’s reference to Reagan functioned by reminding the audience that he had some type of relationship to Reagan, the president so highly favored and remembered by Republicans. Santorum compared his belief of Washington being a problem to Reagan’s same belief, which added credibility to his answer. Notably, referencing Reagan allowed Santorum to depict himself as a political outsider, as someone who was willing to take on Washington and make a difference. In a way, comparing himself to Reagan aided Santorum in framing the type of president Santorum would be. Santorum’s discussion of his connection to Reagan served to advance Santorum’s image for his presidential campaign.

Conclusion

Throughout all of the undercard debates, the candidates overwhelmingly discussed Reagan in a positive light, which allowed them to boost the credibility of their answers. By doing so, candidates mentioned Reagan in order to illustrate how they could be bipartisan, match the conservative standard Reagan set, be a strong commander-in-chief, and/or form their image. However, former Texas Governor Rick Perry (2015) was the exception to the positive mentions of Reagan. When discussing immigration, he noted,

Americans are tired of hearing this debate -- want to go to, what are you going to do about illegal immigration? For 30 years this country has been baited with that. All the way back to when Ronald Reagan signed a piece of legislation that basically allowed for

amnesty for over 4 million people, and the border is still not secure.

Perry painted Reagan as part of the problem rather than the solution in the ongoing debate about what to do about illegal immigration. Since every other reference to Reagan was positive, Perry’s negative mention of Reagan really stood out in the debate. While it is impossible to discern exactly how this reference affected Perry’s performance in the race, his decision was not strategic, due to the debates being catered to a Republican audience for whom Reagan was highly favored if not dearly loved. When running for office, negatively mentioning someone highly favored by the voting bloc one is trying to appeal to undeniably hurts one’s chances of winning.

After analyzing all of the references to Reagan throughout the undercard debates, the most common strategy candidates utilized when referencing the former president was by comparing themselves to Reagan. Notably, many candidates were very bold when referencing Reagan, communicating that they believed they could be the next Reagan. One possible reason for the boldness is because the candidates in the undercard debates wanted to move up to the mainstage debates, and mentioning Reagan in a bold way gave them the opportunity to be noticed by voters. Graham was the boldest in saying that he could be the next Reagan. At the same time, this strategy provided candidates the best opportunity to appeal to the audience’s positive collective memories of Reagan, which could potentially have been a strategic way to win support. Another significant aspect of the undercard debates was that multiple candidates mentioned Reagan during the first three debates, but Reagan was mentioned zero times in the final four debates. One potential explanation for this phenomenon was that Graham was only featured in one out of the final four debates, and he was the candidate who most frequently mentioned Reagan during the undercard debates. Or, since no one faced backlash for outlandish

constructions of Reagan’s memory, and since everyone praised Reagan, it may have ceased to appear as a way to create a comparative advantage relative to the other candidates. Alternatively, as time went on, it might have become clearer that the undercard candidates had less of a chance of moving up to the mainstage debates. Therefore, candidates may have felt less of a need to make dramatic references to Reagan in the hopes of being noticed and moving up to the mainstage debates.

The candidates participating in the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary undercard debates referenced Reagan multiple times throughout their first three debates before stopping in the following four debates. The main strategies candidates used when referencing Reagan were by comparing themselves to Reagan, utilizing his name to boost or diminish credibility, and reminding audiences of their relationship to Reagan. Each way of referencing Reagan gave the candidates some advantage in supporting their argument, but the comparison strategy provided candidates the greatest opportunity to play upon the audience’s collective memory of Reagan. Notably, the candidates who did compare themselves to Reagan were very bold in the way they did so, which could be explained by their desire to be noticed by the audience and gain enough support to enter the mainstage debates. In addition, candidates were able to use these rhetorical strategies for different purposes. Reagan’s name did not advance one single cause or issue throughout the undercard debates. For example, Graham often referenced Reagan in order to promote his foreign policy and paint himself as a strong future commander-in-chief. Patacki, on the other hand, compared himself to Reagan because he viewed him as an ideal conservative standard of leadership, and he wanted to be seen as a strong leader as well. Other issues candidates advanced by discussing Reagan included bipartisanship and the importance of being a political outsider. Since Reagan was collectively remembered in so many different ways, his

name lends itself to being cited to support a large array of policies and beliefs, even ones that appear in tension or openly contradictory with others. Overall, referencing Reagan aided undercard candidates in better communicating their positions and qualities to the audience and viewing public.

Chapter Three: Performing in Primetime: An Analysis of the Mainstage Debates

Out of the 17 GOP candidates, those with the highest polling percentages were invited by television networks to participate in mainstage debates, which typically aired after the undercard debates, often in primetime. The mainstage debates placed less emphasis on the candidates needing to prove themselves, since the candidates who were invited to participate were already polling much higher than those in the undercard debates. In addition, the candidates did not need to utilize attention-grabbing strategies to the same extent as the undercard candidates because they already had greater name recognition. However, mainstage candidates were still likely to try to claim Reagan’s legacy, playing on the audience’s collective memories of the former president. The mainstage candidates utilized similar strategies of referencing Reagan as the undercard candidates; many references were comparisons that served to boost the credibility of the candidates and establish a connection to Reagan. Referencing Reagan allowed candidates to discuss a variety of topics, including health care, foreign policy, ability to evolve on issues, bipartisanship, the economy, abortion, and leadership. Throughout the mainstage debates, candidates referenced Reagan for different reasons, using his name as a way to support their answers.

Reagan and Healthcare

One of the reasons Ohio Governor John Kasich mentioned Reagan in the GOP debates was to advance his position on healthcare. Most references to Reagan throughout the debates served to increase the credibility of a candidate’s position. One way candidates attempted to enhance their credibility was to show how Reagan had done something they also did or had supported a policy position they also supported; essentially, Reagan was mentioned in candidates’ answers in order to provide justification for their actions. In particular, if the GOP

candidates were accused of supporting an unpopular position or were confronted about some negative decisions made while in office, the candidates would often point to how Reagan had done something similar. By referencing Reagan, their decision or policy position would likely seem more credible (or, at a minimum, more defensible) to a Republican audience who had positive collective memories of the former president. For example, when Kasich was confronted about his expansion of Medicaid in Ohio during the August 6, 2015 Cleveland, Ohio debate, Kasich reminded the audience that Reagan had expanded Medicaid at least three times while in office. By stating this, Kasich was utilizing Reagan’s name as a means to justify his actions. His answer also demonstrated that he likely believed the audience regarded Reagan with such high respect that they might excuse Kasich’s Medicaid expansion since Reagan had done the same thing. Kasich used this same strategy again during the February 13, 2016 Greenville, South Carolina debate. Kasich (2016) said, “You know who expanded Medicaid five times to try to help the folks and give them opportunity so that you could rise and get a job? President Ronald Reagan.” In both the Greenville and Cleveland debates, Kasich opened his defense of Medicaid with a reference to Reagan. By mentioning Reagan before any of his other explanations of why he expanded Medicaid, Kasich highlighted the importance he placed on the former president. Once again, since Kasich revealed that Reagan had done the same thing he did, he was providing credibility to his answer, making Republicans more likely to support him. Kasich referenced Reagan in order to justify one of his controversial positions on healthcare.

Reagan’s Foreign Policy

Referencing Reagan also aided candidates in explaining their foreign policy platforms. During the Cleveland debate, Senator Rand Paul mentioned Reagan in order to justify why he believed in negotiations. Paul (2015) said, “I oppose the Iranian deal, and will vote against it. I

don't think that the president negotiated from a position of strength, but I don't immediately discount negotiations. I'm a Reagan conservative. Reagan did negotiate with the Soviets.” Paul supported his position by reminding the audience that Reagan had also engaged in negotiations, something Paul was planning to do if elected. At the end of his answer, in order to show viewers that he had a connection with Reagan, Paul aligned his identification with Reagan. Paul relied on the Republican audience's collective memories of Reagan when answering, as he likely believed that the audience held Reagan in such a high regard based on how they remembered him that anything he had done should be considered a wise decision. Therefore, Reagan was referenced for the purpose of enhancing the credibility of Paul's position that negotiation was something to consider in the foreign policy arena.

Paul utilized Reagan's name as a way to advance his belief that negotiating is a necessary part of foreign policy multiple times throughout the GOP debates, but he met opposition on this claim from former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina. In both the November 10, 2015 Milwaukee, Wisconsin debate and the December 15, 2015 Las Vegas, Nevada debate, Fiorina referenced how Reagan walked away from Reykjavik in order to prove her point that this was the time for strength against enemies. When Fiorina (2015) was asked about her position on talking with Putin, she replied,

I didn't say I would cut off all communication with Putin. What I said was as president of the United States, now is not the time to talk with him. Reagan walked away at Reykjavik. There is a time and a place for everything. There is a time and a place for talk. And there is a time and a place for action.

Fiorina's reference to Reagan had the potential to play on Republicans' collective memories of the Reykjavik Summit in 1986, when Reagan met with the General Secretary of the Communist

Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev in order to discuss nuclear weapons. Though the purpose of the summit was to negotiate, Reagan ultimately halted talks when he and Gorbachev were unable to reach a compromise. Fiorina reminded the audience that Reagan had been willing to negotiate, but was also prepared to walk away and take action if the situation called for him to do so. With this memory of Reagan, the audience would be better equipped to see Fiorina as someone willing to appropriately take action in the foreign policy arena.

During the Milwaukee debate, Fiorina referenced Reagan walking away from Reykjavik in order to contrast her position of strength to Paul’s insistence on trying to avoid war. Paul (2015) said, “I think the first war in Iraq was a mistake...You can be strong without being involved in every civil war around the world... Ronald Reagan was strong, but Ronald Reagan didn't.... send troops into the Middle East.” Paul, like Fiorina, referenced Reagan for the purpose of increasing the credibility of his position that war could be avoided, which was somewhat unpopular among conservatives. Fiorina (2015) interrupted Paul during his answer and said, “Ronald Reagan walked away at Reykjavik...he walked away, he quit talks.” Fiorina and Paul both used Reagan’s name and collective memories attached to his name in order to support contrasting positions. When Paul referenced Reagan, Fiorina countered with another reference to Reagan in order to discredit her opponent and boost her own credibility. Not only was Fiorina able to support her position by referencing Reagan, she was also potentially able to remove the credibility Paul had just built with his answer concerning the same topic. Paul and Fiorina’s disagreement illustrated how there were different sets of collective memories upon which candidates would base their arguments. Even though Paul and Fiorina referenced Reagan to support opposing positions, they both showed that Reagan could be invoked for the purpose of discussing foreign policy.

Cruz also tackled foreign policy when referencing Reagan, which helped him justify his plans to deal with Iran. In the Miami debate, Cruz said,

It's worth remembering Iran released our hostages the day Ronald Reagan was sworn into office. And America needs a president who stands with our friends and allies, as I will do, and who stands up and demonstrates strengths to our enemies. That's why on day one, I will rip to shreds this catastrophic Iranian nuclear deal because the Ayatollah Khamenei must never be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons.

In his answer, Cruz was embodying Reagan's "peace through strength" mentality, sharing that he felt confident he could strongly resolve the United States' issues with Iran. Within this reference, Cruz compared himself to Reagan, which enhanced the credibility of his answer. Cruz was strongly against the Iranian nuclear deal, and referencing Reagan allowed him to justify this viewpoint. In addition, Cruz painted himself as someone who could be the next Reagan, as he shared how he planned to show the same strength as Reagan had. Cruz would then have an advantage in reaching Republicans who have positive collective memories of Reagan. By both reminding viewers of something that happened in Reagan's time in office and comparing himself to Reagan, Cruz strategically tailored his answer to affect collective memories of the former president. Cruz, Fiorina, and Paul all referenced Reagan in order to advance their foreign policy positions.

Reagan as Able to Evolve on Issues

In order to counter accusations of flip-flopping, business leader and reality star Donald Trump claimed that he had simply evolved on certain issues, just as he believed Reagan had. Throughout the 2015-2016 GOP debate season, Trump's past history as a liberal Democrat was emphasized by opponents and the media. Trump's main strategy in justifying his past status as a

Democrat was to remind viewers that Reagan was also a liberal in his early days, but he still became a strong conservative president. For example, during the Greenville debate, Trump (2016) said, “You have to have flexibility. In Ronald Reagan, though, in terms of what we're talking about, was the great example. He was a somewhat liberal Democrat who became a somewhat, pretty strong conservative. He became — most importantly, he became a great president.” Trump’s argument relied heavily on Republican’s collective memories of Reagan’s presidency. If the audience agreed with Trump’s assessment of Reagan’s presidency, then they would likely draw the parallel between Trump’s evolution from liberal to conservative, remember how this path was successful for Reagan, and then desire that same success again in Trump. Overall, like many other candidates, Trump was referencing Reagan to increase his credibility as a conservative. Trump likely believed his response was successful because during the subsequent debate on February 25, 2016 in Houston, Texas, Trump repeated close to the same response, saying, “And if you talk about evolving, Ronald Reagan was a somewhat liberal Democrat. Ronald Reagan evolved into a somewhat strong conservative — more importantly, he was a great president.” Trump was trying to convince the audience that his past did not matter, but that, like Reagan, he would be able to be a great president. Trump was able to utilize Reagan’s name to justify why he changed his political leanings over time.

Reagan and the Economy

GOP candidates also mentioned Reagan to either support their own economic policy or diminish the credibility of another’s plan. In one instance, Senator Marco Rubio attacked Senator Ted Cruz about his alleged value-added tax (VAT) plan. Rubio (2016) said,

I'm not going to have something that Ted described in his tax plan. It's called the value added tax. And it's a tax you find in many companies in Europe. Where basically,

businesses now will have to pay a tax, both on the money they make, but they also have to pay taxes on the money that they pay their employees. And that's why they have it in Europe, because it is a way to blindfold the people, that's what Ronald Reagan said. Ronald Reagan opposed the value tax because he said it was a way to blindfold the people, so the true cost of government was not there for them... When I am president of the United States, I'm going to side with Ronald Reagan on this.

In order to discredit Cruz, Rubio quoted Reagan, who had said that a VAT would trick the American people, after accusing Cruz of incorporating a VAT into his tax plan. While Rubio attempted to raise his own credibility by sharing how he would side with Reagan at the end of his answer, he was initially focused on attacking Cruz. Rubio's reference to Reagan served the purpose of removing or at least lessening credibility from Cruz, demonstrating that references to Reagan were not always used to support one's own position. Mentioning Reagan for the purpose of diminishing an opponent's credibility was uncommon during the debates and therefore presented an opportunity for candidates to catch the audience's attention. In addition, Rubio contrasted himself against Cruz in order to paint himself the stronger candidate for president.

After Rubio's attack, Cruz responded by discussing what he believed Reagan would really think about his tax plan. Cruz's reference to Reagan was similar to Fiorina's response to Paul about Reagan's foreign policy, in that Cruz was countering one Reagan reference with another. Cruz (2016) first explained that his flat tax plan was not a VAT, and then said,

The final observation, invoked Ronald Reagan. I would note that Art Laffer, Ronald Reagan's chief economic adviser, has written publicly, that my simple flat tax is the best tax plan of any of the individuals on this stage cause it produces economic growth, it raises wages and it helps everyone from the very poorest to the very richest.

Cruz’s trust in Reagan went so far as to extend to his adviser, Laffer, as a means of enhancing credibility. Cruz was essentially trying to prove that Reagan would approve of his flat tax plan because Reagan’s chief economic adviser approved of the plan. Cruz’s counter-reference to Rubio once again illustrated that not every reference to Reagan was accepted by Republicans, and that candidates saw certain references to Reagan as more “true” than others. Reagan can be referenced to support contrasting positions, but Reagan can also be referenced to outdo Reagan. Rubio and Cruz’s VAT argument also showed how Reagan can be mentioned as support for economic plans, even when if the plans differ. Cruz and Rubio remembered Reagan and his policies differently, and incorporated contrasting evidence into their arguments to demonstrate the side they thought Reagan would support. The success of Rubio’s and Cruz’s arguments likely relied on which collective memories of Reagan the audience possessed.

Another way candidates utilized Reagan as a mode of credibility was to mention something Reagan had accomplished as proof that one of their plans could work. For example, both Cruz and Kasich reminded audience members that Reagan’s tax cuts brought economic growth to the United States. During the October 28, 2015 Boulder, Colorado debate, Cruz said, “Growth is the answer. And as Reagan demonstrated, if we cut taxes, we can bring back growth.” Cruz was using a proven Reagan initiative to lend credibility to his tax plan. By pointing back to a specific Reagan action, Cruz could better play upon the Republicans’ collective memories of the economy during Reagan’s presidency. Cruz was able to parallel the time of prosperity that was heavily associated with Reagan to Cruz’s plans to bring about similar times in the future. Later, in the same debate, Kasich (2015) said, “We’ve cut taxes, balanced budgets, changed the regulatory environment. Folks, you want to...fix America, this is the formula. It worked for Reagan and it works for our team in Ohio.” Significantly, both candidates

utilized the same case to prove their point that cutting taxes would bring growth. Kasich took an additional step of comparing himself to Reagan by demonstrating that he had already accomplished the same things as Governor of Ohio that Reagan did during his presidency. This further comparison would allow Kasich to appeal to Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan to a greater extent, and help them realize that Kasich could be the next Reagan. Overall, citing Reagan’s accomplishments as proof that a candidate’s plan would be successful gave candidates a greater ability to engage Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan, and to project these memories onto the candidate making the comparison. Cruz and Kasich both made points of how cutting taxes would lead to growth and prosperity for Americans, just as it had for Reagan, which allowed them to have greater potential in influencing voters.

Reagan, Immigration, and National Security

Referencing Reagan also helped candidates support their positions on immigration and national security. In order to justify his more moderate stance on immigration, Kasich (2015) quoted Reagan, saying, “Well, look, in 1986 Ronald Reagan basically said the people who were here, if they were law-abiding, could stay.” Kasich attributed these words to Reagan for the purpose of bolstering his point, as Reagan served as a source to back up Kasich’s position that it was neither worthwhile nor realistic to deport 11 million illegal immigrants. Similarly, Cruz quoted Reagan, but he used his quotation to contrast himself against Rubio. In the Milwaukee debate, Cruz (2015) said,

You know, there was a time for choosing as Reagan put it. Where there was a battle over amnesty and some chose, like Senator Rubio to stand with Barack Obama and Chuck Schumer and support a massive amnesty plan. Others chose to stand with Jeff Sessions and Steve King and the American people and secure the border.

Cruz utilized Reagan to frame the situation, insinuating that Rubio made the wrong choice when the “time for choosing” came. In contrast, Cruz implied that he made the correct decision in opposing amnesty because he believed it would protect the American people. Therefore, Cruz’s reference to Reagan served to increase Cruz’s credibility and to decrease Rubio’s credibility. Additionally, quoting Reagan was a more complete way for Kasich and Cruz to use collective memories of Reagan to their advantage, because it provided a more exact, or accurate, reflection of what Reagan said. Instead of a candidate discussing their opinion of Reagan, or making an indirect claim on what Reagan believed, the candidates were using Reagan’s exact words to trigger the audience’s positive collective memory of the former president.³ The Reagan quotations aided Kasich and Cruz in promoting their immigration and national security positions.

Reagan as Bipartisan Broker

One of the most frequent reasons Reagan was mentioned in the GOP debates was for the purpose of promoting bipartisanship. Trump compared Reagan’s proficiency in making deals to his own business acumen multiple times throughout the debate, which allowed Trump to refer to his successful career. During the February 6, 2016 Manchester, New Hampshire debate, Trump said, “No, a good deal maker will make great deals, but we’ll do it the way our founders thought it should be done. People get together, they make deals. Ronald Reagan did it with Tip O’Neil very successfully.” Trump mentioned Reagan as an example to support his point that it is important to make deals, but he also did so because Reagan could add credibility to his point.

Trump likely understood that many audience members highly respected Reagan, would approve

³ However, Reagan’s “time for choosing” was famously put forth in a 1964 speech endorsing Barry Goldwater, not something he had said during his presidency or about immigration, so exact quotations can still be potentially deceptive.

of anything Reagan did, and see it as important that a current candidate would follow his example. In a way, Trump utilized Reagan’s name as a way to promote the worthwhile quality of the bipartisanship deals that he believed he would make if elected president. Trump repeated this same reasoning during the March 10, 2016 Miami, Florida debate: “Nobody is complaining about the deals that Ronald Reagan made. And he made it with Tip O’Neill. We need to have people get together and work good deals out, good deals out from our standpoint. And I’ll tell you this, it can be done.” Not only did Trump reference Reagan, but he also made it clear that he could accomplish the same things Reagan had while he was in office. In both of his answers about making deals if elected, Trump sought to remind the audience of Reagan’s bipartisanship efforts while in office, and tried to convince them that he would be able to make successful deals too. Trump had the potential to influence those with positive collective memories of Reagan, showcasing how he could be like the former president. Trump’s comparisons to Reagan allowed him to make a more effective argument that could influence Republicans’ collective memories and promote bipartisanship.

Other candidates specifically referenced the “Reagan coalition” in order to support their desire for bipartisanship. In doing so, Kasich implied that he would take on the same plan as Reagan. In the Houston debate, Kasich discussed how President George H.W. Bush and Reagan worked together to try to discover a solution for a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. Kasich (2016) said, “With President Reagan and George Bush, it was a bipartisan coalition to address the issue, and I think we can and should do it again. And I will have a plan in the first 100 days to get it done and get this issue behind us.” Kasich was saying that he wanted to reutilize Reagan’s plan, making himself appear similar to the former president, just as Trump did when discussing Reagan and O’Neill’s capacity to make strong deals. In addition, Cruz did the

same thing in the January 28, 2016 Des Moines, Iowa debate, when he mentioned that it would be important for the next president to be able to bring together the Reagan coalition. Like Kasich, Cruz aligned himself with Reagan’s beliefs and shared how he would promote these values as president. Cruz’s approach allowed him to illustrate how he would act like Reagan as president, bringing diverse groups of people together to support a common cause. Without directly saying it, Cruz was communicating that he could be the next Reagan. Thus, people with positive collective memories of Reagan would likely want another Reagan in office, giving Cruz a greater chance to gain their support. Significantly, as Noon (2004) said, once a candidate could convincingly compare themselves to Reagan, those with positive collective memories of Reagan would have a harder time critiquing that candidate (p. 341). Kasich and Cruz both made it harder for the audience to critique them after comparing their plans for bipartisanship to Reagan’s successes in office. They also provided support for their argument by reminding the audience of the success they remembered Reagan having while he was in office. In a way, Cruz and Kasich were contributing to building new collective memories of Reagan by sharing how they remembered his presidency. Finally, Cruz and Kasich’s Reagan references demonstrate how Reagan can be used to promote bipartisan values.

Reagan and Abortion

Reagan was commonly referenced in order to provide justification for controversial issues, as Christie did to garner support for his position on abortion. In the Manchester debate, Christie (2016) said,

And the fact is that we have always has believed, as has Ronald Reagan, that we have self-defense for women who have been raped and impregnated because of it, or the subject of incest and been impregnated for it. That woman should not have to deliver that

child if they believe that violation is now an act of self-defense by terminating that pregnancy.

Before answering, Christie had not been prompted in any way to speak on Reagan, so he likely brought up the former president because he believed Reagan would be a helpful source in advocating for his position on abortion. Allowing abortions for women who have been raped was a controversial position among Republicans, so mentioning Reagan would likely have made viewers more likely to at least accept his position, if not support it. Essentially, Reagan served to make Christie’s position on abortion less controversial, lending credibility to his position. Without Reagan’s perceived agreement on the issue, it would likely have been more difficult for Christie to convince the audience to agree that abortion could be considered a form of self-defense. Christie’s reference showed how a reference to Reagan could also be used to justify a controversial position such as abortion.

Reagan’s Values

Citing Reagan’s values was another way candidates sought to enhance their credibility and compare themselves to Reagan. For example, Former Governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee quoted Reagan as saying “trust, but verify” in order to add credibility to his point that the reason he did not trust Obama was not because they were members of different parties. Huckabee’s reference to Reagan functioned to lend believability to Huckabee’s argument. Since Huckabee quoted Reagan, he was providing another reason for the audience members to believe him. Famous former neurosurgeon Ben Carson similarly quoted Reagan in order to showcase how he shared the same values as Reagan. Carson quoted Reagan’s “11th commandment” on two occasions, reminding audience members that he would not speak ill of fellow Republicans. Quoting this classic Reagan commandment may have assisted Carson with his argument, and

also helped him to align himself with Reagan’s values, as well as demonstrating that Carson intended to act in a similar manner to Reagan if elected president. The combination of quoting Reagan and also taking on one of Reagan’s rules could have played upon Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan, and helped them see Carson as a similar leader. Quoting Reagan directly provided unique advantages for Christie and Carson to draw on the Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan.

Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush also mentioned Reagan in order to communicate what values were important to him. In the Manchester debate, Bush (2016) said,

President Reagan believed in the future of our country, believed in its greatness, had a hopeful, optimistic message. Drew people towards our cause. We need someone who has a proven record to take our case to the American people because our philosophy is by far the best one. Limited government, entrepreneurial capitalism, of peace through strength. I believe I have the skills to take our party to victory in November...

After listing off some of Reagan’s values, Bush explained that these ideals helped grow the Republican Party. Bush was proving that Reagan’s concept of optimism led to the success of the Republican Party, which allowed Bush to show that it was valuable that he also shared these same beliefs. Reagan served as the vehicle for Bush to showcase which values he found important and why it was helpful that he possessed these values. Mentioning Reagan allowed him to support his answer while also drawing parallels between himself and the former president. By saying he had the skill set to win the general election, Bush was implying he could recapture the same success Reagan had in courting new members to the Republican Party. Bush’s answer worked well in engaging with Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan, as he illustrated the similarities between what Reagan did while in office and what Bush planned to do. Making these

comparisons likely gave Bush a better chance at gaining the support of those with positive collective memories of Reagan. Both directly quoting Reagan and recounting his philosophy allowed GOP candidates to present what values they found important.

Reagan’s Leadership as a Model

Candidates also referenced Reagan by comparing his leadership abilities to their own. This strategy allowed candidates to increase their credibility as presidential candidates, as well as give them the opportunity to take advantage of Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan’s perceived successful time in office. In addition to comparing his leadership to Reagan’s, Cruz also compared the time periods in which both politicians campaigned. During the Milwaukee debate, Cruz (2015) said, “I believe that 2016 will be an election like 1980, that we will win by following Reagan's admonition to paint in bold colors, not pale pastels. We're building a grassroots army.” Notably, Cruz explained that he would literally utilize Reagan’s strategy, boldly taking on some of Reagan’s leadership qualities. By following Reagan’s admonition, Cruz allowed himself to appear more similar to the former president. This strategy would allow Cruz to more easily draw upon Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan because he was mirroring something Reagan did, and pointing out to the audience that he was doing so. Additionally, once Cruz compared himself to Reagan, it would be harder for Reagan supporters to critique him, as he began to embody the former president’s beliefs (Noon, 2004, p. 341). Due to the positive collective memories surrounding Reagan, this strategy was a strong way to win over voters ahead of the primary elections.

Cruz followed this strategy of sharing how he planned to do the same thing as Reagan multiple times in order to emphasize how he had the same leadership qualities as Reagan. During the Las Vegas debate, Cruz (2015) said,

Ronald Reagan reignited the American economy, rebuilt the Military, bankrupted the Soviet Union and defeated Soviet Communism. I will do the same thing. Cutting taxes, cutting regulation, unleashing small businesses and rebuilding the Military to defeat radical Islamic terrorism — our strategy is simple. We win, they lose. We've done it before and we can do it again.

By saying he would “do the same thing” as Reagan, Cruz was giving the audience confidence that he could be the next Reagan (Cruz, 2015). Those who shared the positive collective memory of Reagan would probably want someone similar in office, and Cruz was telling them he could reenact Reagan’s time in office. A large part of Cruz’s strategy in the debates was comparing the 1980s to the current election cycle, as he did when discussing Reagan’s admonition to be bold, illustrating that a candidate like Reagan, who was remembered by Republicans as being successful, would be suited for presidency now as well. Cruz continued to draw these parallels in the Des Moines debate, when he said,

In 1981, when Ronald Reagan came to the Oval Office, he encountered a military that had been debilitated just as the current military has, just like Jimmy Carter weakened our readiness, undermined our ability to defend this country, so too has Barack Obama. Just as morale in the military has plummeted in the last seven, so it had then. What Reagan did is he began with tax reform and regulatory reform, unleashing the engine of the American free enterprise system. It brought booming economic growth and that growth fueled rebuilding the military. I intend to do the exact same thing to defeat radical Islamic terrorism...and to devote the resources from the booming economy to rebuilding our Navy, rebuilding our Air Force, rebuilding our Army and ensuring we have the capacity to keep this country safe.

Cruz began this argument by describing the context surrounding Reagan’s first term in office before proceeding to describe how the context surrounding the 2016 election was almost exactly the same, mainly comparing the presidents who served prior in both cases. From there, Cruz shared how he once again planned on doing “the exact same thing” as Reagan. Cruz listed off a long list of things Reagan did that he also intended to do, reminding the audience of Reagan’s leadership qualities. Cruz then implied that he shared these same qualities, as he planned to accomplish the same tasks. Later, in the March 3, 2016 Detroit, Michigan debate, Cruz repeated the “exact same thing” message once again, making it a common theme of his campaign rhetoric. Cruz likely believed the voters wanted a candidate similar to Reagan, as he constantly emphasized how he would follow Reagan’s strategy if elected. Cruz’s strategy worked best for playing into the Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan, because his statements of planning to do the same thing as Reagan suggested that he believed he could be the “next Reagan,” which is something someone with a positive outlook on Reagan’s presidency would reasonably desire. Cruz also benefitted from being repetitive; by constantly mentioning Reagan in association with promoting his own leadership qualities, Cruz was strategically demonstrating how he could be the next Reagan.

Conclusion

Candidates participating in the mainstage 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates referenced Reagan for enhancing the credibility of their answers. One potential reason for the focus on adding credibility to their arguments was that mentioning Reagan often required little additional explanation, justification, or warrant for candidates other than saying Reagan had been a successful president. Candidates acted as if this explanation were sufficient, helping them spend less time on justifying their answers. The ways candidates enhanced the credibility of their

argument by referencing Reagan included explaining how Reagan had done something they were attacked for doing, quoting Reagan, and citing his actions as proof for their plans. These different ways of utilizing Reagan’s legacy for credibility purposes shows how there are multiple strategic ways to reference Reagan in a debate. Even if a method of referencing Reagan did not play upon collective memory, it can still serve a function in a candidate’s argument.

Most candidates also referenced Reagan for the purposes of drawing comparisons between themselves and the former president. Candidates did so by attempting to align themselves with Reagan, comparing their plans to some of Reagan’s accomplishments, and by demonstrating they have some of the same qualities as Reagan. Candidates also would regularly emphasize the importance of Reagan; the more specific ways candidates did so was by explaining a need for a president like Reagan, discussing their relationships with the former president, and by commending Reagan. Discussing the importance of Reagan was a less common strategy utilized in the debates, but it was possible that candidates wanted viewers to know they respected the former president. The strategies of referencing Reagan served to advance various causes and issues throughout the debates. By mentioning Reagan, candidates were better able to support their arguments on topics such as healthcare, foreign policy, evolving political stances, bipartisanship, the economy, immigration, personal values, abortion, and leadership. The wide variety of stances taken in each of these categories demonstrates that there was no one single way candidates would bring up Reagan during the mainstage debates.

Chapter Four: An Analysis of the Mainstage Debate Showdown at Ronald Reagan’s Presidential Library (Simi Valley, CA)

This chapter will center on the second mainstage GOP presidential primary debate, held at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California, in order to better compare the various ways in which candidates utilized references of Ronald Reagan as a debate strategy. This debate contained the most references to Reagan out of all of the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates, likely due to the location of the debate. In addition, Jake Tapper, one of the moderators of the debate, worked to frame some of the debate around Reagan, and even asked questions that led most of the candidates to discuss Reagan. Throughout the debate, candidates shared their personal connections to Reagan, compared themselves or their policies to Reagan and/or his policies, thereby invoking Reagan as a way to boost their credibility. This debate is important because it emphasizes the different views candidates had of Reagan, the strategies candidates had for using Reagan’s name, and the idea that it was almost obligatory for candidates to mention Reagan particularly in this specific primary debate (and its accompanying venue) in order to compete.

Broadcast by CNN, the second mainstage GOP debate took place on September 16, 2015, and featured the eleven leading GOP candidates. While the GOP candidates referenced Reagan throughout the other mainstage and undercard debates, Reagan’s name was mentioned 45 times by both moderators and candidates during the second debate. While many of the references were likely motivated by the location of the debate at the Reagan Presidential Library, moderator Jake Tapper (2015) even said that Reagan was “looming large over this debate.” Due to the location, the candidates may have felt more pressure than ever to form a connection to Reagan and to illustrate their approval of the former president. Tapper (2015) framed the content of the debate

best when he gave this tease before a commercial break: “So how Reaganesque exactly are these Republicans?” Tapper, as a moderator, considered discovering how “Reaganesque” each candidate was to be one of the most important questions of the debate. By exploring this question, Tapper was signaling to voters that similarity to Reagan was something relevant to consider when selecting a candidate to support. Most of the candidates were willing to endorse this criterion for evaluation, based on how they advocated for themselves in this debate.

With emphasis already placed on the location and its relation to Reagan, Tapper and the rest of the candidates predictably engaged in “Reagan talk” for the rest of the debate. The most invocations of Reagan came when Tapper (2015) asked,

Ronald Reagan, the 40th President, used the plane behind you to accomplish a great many things. Perhaps, most notably, to challenge Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the wall, and ultimately, to make peace with the USSR. How will the world look different once your Air Force One is parked in the hangar of your presidential library?

While Tapper referenced Reagan in this question for the purpose of relating the location of the debate to the question, many candidates took this question as an opportunity to draw comparisons between themselves and Reagan. However, a few candidates chose not to reference Reagan at all while answering this question. Mike Huckabee did not mention Reagan one time during his answer, and chose to focus on his policy positions, discussing foreign policy, tax reform, and abortion. Similarly, Jeb Bush also discussed policy, focusing on his positions on business, immigration, and poverty. Donald Trump neither referenced Reagan nor his policy in response to Tapper. Instead, he simply emphasized the need to make the country great and the importance of finding solutions to the problems discussed at the debate. Carly Fiorina and John Kasich also avoided mentioning Reagan during this question, and spoke more generally about

liberty and building strong relationships with other countries. However, each of these candidates, with the exception of Fiorina and Trump, had already discussed Reagan earlier in the debate. Perhaps these nine candidates did not see the need to mention Reagan again, as they had already discussed his merits and shared why they appreciate his presidency. Even though some candidates did not reference Reagan during this question, many of the candidates took the time to talk about the former president. Ted Cruz (2015) took a different approach to Tapper’s Reagan question as well, and opened his answer by saying, “Ronald Reagan believed in America,” before immediately transitioning into his own plan for the presidency. Cruz did not reference Reagan throughout the remainder of his answer. This was unusual, as Cruz was the one of the candidates who most frequently mentioned Reagan throughout the GOP primary presidential debates. Cruz spoke positively about Reagan in his answer, but did not relate himself or his policy to Reagan at all. While not all candidates answered Tapper’s question, most candidates made a reference to Reagan during the Simi Valley debate, mentioning him to advance issues important to their campaigns. The candidates referenced Reagan in order to support their positions on a wide variety of issues, such as the value of being a political outsider, leadership, being inspired to hold the same beliefs as Reagan, foreign policy, and the economy.

Reagan as an Outsider

During the Simi Valley debate, Paul mentioned Reagan in order to communicate how being an outsider was an asset. One strategy the candidates used during this debate was illustrating the personal connection between themselves and Reagan. While the location of the debate at the Reagan Presidential Library likely motivated the sharing of any relationship with Reagan, the candidates were still using Reagan’s name as a rhetorical tool. Senator Rand Paul

(2015) was the first to answer Tapper’s question and to discuss his personal connection with Reagan:

I met Ronald Reagan as a teenager, and my family, we're **[apparent typo in official transcript- perhaps intended to be we were]** big supporters of him when he ran against Gerald Ford. It was a big deal because he was the grassroots, running against the establishment, and I'll never forget that. And, how he stood up and said, you know what, this is something new that our country needs, and our party needs.

This reference to Reagan detailed Paul’s personal, real connection to Reagan. He shared that he had once met Reagan, and that he was from a family of Reagan supporters. After acknowledging his connection to Reagan, Paul shared how Reagan was against the establishment and that the country needed someone like that in office. Paul was commonly known as a Republican outsider, as he was libertarian-leaning, so he was able to argue for a strong similarity between Reagan’s accomplishments as an anti-establishment candidate to the ethos of Paul’s own campaign. Paul was helping viewers see himself as similar to the former president in order to demonstrate how he was the counter-establishment candidate needed by the United States. Therefore, referencing Reagan allowed a candidate to communicate his status as a political outsider as an advantage.

Reagan and Leadership

One of the most common characteristics candidates promoted when referencing Reagan was their leadership skills. In showcasing leadership, overlap was also created to continue the idea that Reagan’s status as a political outsider was a useful trait in his presidency. John Kasich (2015) sought to demonstrate his ability as a strong leader when he mentioned Reagan: “I defeated an incumbent Democrat in 1982; running on the Reagan program, I was the only Republican in America to defeat an incumbent Democrat that year.” In this answer, Kasich was

attempting to showcase his relationship with the former president, while also reminding viewers that he was able to win in tough situations, making him a strong leader. Kasich implied that running on the Reagan program was the key to him being the only Republican to defeat an incumbent Democrat in 1982. This mention of Reagan came with no prompting, so it seemed as if Kasich referenced Reagan in order to draw another connection between himself and the former president. Like other candidates, Kasich likely realized how valuable a connection to Reagan would be in winning the primary, due to Republicans’ positive collective memories of Reagan. Kasich ran during Reagan’s administration, so Kasich was better able to draw on these audience memories than other candidates. Kasich (2015) emphasized his connection to Reagan again when he said, “I think I actually flew on this plane with Ronald Reagan when I was a congressman,” in reference to Air Force One. By sharing that he had flown with Reagan on Air Force One, Kasich was suggesting that he actually knew Reagan. He was not merely inspired by Reagan or attempting to align his policies with Reagan, but showing he actually worked with President Reagan while Kasich was a member of Congress, thus experiencing the former president’s leadership skills firsthand. Kasich telling his story about his time on Air Force One was likely intentional and strategic, since he was competing in a debate where utilizing time efficiently is valuable. As in the other mainstage debates, demonstrating a connection to Reagan emerged as a common strategy during the Simi Valley debate. Kasich was successful at the same time Reagan was successful, so some of the idealized memories of the Reagan administration could be applied to Kasich as well. Therefore, mentioning Reagan in order to prove his own leadership skills was a strong strategy for Kasich.

Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush referenced Reagan in order to show how he wanted to take an approach to leading that resembled Reagan’s, which he defined as hopeful and

optimistic. Bush discussed how he wanted to be like Reagan, and then shared that he intended to be like Reagan in terms of immigration policy. Bush’s debate strategy here relied on him explaining how he could be the next Reagan. He had to explicitly say, “I’m on the Reagan side of this” (Bush, 2015). Agreeing with Reagan likely boosted the credibility of his plan, while saying that he could be a new Reagan for the United States would be an even more successful strategy, as long as audiences did not feel as if it was a reach or over-done. Walker (2015) also compared himself to Reagan during the Simi Valley debate; he said, “Ronald Reagan knew how to go big, and go bold. He understood the essence of moving this country forward, and that’s what I did when I took on the status quo in my state, and the Washington based special interest.” In this reference, Walker compared Reagan’s leadership skills with his own ability to be a leader, partially for the purpose of lending credibility to his answer. Significantly, both Bush and Walker took a very general characteristic about Reagan to apply to their own more specific plans for their presidencies. When utilizing collective memory to boost their perceived ability to be president by comparing themselves to Reagan, the candidates often used general words and feelings, rather than policy details or technical specifics, to define what they thought Reagan believed. Bush carefully chose terms that would not remind audience members of specifics of Reagan’s time in office, and instead, compared Reagan’s approach to the presidency to Trump’s planned approach to presidency.

While Bush deemed Reagan’s approach as hopeful during his answer in this debate, Bush (2015) said that in Trump’s approach, “everything is bad, that everything is coming to an end.” After saying this, Bush proceeded to declare that he was on Reagan’s side, directly equating his approach with the former president’s approach. By making this comparison, Bush could transfer, by association and suggestion, Republicans’ positive collective memories of Reagan to himself.

From there, Bush contrasted himself, someone like Reagan, to his greatest perceived threat, Trump. In other words, Bush used Reagan’s name as a tool to try to take down his opponent. Additionally, using vague references allowed candidates to make it seem like there were greater similarities between Reagan and themselves than there really were. Therefore, Walker was also likely utilizing Reagan’s name as a strategy to boost sentimental feelings among Republicans that Walker could recapture. In addition, when Walker said that he done the same things as Regan did during his presidency, he was attempting to demonstrate that he that he was already like Reagan. Walker tried to convince the audience that he had progressed the nation by challenging the norm in Wisconsin, just as Reagan had sought to move the country forward. More so than his other Reagan reference, Walker was moving closer to claiming Reagan’s legacy, or implying he could be the next Reagan. Walker’s strategy mirrored the way Tapper framed the debate; he was attempting to show how he “Reaganesque” he really was. Both Bush and Walker were able to use their references to Reagan to accomplish multiple goals, including showing off their leadership abilities, taking down Trump, and insinuating they could be the next Reagan.

Walker also advertised his leadership skills when he attempted to explain how he was like Reagan in response to Tapper’s Reagan question. In order to show that he was the same type of leader as Reagan, Walker (2015) declared that Reagan was an “eternal optimist in the American people,” and then proceeded to declare that he shared this same optimism. Walker’s strategy here was to discuss a characteristic he thought people would support, remind the audience how Reagan possessed that characteristic, and then share how he also embodied that characteristic. Realistically, Walker did not need to mention Reagan for the audience to agree that being an optimist for the American people was a positive trait, and that Walker was an

optimist. However, Walker chose to mention Reagan because he could draw on Republican’s collective memories of the former president. The audience would likely remember Reagan’s time as president and desire that same type of optimism again in a leader. Candidates seemed to be hoping that the audience members desired to live out another Reagan presidency, due to how popular Reagan remained among Republicans so long after his death. After discussing his similarity to Reagan, Walker went on to discuss his plan for making the United States better, without further reference to Reagan. Walker once again moved from a broad principle supported by Reagan’s time in office to his own policy positions, without citing any of Reagan’s specific views on such issues or policies. Walker essentially used Reagan as an attention grabber at the beginning of his speech, invoking his name and a vague concept about the former president to set up his answer, and then gave a speech related to his own views. Like many of the other candidates, Walker brought up the former president in order to grab attention and to restore faith to the American people that he could return from behind and win the Republican primary.

One way in which Bush reminded viewers of his leadership skills was by equating himself to Reagan and creating a parallel between modern times and the 1980s. During one of his answers, Bush accused President Barack Obama and Secretary Hillary Clinton of ushering in a time of weakness to the United States. He then stated how he would be the one to work through this weakness by exercising “peace through strength” (Bush, 2015). By stating this phrase, Bush had the potential to draw upon Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan’s strong leadership. Bush then explained how Reagan led the United States after a time of weakness as well, drawing a parallel between what Reagan accomplished and what Bush was going to do during his presidency. Bush believed he would be the next leader to take the United States out of a period of weakness. Bush had continued to equate himself to Reagan, and was definitely trying to

portray himself as the “next Reagan,” laying claim on his legacy. By saying he would accomplish the same things Reagan did during his presidency, Bush was attempting to play into Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan’s time in office, making voters more likely to support him in order to bring back the successes they remember from Reagan’s presidency.

Kasich, perhaps, made the biggest jump in comparing himself to Reagan. After he established that he had a close relationship with Reagan, Kasich (2015) directly compared himself to Reagan saying Reagan’s “goals, and mine, really much — are pretty much the same. Lift Americans, unify, give hope, grow America, and restore it is to that great, shining city on a hill.” With these statements, Kasich insinuated he would be a strong leader like Reagan. Kasich was attempting to claim Reagan’s legacy, essentially equating himself to Reagan. He drew upon Republicans’ collective, positive memories of Reagan by using strategically ambiguous, hopeful terms such as “unify” and “grow” without going into detail how he would accomplish those goals. Furthermore, Kasich also referenced Reagan’s iconic “city on a hill” rhetoric, originating long ago by John Winthrop, but repeatedly invoked as part of the essential core of Reagan’s rhetorical vocabulary, by sharing that he wanted to restore America to a glorified position. By calling back to one of Reagan’s most well-known tropes, Kasich continued to utilize Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan in order to try to make them desire a return to that time, and for them to believe Kasich was leader who could return the United States to an exalted status. Since Kasich said he and Reagan shared the same goals, he also was able to benefit from the audience seeing Kasich as a mythic figure like Reagan, making him harder to critique (Noon, 2004, p. 341). Referencing Reagan in relation to their leadership skills allowed candidates to compare themselves to Reagan, and make a case for how they could be like Reagan if elected president.

Reagan as Inspiration

Many candidates cited Reagan as one if not the inspiration for their decision to run, and/or for some of their political beliefs. By sharing how Reagan inspired them, candidates were indicating that they agreed with many of Reagan’s views and would be likely to enact some of them in office. This reassurance would help them win over Republicans who have positive collective memories of Reagan. For example, Carson (2015) tried to illustrate a personal connection to Reagan in his answer to Tapper:

Well, you know, I was a radical Democrat before I started listening to Ronald Reagan. And he didn't sound like what they said Republicans were. He sounded logical. And I hope that I sound logical also. Because when I look at what is going on with the United States of America, I see a lot of things that are not logical. I see us allowing people to divide us, when in fact our strength is in our unity. I see people exercising the most irresponsible fiscal habits that anyone could possibly do....And I think also that Ronald Reagan was a master at understanding that a pinnacle nation has to be a nation that leads.

Carson’s answer focused on his story of becoming a Republican, and he attributed this conversion to Reagan. Simply put, Carson was attempting to draw a personal connection to Reagan through telling a story. Through his answer, Carson also explained that Reagan was his inspiration for being a Republican, insinuating that he shared many of Reagan’s beliefs. Walker also referenced Reagan in his answer by telling a story that put his relationship with Reagan on a more personal level, recounting how he turned 13 a couple days before Reagan was elected. While discussing the importance of Reagan was a common strategy in the mainstage debates, the Simi Valley debate contained more references that built a connection between Reagan and the candidate. Specifically, these candidates crafted references to Reagan that were much more

personal in nature, sharing how they were inspired by the former president. By saying Reagan was their inspiration, the candidates could show they had similar beliefs to Reagan, making them more worthy of support.

After citing how old he was at the time of Reagan’s election, Walker continued to share how Reagan served as his inspiration to run for president. He said,

A lot of people forget this, but just a few days before that election 1980, he was behind in the polls. And I think what changed things was people in America realized they didn't want to hear what was bad about America, they wanted to know how it was going to be better. Ronald Reagan wasn't just a conservative Republican, he was an eternal optimist in the American people. And I am too. (Walker, 2015)

By pointing out how Reagan was behind prior to victory, Walker indirectly drew a parallel between Reagan’s position in his primary race, and Walker’s position in the Republican presidential primary. At the time of the debate, Walker was behind in the polls, and he wanted to demonstrate to viewers that he could return from behind and become a great and beloved leader just as Reagan did. Walker’s reference had the potential to draw upon Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan, trying to remind listeners of the good memories of Reagan’s presidency, and communicate that Reagan changed the norm by sharing how the United States was going to get better. By alluding that he could come from behind like Reagan, Walker could lead the audience to believe he could also recapture the glory days of Reagan’s presidency while in office by being an optimist in the American people. Similarly, in one of his answers, Rubio (2015) said, “I’m honored to be here at the Reagan Library, at a place that honors the legacy of a man who inspired not just my interest in public service, but also our love for country.” While Rubio’s relationship to Reagan was not as close as Paul or Kasich’s relationship to Reagan, he was still

able to illustrate some connection to the former president by saying Reagan had inspired him. Rubio was following the same strategy of other candidates by pointing out a connection between himself and Reagan, and then making that reference very personal. Rubio did this by sharing how Reagan helped him realize his love for the United States. Rubio was attempting to show that Reagan was an important figure in his life, likely because approving of Reagan was important to voters. Not only did Rubio approve of Reagan, but he held him to such a high regard that he considered him his political inspiration. By sharing that Reagan motivated his political involvement, Rubio could then attempt to convince the audience he would be similar to Reagan when in office. Like Walker, Rubio then had the ability to use Republicans' collective memories of Reagan to his advantage; if a candidate made a strong comparison to Reagan, it would be harder for the audience to critique that candidate, as the candidate would now be more like the mythic figure they admire (Noon, 2004, p. 341).

Christie's connection story to Reagan was unique, as he did not even add a transition between discussing Reagan and answering Tapper's question. Instead, Christie (2015) said, “my first vote was for Ronald Reagan. Boy, am I glad I did it. And I think the country is, too. A Christie presidency won't be about me.” Christie's short talk about Reagan in contrast to the rest of his own answer was startlingly distinct. Christie's mention of Reagan came across as more of an afterthought rather than a meaningful part of his answer. Reagan did not appear to fit into Christie's plan for the world for when he is president, and instead, he focused on discussing law enforcement and the plight of “the common man.” Christie's unrelated reference to Reagan demonstrated how mentioning Reagan was an expectation for each candidate. Even when mentioning Reagan added nothing to an answer, a candidate did so regardless, as they saw it as a requirement of gaining approval of those watching the debate. Christie solely stated his approval

of Reagan, and made no effort to draw further parallels or point out similarities between himself and the former president. Therefore, unlike some of the other candidates who referenced Reagan for the purpose of highlighting their relationship to the former president, Christie did not utilize the Republicans’ collective memory of Reagan to his advantage. Christie acted as if he needed to do no further work to explain why he mentioned Reagan, and then failed to connect Reagan to his answer convincingly. Therefore, in Christie’s case, Reagan’s name appeared to be utilized solely as an attention-grabber or to fulfill the perceived requirement to mention Reagan in the Reagan Presidential Library debate.

Even though many of the references to Reagan during the Simi Valley debate featured candidates trying to draw connections to Reagan, these mentions could still be used in strategically different ways. For example, while other candidates focused on Reagan’s attributes or policies in their references, Carson was able to share how Reagan was a part of his story of becoming a Republican. Carson’s reference to Reagan was unique due to it being the only conversion story, so he was able to separate himself from the other candidates. In addition, his reference functioned as making a prediction for his presidency. Rather than making an attempt at claiming Reagan’s legacy or trying to embody Reagan’s philosophy, Carson pointed out what he liked about Reagan, and shared how he hoped to act in a similar manner. Carson’s mention of Reagan acted more like a promise of the president he hoped to be. Despite Carson not making a direct claim to Reagan’s legacy, he still would be able to take advantage of Republicans’ collective memories, as did Walker and Rubio. Since Carson explained how he would be similar to Reagan, the audience would likely have a hard time critiquing him as well.

With so many candidates discussing their personal relationships to Reagan, the candidates were signaling to voters that those who knew Reagan, and were inspired by him,

would make better nominees for president. An established relationship with Reagan would allow the candidates to show they were inspired by Reagan and shared many of his beliefs, which would help them gain support from Republicans who had positive collective memories of Reagan. Throughout the GOP debates, mentioning Reagan’s name became a strategy. More specifically, in this debate, establishing a personal relationship with Reagan became part of the strategy. Since Paul shared that he met Reagan, the other candidates may have felt they needed to show they were at least equal to Paul, and had connections to Reagan as well. By matching other candidates’ stories about Reagan, the candidates were demonstrating their belief that a connection to Reagan, such as saying he was their inspiration, was a worthwhile debate strategy to pursue.

Reagan and Foreign Policy

Another common reason candidates referenced Reagan was to seek credibility for their foreign policy positions. Just as in the other mainstage debates, candidates compared themselves to Reagan, as well as their more specific plans or qualities to those Reagan also possessed. Paul (2015) shared how he and Reagan had a similar foreign policy philosophy when he said,

If I were president, I would try to be one who says, you know what, I'm a Reagan Conservative. I'm someone who believes in peace through strength, and I would try to lead the country in that way knowing that our goal is peace, and that war is the last resort, not the first resort. And, that when we go to war, we go to war in a constitutional way, which means that we have to vote on it, that war is initiated by congress, not by the president, that we go to war electively. That when we go to war, we don't fight with one arm tied behind our back, we fight all out to win, but then we come home.

Notably, Paul called himself a “Reagan conservative.” Paul Kengor (2014), a Reagan expert, identified the 11 principles of a Reagan conservative as “freedom, faith, family, sanctity and dignity of human life, American exceptionalism, the Founders' wisdom and vision, lower taxes, limited government, peace through strength, anticommunism, and belief in the individual” (p. 104). The term “Reagan conservative,” from Kengor’s perspective, essentially encompasses Reagan’s entire political philosophy, so by saying he was a Reagan conservative, Paul was attempting to claim ownership on this philosophy. Further, Paul was hoping that sharing his ownership of this philosophy with viewers would encourage them to vote for him. Paul’s foreign policy agenda was very different than the other candidates’ positions, so justifying his view by using Reagan would give him a better chance at gaining support in the elections.

Rubio also mentioned Reagan in his answer to Tapper’s Reagan question in order to share his foreign policy with viewers. Rubio avoided saying how he was exactly like Reagan, and compared himself to the former president in a more indirect manner than the other candidates. When answering Tapper’s Reagan question, he said,

One of the things that made Ronald Reagan a great president, is that he understood that America was a unique nation, like **[apparent typo in official transcript itself: seems that should read unlike]** any other that had existed throughout human history. He knew it was founded on universal principles that were powerful, the dignity of all people, human rights, the rights of all to live in freedom and liberty, and choose their own path in life. He didn't just believe it, he acted on it. (Rubio, 2015)

After discussing Reagan, Rubio transitioned into sharing that he would use Air Force One to fly to meet with allies first, then adversaries, with the hopes of spreading ideals of liberty and freedom to countries like China. Rubio did not claim ownership of Reagan’s legacy; instead, he

pointed out aspects of Reagan that he thought made Reagan a great president, explained how he also possessed these traits, and that those traits would help him succeed in the foreign policy arena. While other candidates had assumed Reagan’s greatness in their answers, Rubio did more work to prove what led to Reagan’s success as president. Rubio attributed Reagan’s strong presidency to his understanding of American exceptionalism, dignity of human life, and freedom. Without directly declaring that he too was a Reagan conservative, Rubio explicitly referenced three of the eleven principles Kengor believes belong to a Reagan conservative. Rubio’s purpose in mentioning Reagan appeared to be to demonstrate that his plan and leadership qualities would lead to success. Rubio utilized Reagan as a way to predict his own success in the foreign policy arena, rather than just as a way to increase his credibility.

Paul’s Reagan references not only helped to boost the credibility of his own foreign policy positions, but also to diminish the credibility of his opponent’s positions. When Tapper asked Paul if Walker’s position on canceling the state dinner with China was correct, Paul drew a parallel to how Reagan handled the Cold War. Paul supported diplomacy through keeping a dialogue with another country, not shutting them out. Paul discussed how Reagan kept up talks with the Russians throughout the Cold War, and that he believed this was an effective strategy. By pointing out how Reagan had handled what Paul considered a similar situation, Paul was increasing the credibility of his answer, and the likelihood that voters would approve of his answer. At the same time, Paul was illustrating how Walker, as well as Fiorina, who he mentioned wanted to stop talks with Putin, were not aligned with Reagan, and therefore less credible. Carson also made use of the credibility strategy when answering Tapper’s Reagan question by relating Reagan’s belief that a pinnacle nation should lead to his position that the United States needed to lead in the Middle East. Carson was utilizing a vague Reagan principle,

and interpreting it to fit a more specific use when discussing his foreign policy. As the candidates had done when utilizing the comparison strategy, Carson selected general traits about Reagan before discussing his specific plans for the purpose of boosting his own credibility. When responding to Tapper, Carson did not discuss any of Reagan’s specific positions on foreign policy; instead, he relied on a broad principle to bolster his take on the Middle East. Carson primarily mentioned Reagan as evidence that his plan for the Middle East was the correct way to proceed. While he did not claim Reagan’s legacy, he referenced Reagan as a means to enhance his own credibility, as Paul had done. Carson believed that if the United States intervened in the Middle East, a coalition would form to support them, and Reagan’s broad view that a pinnacle nation leads was Carson’s sole support for this concept. Carson and Paul both appeared to see mentioning Reagan as useful when justifying foreign policy positions.

Paul continued to draw on the strategy of utilizing collective memory to support his foreign policy agenda throughout the Simi Valley debate. Paul (2015) referenced one of Reagan’s classic sayings, “peace through strength,” in order to further draw upon Reagan nostalgia. Reagan constantly employed the phrase “peace through strength” throughout his time in office, using it to justify strong military action for the purpose of obtaining peace. During his time as President, Reagan illustrated this principle by increasing defense spending, negotiating treaties, and fighting against international terrorism (The White House, 2017). As Paul knew, many of the audience members, attending due to their higher interest in (and often higher knowledge of) politics, would be familiar with the reference to Reagan and the phrase “peace through strength.” According to the Trump administration’s White House website (2017), “Overall, the Reagan years saw a restoration of prosperity, and the goal of peace through strength seemed to be within grasp.” By referencing this phrase, Paul was using Republicans’

collective memories of Reagan to his advantage in order to connect the memory of prosperity in connection to the words “peace by strength.” Once again, referencing Reagan for the purpose of increasing the credibility of a foreign policy position was useful for a candidate.

Reagan, the Economy, and Abortion

Some candidates referenced Reagan in order to support their positions on the economy. During the Simi Valley debate, Walker (2015) compared his economic plans to those of Reagan’s, noting that, “our plan is based on the Ronald Reagan tax cuts of 1986. That brought about one of the longest sustained periods of economic growth in American history.” Walker was mainly bringing up Reagan’s name to enhance the credibility of his economic plan. In this reference, Walker did not explain the details of the plan, possibly assuming the audience would remember the Reagan tax cuts. Bush also explained how one of his plans was like Reagan’s when he discussed the “Reagan rule,” which stated that organizations like Planned Parenthood should not get funding, as one could not separate the money between actual abortion procedures and the promotion of abortion. Bush deemed that the Reagan rule was the right way to approach the abortion issue, and he pledged to bring back the rule if he became president. Like Walker, Bush was basing a plan for his presidency directly off of a plan Reagan enacted. In addition, Walker and Bush’s comparisons were slightly deeper than the other candidates; while other candidates have discussed ambiguous qualities that make themselves or their platforms similar to Reagan, Walker and Bush explicitly shared how their plans were based on Reagan’s plan or the same as Reagan’s policy. Therefore, Bush and Walker were able to use references to Reagan to potentially gain more support for plans for the economy (in the case of Walker) or regarding abortion (in Bush’s case).

When discussing the Reagan rule, Bush’s reference to Reagan’s stance on abortion would likely have helped him draw upon Republicans’ collective memory that Reagan’s beliefs led to positive outcomes for the United States. However, Bush did not solely rely on collective memory, but also affirmed that he believed this was a strong and appropriate stance. Rather than only utilizing Reagan to boost his credibility, Bush demonstrated to the audience that he approved of Reagan, hoping to gain trust from the audience who he knew also loved Reagan. Bush’s father, George H.W. Bush, was Reagan’s vice president, and Bush had the opportunity to create continuity between their presidencies. However, the only time Bush (2015) tried to mention his father in conjunction with Reagan he got cut off as he said, “the world was a lot safer because of...The leadership of Ronald Reagan and my...”. Since he was cut off by Donald Trump, Bush did not have the chance to draw on the collective memory of his father serving alongside Reagan. The other times Bush discussed his family, he attempted to make it clear that he was different than them and that he had his own agenda.

Huckabee also utilized Reagan’s name to support his economic positions, taking a stance for working class Americans. Huckabee (2015) said:

But it occurs to me as we're sitting here in the Reagan Library that most of us would like to pay tribute to a guy who, when he got elected, didn't get elected telling everybody how great he was. He got elected telling everybody how great the American people were. And he empowered them to live their dreams, which is what I'd love to see us do by no longer penalizing the people who are out there working because they are taking a gut punch right now.

Huckabee’s economic plan included not penalizing the working class, which he connected to Reagan’s admiration for the American people. Huckabee said he would want to bring this same

admiration into his own presidency so he could help the working class by being like Reagan in office. Like many other candidates, Huckabee was comparing himself to Reagan in a way that would help Republicans view Huckabee as someone who could reenact Reagan’s success.

Therefore, Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan gave Huckabee a chance to gain support by talking about how he and Reagan had similar ways of approaching the economy. Throughout the Simi Valley debate, many candidates were able to reference Reagan to garner support for their economic policies.

Conclusion

The ways candidates mentioned Reagan in the Simi Valley debate closely mirrored the strategies utilized in the rest of the mainstage debates. The first strategy was to attempt to draw a connection to or establish a relationship with Reagan. Pointing out a personal relationship with the former president allowed candidates to have greater authority over declaring what Reagan would have done. Doing so also made it easier for candidates to draw on the audience’s collective memory of Reagan. This strategy was much more frequent in this debate than the rest of the mainstage debates, and notably, candidates made many more personal references to Reagan during the Simi Valley debate. One possible explanation for this occurrence is that the candidates were cognizant of the location of the debate being at the Reagan Presidential Library, and thus felt rhetorically obligated to mention Reagan. In other words, the location may have inspired the candidates to be more personal when mentioning the former president. The second strategy utilized in this debate was sharing how one was similar to Reagan. Collective memory can assist with and enact this strategy, as the audience could remember the successes of Reagan or the positive attributes of Reagan mentioned by the candidates. They would thus be more likely to support the candidate, as they may want to recreate that time. The third strategy candidates

used was mentioning Reagan in order to boost their own credibility. The candidates acted as if Reagan’s approval was enough to justify their plans. Finally, candidates combined strategies of mentioning Reagan throughout this debate, sometimes working a comparison into a credibility answer, and vice versa. By combining strategies, candidates demonstrated that there is no one way to reference Reagan, even within one answer.

Overall, comparing oneself to Reagan allowed candidates to discuss their own policies and visions for the presidency better than with any of the other strategies. In the Simi Valley debate, candidates referenced Reagan in order to promote the importance of being an outsider, connect their approach to leadership Reagan’s, explain how Reagan inspired them, and emphasize commonalities on the issues, particularly in terms of foreign policy, economic plans, and attitude toward abortion. In a way, Reagan’s name served as a multipurpose tool for candidates. Since there were so many different sets of collective memories of Reagan, candidates could support their arguments by sharing how they remembered Reagan. Therefore, by referencing Reagan, candidates were able to support a wide range of issues important to their campaigns, and it appeared to be a low risk strategy, as there did not seem to be any negative consequence to invocations of Reagan that fell flat for their intended audiences.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Analyzing the references to Ronald Reagan in the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates revealed several notable findings, such as how candidates can use Reagan’s name to support a variety of issues and that comparing oneself to Reagan allows a candidate to play on Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan. I will lay out these findings in this chapter, explaining their significance. Then, I will discuss the limitations of this study, and discuss courses for future research. Finally, I will explain how this study contributes to the body of knowledge surrounding presidential debates, Reagan, and the communication of the Republican Party.

Findings

Since Reagan was referenced continuously throughout the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates to advance candidates’ goals, it is clear the former president has made an impact on the communication of the modern-day Republican Party. In this thesis, I have examined three components of this particular debate season: the “undercard” debates in Chapter 2 (for candidates not polling highly enough to be in primetime), the “mainstage” debates in Chapter 3 (for candidates polling the highest), and the Simi Valley, or “Reagan debate” in Chapter 4. In both the undercard and mainstage debates, most references allowed candidates to compare themselves to Reagan and boost the credibility of their arguments. However, the ways candidates compared themselves to Reagan differed. Some candidates mentioned Reagan in order to emphasize the importance of bipartisanship, while others tried to justify a controversial position they held, such as abortion. In addition, Reagan was only mentioned in a negative light during one debate, by undercard candidate Rick Perry. Otherwise, references to Reagan were overwhelmingly positive and brought up by a diverse range of candidates.

Chapter 2 examined the invocation of Reagan in the GOP presidential primary undercard debates. The analysis of the undercard debates revealed that undercard candidates mainly referenced Reagan to talk about bipartisanship or how he was a model for conservatives, but some candidates referenced Reagan to talk about foreign policy or Reagan’s status as an outsider. Therefore, undercard candidates mostly focused on comparing their qualities or beliefs to Reagan, rather than policy. One likely explanation for most of the references being used to promote a candidate’s image or values was because the purpose of the undercard debates was to give the candidates exposure to voters and an opportunity to prove themselves worthy of moving up to a mainstage debate. Thus, undercard candidates needed to introduce themselves to an audience who did not know them, focusing more on their personal traits than specific issues. Candidates may have mentioned Reagan in order to help the audience recognize them and give them the support they needed to qualify for the mainstage debates. The undercard candidates were also fairly bold in the way they referenced Reagan, even implying they could be the next Reagan, likely trying to grab the audience’s attention. For example, Lindsey Graham (2015) even said, “I will be the next Ronald Reagan,” which shows he believed he had the ability to perform like the former president. Graham was the boldest candidate in referencing Reagan, but backed up his mentions with other bold claims of being the most qualified candidate or being able to win wars. Being bold when referencing Reagan was another potential debate strategy, which also allowed candidates to better utilize Republicans’ existing collective memories of Reagan to their advantage. Another possibility is that since candidates were in the undercard debates, they had nothing to lose, and going all in by claiming to be the next Reagan would not hurt them. In other words, the undercard candidates could better justify taking risks.

Notably, Reagan was only referenced in the first three out of seven undercard debates, while he was mentioned in all twelve of the mainstage debates. One possibility is that the candidates invited to the undercard debates happened to feel less of a connection to Reagan, and did not want to mention him. Graham mentioned Reagan the most out of all undercard candidates, and he was not featured in three of the final four undercard debates, so part of the drop in references could be accounted for by his absence. Alternatively, since all candidates were mentioning Reagan, and the candidates were not being penalized for misrepresenting the former president, the candidates had no strategic reason to continue mentioning Reagan. Since mentioning Reagan had become commonplace, it provided no strategic advantage in contrasting oneself against opponents.

In Chapter 3, I focused on the mainstage debates, which featured the candidates highest in the polls. Like the undercard debates, most mainstage candidates referenced Reagan in order to increase the credibility of their answers and illustrate how they were like Reagan. However, mainstage candidates used Reagan references to attack their opponents more than undercard candidates did. Also, mainstage candidates referenced Reagan in order to support a wider range of policy positions. The candidates mentioned Reagan in order to support their positions on healthcare, foreign policy, evolving on issues, the economy, immigration, bipartisanship, abortion, personal values, and leadership. Since Reagan was referenced to bolster a larger range of issues, there was no one category that stood out for being the most common to reference. However, the references to Reagan in the mainstage debates were largely policy-focused in contrast to the undercard debate’s attention to a candidate’s image. Additionally, one of the most common ways candidates referenced Reagan was for the purpose of justifying unpopular decisions they made by pointing to something similar Reagan had done while in office. During

the Cleveland debate, Kasich, when confronted about his expansion of Medicaid as Ohio governor, reminded the audience that Reagan had expanded Medicaid three times in order to lessen the pushback from the audience. Therefore, Reagan’s actions lent credibility to Kasich’s political decisions. Interestingly, candidates featured in the undercard debates never tried to reference Reagan in this way. One explanation for this type of reference being common only in the mainstage debates is because the mainstage candidates were not trying to prove themselves in the same way as undercard candidates. In comparison to the undercard candidates, mainstage candidates did have something to lose; if they were too bold, they could risk being demoted to the undercard debates. In addition, mainstage candidates were more often asked about questionable decisions or positions during the debates.

In the mainstage Simi Valley debate held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, moderator Jake Tapper’s Reagan question prompted multiple candidates to discuss Reagan. However, not all candidates referenced Reagan in their answer. Notably, Ted Cruz, who was one of the candidates that named Reagan the most in answers, did not answer the “Reagan question” with any mention of the former president. Later in the same debate, Cruz referenced Reagan multiple times when other candidates were not doing so. Referencing Reagan at a time when other candidates were not able to counter Cruz’ “Reagan talk” helped Cruz stand out. Thus, waiting to reference Reagan may have been more strategic, as Cruz was separating himself from the rest of the candidates, allowing his mentions of Reagan to gain more attention.

In comparing the undercard debates and the mainstage debates, candidates participating in the undercard debates were typically bolder in the ways they referenced Reagan. While Graham stood out as making the strongest comparisons between himself and Reagan, other undercard candidates made bold statements about the former president. For example, George

Patacki brought up Reagan during the Simi Valley debate and said that Reagan’s leadership is what is needed in the White House today, and that was why he wanted to run for president. Essentially, Patacki was saying he would be able to perform as well as Reagan, were he elected president. In an indirect manner, Patacki was implying he could be the next Reagan. While mainstage candidates would occasionally insinuate they would be like Reagan, they were rarely so bold as to say they were capable of being the next Reagan. More commonly, mainstage candidates would compare a specific issue, quality, or position of their own to one of Reagan’s policies. The best explanation for why undercard candidates were bolder was simply because they needed to move up to the mainstage debates in order to have a chance to win the GOP nomination. One way they could gain support from viewers was to say something attention-grabbing, such as saying one could be the next Reagan. For an audience composed overwhelmingly of Reagan admirers, stating that one’s purpose for presidency was to be like Reagan could cause them to consider supporting that candidate.

Among the major ways candidates referenced Reagan, comparing a quality about oneself, such as ability to lead, to Reagan would appear to be the best strategy for candidates to utilize in order to tap into the audience’s existing collective memories of Reagan. For those who remember Reagan as an ideal figure, they would likely want someone who claims to be like him in office. Therefore, candidates who convincingly made a case that they were like Reagan, or that one of their positions was comparable to one of Reagan’s policies, had an opportunity to appeal to the collective memories surrounding Reagan.

The findings that I present here offer insights for candidates and their campaign teams, in preparing for future Republican primary debates, especially should the mainstage and undercard precedent set in 2015-2016 continue in the future. First, candidates should acknowledge the

extreme modern popularity of Reagan, and try to create strategies that take advantage of his popularity. Campaigns should also recognize the existence of Republicans’ overwhelmingly positive collective memories of Reagan, and should reference Reagan in order to lend credibility to their answers. This analysis also could help campaigns realize that Reagan’s legacy can be used to support a variety of issues, so if a candidate needs to justify a certain position, they can likely look to Reagan. Many of the references to Reagan throughout the debates were vague, so candidates do not have to find an exact comparison between themselves and Reagan. Every mainstage candidate mentioned Reagan at least once throughout the debate season, so candidates participating in future presidential primaries should also mention Reagan, so they are not the one candidate who avoids talking about Reagan. Candidates should make it clear that they respect Reagan, at the very least, but if they want to tap into Republicans’ collective memories of Reagan, they should also seek to compare themselves to the former president.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that it is difficult to draw empirical conclusions about the effects of referencing Reagan without a corresponding set of empirical data. However, as Zarefsky (2014) notes, “The critic’s task is to make a case for his or her interpretation, in keeping with Brockriede’s (1974) position that criticism is an exercise in argument” (p. 386). In this study, I sought to make a compelling argument for the effects by considering the most likely explanations for certain behaviors, and ruling out alternatives. In this study, I examined a substantial set of texts (a rhetorical equivalent in some ways to “data”), the transcripts from the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates, which offer important and useful insights about rhetoric, political communication, primary debates, and collective memory. Nevertheless, in ensuring that a reasonable data set was analyzed, other complementary artifacts could not be

included in this study. Future research on this topic could include adding in empirical information, such as polling, dial-testing, or focus group analysis, as well as involving other important documents, such as references in campaign speeches and campaign materials. These additional artifacts could potentially provide valuable insights about the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates and the invocations of Reagan that they contain.

Discussion of candidates’ motivations for mentioning Reagan is not an exact science. My approach utilizes textual evidence (in the form of quotations) in order to make an argument for drawing reasonable inferences, based on what candidates say (or do not say), about what we might conclude about their motivations. There is no way to truly know the internal motivations of a candidate’s actions, and they may not be aware of these motivations themselves. Therefore, considering the most likely motivations behind candidates’ references to Reagan and building an argument to logically support these inferences offered the best method/approach for me to draw conclusions about why candidates reference Reagan in primary debates.

Another potential future course of study would be to look at past GOP presidential primary debates from other election cycles, and see if references to Reagan have increased or decreased over the years. Analyzing the change over time would paint a clearer picture on how Reagan has affected the communication of the Republican Party. In addition, one could compare the types of references to Reagan in the 2015-2016 debates cited in this study to those contained in older GOP debates, and analyze whether the ways Reagan is mentioned have changed. Comparing the ways references have changed could provide valuable insight on debate strategy. When the next GOP presidential primary debates occur, it would also be interesting to compare the findings in this study to the references of Reagan in future debates, if there any references. Once again, analyzing the changes between debates would show how Reagan continues to affect

and influence the Republican Party’s communication, especially as the distance between his presidency and the present grows. Finally, comparing how Republicans reference Reagan to how Democrats reference some of their greatest beloved presidents would be another potential course of study that could lead to insights about what the different Parties value. Given that many Democrats call themselves “Reagan Democrats,” doing an analysis of how references to Reagan work their way into Democratic primary debates, even if less frequently, could also provide valuable insights. Finally, one could compare how Reagan is invoked in primary debate in comparison to general election debates, to see if the expansion of audience size, shared opinions, etc. affects how these references operate.

Contributions

I argue that this study offers valuable contributions in a number of areas. First, I identify contributions for our understanding of presidential primary debates. Second, I reflect on the implications of employing the method and approach I utilized. Next, I consider the implications of this study on existing collective and public memory research. Then, I present how Reagan is referenced in a variety of ways, and can serve to support a variety of campaign agendas. Finally, I conclude that Reagan has had a significant effect on the communication and messaging of the modern-day Republican Party.

This rhetorical analysis of the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates provides new insight into the presidential primary debates. Referencing Reagan can be a strategic way for candidates to communicate their positions on issues, set themselves apart from other candidates, and appeal to a Republican audience. Candidates can mention Reagan in order to support a wide range of issues or to build a certain image of a candidate. This study supports the idea that referencing Reagan can be used as a communication tool in presidential primary debates. With

this established, one can conclude that candidates have different motivations for referencing Reagan, as evidenced by the different ways candidates reference Reagan. Some candidates bring up Reagan in order to justify a controversial position, while others reference the former president in order to prove how they could be the next Reagan. Furthermore, these references could support issues like abortion, positions on foreign policy, or promote the importance of certain qualities like bipartisanship. In the 2015-2016 debates, candidates were able to mention Reagan in a way that boosted the credibility of their answers. Thus, mentioning Reagan can help a candidate provide support for their answer, and aid them in being more convincing and potentially more effective in the debate. As Reagan was referenced in all twelve of the mainstage primary debates, Reagan was at the very least a consistent theme throughout the debates.

Some candidates, when referencing Reagan, compared the context surrounding the 2016 election was to that surrounding Reagan’s 1980 campaign. By showing how the two campaigns were similar, candidates could explain how a candidate like Reagan would be necessary for 2016, and how they were the candidate most similar to Reagan. Then-candidate Donald Trump mentioned Reagan multiple times throughout the debates, primarily to justify how he had evolved on issues and to stress the importance of making strong deals. This study provides insight into how Trump may govern throughout the remainder of his presidency. Based on what he said when referencing Reagan during the debates, Trump is comfortable with changing his position on issues, and sees it as a natural part of being involved in politics. In addition, Trump believes making deals are a necessary part of being in office. Since Trump referenced Reagan multiple times in regards to how he wanted to act as president, one could conclude that Reagan is still influencing how the country is run today.

The approach to analysis in this paper was to divide the debates into the undercard debates, mainstage debates, and the “Reagan debate” held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. After division, all of the references to Reagan were identified, and analyzed individually. Taking notes on each individual reference aided the writing process. References were sorted based on what aspect of Reagan the candidates were discussing, be it foreign policy, domestic policy, his beliefs or something more general. In addition, notes were also organized by type of reference, such as for the purpose of boosting credibility or making a comparison. Chapter 4 was written first, and relied on inductive reasoning, drawing out generalizations from the set of references. Chapters 2 and 3 also utilized inductive reasoning, but they were first outlined, which helped the writing process proceed in a more organized manner. Overall, when conducting a rhetorical analysis on a certain type of reference from debates, drawing generalizations from the references, and then categorizing the references, seems to be a strong way to proceed in order to understand the ways in which something is discussed.

In addition, certain ways of referencing Reagan lent themselves to playing upon collective memory more than others. If a candidate referenced Reagan for the sole purpose of explaining their connection to the former president, an audience who positively remembers Reagan will likely appreciate the connection, but the candidate is not reminding them how they can recreate the time the audience so fondly remembers; the candidate is only sharing that they knew or related to Reagan. Similarly, if a candidate references Reagan to boost the credibility of their answer or to justify something they did, a Republican audience will likely be more convinced, but they still may not see the candidate as someone who is like Reagan. However, when candidates compare themselves to Reagan, they are illustrating how they have the capability to be like the president that is remembered in such a positive manner. Reagan remains

popular among Republicans, and candidates have the opportunity in debates to illustrate how they could be like the popular president if they were in office. In addition, once a candidate compares themselves to Reagan, collective memory of the former president makes it harder for Republicans to critique that candidate (Noon, 2004, p. 341). Therefore, this study offers valuable contributions to how campaigns may want to tap into collective memory in the future.

By constantly mentioning Reagan in a positive manner, candidates were reinforcing the existing collective memory surrounding Reagan. When considering both the undercard and mainstage GOP presidential primary debates, Reagan was only referenced negatively one time. Therefore, the numerous other references to Reagan were positive, and candidates were constantly sharing how they admired Reagan. With Reagan being remembered so well in such a public manner, the candidates themselves were contributing to the collective memory of Reagan held by the Republican Party. Reagan was already remembered as a strong, admired figure, and the candidates' discussions surrounding the former president only add to the positive collective memories of Reagan that already existed.

Another important contribution of this study is that candidates referenced Reagan in a variety of ways; there is no singular way candidates referenced Reagan. Thus, referencing Reagan in different ways illustrates that there are multiple debate strategies involving Reagan. Candidates both mentioned Reagan to increase personal credibility and to increase credibility in making a certain policy decision. Referencing Reagan was often the quickest way for a candidate to justify an issue, especially if it was controversial. This study found that Reagan's name could be used to support controversial positions like abortion or a focus on negotiations in the foreign policy arena. Simply, if Reagan had done something while in office, a candidate would claim that it was justifiable that they did it too. Also, sometimes a candidate would quote something

Reagan had said, while other times candidates mentioned something Reagan had done in order to prove that a similar plan of their own could work. Direct quotations helped candidates provide strong support for their arguments, and support specific actions, such as exercising “peace through strength” when dealing in foreign policy. In addition, some candidates contrasted Reagan against one of their opponents in order to decrease the opposition’s credibility. Similarly, candidates could use Reagan’s name to diminish the credibility of many positions, such as when Carly Fiorina reprimanded Rand Paul for being so insistent on negotiation. Other candidates simply sought to establish that they knew or had a connection to Reagan. Connections to Reagan ranged from him being the inspiration for their involvement in politics to actually working for the former president. For example, John Kasich continually reminded viewers that he worked under Reagan in order to demonstrate that he possessed the same leadership skills and capabilities as Reagan. Candidates likely saw having a relationship with Reagan as an advantage, or else there would be little reason to mention the connection. Additionally, some candidates shared they planned to enact the exact same plans Reagan did while in office. Overall, after studying the debate transcripts, the way Reagan was referenced varied by each individual mention, and the type of reference accomplished different things for a candidate’s answer. Therefore, Reagan’s legacy is a valuable resource for campaigns, as he can be served to justify or support a wide variety of issues and qualities in a candidate. This demonstrates that the way Reagan is referenced is not always accurate; however, this inaccuracy does not usually hurt the candidates as Reagan is collectively remembered in a diverse set of ways. Additionally, candidates do not necessarily need to seek more tangible support for their arguments if they are able to just reference Reagan.

Ronald Reagan has affected the communication and messaging of the Republican Party, as he was constantly mentioned throughout the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates. Due to the number of times Reagan was mentioned throughout the debates, it is likely becoming more necessary for Republicans to mention Reagan in order to compete or to please other members of their party. If one candidate referenced Reagan, another candidate often felt compelled to mention Reagan in their response. As attested to by the frequency and the many kinds of ways that he is invoked in these debates, Reagan remains a central part of the communication of the Republican Party over twenty years after his time in office.

Conclusion

Throughout the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates, former President Ronald Reagan was mentioned numerous times. Due to the number of times Reagan was significantly mentioned during the debates to provide valuable support for candidates' arguments, it can be concluded that Reagan has an enormous influence on the way the modern Republican Party communicates. Significantly, Reagan was referenced in no singular way; Reagan was referenced to support everything from economic plans to the importance of being an outsider. Republicans talk about Reagan in different ways, and the way he was mentioned even differed slightly between candidates competing in the undercard debates versus the mainstage debates. Therefore, referencing Reagan during a debate setting serves different functions for candidates in an undercard debate than those in a mainstage debate. Additionally, referencing Reagan can simply be recognized as a debate strategy since candidates were able to utilize the former president to justify and support their answers. While much work remains to be done to understand why Reagan is referenced so frequently and to consider a wide range of potential effects these references generate, Reagan has definitely affected the way Republican candidates communicate

in debates. Therefore, due to the prevalence and centrality of references to Reagan in the 2015-2016 GOP presidential primary debates, and the way in which his name was utilized to support candidates' arguments, President Ronald Reagan's legacy has affected and will likely continue to affect the communication of the modern Republican Party in primary debates, which scholars, candidates, and campaign teams would benefit greatly by systematically analyzing and exploring.

Bibliography

- Aden, R. C. (1989). Entrapment and escape: Inventional metaphors in Ronald Reagan's economic rhetoric. *Southern Communication Journal*, 54(4), 384-400. doi: 10.1080/10417948909372769
- Bunch, W. (2010). *Tear down this myth: The right-wing distortion of the Reagan legacy*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Bolton, J. (2016 Nov. 9). The Reagan Democrats have returned to the Republicans - handing the party unprecedented power. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk>
- Druckman, J. N., Jacobs, L. R., & Ostermeier, E. (2004). Candidate strategies to prime issues and image. *Journal of Politics*, 66(4), 1181-1202. doi: 10.1111/j.00223816.2004.00295.x
- Drury, S. A. M. (2014). Defining national security as peace through strength: Ronald Reagan's visionary rhetoric of renewal in the 1980 presidential campaign. *Argumentation & Advocacy*, 51(2), 87-102. Retrieved from eds.a.ebscohost.com
- Enos, L. R., Campbell, K. K., King, A., Condit C. M., Jensen R. J., Foss S. K., Medhurst, M. J., & Zarefsky, D. (2006). Symposium: Interdisciplinary perspectives on rhetorical criticism, *Rhetoric Review*, 25:4, p. 357-387. DOI: 10.1207/s15327981rr2504_1
- Eshleman, M. O. (2014). Kengor, Paul. 11 Principles of a Reagan Conservative. *Library Journal*, (4). 104.
- Fahey, M. (5 Oct 2015). When did republicans become obsessed with Reagan? *CNBC*. Retrieved from [https:// www.cnbc.com/](https://www.cnbc.com/)
- Fisher, W. R. (1982). Romantic democracy, Ronald Reagan, and presidential heroes. *Western Journal Of Speech Communication: WJSC*, 46(3), 299-310. doi: 10.1080/10570318209374088

- Gold, E.R. (1988). Ronald Reagan and the oral tradition. *Central States Speech Journal*, 39(3-4), 159-175. doi: 10.1080/10510978809363247
- Hantz, C. A.. (1996). Ideology, pragmatism, and Ronald Reagan's world view: Full of sound and fury, signifying...? *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 26(4), 942–949. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551662>
- Holmes, A. R. (2010). Ronald Reagan: Conviction politics and the transatlantic relationship. *Journal Of Transatlantic Studies*, 8(3), 257-267. doi:10.1080/14794012.2010.498127
- Howell, B. W. (2003). Ronald Reagan’s address at Moscow State University: A rhetoric of conciliation and subversion. *Southern Communication Journal*, 68(2), 107-120. doi: 10.1080/10417940309373254
- Iyengar, S. & Simon, A. F. (2000, February). New perspectives and evidence on political communication and campaign effects. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 51, 149-169. doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.51.1.149.
- Jerit, J. (2004). Survival of the fittest: Rhetoric during the course of an election campaign. *Political Psychology*, (4). 563-575. Dio: 10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00387.x
- Jones, J., & Rowland, R. (2005). A Covenant-affirming jeremiad: The post-presidential ideological appeals of Ronald Wilson Reagan. *Communication Studies*, 56(2), 157-174. doi:10.1080/00089570500078783
- Jones, J. M., & Rowland, R. C. (2015). Redefining the proper role of government: Ultimate definition in Reagan’s first inaugural. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 18(4), 691-718. Retrieved from eds.a.ebscohost.com
- Murphy, J. M. (1992). Presidential debates and campaign rhetoric: Text within context. *Southern Communication Journal*, 57(3), 219-228. doi: 10.1080/10417949209372867

Newport, F. (2011, February 18). *Americans say Reagan is the greatest US president.*

Retrieved from Gallup website: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/146183/americans-say-reagan-greatest-president.aspx>

Noon, H. D. (2004). Operation enduring analogy: World War II, the war on terror, and the uses of historical memory. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 7(3), 339-366. Retrieved from

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Oct. 28). Republican candidates debate in Boulder, Colorado.

The American Presidency Project. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Aug. 6). Republican candidates debate in Cleveland, Ohio. *The*

American Presidency Project. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, Jan. 28). Republican candidates debate in Des Moines, Iowa.

The American Presidency Project. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, March 3). Republican candidates debate in Detroit, Michigan.

The American Presidency Project. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, Feb. 13). Republican candidates debate in Greenville, South

Carolina. *The American Presidency Project.* Retrieved from

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, Feb. 25). Republican candidates debate in Houston, Texas. *The*

American Presidency Project. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Dec. 15). Republican candidates debate in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The American Presidency Project. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, Feb. 6). Republican candidates debate in Manchester, New

- Hampshire. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, March 10). Republican candidates debate in Miami, Florida. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Nov. 10). Republican candidates debate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, Jan. 14). Republican candidates debate in North Charleston, South Carolina. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Sept. 16). Republican candidates debate in Simi Valley, California. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Oct. 28). Republican candidates "undercard" debate in Boulder, Colorado. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Aug. 6). Republican candidates “undercard” debate in Cleveland, Ohio. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, Jan. 28). Republican candidates "undercard" debate in Des Moines, Iowa. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Dec. 15). Republican candidates "undercard" debate in Las

- Vegas, Nevada. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Nov. 10). Republican candidates "undercard" debate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2016, Jan. 14). Republican candidates "undercard" debate in North Charleston, South Carolina. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Peters, G. & Wooley, J. T. (2015, Sept. 16). Republican candidates "undercard" debate in Simi Valley, California. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>
- Phillips, K. R. & Browne, S. H. & Biesecker, B. & Zelizer, B. & III, C. E. M. & Phillips, K. R. (2004). *Framing public memory*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press. Retrieved from <https://muse.jhu.edu>
- Plant, A. (2015). *Ronald Reagan in 2016: The symbolic and political uses of collective memory*. Politics & Government. Undergraduate Theses. Paper 2. Retrieved from <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu>
- Quint, C. (2016). *Contesting “obligation”: Memory, morality, and the (re)construction of divestment narratives*. Masters Theses. Paper 468. Retrieved from <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu>
- Ritter, K. (1968). Ronald Reagan and “the speech”: The rhetoric of public relations politics. *Western Speech*, 2(1), 50-58. doi: 10.1080/10570316809389549
- Scheele, H. Z. (1984). *Ronald Reagan's 1980 acceptance address: A focus on American values*.

Western Journal Of Speech Communication: WJSC, 48(1), 51-61. doi:

10.1080/10570318409374141

Schwab, L. M. (12 July 2017). *The illusion of a conservative Reagan revolution*. Retrieved from

<https://books.google.com>

Smith, C. R. (2017). Ronald Reagan’s rhetorical re-invention of conservatism.

Quarterly Journal of Speech, 103:1-2, 33-65, DOI: 10.1080/00335630.2016.1231415

Snyder, B. (2015, September 17). Here’s how many times Ronald Reagan was mentioned in the

second Republican debate. *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/>

The White House (2017). “Ronald Reagan.” *The White House*. Retrieved from

www.whitehouse.gov

Thomas, D., & Baas, L. (1993). Ronald Reagan in the public mind. *Political Psychology*, 14(1),

55-75. doi:10.2307/3791393

Tucker, B., & Watson, P. (21 July 2012). *American culture transformed: Dialing 9/11*.

Retrieved from <https://books.google.com>

Tumulty, K. (2015 Sept. 1). How Carly Fiorina earned a spot on the big stage at the GOP debate.

The Washington Post. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>

Zelizer, J.A. (2016, Feb. 3). This is Reagan’s party. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from

<http://www.theatlantic.com/>