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Crines, AS (2013) Why did Boris Johnson win the 2012 mayoral election? Public policy and administration research, 3 (9). 1 - 7. ISSN 2224-5731

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Why did Boris Johnson Win the 2012 Mayoral Election?

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Abstract

This article investigates the rhetorical and oratorical abilities of Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone towards explaining the 2012 London Mayoral election result. This discussion highlights the importance of *personality* in the election campaign, in particular relation to the impact of the overarching taxation issue. By drawing upon a selection of rhetorical and oratorical devices, this article argues that Johnson won because of a range of issues that included his strong communicative abilities, the inverse failure of Livingstone to engage rhetorically with the electorate, and the corrosive perception of impropriety on the taxation issue. Combined with the overfamiliarity of the London electorate with the Labour candidate, this benefitted Johnson electorally.

1. The Making of a Mayor

The position of London mayor was introduced to be highly scrutinised. As Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts argued in their report to the government office in London: “Within the UK the Mayor will be the most important directly elected executive, and their activities are likely in practice to be as well known to the public as those of Scotland’s First Minister or Cabinet ministers. Hence it is probable that there will be strong interest in standing for Mayor, both within political parties and from independent candidates - some of whom may well be able to assemble a media team and sufficient financial support to mount effective campaigns.” As a result the style of occupant may impact upon their policies and, of course, communication.

Such is the importance of effective political communication, that it has the capacity to lend victory to some and defeat to others. It is the means through which political competitors convince the electorate (the audience) of their intellectual vigour and range of talents required in order to be granted the powers that come with high office. As fundamentals, well-crafted rhetoric and oratory can influence the emotions of an audience, with the capacity to shape and redefine the political evolution of parties and nations. As an example, Tony Blair’s oratory was able to argue a convincing case to ideologically re-orientate the Labour Party, taking them out of the wilderness of opposition under a new Third Way philosophy, and ultimately redefining British social democracy in the process. Despite its broad absence from British politics literature, oratory has historically shaped and continues to shape the political landscape. Such is its importance, therefore that it cannot be underestimated by those seeking to understand how and why some win power, whilst others lose it.

As a recent example, the Mayoral election in London is of particular interest for an oratorical analysis because the communicative skills of both leading figures are at the forefront of their electoral strategy. Indeed, their mutual political ideologies are well rehearsed, with the electorate familiar with both, thus their ideas underscore much of their electoral appeal. As political actors, however their oratory is the means through which those ideas are communicated to the electorate. Academic studies of political ideology are well catered for in the literature, consequently for this article I will focus upon the impact of political oratory. This will focus upon both the victor, Boris Johnson and his nearest opponent, Ken Livingstone towards constructing an answer to the question posed by the article; why did Johnson win the Mayoral election?

Each contender benefits from a political personality that has been subjected to public scrutiny over recent years. Johnson’s public profile is such that as both an orator and a politician he has benefitted from recognition prior to capturing the title of Mayor of London from his rival in 2008. Granted, some may have questioned his credibility given that profile was based on him being ‘a joker’. Indeed, it was partly through his appearances on mainstream television shows such as *Have I Got News for You* that constructed that public image. However, this constructed the character of a likable and trustworthy individual with strong intellectual capital. Given the importance of the Mayoral election as a *de facto* personality contest, such prior media experiences possessed a resonance that grew his credibility by providing a platform for him to showcase his likeable character. Also the apparent absence of clear ideological hangovers from the periods of internal Conservative disagreement also aided his reputation, despite holding ‘avowedly Conservative’ positions on issues such as tax and police numbers, positions regarded as equally conservative as David Cameron’s (Robinson & Dewsbury, 2012). Johnson’s *ethos* as trustworthy politician derives from these factors, which when combined with his communicative style makes him a formidable challenger. Indeed, such is the strength of his character that even some who subscribe to Labour’s centre-left ideological position shifted their support to Johnson simply because he had ‘genuine star quality’ (Shakespeare, 2012).

In contrast, Livingstone’s credibility as a potential returning Mayor derives more from his longstanding association with the socialist label and his commitment to Labour politics over a career spanning four decades.

Such is the strength of these that even when challenged by the Thatcherite period (the defeat of traditional socialism and the institutional abolition of the GLC) he retained a degree of credibility from both. Livingstone's socialism became increasingly *romanticised*, almost quaint inasmuch as he rhetorically opposed big business and 'the rich', yet courted them for the economic interests of the City, entirely subverting the 'say what we mean, mean what we say' mantra of the Labour Party. Indeed, this romanticism enabled him to become something of an anti-Third Way 'idealist', as embodied by his 'independent challenger status' to the Labour Mayoral candidate, Frank Dobson in 2000. His election as the first Mayor of the London Assembly demonstrates Livingstone's longevity and ability to overcome adversity *vis-a-vis* the abolition of the GLC and the emergence of the Third Way, whilst simultaneously demonstrating a longstanding commitment to the city. Important to acknowledge is his earlier opponents were not of the same communicative quality as Johnson, nor did they have a comparably high public profile to that of the Conservative victor. This ensured Livingstone dominated London politics, holding the position until Johnson's successful challenge in 2008. Since his defeat, Livingstone has failed to demonstrate a clear vision for the city, acting as a realist critic of Johnson rather than showcasing a positive and progressive future for London that could inspire the electorate sufficiently to support his return to the position in 2012. This shifted the electoral balance of favour towards Johnson.

2. Theoretical Basis

In order to fully evaluate how communication impacted upon Johnson's electoral victory, I will conduct this evaluation by drawing from a selection of rhetorical concepts (*ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*). This theoretical basis enables an examination of an orator's credibility (*ethos*), their use of emotions (*pathos*), and their use of logic (*logos*), vital to convey convincing political rhetoric (Olmsted, 2006). These concepts, initially conceptualised by Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and later scrutinised by enlightenment figures such as John Quincy Adams, have been used by contemporary scholars towards studying rhetoric and oratory amongst political elites. These enabled an understanding of how politicians can use oratory to influence their audience and advance the thrust of their arguments. A full review of the prior uses of these concepts is out of scope for this short article as this discussion focuses on the narrow question of Johnson's electoral victory in 2012, however a fuller analysis of their value is demonstrated in the insightful scholarship of Alan Finlayson, Judi Atkins and James Martin, as well as Wendy Olmsted and Max Atkinson. Such scholarship demonstrates that these concepts have previously produced insightful evaluations into how political communication has impacted upon the political process, and can prove invaluable as part of this article.

By drawing upon these analytical traditions, it will become possible to scrutinise the communicative abilities of both Johnson and Livingstone. It is important to note that whilst communication is highly significant, political events remain overarching in providing a trajectory towards either electoral success or failure. Indeed, an appreciation of oratory and rhetoric can only be fully appreciated if placed within their appropriate political circumstances, as to evaluate in isolation risks disregarding other decisive factors. In the case of this article, the political context can be found in Livingstone's evident failure to communicate his policy message because of Johnson's convincing rhetoric surrounding Livingstone's tax issues. It would, therefore be facile to suggest Johnson won simply because of either his communicative abilities or ability to command the agenda, however to discount either would be to disregard vital ingredients that explain Johnson's victory. Indeed, the issue of tax enabled Johnson to deploy rhetoric concerning trust, simultaneously aiming to undermine Livingstone's potential *ethos* as someone the electorate should feel confident as Mayor. As such, given much of the rhetoric surrounded this issue, it will be the central ballast of this analysis.

3. Tax, Rhetoric, and the Mayoral Selection

As discussed, both Johnson and Livingstone are equally individual entities when considered in the context of the mainstream within their respective political parties. Each has gained a credibility within their respective parties that withstands the strength of their party leaderships (for Livingstone, Blair and Brown; for Johnson, Cameron). This enables them to stand aside from their mainstream leadership, with the Mayoral platform separate from Westminster. This places the Mayoral election into its own political context, partly divorced from the Westminster game, yet still potentially damaging for the Westminster leaders. Importantly however, this should not lead to the conclusion they oppose those mainstream leaderships *per se*, however the race to be London Mayor has its own distinctive character separate from the mainstream. Johnson confirms this saying 'People understand that the Mayoral system is different, they understand that the Mayor is to a greater extent independent of party or government' (Waugh & Macrory, 2012). As such, those standing for the position must retain an independence of thought and action that enables them to sit in the role with a degree of credibility. Moreover, the result may not provide a broader indication of how the electorate views the respective political parties or their performances. Because of the personalised nature of the Mayoral election, Johnson's victory should not be seen as simply a victory for the Conservatives (especially when contrasted to the local elections).

Rather, it was a victory for Johnson. Reflecting this, Livingstone's defeat cannot be seen as a defeat for Labour, rather it was his defeat alone. Consequently it cannot be assumed that Johnson's conception of Conservatism is somehow more appropriate for Cameron or the broader party simply by his victory. The result is a victory for Johnson and a loss for Livingstone, rather than a preference or rejection of a particular party's ideology, thereby limiting the potential of party leaders to learn ideological lessons from the results (BBC, 2012).

Adding to their independence is the distinctive relationship both have with their respective mainstreams. These have prevented either from fully reaching higher positions of leadership within their mutual parties. This has, to varying degrees, shielded them partly from the rancour associated with modern politicians. For example, the expenses scandal was seen more as a crisis of Westminster politics and appeared to have limited impact on the public reputations of either, despite Johnson's own expenses issue. Rather, their relationship with the electorate is based more on their profile away from the Westminster arena, which played to their advantage. This is more evident in Johnson's case given his higher media profile, however both have been able to maintain a credible and separate reputation sufficient to dominate London, if not British politics as a result.

Johnson drew from his media personality to utilise likeable oratorical skills. His was a *performance*-based oratory, designed to build upon his prior *ethos*, which he combined with his record as Mayor since 2008. Moreover, Johnson's rhetoric appealed much more to emotion rather than logic, framing his rhetoric with an optimistic humour as well as a clear message. For example, when considering morality he proposed that 'ever since Hesiod, ever since Isaiah human beings have loved to listen to prophets of doom and they have loved to believe that theirs is a uniquely fallen and selfish generation. I don't believe it' (Montgomerie, 2012). Contrasting this style of defending the 'current generation', Livingstone's rhetoric appears to appeal more to divisiveness, by highlighting failures in order to provide his rhetoric with an opponent. For example, he utilises more generalised and descriptive insults to portray the wealthy as 'rich bastards' giving an assumption of impropriety. The attack upon the wealthy proved controversial given Livingstone's own private financial affairs appeared to demonstrate wealth. Indeed, a key suggestion that framed much of the subsequent rhetoric from Johnson was that Livingstone was simultaneously 'channelling his income through a private company to reduce his tax bills', compounding what appeared to be a hypocritical element in the Labour challenger's rhetoric (Martin, 2012). Livingstone's defence sought to attack Johnson's character rather than the accusation made, arguing that 'the guy's a bare-faced liar. I have never used a company to minimise my tax obligations' (BBC News 2012b). This issue framed much of the subsequent rhetoric, but by no means all throughout the campaign. In terms of campaigning strategy, this issue benefitted Johnson's rhetorical style more because it enabled him to grow his own moral character, contrasting himself against Livingstone's. He sought to portray himself as an honest high tax payer, his opponent as an apparent 'dishonest tax dodger'. By highlighting what appeared to be quantifiable evidence of tax evasion, Johnson was able to attack the moral and financial values of his opponent, whilst simultaneously growing his own. This enabled Johnson emphasise the necessity of the Mayor to be a trustworthy character as well as proving politically competent.

Such was the centrality of the tax issue that it also textured the rhetoric during televised debates. Johnson gained enhanced *ethos* during a Sky News televised debate where they elevated the attack on the Labour candidate in relation to his tax. By utilising a *praeteritio*-style of questioning, Johnson successfully provoked Livingstone into revealing he paid a reduced percentage of tax than himself. Johnson made the proposition that Livingstone 'goes bashing me for allegedly calling for tax cuts in the budget, when he campaigns for an 80% tax rate. And, to the best of my knowledge Ken, you pay a tax rate of 14.5%' (Johnson, 2012a). This important tactic places an accusation at the door of the defender, which he immediately addressed. By implying – *to the best of his knowledge* – Livingstone paid a reduced level of tax, Johnson was able to force the issue onto specific figures by compelling the Labour candidate to reveal his percentage of tax. 'I publish my tax returns... it's 35%. Boris pays 41%, but then he earns half a million pounds, he should pay more than me.' Although in his rhetoric Livingstone aims to justify his reduced tax rate by drawing upon Johnson's higher earnings, this confirms his tax rate as lower than Johnson's, which has a negative rhetorical impact upon the character of the defender, whilst growing Johnson's. Regardless of any contextualised defence, Livingstone revealed he pays less tax in percentage terms than Johnson, thereby suggesting he makes a reduced contribution against Johnson, the greater contributor. This compounded Livingstone's difficulties on this issue.

In terms of style, Johnson's provocative rhetoric relies upon his performance in the arena and his ability to capitalise upon an emotional investment made by the audience. The audience expects its leaders to be both competent and honest, and for Johnson to suggest otherwise in his opponent produced electoral benefits. Johnson's ability to draw upon his well-practiced performative and deliberative forms of delivery enables him to convey *logos*-driven rhetoric in a manner likely to sustain an audience's interest, thereby giving him an emotional benefit. Put simply, the audience is compelled by Johnson's performance to listen, enabling him to convince them of his arguments. Contrasting this, Livingstone's style draws more upon the considered form of delivery, which uses fewer elements of performance based oratory, reducing his impact. Because Johnson's form of

oratory is based on showmanship, Livingstone is less able to compete, curtailing his ability to retort with similar credibility. In terms of communication, the performative delivery of his emotive rhetoric ensured Johnson was able to benefit from these direct engagements with his opponent, enhancing his electoral potential. Put simply, Livingstone's performance was less convincing than Johnson's, thereby losing the interest of the electorate in the audience.

Johnson's preference for *praeteritio* ensures that he is able to deploy rhetoric designed to remind the audience of his opponent's flaws. This is achieved by talking about an issue whilst seeming to suggest that he is *not* going to discuss it. This also enables him to remind the audience of his own earlier 'successes' in office, further growing his *ethos*, and undermining his opponent. In the political process, reminding an audience of success whilst disregarding failures is a normal enough tactic, however combined with Johnson's performative style of oratory and emotive rhetoric he is able to gain the upper hand. As an example of this method, whilst launching his campaign he set the scene by seeming to put to one side the tax issue, whilst simultaneously reminding his audience of the controversy. 'Because this election is not about who dodges tax and who doesn't - though I think the answer to that is by now fairly clear...' By framing the sentence in this fashion, Johnson has claimed the moral high ground by appearing to distance himself from the tax issue whilst simultaneously suggesting guilt on the part of his opponent. With little subsequent scrutiny, this suggestion resonates with his audience. He continued saying 'I hope people will understand why it was necessary to speak bluntly to Ken Livingstone in the lift the other day. This election is about trust.' Alluding to an attack on untrustworthiness in this manner, he showcases his own *trustworthy character*, sufficient to instruct others of appropriate behaviour. Again, this elevates his own *ethos* whilst seeking to illustrate the inverse in his opponent. He concluded saying 'I think it has astonished some of our officials we in City Hall have kept the promises we made to London four years ago' (Johnson 2012b). Within this example of Johnson's rhetoric, it is possible to discern a moral dimension of social responsibility *vis-à-vis* taxation, for him to enhance his own credibility, and to remind the audience of the apparent flaws of the former Mayor. Moreover, he concludes by showcasing his competence in City Hall by reminding the audience that keeping promises was surprising to the officials, implying Livingstone's inability to keep his was the norm prior to 2008. This approach aims to demonstrate Livingstone's political and personal unsuitability for the position of London Mayor, whilst providing Johnson with a convincing narrative.

Although Johnson claimed to be laying the tax issue to rest, it is evident that the issue was at the front of his campaign strategy. In reply, Livingstone's rhetoric sought to highlight the comparable nature of his own tax arrangements with those of Johnson and others. He framed the defence of his tax records by arguing 'the simple fact is, and the hypocrisy of all this, is Boris Johnson has exactly the same arrangements to handle his earnings from television.' This form of rhetoric does not aim to demonstrate 'innocence' but rather to highlight similar guilt amongst others. This discrediting approach looks to attack the *ethos* of his opponents, whilst **not** enhancing his own, alluding to a *corruption of all* to which he is a victim. He continued by arguing 'I am not offshore. I am running a small company, just like hundreds of thousands of people. It's a smear campaign currently being run' (Livingstone, 2012). The insinuation of this tactic seeks to portray his integrity as comparable to those of other political figures, and that the trustworthy narrative Johnson was seeking to construct was based upon a false understanding of his own financial affairs. Moreover, the role of the media in portraying Livingstone has unsuitably played strongly to Johnson's benefit, with the *Evening Standard* reminding the reader of these apparent flaws to the betterment of Johnson. Livingstone's rhetorical defence was to appeal to a sense of cynical realism that sought to depict the tax arrangements of political elites as analogous to his own, thereby undermining Johnson's moral attack without alluding to any enhanced *ethos* of his own. This approach does not aim to enhance his own position, however it does aim to undermine his opponent.

Given Johnson argued he pays a higher rate of tax, and that he has highlighted apparent flaws in Livingstone's competence, his rhetoric garners a higher salience with the electorate, growing his electoral potential and contributing towards his election victory. In terms of how Livingstone conducted his rhetorical defence on the above central issue, he did not prove as convincing as a potential future Mayor because of his apparent inability to fully defend his position. Moreover, Johnson was able to use the issue to demonstrate his own higher tax rate, his ability to assume a higher moral position, and to illustrate his apparent governing successes. In sum, Johnson tapped into this sense of ingrained unsuitability in his opponent which he successfully exploited throughout the campaign.

The issue of tax, however, hides a more fundamental issue facing the Mayoral election. Rhetoric resonates if the speaker has credibility and both candidates have demonstrated competence in office. The issue of tax may have provided the political context of the rhetoric, however in terms of convincing the electorate who should be Mayor, 'Boris won because Londoners saw him as the most charismatic and likeable candidate. Ken lost, because after 41 long years too many Londoners have simply had enough' of him (Bienkov, 2012). This disconnect with the electorate conspired to shift the balance of electoral fortune in favour of the Conservative candidate. As perceptively argued by Adam Bienkov for *The New Statesman* 'too many Londoners have simply

stopped listening to him'. For any political communicator, this is a fatal issue. Regardless of policy-related rhetoric, or character defence, by being disregarded entirely by a majority of the electorate Livingstone simply held little realistic prospect of electoral victory. This was perpetuated by Johnson's ability to motivate an audience and to appear fresher when contrasted to Livingstone. These factors contributed significantly to Johnson's electoral victory.

4. Conclusions

To summarise the core argument of this article, Boris Johnson won because his rhetoric and prior credibility was more appealing to the electorate when contrasted against Ken Livingstone, who had become mired in controversy surrounding his tax issues. This was against the flow of support for the parties more broadly, with the Conservatives suffering electorally to Labour's benefit during the simultaneous by-elections. The Mayoral elections were distinct from the national political picture because of the focus on personalities, giving the election an entirely different flavour. Tax provided Johnson with a rhetorical platform with which to continually remind his audience of his opponents unsuitability to be Mayor. This issue was compounded by the rhetorical disconnect caused by the electorate becoming increasingly tired of Livingstone, conspiring to make his electoral prospects bleak. Indeed, his long career had significantly reduced his novelty value, undermining his credibility as a potential replacement for the more popular Johnson.

Although the tax issue was vital in enabling Johnson to demonstrate his trustworthy *ethos*, a major issue facing Livingstone was this sense of overfamiliarity with the Labour candidate. His long career prevented him being able to convey a sense of newness to the electorate, nor could he realistically withstand the oratorical skills of his opponent. Although Livingstone's supporters may attribute negative coverage by the *London Evening Standard* of his campaign as a possible explanation of his failure, such treatment is a normal enough feature of the political process. It can be argued that negative press coverage has been an issue he has contented throughout his time in Labour politics, which produced a number of electoral victories despite harsh press coverage from the right-wing and moderate liberal printing houses. Over the course of his career, first rooted in hard left militancy before gravitating towards socialist romanticism over the New Labour period, he has been subjected to attacks from the media, making the suggestion that the *London Evening Standard* played an increased role in this election unconvincing.

Effectively, Livingstone was seen to be lacking a convincing narrative or new vision for the City. With little new to say, this disconnected him from the electorate. In contrast, Johnson's character, communicative skills and his seemingly successful record as Mayor between 2008 and 2012 enabled him to prove more convincing, ensuring Livingstone was left on the defensive. Consequently, Johnson's electoral victory can be attributed to Livingstone's apparent personal flaws *vis-à-vis* tax and his political tiredness, as well as Johnson's own more impressive communicative abilities and more likeable character.

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