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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **‘Forward’ with Obama, or ‘Believe’ with Romney? Campaign Communication in the U.S. Presidential Race**

By Senol Yilmaz

### **Synopsis**

*Obama’s slogans of “Hope” and “Change” in the 2008 presidential elections resonated strongly with the U.S. electorate. His 2012 “Forward” slogan seems stronger than Mitt Romney’s “Believe in America”. Which slogan will be better aligned with the economic situation of the day?*

### **Commentary**

Political slogans play an important role in campaign communication in U.S. presidential elections as they condense who a candidate is and what he or she stands for into a concise tagline.

Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008 was successful for two reasons. Firstly, his campaign team devised strong slogans, and secondly, they employed social media intelligently to get the message across. Both put him at a great advantage against his former rival John McCain. Now in 2012, the campaign team of his Republican competitor Mitt Romney seems to have learnt from Obama’s successful utilisation of social media in 2008. As Obama’s comparative advantage in terms of innovative communication channels has eroded, the message could be more important now than in 2008.

Experts identify three characteristics common to strong slogans: the slogans have power to captivate attention, they fit into the prevalent zeitgeist, and differentiate the candidate from his competitor.

### **Obama 2008: “Hope” and “Change”**

Obama’s 2008 “Hope” and “Change” slogans seemed to have met all three requirements for strong slogans.

Firstly, both “Hope” and “Change” are captivating slogans, which refer to and promise a better future. However, neither slogan actually indicates a pathway to or details of that better future. This lack of substance may ultimately be the slogans’ strength: Political theorist Noam Chomsky calls them “blank slates” that allow everyone to project their own personal desires and aspirations for the future, and thus induce buy-in.

Secondly, the slogans were in line with the prevalent zeitgeist: With George W. Bush’s unpopularity, the majority of the U.S. electorate wanted a change in leadership and style. Furthermore, the economic performance of the country was low and a change of direction much desired by the people.

Thirdly, both “Hope” and “Change” differentiated Obama from McCain. The then 72 year-old McCain had worked for 26 years in Washington, DC and was thus considered part of the political establishment. Voting for him was perceived as voting to keep the status quo. The much younger Obama managed to portray himself more convincingly as a fresh, new agent for change.

### **Obama 2012: “Forward”**

Once again in 2012, Obama’s campaign team seems to have picked the right slogan: “Forward” meets at least two of three requirements of powerful slogans, captivating attention and distinguishing Obama from his competitor Romney.

“Forward” fits neatly into the context as it promises continuity to both of his 2008 themes: the hope for a better future and the process of change that has begun in the first term. The word “Forward” itself is powerful as it has positive synonyms such as advancement, audacity, progress, optimism, etc. This may resonate strongly with the American electorate since it also accounts for American national narratives of frontier spirit and mobility.

“Forward” also distinguishes Obama from Romney who is portrayed as fickle by both the media and the Obama team: someone who flips-flops and sacrifices his convictions for political gain. At the same time, the president himself is depicted as straight-forward: a man of convictions who acts upon principle.

### **Romney: “Believe in America”**

Even though two-thirds of Americans consider religion an important part of their lives, Romney’s slogan “Believe in America” is weak at least in regard to two of the three requirements.

The slogan is not strong enough to captivate attention: While it is as unsubstantial as “Hope”, “Change”, or “Forward”, it does not necessarily promise improvement of the current situation. Furthermore, believing is static whereas “Change” or “Forward” call for agency and active participation in the political process that could help mobilise supporters and voters.

Moreover, it does not distinguish Romney from Obama. As far as religion is concerned, Romney belongs to a Christian minority, the Mormons, who are viewed suspiciously by some adherents of other Christian groups. It is also unlikely that Romney’s “Believe” slogan is an attempt to sow suspicion of Obama being a Muslim to distinguish Romney from the president; that would not ring well with mainstream America. It seems the only situation in which Romney’s “Believe” slogan could resonate with the U.S. electorate is a worsening economy.

### **Yet again: It’ll be the Economy, Stupid!**

The decisive factor in this campaign will be how well the slogans account for the prevalent zeitgeist. Accordingly, the slogans used by the competitors will either hit the mark, or fail.

In Obama’s case, “Forward” might best work for his track record on foreign affairs and national security: The decapitation and weakening of Al Qaeda as well as the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the initiated withdrawal from Afghanistan seem to be popular with voters. However, these issues seem to be ranking low in the priority list of the American electorate. According to a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll, only one per cent considered National Security as the single most important issue in their choice for president, one per cent opted for the War in Afghanistan, and one per cent considered Foreign Policy the single most important issue.

More than half of the respondents, 53 per cent, held that the single most important factor will be the economic performance of the country. Hence, voters will base their decision at the ballot mainly on economics. If the economy grows, “Forward” with Obama could be seen as the way to go. If economic indicators worsen in the less than 100 days until the elections, “Forward” into further decline is likely to scare away voters.

In the latter scenario, Romney’s confidence evoking “Believe in America” may resonate better. In such a case, an optimistic belief in the strength and resourcefulness of the U.S. to get out of the economic trough may resonate more strongly with the electorate – and all of Romney’s gaffs in his recent overseas trip may prove inconsequential.

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