

# Climate Change Diplomacy: A study of President Barack Obama's Rhetoric

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## Introduction

President Barack Obama is praised as one of the greatest orators of our century; he has demonstrated remarkable technical integrity and set higher standards of eloquence. His speeches provide guidance to the nation and are full of emotive power to successfully encapsulate the national mood. This is a study of Obama's rhetoric specifically on the issue of climate change – **how does his rhetoric portray climate change, what narratives does he use, were these successful?** It has involved both a broad reading of secondary literature on Obama and rhetoric, and a thorough analysis of 41 of Obama's speeches on climate change and energy, identifying his use of rhetorical devices such as figurative language, narrative, tone and rhythm. The analysis shows that he uses four eminent themes to portray the issue: **the American Dream, the economy, national security, and clean energy.**

## What is rhetoric?

Aristotle defines rhetoric as the 'faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.' According to him, good rhetoric comprises the successful use of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logical impact). A study of rhetoric focuses on the figurative language used to persuade and shape the opinions of an audience, as well as the cognitive and performative aspects of communication.

## Climate change, the American Dream and Family

Obama strategically connects the issue of climate change with the ideal of the family and of fulfilment of the American Dream. His speeches incorporate powerful narratives on the role that families can have as creators of a better future.



Obama speaks at COP21 Paris, 30/11/2015 (Kevin Lamarque, Reuters).

**'A world that is worthy of our children.'**

He argues that individual dreams can be pursued while also coming together as one family to safeguard the country and its opportunities for future generations to pursue their dreams too.

This narrative has a strong potential to unify, and evokes feelings of patriotism and family values. It is a credible narrative for Obama because of his ethos as a good family man. Despite his powerful status, Obama portrays himself as a relatable middle class American Father - a Father not only for his own children but also for the nation.

## Climate Change and the Economy

Obama continuously frames climate change as an economic issue, highlighting the economic benefits of his plans to make clean energy the 'profitable kind of energy'. Such benefits include increased jobs, lower energy bills, and reduced fuel costs.



Obama delivers address on energy policy at Cushing Pipe Yard, Oklahoma, 22/03/2012 (Joe Wertz, StateImpact Oklahoma).

**'put more people back to work, and ultimately help to curb the spike in gas prices...'**

Since people respond more effectively to familiar messages, exploiting the familiar economic concerns of the public is an attempt to achieve maximum support for his energy plans. Obama seemingly understands the needs and concerns of the majority and frames the climate issue in a way to address these.



Obama delivers remarks during a morning plenary session of the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen 18/12/2009 (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

## Climate Change and National Security

Obama often remarks that climate change is a threat, and particularly a threat to national security. The impacts of climate change (increased flooding, drought, etc) can lead to population migration, spur crises, and amplify conflicts, consequently effecting prosperity, public safety, and international stability.

**'The pentagon says that climate change poses immediate risks to our national security.'**

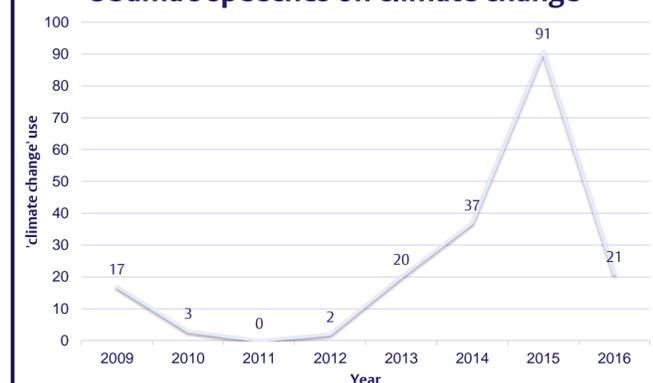
Obama quotes this often in 2015, almost amplifying the importance of the climate change issue to the same levels as that of terrorism in an attempt to persuade his audience of its true danger.

## Clean Energy vs Climate Change

During Obama's time in office, there are two clear shifts in his rhetoric. Firstly, the term 'climate change' seems to almost disappear from his lexicon, being replaced with a more optimistic, consumer-friendly 'clean energy' rhetoric. However this avoids the harsh reality of climate change, failing to convey a sense of urgency and bypassing the idea that energy consumption should be curbed.

In his second term, then, it appears Obama recognises this need for more powerful, realistic terminology to encourage action. From 2013, he increasingly uses scientific evidence to support his case and returns to a 'climate change' rhetoric, to the point that he mentions the term 26 times in one 2015 speech to the US Coastguard.

### Use of the term 'climate change' in Obama's speeches on climate change



## Conclusion

Shown above are the prominent themes that Obama uses to portray climate change and to convince his audience of his plan to jump-start the economy with clean energy, to protect the security of the nation and planet, and to create a better planet for future generations. However, this is only the starting point in studying Obama's climate change rhetoric. The next steps are to determine whether Obama's rhetoric was actually successful. After all, only days after being elected, Obama claimed that his presidency was to "mark a new chapter in America's leadership on climate change that will strengthen our security and create millions of new jobs in the process." However, how true really is this? Did his rhetoric encourage action against the issue, or was it 'all talk and no walk'?



Obama delivers speech at Heil Family Farm, Haverhill, Iowa 14/08/2012 (AP Images, Carolyn Kaster)