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Strategic maneuvering in the political rhetoric of Barack Obama

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U.S. President Barack Obama's rhetoric lends itself well as a highly interesting case study for exploring the possibilities of contemporary political rhetoric of being both successful on the one hand and rational, according to normative standards of argumentative discourse, on the other. Taking up the concept of "strategic maneuvering" as developed within Pragma-Dialectics (cf. van Eemeren 2010), a corpus of Obama's speeches and books is analyzed in order to assess both its rationality and efficiency. The analysis shows that Obama not only knows extremely well how to use the classical inventory of (political) rhetoric, but also tries to overcome the standard strategic maneuvering of political rhetoric which is often polarizing and destructive. Obama tries to change this traditional style of political rhetoric by his orientation towards consensus and universal values and by his willingness to practice self-criticism. The evaluation of Obama's political rhetoric has also shown, however, that Obama is sometimes forced to abandon his high ethical and rhetorical standards in order not to lose a substantial section of the U.S. voters. In some of these cases, it might be argued that his strategic maneuvering "derails". All in all, however, Obama has shown us that a leading contemporary politician can overcome traditional party rhetoric by following new types of strategic maneuvering which, at least sometimes, successfully reconcile normative standards of rational discussion with rhetorical principles of efficient persuasion.

Keywords: Barack Obama; political rhetoric; democracy; Pragma-Dialectics; strategic maneuvering; fallacy; pragmatic argument; irony; self-criticism

1. Introduction

U.S. President Barack Obama's rhetoric lends itself well as a highly interesting case study for exploring the possibilities of contemporary political rhetoric of being both successful on the one hand and rational, according to normative standards of argumentative discourse, on the other.

That is, his political career and his presidency can provide a test case for the following central question: Can a leading politician such as President Obama achieve political success through a kind of political rhetoric which highlights (universally acceptable) rational and humanitarian ideals and at the same time is able of efficiently establishing consensus among the majority of voters or at least a large part of the listening audiences?

At first sight, a positive answer to this question seems to be blatantly wrong because of the following dilemma: Either leading politicians adjust their rhetoric to the interests of large sections of the electorate in order to be (re-)elected; but then they often have to violate universally acceptable standards of rational reasoning, for example, by arguing in a populist and/or an emotional way. Or they try to comply with these universal standards which results in reduced persuasiveness because they have to neglect many group-specific interests and preferences which contradict (some of these) universal standards.

A synthesis of both sides of the dilemma also seems to be almost impossible if one accepts the basic tenet of Down's economic theory of democracy (cf. Downs 1957), namely, that rational decision-makers (governments, political parties, interest groups etc.) try to be maximally efficient. This means that they try to move toward theirs goals in a way which, to the best of their knowledge, "uses the least possible input of scarce resources per unit of valued output" (Downs 1957: 5). At the same time, Downs assumes a "self-interest axiom", that is, "whenever we speak of rational behavior, we always mean rational behavior directed towards selfish ends" (Downs 1957: 27). From this, he concludes: "parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies" (Downs 1957: 28; 111).

While this theory explains much of the observable behavior of politicians within democratic states – several examples concerning Obama's rhetoric will be given below, Section 5 –, it still is overly reductionist in its basic assumptions. Even Downs (1957: 27) concedes that "[i]n reality, men are not always selfish, even in politics". Moreover, the economic theory of democracy has been criticized for not sufficiently taking into account an empirical comparison of existing varieties of democracy (cf. Schmidt 2010: 489). Finally, by focusing on maximally efficient means for reaching the main goal of (re-) election, Downs neglects the undeniable importance of political programs for political agents, even if these programs and the resulting policies sometimes diminish the agents' chances for (re-) election (cf. Schmidt 2010: 207; Downs (1957: 112) admits that "occasionally maintenance of an ideological stand takes precedence over the all-out drive for office").

In the following, I would like to explore a possible theoretical solution for the dilemma mentioned above. It can be derived from the Extended Theory of Pragma-Dialectics (cf. van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, 1992;

van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002, 2006; van Eemeren 2008, 2010). This Extended Theory tries to integrate normative, dialectic approaches to argumentation based on reasonableness with rhetorical approaches aiming at persuasive efficiency. "Strategic maneuvering" is defined as "the management of the discourse […] which is aimed at making the strongest possible case while at the same time avoiding any moves that are clearly unreasonable" (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002: 16). Similarly, van Eemeren (2010: 40) characterizes strategic maneuvering as "the continual efforts made in all moves that are carried out in argumentative discourse to keep the balance between reasonableness and effectiveness".

Using a railway metaphor, van Eemeren (2010: 41) goes on to make the following statement: "In case of a derailment of strategic maneuvering the pursuit of effectiveness has gained the upper hand at the expense of the pursuit of reasonableness, so that the process of resolving a difference of opinion on the merits gets distorted". From a more general perspective, van Eemeren (2010: 198) equates derailments of strategic maneuvering with fallacies: "All derailments of strategic maneuvering are fallacies in the sense that they violate one or more of the rules for critical discussion and all fallacies can be viewed as derailments of strategic maneuvering".

Within the Extended Theory of Pragma-Dialectics, three types of strategic maneuvering are distinguished (cf. van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2006: 383; cf. also van Eemeren 2010: 93f.):

> "First, there is the choice made from the available "topical potential", the (not always clearly delineated) repertoire of options for making an argumentative move that are at the arguer's disposal in a certain case and at a particular point in the discourse."

> "Second, there is the choice of how to adapt the argumentative moves made in the strategic maneuvering to meet "audience demand", the requirements pertinent to the audience that is to be reached."

> "Third, there is the exploitation of "presentational devices", which involves a choice as to how the argumentative moves are to be presented in the way that is strategically best."

Below, I would like to take a closer look at the problems and dilemmas successful politicians face when they maneuver strategically. Then, I would like to give a provisional and tentative answer to the question whether a politician such as Barack Obama can indeed succeed in maintaining the balance between reasonableness and efficiency.

My criteria for reasonableness will be derived from normative models developed within modern argumentation theory (cf. e.g. Habermas 1988, van Eemeren/ Grootendorst 2004). Criteria for efficiency are, for example, election or re-election (both now (May 2013) being applicable because of the election and re-election

of Obama in 2008 and 2012), high approval rates in polls following important political speeches, or relative success in persuading political opponents in parliament to vote for one's own position. At least in some cases (e.g. Obama 2011a; cf. below Section 4), this political success can plausibly be seen as the direct result of Obama's strategic maneuvering.

In order to do this, I shall analyze a series of argumentative passages from Obama's three books (Obama 2004, 2008a, 2010a) and thirteen of his speeches, including seven campaign speeches (Obama 2008b) and six presidential speeches (Obama 2009b, c, d; 2010b, 2011a, b).

2. Strategic maneuvering in political rhetoric

Any politician trying to achieve both the goal of reasonableness and the goal of efficiency has to face a series of dilemmas. More specifically, he or she has to reconcile three (seemingly) incompatible pairs of concepts/principles: rationality vs. efficiency, universalism vs. populism, "cool reason" vs. emotional arguments.

As far as the dilemma of reconciling rationality and efficiency is concerned, the following problem arises: Often the strongest arguments are not the most persuasive ones and vice versa. From this, Plato (cf. Gorgias 464b-465d) concluded that the rhetoric of his time was mainly used to make the weaker case appear as the stronger one and that such a rhetoric was an "evil art" flattering the human soul just as the art of cooking flatters the human body. However, it is not necessary to assume that rationally convincing and rhetorically persuasive arguments generally do not or even cannot overlap. Rather, Aristotle's solution for the first dilemma (cf. rhet. 1354a 11–26, 1355a 31) is more plausible, namely, that the speaker should not argue for the case which is wrong, but it would be a shame if the stronger case/ the true thesis did not prevail just because the speaker is not able to present it persuasively. So rational and persuasive strategies should go hand in hand.

In a similar vein, van Eemeren (2010: 35f.) argues that extensive empirical research done within the framework of Pragma-Dialectics has shown that "the norms of reasonableness incorporated in the pragma-dialectical discussion procedure are to a large extent intersubjectively acceptable to ordinary arguers" (cf. also Down's remark (1957: 108) that "competition tends to force all the parties in our model to be relatively honest").

As far as the dilemma of reconciling universalism and populism is concerned, one has to confront the following problem: On the one hand, politicians primarily have to convince their supporters/the members of their party/their local audience; on the other hand, in order to be rational, their rhetoric should address a "universal audience" (in the sense of Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca 1983: 39ff.; cf. also Danblon

2003; Kopperschmidt 1989, 1990, 2003, 2006). A possible practical solution to this dilemma could follow a seemingly paradoxical strategy: A growing part of the population is tired of adversarial "party rhetoric" (cf. Klein 1996; Kienpointner 2003; Tannen 2004; Posch 2006), so attempts to move beyond the borderlines of traditional ideologies and political parties – somewhat paradoxically – could be effective to a certain degree also in front of audiences where the majority does not share the ideological background of the speaker.

Below, I will try to show that part of Obama's strategic maneuvering implements this possible practical solution, by trying to adapt his political rhetoric not only to the "Democrat" section of his "composite audience" (cf. van Eemeren 2010: 110), but also to the "Republican" part. Moreover, Obama tries to formulate standpoints which are not only acceptable for the white majority of the U.S.A., but also for ethnic minorities within the U.S.A., or even for an international audience, including the Islamic world (cf. Mohammed/Zarefsky 2011).

As far as the third dilemma, namely, the assumed incompatibility of "cool reason" and emotional arguments is concerned, the following problem arises: Traditionally, emotional appeals such as personal attacks ("argumentum ad hominem"), threats ("argumentum ad baculum"), appeals to awe and respect ("argumentum ad verecundiam"), appeals to strong emotions such as love and hate of mass audiences ("argumentum ad populum") have been classified as fallacies. However, at the same time, they are extremely persuasive and a political speaker is not really able to do without them.

A possible practical solution could make use of more recent research (cf. especially the work of Douglas Walton 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000), which has stressed that not all emotional appeals are necessarily fallacious. So the central question is not whether emotional appeals are acceptable or not, but which emotional appeals are acceptable in a given context of political rhetoric. Here, a speaker can maneuver strategically by selecting positive emotions, and refrain from relying on emotional appeals alone (on fallacious emotional appeals within right wing populist rhetoric cf. Reisigl/Wodak 2001; Kienpointner 2005).

Again, I will try to show that part of Obama's strategic adaptation to the audience demand includes this possible practical solution by appealing mostly to positive emotions, by not appealing to emotions alone, and by not trying to arouse overwhelming emotions which block further rational discussion.

3.   Overview of Obama's persuasive strategies

On a highly general level, it can be said that Obama uses the classical arsenal of argumentative and stylistic techniques in order to maneuver strategically

(cf. Crystal 2008; Gössler 2009; Kienpointner 2010 for a more detailed illustration). More specifically, and as far as the topical potential is concerned, Obama tries to select starting points (premises) and to integrate them into argument schemes which are effective in political rhetoric, for example, the "Pragmatic Argument" (cf. below), or the "Argument of Justice" (cf. Kienpointner/Orlandini 2005).

As far as audience demand is concerned, Obama adapts these argument schemes to meet audience demand, for example, while trying to appeal to groups of voters who traditionally vote for the Democrats, he also tries to select topics and arguments which are attractive for (at least some) Republican voters.

Finally, in order to use presentational devices effectively, Obama formulates his arguments in a persuasive way, that is, in a clear, rhythmic, well-structured way, making the central messages easy to remember, using classical figures of speech effectively, such as alliteration, anaphor, parallelism, antithesis and climax, metaphor, metonymy, irony, rhetorical questions. Normally, however, and beyond the antagonism of classical political "party rhetoric", Obama refrains from using these presentational devices, for example, metaphors, in an overly aggressive way (on metaphor in political rhetoric cf. Lakoff 1987, 1996, 2005; on Obama's use of metaphor cf. Gössler 2009: 58ff.; Kienpointner 2010: 110).

These strategies will now be illustrated with a few examples. As far as the topical potential is concerned, Obama quite often maneuvers strategically with the persuasiveness of "Pragmatic Arguments". Pragmatic Arguments are a type of causal argumentation which evaluates political decisions, initiatives and activities by pointing out their positive or negative effects (cf. Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca 1983: 357ff.; Schellens 1985: 157; Kienpointner 1992: 340, Garssen 1997: 21f., Walton et al. 2008: 100ff.). There are two versions of the Pragmatic Argument, a positive version, which highlights positive effects of political decisions and activities, and a negative version, which highlights negative effects. Their structure can be made explicit as follows:

> Pragmatic Argument (Positive version):
>
> If act A has positive effects B, C, D […] and has no, or fewer, or less important negative effects than an alternative act X, A should be done/ should be evaluated positively.
>
> Act A has positive effects B, C, D […].
>
> Act A has no, or fewer, or less important negative effects than an alternative act X. Therefore: Act A should be done/ should be evaluated positively.
>
> Pragmatic Argument (Negative version):
>
> If act A has negative effects B, C, D […] and has no, or fewer, or less important positive effects than an alternative act X, A should not be done/ should be evaluated negatively.

Act A has negative effects B, C, D […].

Act A has no, or fewer, or less important positive effects than an alternative act X. Therefore: Act A should not be done/ should be evaluated negatively.

Pragmatic Arguments are very common in political rhetoric. And they are also an especially suitable topical choice for Obama who, during his presidential campaign, promised to bring "change".

Most of the time, political actions have both positive and negative effects. Therefore, by selecting (mainly/only) positive effects of one's own political position and (mainly/only) negative effects of the political opponent's position, this kind of strategic maneuvering is in danger of becoming fallacious, that is, of "derailing". The following example from one of Obama's campaign speeches lists a series of positive effects of his possible presidency:

(1)   *I'll be a President who finally makes health care affordable and available to every single American in the same way I expanded health care in Illinois – by – by bringing Democrats and Republicans together to get the job done.*

I'll be a President who ends the tax breaks for companies that ship our jobs overseas and put a middle-class tax cut into the pockets of the working Americans who deserve it.

I'll be a President who harnesses the ingenuity of farmers and scientists and entrepreneurs to free this nation from the tyranny of oil once and for all.

And I'll be a President who ends this war in Iraq and finally brings our troops home; who restores our moral standing; who understands that 9/11 is not a way to scare up votes […]. (Obama, Des Moines, Iowa Caucus Night 2008b: 204)

In this passage, Obama is maneuvering strategically as far as the topical potential is concerned, by selecting only positive effects of his possible presidency. He also enhances the effectiveness of this pragmatic argument by using presentational devices such as alliteration, anaphor, parallelism (*I'll be…I'll be…I'll be…And I'll be*), metaphor (*the tyranny of oil*), metonymy (*put a …tax cut into the pockets*) and by adapting this argument to his composite audience, appealing to Democrats as well as Republicans (*bringing Democrats and Republicans together*).

This kind of strategic maneuvering using the topical potential might be criticized as fallacious because Obama does not mention any potentially negative effects of his presidency and does not specify how far he would be willing to go in giving up principles and making compromises with his political opponents. And Obama has indeed been criticized severely for going too far in giving up his own principles in order to achieve a political compromise with his opponents (cf. below, Section 5).

However, numerous other passages from campaign and presidential speeches held by Obama do show that he is eager to admit that solutions of complex political problems are never easy and is willing to criticize himself, that is, to admit that his political decisions and activities also had/have negative effects (cf. below, Section 4). Moreover, it cannot be denied that in the meantime, Obama has been at least partially successful in implementing some of the changes mentioned and promised in this passage.

Another illustrative example concerns the strategic use of irony. Typically, Obama uses irony in a rather mild and humorous form, attacking his political opponents only indirectly In this way, Obama's strategic maneuvering employs presentational strategies such as ironic utterances to create a positive emotional atmosphere:

(2)   *We cut taxes…We cut taxes for small businesses…We cut taxes for 8 million Americans paying for college… I thought I'd get some applause on that one.*
       (Obama, State of the Union, Congress 2010b: 3)

In this passage from his State of the Union Speech 2010, after listing several tax cuts enacted by the government, Obama receives loud applause by the Democrats, while the Republicans remain quietly seated. Obama's ironic remark (*I thought I'd get some applause on that one*) conversationally implies a mild criticism (and was accompanied by nonverbal behaviour such as a friendly smile towards the seats of the Republicans, as the video recording of this speech shows), namely the message that Republicans should applaud the president's report about tax cuts, even though they are his political opponents, because tax cuts are a political standard goal of Republican politics.

I would very briefly like to mention two more examples for Obama's strategic use of irony: In his Keynote Address at the Democratic National Convention 2004, after listing a few important aspects of the American dream, Obama mildly ironically alludes (cf. […] *our votes will be counted – at least most of the time*) to the problematic vote counts in Florida in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential elections:

(3)   *A faith – a faith in simple dreams.* […] *That we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution and that our votes will be counted – at least most of the time.* (Democratic National Convention, Boston, July 27, 2004, transcription (minutes 4:50–5:22) of the video in: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWynt87PaJ0; visited last time September 5, 2011)

In a passage of his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama (2008a: 199) indirectly criticizes the fact that within the White House under G.W. Bush, a certain oil-bias prevented a realistic recognition of the dangers of climate change: *Just about every scientist outside the White House believes that climate change is real.*

4. Characteristic features of Obama's rhetoric: New types of strategic maneuvering: Self-Criticism and the universalist tendency

While the examples for Obama's strategic maneuvering discussed so far show a remarkable rhetorical competence, they are not sufficient to clearly distinguish his strategic maneuvering from persuasive techniques used by many other (successful) politicians in the U.S. and elsewhere. So the question remains: What are the characteristic features of Obama's strategic maneuvering? Two possible answers could be: (1) Obama's disposition to admit mistakes, both at a personal and at a governmental or national level. (2) Obama's universalist and consensus-orientated perspective. And of course, there are other characteristics of Obama's strategic maneuvering which I cannot deal with in this paper (e.g. his insistence on the principle of (audacious) hope, cf. Atwater 2007; Kienpointner 2010).

Given some widespread stereotypes about successful (male) politicians, who constantly have to show strong leadership, to act with determination, to commit themselves to strong patriotism and to demonstrate self-assurance and self-confidence, it is remarkable that Obama has been willing to admit mistakes and weaknesses, both in his campaign speeches and in his presidential speeches (on the potential dangers for (presidential) democracy created by strong, charismatic leaders cf. Schmidt 2010: 179; 429). Here is a list of illustrative examples, both on the personal level as well as on the governmental and national level:

(4)   *I say this* [= Obama's decision to try to become a good father] *knowing that I have been an imperfect father – knowing that I have made mistakes and will continue to make more; wishing that I could be home for my girls and my wife more than I am right now.* (Obama, Father's Day, Chicago 2008b: 236)

(5)   *But perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize is the fact that I am the Commander-in-Chief of a nation in the midst of two wars. … I am responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land. Some will kill. Some will be killed.* (Obama, Nobel Prize speech, Oslo, Norway 2009d: 1)

(6)   *I take my share of the blame for not explaining it* [= health reform] *more clearly to the American* People. (Obama, State of the Union, Congress 2010b: 7)

In the three passages quoted above, Obama expresses self-criticism as far as his lack of quality time for his wife and children is concerned, casts some doubt at the legitimacy of his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize as a "war president", and finally takes part of the responsibility for the numerous delays and difficulties of implementing his health reform. Now one could ask why he is using this kind of strategic maneuvering (that is, selecting topics for self-criticism), which at first sight could only harm his political image while not having any positive persuasive

effect. One reason might be that growing sections of the electorate no longer want to hear and do no longer believe all the clichéd success stories of tough and self-confident, "super-human" political leaders. Therefore, Obama's self-criticism, on the one hand, contributes to his credibility (and, hence, persuasiveness), and, on the other hand, also makes his arguments more balanced and rationally acceptable.

What is even more remarkable, Obama extends this self-criticism to his government and the U.S. as a whole, as the following examples show:

(7) *Nine-eleven was an enormous trauma to our country. The fear and anger that it provoked was understandable, but in some cases, it led us to act contrary to our traditions and our ideals. We are taking concrete actions to change course. I have unequivocally prohibited the use of torture by the United States, and I have ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed by early next year.* (Obama, Cairo 2009b: 3)

(8) *For many years, Iran has defined itself in part by its opposition to my country, and there is in fact a tumultuous history between us. In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government.* (Obama, Cairo 2009b: 4)

(9) *Our administration has had some political setbacks this year, and some of them were deserved.* (Obama, State of the Union Speech, Congress 2010b: 13)

Again one might think, at least at first sight, that criticism of the foreign policy of the U.S. or the Democrat government led by Obama is doomed to fail as far as persuasive success is concerned. But then again, self-criticism of this sort could arguably have made a modest contribution to the more successful negotiations with national and international political opponents, eventually leading to the New START Treaty with Russia (ratified by the U.S. Senate with a two-thirds majority, including 13 Republicans, on December 22, 2010) and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act ending the ban on gay men and lesbians serving openly in the U.S. army (passed by the U.S. Senate with a majority including eight Republicans, on December 22, 2010).

As far as Obama's universalist and consensus-orientated perspective is concerned, the following passages from his speeches and books are remarkably close to positions developed in contemporary theories of rational communication and argumentation (cf. Habermas 1988; Kienpointner 1996; Reisigl/Wodak 2001; Danblon 2003; van Eemeren/Grootendorst 2004; Kopperschmidt 2006; Wodak 2011) and in critical or deliberative theories of democracy (cf. Schmidt 2010: 236ff.; 254ff.). The first examples concern an integrative attitude towards his political opponents at the national level and the willingness to debate all issues, even those which seem to be undisputable from one's own political or religious perspective:

(10)   *Black leaders need to appreciate the legitimate fears that may cause some whites to resist affirmative action.*

   Union representatives can't afford not to understand the competitive pressures their employers may be under.

   I am obligated to try to see the world through George Bush's eyes, no matter how much I disagree with him. That's what empathy does – it calls us all to task, the conservative and the liberal, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressed and the oppressor. (Obama 2008a: 82)

(11)   *What our deliberative, pluralistic democracy does demand is that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals must be subject to argument and amenable to reason. If I am opposed to abortion for religious reasons and seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or invoke God's will and expect that argument to carry the day. If I want others to listen to me, then I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.* (Obama 2008a: 259)

These two passages show how Obama calls for serious attempts to understand the position of the social and/or political or religious opponent, that is, attempts to overcome traditional one-sidedness and partisanship found in a great deal of political discourse. While this type of strategic maneuvering might be totally ineffective before audiences who stick adamantly to their group-specific interests and convictions and even interpret signs of empathy and understanding as a political weakness (cf. Schmidt 2010: 300f.), it could be more persuasive as a means of strategic adaptation to audience demand before heterogeneous, composite audiences or could successfully appeal to benevolent outsiders not directly involved in the controversial issues (cf. van Eemeren 2010: 112).

   More than this, he also asks for the integration of his opponents into political actions and decisions. Interestingly enough, the remarks in Example (12) were followed by a friendly smile and a gesture of approval by Senator McCain, as the video recordings of this session clearly show (on similarities and differences between Obama's and McCain's rhetorical style cf. Kyrala 2010):

(12)   […] *for those Americans who can't get insurance today…, we will immediately offer low-cost coverage that will protect you against financial ruin if you become seriously ill. This was a good idea when Senator John McCain proposed it in the campaign, it's a good idea now, and we should all embrace it.* (Obama, Health Care, Congress 2009c: 3)

(13)   *That's why I've called for a bipartisan fiscal commission, modeled on a proposal by Republican Judd Dregg and Democrat Kent Conrad.* (Obama, State of the Union Speech, Congress 2010b: 8)

At the international level, Obama tries to take into account the interests of all ethnic or religious groups and, ultimately, all nations (cf. Mohammed/Zarefsky 2011:93):

(14)   *Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition. I saw it firsthand as a child in Indonesia, where devout Christians worshiped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. That is the spirit we need today. People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul.* (Obama, Cairo 2009b:5)

(15)   *What has always united us – what has always driven our people, what drew my father to America's shores – is a set of ideals that speak to aspirations shared by all people: that we can live free from fear and free from want; that we can speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please.* (Obama, Berlin 2008b:270)

It is also interesting that Obama sticks to his universalist and consensus-orientated attitude even when it is put to a hard test and when it would be tempting to use a more adversarial kind of rhetoric. This was the case after the Arizona shooting on January 8, 2011, when Jared Lee Loughner killed six people and injured Gabrielle Giffords (Democrat U.S. Representative) very seriously. Shortly before the shooting, on her website Republican Sarah Palin had posted the image of a rifle gunsight portraying Arizona's 8th Congressional District as a "target" for a Republican takeover in the U.S. elections on November 2, 2010. This was Gabrielle Giffords' district, who, tragically, had even previously warned Palin in an MSNBC interview on March 25, 2010 that her "target" metaphor could be taken seriously. Far from taking political advantage of these facts, and avoiding the arousal of bitter emotions of hatred and despite, Obama called for an end to aggressive party rhetoric and a new political climate of mutual respect and cooperation.

His speech was approved by an overall 78% in a poll conducted by Washington Post and ABC News (cf. the website: http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/giffords-tucson-shooting-abc-news-washington-post-poll, last time visited August 31, 2011). Moreover, it was appreciated not only by his supporters, but also by 71% of the Republicans participating in the poll. Here is one significant passage of the speech:

(16)   *You see, when a tragedy like this strikes, it is part of our nature to demand explanations – to try and pose some order on the chaos and make sense out of that which seems senseless. […] But at a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized – at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who happen to think differently than we do – it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.* (Obama, Tucson 2011a:3)

In my view, all the examples in this section show that Obama, while not always achieving persuasive effectiveness, comes close to reasonableness as far as his typical ways of strategic maneuvering are concerned.

In the following section, I would like to give a few examples where his strategic maneuvering is in danger to derail or has indeed derailed.

5.   Criticism of Obama's strategic maneuvering

Of course, as with any type of strategic maneuvering, Obama's personal style of using topical choice, audience demands and presentational devices runs the risk of derailing, that is, to become fallacious argumentation. In the following, more specifically, I wish to present some evidence that there are four issues where Obama's strategic maneuvering is in danger of derailing (note that my criticism is not exclusively based on a moralistic viewpoint, but also involves a criticism of fallacious arguments, such as instances of self-contradiction):

1.   Obama tends to neglect the problems of Native Americans, who are only rarely selected as a topic of his political argumentation. This can be criticized because following his universalist perspective, Obama should not neglect this minority group, even though quantitatively, it is only a very small part of the U.S. electorate. In fact, in this specific case, Down's (1957) economic theory of democracy might be justly adduced to explain Obama's strategic behavior. Moreover, his relative neglect of the Native Americans could be criticized from the theoretical perspectives of liberal or pluralist theories of democracies which especially call for the protection of small, powerless minorities (cf. Mill 1946: 189ff.; Schmidt 2010: 137; 219).
2.   Furthermore, Obama accepts capital punishment for a small number of exceptionally brutal crimes, but this contradicts his universalist attitude as far as ethics is concerned.
3.   Moreover, Obama has argued for building new nuclear power plants, which is not compatible with his insistence on basing U.S. power supply on sustainable sources of energy, when he calls for "a bold and sustainable energy policy" focused on enhancing renewable energy in his campaign speeches and texts (cf. Obama 2008b: 251ff., 65ff.).
4.   Finally, and maybe most importantly, precisely his consensus-orientated attitude quite often forced/forces Obama into compromises with the Republicans. At least according to Obama's critics from the left wing of the Democrat Party and the U.S. political left in general, these compromises contradict positions and standpoints expressed by Obama earlier on in his books and campaign speeches.

The neglect of the problems of the Native Americans manifests itself, for instance, in the following famous passage from Obama's speech at the National Convention of the Democrats on July 27, 2004, where he omits the Native Americans when listing the other, larger ethnic U.S. minorities (quoted after Obama 2008a: 273f.):

(17) *There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America – there's the United States of America* (Speech at the National Convention of the Democrats, July 27, 2004).

This is not an exceptional case, as several other passages from Obama's campaign speeches and books demonstrate (cf. Obama 2008a: 180, 287f., Obama 2008b: 219, 227; cf. also the critical analysis in Kienpointner 2010: 112f.). So the suspicion arises that the issue of the Native Americans is simply not selected as a topic because they can be dismissed as an insignificant part of the U.S. electorate. However, in all fairness it has to be conceded that there are also passages in Obama's books and speeches where he does take on the issue of the Native Americans and, for example, makes explicit the incredible injustice Native Americans had to suffer during the age of European and U.S. colonialism (cf. Obama 2008a: 114, 332; Obama 2008b: 227). Moreover, in his children book "Of thee I sing" he includes Sitting Bull as one of 13 groundbreaking Americans (cf. Obama 2010: 9), praising him as a man "who healed broken hearts and broken promises" and whose "wisdom touched the generations".

For this inclusion, Obama was severely criticized by the editor of Fox News, "Obama praises Indian chief who killed U.S. general" (cf. http://nation.foxnews.com/media/2010/11/15/ obama-praises-indian-chief-who-killed-us-general; last time visited September 2, 2011). Later, however, Fox News had to correct this historically incorrect headline.

As far as capital punishment is concerned, Obama is opposed to its unjust, unbalanced and illegitimate implementation, and does not believe that it is an effective means of deterring crime, but nevertheless accepts it for a few exceptionally heinous crimes:

(18) *The year the Democrats regained the majority in the Illinois state senate, I sponsored a bill to require the videotaping of interrogations and confessions in capital cases. While the evidence tells me that the death penalty does little to deter crime, I believe there are some crimes – mass murder, the rape and murder of a child – so heinous, so beyond the pale, that the community is justified in expressing the measure of its outrage by meting out the ultimate punishment.* (Obama 2008a: 70)

This, however, not only contradicts his commitment to the universal principles of ethics (cf. above, Section 4), such as Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (1948): "Everyone has the right to life, liberty

and security of person". It also creates the suspicion that Obama does not really believe that capital punishment can be justified reasonably, but he strategically maneuvers according to the insight that any realistically minded candidate for the White House has to strategically adjust his position to the fact that large potions of the U.S. population still are in favor of the death penalty. In this case, Down's economic theory of democracy once again seems to offer a realistic explanation for Obama's strategic maneuvering because "Party members choose an ideology which will win votes, not one they believe in" (Downs 1957: 111).

In this respect, it is interesting that in recent polls (done by Gallup in the year 2007) more than two thirds (69%) of the U.S. population still accepted capital punishment (cf. http://www.gallup.com/poll/101863/sixtynine-percent-americans-support-death-penalty.aspx; last time visited: September 2, 2011).

As to nuclear energy, Obama argued for new nuclear power plants in his 2010 State of the Union Speech and continued to do so even after the nuclear disaster of Fukushima in March 2011 in a speech given at Georgetown University on March 30, 2011:

(19) *But to create more of these clean energy jobs, we need more production, more efficiency, more incentives. And that means building a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants in this country*. (Obama, State of the Union Speech, Congress 2010b: 5)

(20) *Right now, America gets about one-fifth of our electricity from nuclear energy. And it's important to recognize that nuclear energy doesn't emit carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. So those of us who are concerned about climate change, we've got to recognize that nuclear power, if it's safe, can make a significant contribution to the climate change question. And I'm determined to ensure that it's safe. So in light of what's happened in Japan, I've requested a comprehensive safety review by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to make sure that all of our existing nuclear energy facilities are safe. And we're going incorporate* [sic!] *those conclusions and lessons from Japan in design and the building of the next generation of plants. But we can't simply take it off the table* (Obama, Georgetown 2011b: 5).

The safety of nuclear power plants is a highly controversial issue, but after Harrisburg 1979; Chernobyl 1986 and Fukushima 2011 (and many lesser incidents elsewhere) it should have become crystal clear that it is impossible to exclude all kinds of disastrous risks connected with this highly sophisticated technology, apart from the fact that a definitive technical solution has so far not been found for the enormous problem of nuclear waste (on the lack of legitimacy of democratic majority decisions in favor of such high risk technologies, which could become irrevocable decisions in the worst scenario of a nuclear catastrophe, cf. the criticism by Schmidt 2010: 270).

So again, Obama comes close to the fallacy of self-contradiction when he (convincingly) argues for the necessity to stop U.S. dependency on oil with regard to the dangers inherent in climate change, but at the same time tries to trivialize the dangers inherent in nuclear power plants. Moreover, again the suspicion arises that he also maneuvers strategically in this way in order to adapt to audience demand (cf. again Downs 1957): According to recent polls (done by Gallup in 2011), apart from the nuclear industry and its lobbyists, 58% of the U.S. population still believes that U.S. nuclear power plants are safe (on this specific Gallup poll from April 2011 cf.: http://www.gallup.com/poll/146939/majority-americans-say-nuclear-power-plants-safe.aspx; last visited September 2, 2011).

The final and most important point of criticism I want to briefly discuss concerns Obama's compromises with his political opponents. The compromises forced upon Obama as U.S. president, when he has tried to come to an agreement with the Republicans on central issues (e.g. health care, tax policy, budget, debt limit increase) and has had to withdraw commitments previously expressed in his speeches and books, invite a criticism of inconsistency and political opportunism (on this type of criticism of strategic maneuvering cf. van Eemeren 2010: 241ff.). For example, the debt limit increase compromise in August 2011 was reached by Obama only by conceding to the Republicans that there would be no tax increases for rich U.S. citizens, whereas in his campaign speeches he criticized John McCain for wanting to make "permanent the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy" (Obama 2008b: 258).

As Zarefsky (2009: 10) puts it, "Obama's call to transcend partisanship rendered him vulnerable. It made him seem dependent not just on carrying out his program but on securing Republican votes". If this criticism is justified, Obama's universalist strategic maneuvering has degenerated or "derailed" in some of these cases.

However, one might excuse at least some of the compromises agreed to by Obama in the last few years with the enormous political pressure he has had to face and the enormous economic and political changes in the political situation so far in his presidency (cf. Schmidt 2010: 301). This somehow reduces the weight of the harsh criticism of political opportunism sometimes brought forward against Obama by the radical political left: Obama has been called "Brand Obama" (by Chomsky), "Brain dead Obama" (by Hirschhorn), or "a president who either does not know what he believes or is willing to take whatever position he thinks will lead to his re-election" (by Westen; cf. Chomsky 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Hirschhorn 2011; Westen 2011).

A fortiori, the even harsher criticism regularly brought forward against Obama by radical conservative politicians such as Tea Party activist Sarah Palin (for example, cf. a passage from a speech delivered by Palin in Indianola, Iowa, September 3,

2011 (http//:www.washington.post.com/politics, last visited September 4, 2011): "Folks, the truth is Barack Obama is adrift with no plan because his fundamental transformation is at odds with everything that made this country great,"…"It doesn't make sense. He doesn't make sense") cannot be taken seriously, because it is directed at a politician who is losing support from the political left precisely because he conceded a lot – in the eyes of his leftist critics: far too much, see above – to his conservative opponents in order to reach a political consensus.

6.   Conclusions

The analysis of some persuasive strategies of Barack Obama has shown that he not only knows extremely well how to use the classical inventory of (political) rhetoric, but also tries to overcome the standard strategic maneuvering of political rhetoric which is often polarizing and destructive.

Obama tries to change this traditional style of political rhetoric by his orientation towards consensus and universal values and by his willingness to practice self-criticism, both at the individual and at the governmental and national level.

The criticism of Obama's political rhetoric has also shown, however, that Obama is sometimes (increasingly?) forced to abandon his high ethical and rhetorical standards in order not to lose a substantial section of the U.S. voters. In some of these cases, it might be argued that his strategic maneuvering "derails".

All in all, however, a positive answer to the central question asked in the introduction to this paper can be given: Obama has shown us that a leading contemporary politician can overcome traditional party rhetoric by following new types of strategic maneuvering which, at least sometimes, successfully reconcile normative standards of rational discussion with rhetorical principles of efficient persuasion, thus achieving approval for his political points of view by substantial sections of the electorate and even by his political opponents.

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Appendix I

List of Analyzed Texts & Sources.

a. *Books:*

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