

# **A Critical Discourse Analysis of Barack Obama's (2004) DNC Keynote Speech: Unfolding the Elements of Social Liberal Ideology**

**Asiqur Rahman<sup>1\*</sup>**

## **Abstract**

This paper conducts a critical discourse analysis of the linguistic manifestation of social liberal ideology in Barack Obama's (2004) Democratic National Convention (DNC) Keynote speech. Grounded in Fairclough's (2015) discourse theory, Beitz's (1999) and Shypunov's (2018) frameworks of social liberalism, as well as Martin's (2004) positive discourse analysis, the paper examines how Obama's speech constructs and promotes the key tenets of social liberalism – specifically individual liberty, social justice, unity, and equality – in contrast to the notions of division and inequality prevalent in the context of the USA in 2004. The study utilizes four tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): social actor analysis, metaphors, personal pronouns, and lexical analysis. Specifically, it analyzes how Obama's (2004) strategies for representing social actors, his use of metaphors, personal pronouns, and lexical choices reflect and reinforce social liberal ideology. Major findings of this analysis reveal that the core principles of social liberalism (individual liberty and social justice) are evident in Obama's (2004) strategies for representing social actors, his use of metaphors, personal pronouns, and lexical choices. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how ideology is linguistically encoded and disseminated in political speeches, revealing the complex linguistic mechanisms through which political leaders articulate and promote specific ideologies. This provides valuable insights for future research on political communication and ideological framing.

## **Keywords**

A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA), social liberalism, social actor analysis, metaphors, personal pronouns, and lexical analysis.

## **Introduction**

Political speeches are powerful tools for persuading and shaping public opinion, often aimed at advancing the ideologies of political parties. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) seeks to understand, expose, and challenge the social inequalities and abuses of power embedded in discourse within the social and political context (Van Dijk, 2015). However, some political speeches go beyond merely promoting a political agenda; they inspire people to envision a better world for everyone. Obama's (2004) DNC keynote speech exemplifies such transformative and positive discourse. According to Degani (2015), Obama regards American Presidents Jefferson and Roosevelt as role models capable of inspiring the nation to act and alter the course of history. Similarly, Frank & McPhail (2005) noted that Obama's (2004) speech served as a prophetic effort to heal the trauma of racism and to envision a world without racial distinctions. Obama's (2004) speech advocates for a balance between individual freedom and social justice, which is a fundamental tenet of social liberalism. As Obama (2004) states, "Alongside our famous individualism, there's another ingredient in the American saga: a belief that we are connected as one people." In a similar tone, Horváth's (2009) analysis reveals that Obama promotes positive

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor (On Study Leave), Department of English, School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Chittagong Independent University (CIU)

\*Corresponding Author

Email: [asiqur@ciu.edu.bd](mailto:asiqur@ciu.edu.bd)

values such as “pragmatism, liberalism, inclusiveness, acceptance of religious and ethnic diversity, and unity” (p.55).

While previous research highlighted the inspirational and healing aspects of Obama’s (2004) DNC keynote speech, a comprehensive linguistic analysis focusing specifically on its construction and promotion of social liberalism ideology remains unexplored. This paper addresses this gap by rigorously analyzing how Obama’s rhetorical strategies, through specific linguistic choices, manifest the core tenets of social liberalism. The unique contribution of this paper lies in applying multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, integrating Fairclough’s (2015) macro-level discourse theory with Martin’s (2004) positive discourse analysis and established frameworks of social liberalism (Beitz, 1999; Shypunov, 2018; Simhony, 2005; Seaman, 1978; Tyler, 2007), with a view to dissecting the speech’s ideological underpinnings. Grounded in the theory of discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 2015), the theory of social liberalism (Beitz, 1999; Shypunov, 2018; Simhony, 2005; Seaman, 1978; Tyler, 2007), and positive discourse analysis (Martin, 2004), this paper will analyze how Obama’s (2004) Democratic National Convention (DNC) keynote speech promoted the elements of social liberal ideology such as a country of individual liberty, social justice, unity, and equality, as opposed to a country of division and inequality. This paper will first define the underlying theories and outline the research question guiding this analysis. It will then describe the research methods, including the data (the text in question and its socio-political context), the CDA tools and framework used, and finally present and discuss the findings before concluding.

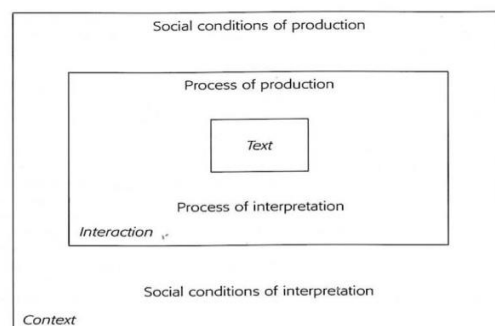
## Theoretical Underpinnings

### Discourse as a Social Practice

Fairclough’s (2015) theory of discourse as a social practice will serve as a fundamental discourse theory for analyzing Obama’s (2004) speech. According to Fairclough (2015, p. 56), the relationship between language and society is internal and dialectical since “language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena *are* (in part) linguistic phenomena”. Linguistic phenomena are social because societal factors determine people’s use of language and, in turn, that language influences society. On the other hand, social phenomena are linguistic because language is not only a reflection or product of social processes and practice but also an integral part of those social conditions. Fairclough (2015, p. 56) exemplified, “Politics partly consists in the disputes and struggles which occur in language and over language”.

## Figure 1

### *Discourse as a Social Practice*



Source: Fairclough (2015)

As shown in Figure 1 above, Fairclough (2015) further argued that discourse as a social practice consists of three interrelated dimensions: “texts, interactions, and contexts.” In correspondence to these three dimensions, he outlined three stages of CDA: Description, interpretation, and explanation. These stages denote that discourse is to be described not only in terms of linguistic properties but also as a product of particular “social conditions,” which may be an immediate social context or a social context in broader metrics (pp. 57-59). The description stage deals with the formal properties of the text, while the interpretation stage views the text as part of social interaction. The explanation stage deals with the social effects of the discourse. Hence, in light of Fairclough’s (2015) theory of discourse as social practice, this paper will describe, interpret, and explain Obama’s (2004) speech within the socio-political conditions of the USA in 2004.

### **Social Liberalism**

For this analysis, it is crucial to define what social liberalism is and its key elements. As it is a hybrid theory (socialism + liberalism), a straightforward definition may oversimplify it. Social liberalism, as a political ideology, can be traced back to Hobhouse’s book *Liberalism* published in 1964 (Seaman, 1978; Shypunov, 2018). According to Shypunov (2018, p. 126), “social liberalism is a consequence of rethinking liberalism through the basic ideological foundations of socialism (liberalism, which incorporated the principles of socialism”. In other words, it consists of socialist policies within a liberal framework. Social Liberalism is a political ideology that proposes reconciling the elements of liberalism, such as the rights and liberties of individuals, with certain elements of socialism, such as equality, unity, social justice, collective welfare, and collective responsibility (Seaman, 1978). The primary concern of social liberalism is fairness to states or societies, while societies have the core responsibility of ensuring the well-being of their people (Beitz, 1999). As opposed to the classical liberal theory of *laissez-faire* (individual liberty without state intervention), social liberalism accepts the state’s intervention (Seaman, 1978). In a nutshell, social liberalism promotes individual liberty and social justice. Social justice encapsulates equality, the common good, collective welfare, and unity. In other words, social liberalism removes the extremes of classical liberalism and socialism. Some scholars differentiate between social liberalism and liberal socialism in terms of which aspect weighs more in blending both ideologies (Orazi, 2023). Over the last couple of centuries, political parties in the Western world have shifted towards this convergence of socialism and liberalism (Shypunov, 2018).

### **Positive Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) primarily focuses on revealing discrimination and hegemonic ideologies hidden in texts. However, Martin (2004, p. 179) suggested a different dimension of discourse analysis, which he referred to as “a complementary perspective, on language and semiosis, which functions to make the world a better place...Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA)”. In other words, as a complementary approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA), PDA aims to analyze discourses that can bring positive change to the world. By the same token, Bartlett (2017) noted that Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) “considers how people make the world a better place and designs interventions based on such considerations (p.133).” According to Martin (2004), Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) aims to analyze semiosis and language that can change the world for the better. While CDA focuses on revealing ideologies, social inequalities, hegemony, etc., hidden behind language, PDA aims to identify discourse that shows how to promote positive societal change, bringing equality and inclusion. As Martin (2004) noted, PDA moves one step

forward from CDA's deconstructive lens of revealing the hegemonic power dynamic embedded in language to a constructive approach to analyze discourse that promotes positive social change. Obama's (2004) Keynote speech can be considered positive discourse since this speech largely promotes positivity, including hope for positive change in society with social justice, reconciliation, unity, racelessness, and individual liberty (Frank & McPhail, 2005). Based on these positive values of social liberalism, this analysis of Obama's (2004) speech would be an example of Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA).

### **Research Question**

The concepts of individual liberty, unity, and social justice promoted in Obama's (2004) speech align with the elements of social liberal ideology. This paper seeks to explore how Obama's (2004) speech promoted these elements of social liberalism, leading to the following research question:

1. How do Obama's (2004) strategies of representing social actors, use of metaphors, choice of personal pronouns, and lexical selections reflect and reinforce the ideology of social liberalism?

### **Research Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing certain tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how social liberal ideology is linguistically constructed within a key political speech. This section outlines the methodological framework, beginning with a detailed overview of the primary data source and its socio-political context. It then explains the specific CDA tools used in the analysis, along with the theoretical rationale for choosing them.

### **Data**

The data for this paper consists of Barack Obama's 16:25-minute keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention (DNC), held at FleetCenter (now TD Garden) in Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A. on July 27, 2004. The data includes the speech and its 2,190-word transcript, collected from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu> (see Appendix 5). The transcript was cross-checked for accuracy against the original archived version available at <https://www.cbsnews.com>. This political speech officially served as an election campaign to promote the interests of the U.S. Democratic Party and endorse its leader, John Kerry, as a presidential candidate in the forthcoming national election in 2004. While the immediate audience of the speech comprised the attendees at the DNC in Fleet Center (now TD Garden), Boston, it was directed to all Americans, as it was streamed and broadcast live on television. The immediate social context of this discourse included the forthcoming U.S. National Election of 2004. At the same time, American society was still dealing with the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that occurred in 2001, alongside the consequences of the Iraq War that began in 2003. The broader context also encompasses issues such as racism and hate crimes, economic recession, and national insecurity during the presidency of George W. Bush (junior).

This charismatic speech by Obama (2004) set a new benchmark of political discourse and marked a turning point in his political career. It catapulted Obama to the national spotlight (Berry & Gottheimer, 2016) as a rising star of the US Democratic Party, paving the way for his eventual presidency in the USA. Obama's (2004) DNC speech is an ideal case for critical discourse analysis since it is rich in linguistic features that promote ideologies such as unity, equality, liberty, and hope for a better America.

## **CDA Tools**

Grounded in the theories mentioned above, this paper applies four CDA tools, including social actor analysis, metaphors, personal pronouns, and lexical analysis, to examine how Obama's (2004) speech promoted the elements of Social Liberal Ideology and positive change. This analysis chooses the four aforementioned tools because they are commonly used in CDA to explore ideologies hidden in the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). To present the findings of this analysis graphically, this paper utilizes Microsoft Excel. The tools for analyzing these features are detailed in the following sections:

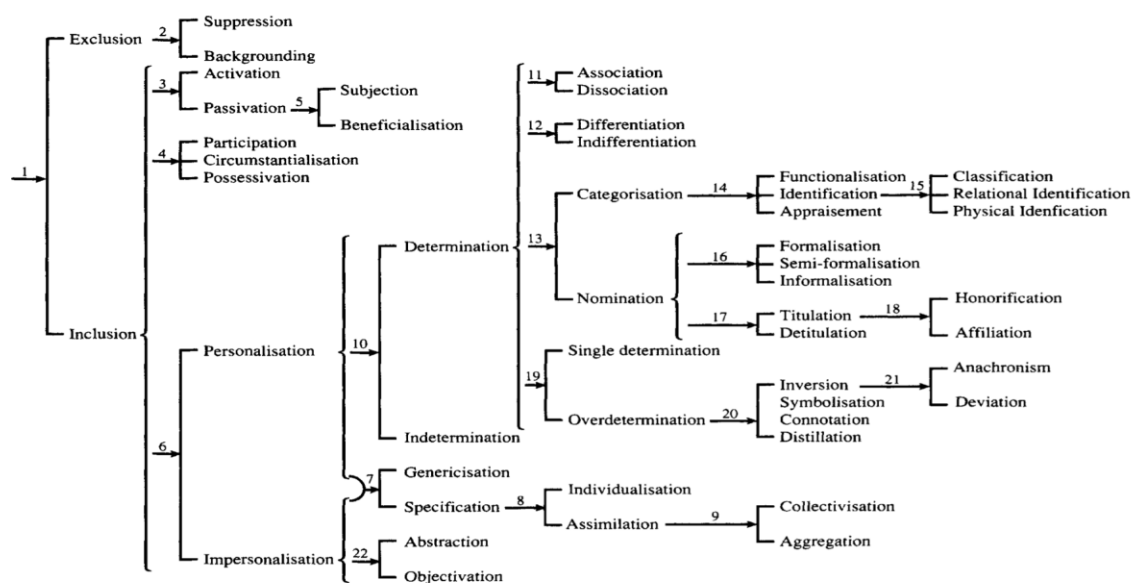
### ***Strategies of Representing Social Actors***

This paper will analyze Obama's (2004) strategies for representing social actors by utilizing Van Leeuwen's (1996) system network of social actor analysis and Machin and Mayr's (2023) simpler version of Van Leeuwen's (1996) model strategies. According to Van Leeuwen (1996), social actors can be represented through inclusion or exclusion in discourse (as shown in Figure 2 below). Within inclusion, social actors may be personalized and impersonalized. While impersonalization includes abstraction and objectivation, personalization involves either determination or indetermination. Furthermore, personalization and impersonalization allow two types of representation: genericization and specification. In the case of specification, social actors may be represented through individualization or assimilation. Assimilation can be done either through collectivization or aggregation.

Machin and Mayr (2023) presented a simpler version of Van Leeuwen's (1996) system network of social actor analysis, stating that social actors could be represented through personalization, impersonalization, individualization, collectivization, specification, genericization, nomination, functionalization, use of honorifics, objectivation, anonymization, aggregation, suppression, etc.

To analyze Obama's representation strategies, this paper mainly applies the inclusion process through individualization, collectivization, and impersonalization. While individualization of social actors in discourse provides additional information about individuals and makes the audience or readers feel empathic and closer to the social actors, collectivization represents social actors as a homogenous group (Machin and Mayr, 2023). Machin and Mayr (2023, p. 114) also noted that social actors can be presented "as being alike or making them into unique, special, identifiable individuals". According to Van Leeuwen (1996), individualization of social actors is realized by singularity, while collectivization can be realized through a mass noun or a noun denoting a group of people (e.g., this nation) and a plurality (e.g., first-person plural we). On the other hand, social actors can be represented as impersonalized entities through either abstraction or objectivation; in the case of abstraction, social actors are included by attributing a specific quality to them (Van Leeuwen, 1996).

**Figure 2**  
*The Representation of Social Actors in Discourse*



Source: Van Leeuwen (1996, p 67)

## Metaphors

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 455), “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing or experience in terms of another”. Metaphor in CDA refers to presenting one concept by drawing upon another idea (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Metaphors possess hidden ideological loadings due to their ability to conceal and shape understandings while simultaneously giving the impression that they reveal those understandings (Fairclough, 1995, as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2023). Obama (2004) made extensive use of metaphors and metaphorical expressions throughout his speech. In this paper, these metaphors will be analyzed through the combined lens of Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Charteris-Black’s (2009) Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), analyzes metaphors by mapping between the source and target domains. Target domains refer to the concept or topic described through metaphors, while the source domain refers to the idea from which the metaphor is derived. This cognitive process of speakers or writers may carry ideologies depending on which domain they draw the concepts from and which domain they target (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). On the other hand, Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), as stated by Charteris-Black (2009), includes three stages: identification, interpretation, and explanation. In the identification stage, metaphorical expressions are located; in the stage of interpretation, these metaphorical expressions are mapped to their underlying concepts; and in the final explanation stage, the ideological implications behind these metaphors are analyzed.

In this paper, CMA and CMT are considered complementary. While CMT focuses on mapping metaphors to source and target domains, CMA adds an additional layer by analyzing the ideological implications hidden within these metaphors. Thus, blending these approaches allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the metaphors in Obama’s speech. Accordingly, the metaphors and metaphorical expressions will first be identified in the speech transcript. They will

then be categorized into source and target domains based on their underlying concepts, and finally, the ideologies behind these metaphors will be examined.

### **Personal Pronouns**

Personal pronouns (*I, we, you, he, she, it, me, us, you, him, her, it, and them*) are employed when referring to individuals or objects the speaker is speaking to or discussing. Like any other political speech, Obama's (2004) speech used personal pronouns such as *I, we, and they*. The use of personal pronouns in Obama's (2004) speech will be analyzed using the lenses of Machin and Mayr (2023) and Van Dijk (1998).

Van Dijk's (1998) ideological square shows discourse can highlight the positive aspects of the in-group by using the pronoun 'us' and the negative aspects of the out-group by using the pronoun 'them'. Machin & Mayr (2023) noted that pronouns are sometimes used to align the audience with or against specific ideas, evoking the speaker's ideas as the audience's ideas to create a collective ideology of one group as opposed to that of others. Personal pronouns can also personalize the connection between politicians and citizens, communicating equality and a sense of community. However, their use in political speeches can be flexible, ambiguous, and, thereby, strategic. For example, the pronoun 'we' can be misleading and used by politicians to make obscure statements (Fairclough, 2000). Hence, this paper will identify, categorize, count, contextualize, examine patterns (if any), and interpret the functions and ideological implications of the personal pronouns used in Obama's (2004) speech.

### **Lexical Analysis**

Lexical analysis, which involves simply examining the word contents and lexical fields used in a text, is one of the basic and essential ways to explore underlying beliefs (Machin and Mayr, 2023). Hence, this paper will analyze Obama's (2004) lexical choices by listing and categorizing them into several themes, such as social justice and individual liberty, to explore the underlying ideology, which is potentially socially liberal.

### **Findings**

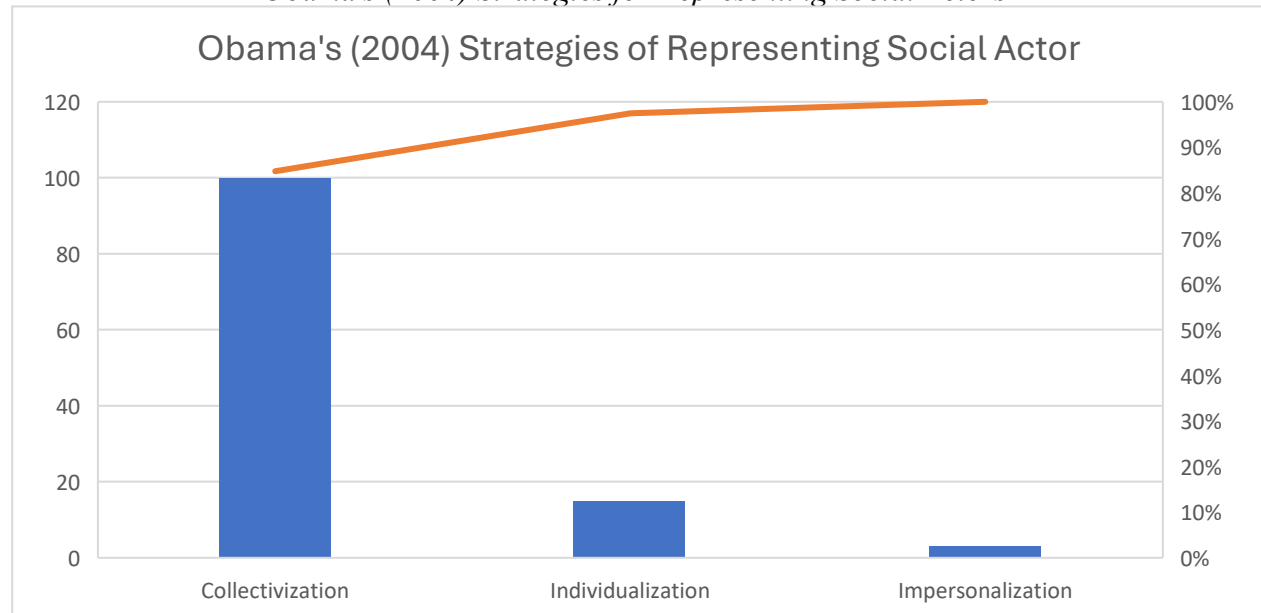
Based on the analysis of the strategies of social actors, the use of metaphors and pronouns, and lexical choices in Obama's (2004) speech, this paper reveals the following findings:

#### ***Social Liberalism in the Strategies of Social Actor Representation***

The analysis reveals that Obama (2004) represents social actors in his speech mainly through collectivization and individualization. He also impersonalizes a few social actors through abstraction. As shown in Figure 3 below and Table 1 in Appendix 1, there are as many as 100 instances of collectivizing social actors in Obama's (2004) speech, including repeated instances (e.g., fellow Americans, one people, independents, immigrants). On the other hand, he individualizes social actors on 15 occasions (e.g., an American Soldier called Shamus, a child on the south side of Chicago, a young naval lieutenant, a millworker's son, a skinny kid with a funny name). It is also identified that on three occasions, Obama impersonalizes social actors through abstraction (e.g., spin masters, pundits).

**Figure 3**

*Obama's (2004) Strategies for Representing Social Actors*



As the findings reveal, Obama (2004) utilizes two primary strategies to represent social actors in his speech: individualization and collectivization, alongside occasional impersonalization through abstraction (see Figure 3 and Appendix 1). Individualization refers to depicting social actors as individuals, which can be accomplished by providing additional referential information about them to connect them with the audience (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 119). Conversely, portraying social actors through collectivization suggests conformity to a larger group, unity, and homogeneity (Machin & Mayr, 2023; Van Leeuwen, 1996). As described in the findings section, Obama (2004) extensively uses the strategy of collectivizing social actors throughout the speech, such as ‘fellow Americans,’ ‘independents,’ ‘our children,’ ‘our military,’ ‘our young men and women,’ ‘the soldiers.’ Such frequent collectivization indicates Obama's priority on conformity to the unity and homogeneity of the people of America, which are core principles of social liberal ideology.

Interestingly, Obama (2004) transitions from individualization to collectivization throughout his speech. He first individualizes the social actors and then merges them into a larger American nationhood. This pattern of transitioning gave Obama the advantage of connecting to the people emotionally while promoting his message of unity and equality alongside individual rights and liberty. At the outset, he individualizes himself, telling the audience the story of himself and his family, saying, “My presence on this stage.... My father was a .... my grandfather was ...my father met my mother... they would give me an African name, Barack.” Then, he seamlessly merged his story into the collective whole of a tolerant America by saying, “In a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success.” He also said, “I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story.” Similarly, Obama (2004) individualizes an American soldier by stating, “A while back, I met a young man named Shamus ...a good-looking kid..., six-two or six-three, clear-eyed, with an easy smile.” He then connects Shamus’s story to all American soldiers who served in the Iraq war, emphasizing society’s obligation toward those fighting for the USA by saying, “Are we serving Shamus as well as he served us? I thought of more than 900 service men and women (the US soldiers).” In this way, Obama continues to individualize social actors



and then collectivize them to draw a holistic picture of the US society, such as “*The father I met who was losing his job,*” “*the young woman in East St. Louis and thousands more like her,*” “*a black youth,*” “*every child in America,*” “*government alone can’t teach kids to learn,*” “*parents have to parent.*” Such constant transition from individualizing to collectivizing the social actors indicates Obama’s concerns for every individual’s rights and liberty as well as the collective welfare of society, which denotes the ingredients of social liberal ideology in his speech.

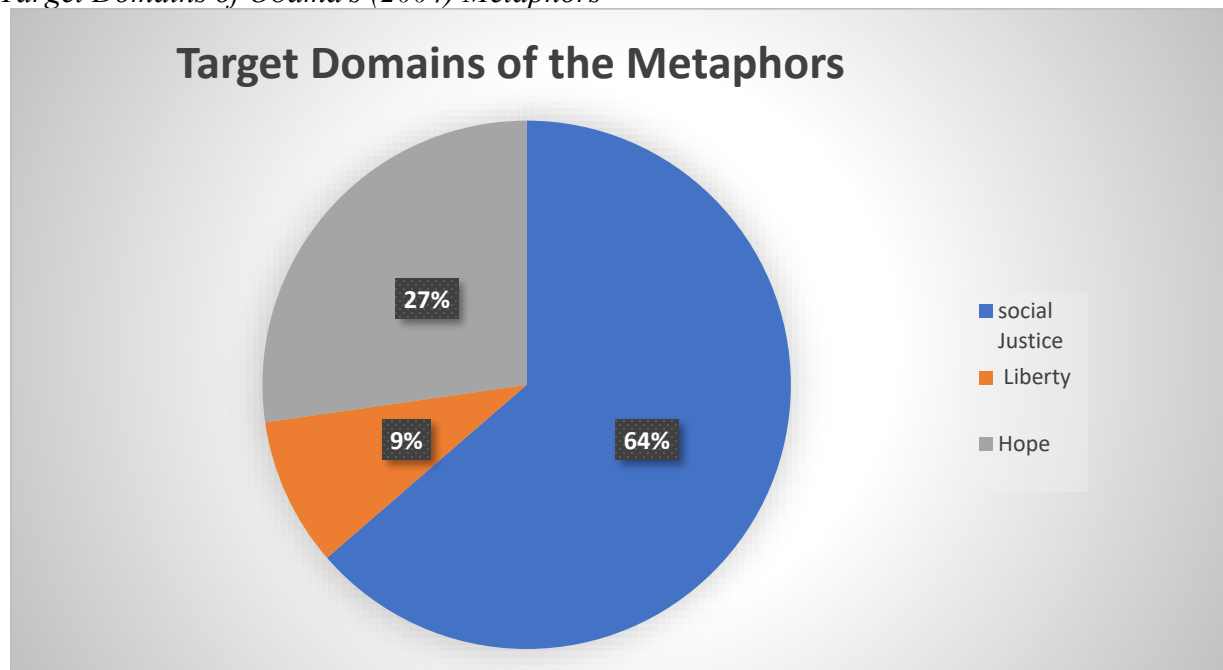
On the other hand, instances of impersonalization through abstraction are also found in Obama’s (2004) DNC speech, as mentioned in the findings section. Obama stated, “There are those who are preparing to divide us: the spin masters and negative ad peddlers ...the pundits like to slice and dice our country.” In these statements, Obama deliberately assigned qualities, such as ‘spin masters,’ ‘negative ad peddlers,’ and ‘pundits’ to the social actors who opposed his ideology of unity and equality by promoting division. Thus, Obama employed the strategy of impersonalization to reinforce his ideology of social liberalism by critiquing those who seek to divide rather than unite people.

### Social Liberalism in Metaphors

In this analysis, a total of 11 different metaphors are identified in Obama’s (2004) speech. As shown in Figure 4 below and Table 2 in Appendix 2, these 11 metaphors are derived from 8 different source domains with 3 similar target domains (social justice, liberty, and hope). Among them, 64% of the metaphors target the domains of social justice (e.g., crossroads of a nation, the crossroads of history, doors of opportunity, road to opportunity), and 27% are related to hope and optimism as opposed to pessimism (e.g., a brighter day, out of political darkness). In comparison, 9 % of the metaphors target individual freedom (e.g., a beacon of freedom).

**Figure 4**

*Target Domains of Obama's (2004) Metaphors*



As described above, although Obama’s (2004) metaphors are sourced from diverse domains, the target domains primarily reflect an optimistic view of America as a nation of unity,

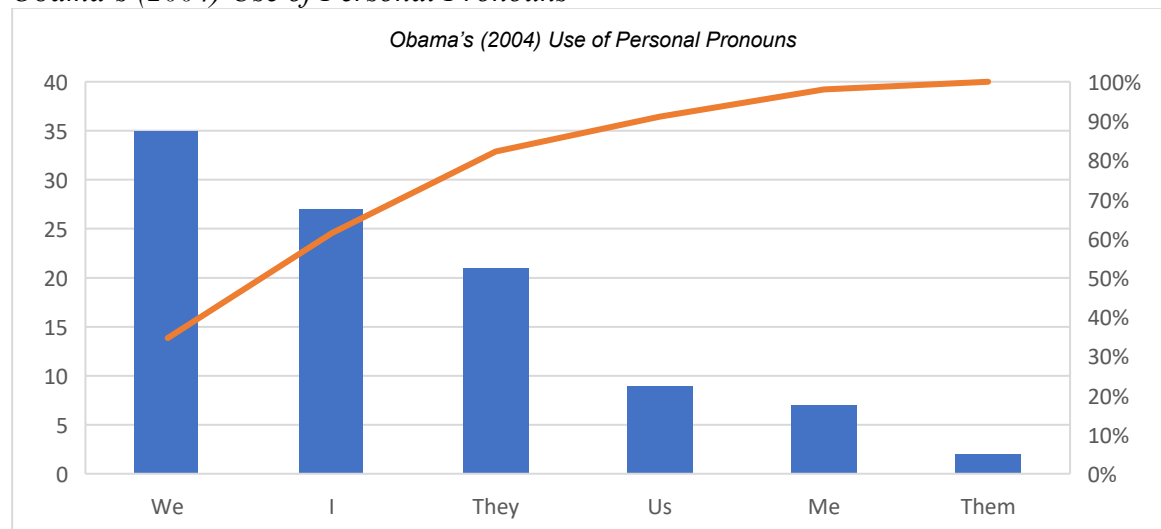
equal opportunity, and individual freedom as opposed to division and cynicism. For example, the metaphor ‘the beacon of freedom’ highlights the freedom and rights of individuals, while the metaphors ‘doors of opportunity’ and ‘crossroads of a nation’ indicate access to equal opportunity for all and unity, respectively. This combination of individual rights, social welfare, and unity through metaphors reinforces Obama's ideology of social liberalism. Interestingly, most of his metaphors (64%) are related to unity and equality, while only 9% of his metaphors are related to individual liberty (see Figure 4 and Appendix 2). This again indicates his priority of social justice over individual liberty within the ideology of social liberalism.

### Social Liberalism in the Use of Personal Pronouns

As shown in Figure 5 below and Table 3 in Appendix 3, the analysis reveals that Obama (2004) uses the pronoun ‘we’ 35 times, ‘I’ 27 times, and ‘us’ 9 times. He employs ‘they’ 21 times, while he makes minimal use of ‘them’ as a personal pronoun (2 times). It has also been found that of the 35 instances of ‘we,’ 33 refer to the people of America. Of the 21 occurrences of ‘they,’ 12 refer to the people of the USA, 7 to Obama’s parents, and only 2 to the enemies of America. He also uses ‘them’ as a personal pronoun 2 times to refer to some individuals who choose to divide rather than unite the nation.

**Figure 5**

*Obama’s (2004) Use of Personal Pronouns*



The analysis of Obama’s (2004) use of personal pronouns also implies his social liberal ideology. As mentioned in the findings section, Obama (2004) employs the pronoun “we” extensively (35 times). Although Fairclough (2000) considered the concept of ‘we’ to be slippery, suggesting that politicians can use it to make vague statements and obscure power dynamics, this does not apply to Obama’s extensive use of the pronoun ‘we.’ In contrast, Machin & Mayr (2023) noted that the pronoun ‘we’ can be used to foster a sense of common interest. This aligns with the essence of social justice, one of the two core aspects of social liberal ideology. As mentioned in the findings above, Obama’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ reflects his intention to promote unity, inclusivity, the common good, and collective interest. For example, of the 35 instances of the pronoun ‘we’ in Obama’s (2004) speech, 33 cases (94%) refer to the people of America, while only 2 instances (6%) refer to his political party (see Figure 5 and Appendix 3). On the other hand,

Obama's utilization of the pronoun 'I' 27 times underscores his support for individual liberty, the other core aspect of social liberalism.

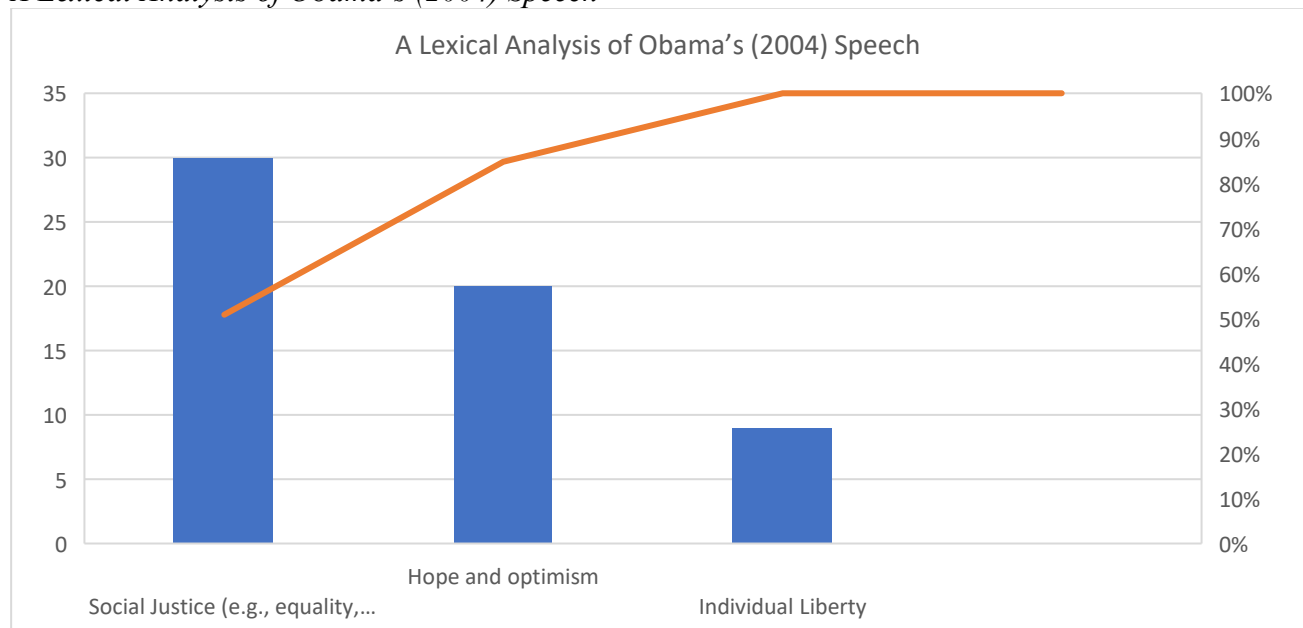
Although Obama uses the pronoun "they" 21 times, he carefully contextualizes it in most cases to avoid ideological squaring (Van Dijk, 1998) and to promote unity instead. Of the 21 instances of the pronoun 'they,' 12 refer to people in the USA from various walks of life. For example, he uses 'they' to describe the diverse individuals he encountered in big cities and small towns, stating, "They don't expect the government to solve all their problems...They know they have to work hard to get ahead, and they want to." The remaining instances of the pronoun "they" include 7 references to Obama's parents and two references to America's enemies (see Table 3). This careful avoidance of language that divides rather than unites people also aligns with the core principle of social liberalism, which advocates for collective interests.

### Social Liberalism in Lexical Choice

As illustrated in Figure 6 above and Table 4 in Appendix 4, the lexical analysis of Obama's (2004) speech reveals three broad themes: social justice, liberty, and hope. Obama uses at least 30 lexical items related to social justice and 9 words/phrases related to individual liberty. Notably, he uses words and phrases about hope and optimism 20 times.

**Figure 6**

*A Lexical Analysis of Obama's (2004) Speech*



As noted above (see Figure 6 and Appendix 4), the lexical analysis of Obama's (2004) speech reveals four broad themes: Unity, social justice, liberty, and hope. His extensive use of lexical items related to unity, social justice, and personal liberty reveals the essence of social liberal ideology. For example, he repeatedly refers to unity, equality, common good, and homogeneity by using phrases such as "*the same energy, the same passion, the same hopefulness, the same urgency, the same health coverage, ideals of the community, open to all.*" On the other hand, his use of words and phrases such as '*liberty, constitutional freedoms, basic liberties, civil liberty, famous individualism, freedom songs, no barrier to success*' indicates his advocacy for the liberty of

individuals alongside social justice. This further confirms the prevalence of social liberal ideology in Obama's (2004) DNC keynote speech. Here again, it is notable that more of Obama's lexical choices are related to social justice (85%) compared to individual liberty (28%) (Figure 6 and Appendix 4), further reinforcing his leaning toward the socialist aspects of liberal ideology in this speech.

## Discussion

The major findings of the analysis, guided by the research question mentioned above, indicate that Obama's (2004) DNC speech embodies the core principles of social liberalism. As detailed in the theory section above, social liberalism merges social justice and liberty. Social justice includes equality, homogeneity, racelessness, and unity, while liberty pertains to the rights and freedoms of individuals. In the speech under scrutiny, Obama's strategies for representing social actors, as well as his use of metaphors, pronouns, and other lexical items, reveal his ideology of social liberalism interweaving individual liberty with social justice.

Remarkably, the speech emphasizes social justice over individual liberty. Some scholars differentiate between social liberalism and liberal socialism based on the priority given to social justice versus liberty while integrating both (Orazi, 2023). Obama's (2004) uneven blend of social justice and liberty, which prioritizes collective welfare over individual liberty, suggests that he leans more towards social liberalism than liberal socialism. This is evident in the findings that Obama (2004) collectivizes social actors much more than he individualizes them; he employs the pronoun 'we' significantly more than other personal pronouns; his use of metaphors associated with social justice outnumbers those targeting liberty; and his lexical items are more closely linked to unity, homogeneity, and social justice rather than to individual liberty and rights.

Overall, the findings based on the analyses of social actors' representation strategies, use of pronouns, metaphors, and other lexical items reveal that Obama's 2004 (DNC) keynote speech is a positive discourse promoting elements of social liberal ideologies, including social justice, equality, racelessness unity, and individual's right and liberty. Throughout the speech, he repeatedly calls for unity and racelessness, as described in the finding sections. For example, emphasized racelessness and equality by repeatedly uttering phrases such as "*Not a liberal America; not a conservative America; not a black America; not a white America; not a Latino America; not an Asian America; the United States of America; A common dream; a solemn obligation; American saga; E pluribus unum/ Out of many, one; we are one people.*" Notably, he uses words and phrases related to positivity, hope, and optimism 20 times, with 'hope' 11 times and 'dream' 6 times, showcasing his vision to bring positive societal changes. Also, approximately 27% of the metaphors Obama uses in this speech are related to hope and optimism as opposed to cynicism (see Figure 4 and Table 2). Hence, this analysis of Obama's (2004) speech exemplifies a positive Discourse Analysis (PDA).

As noted in the theory section, discourse is shaped by social conditions (Fairclough, 2015). Obama's speech reflects the social context of U.S. society in 2004. His advocacy for social justice, unity, equality, and racelessness, along with individual liberty evident in this analysis, echoes the prevalent social conditions in the USA in 2004, which included post-9/11 trauma, the Iraq War, rising hate crimes, widespread racism, employment challenges, and government cutbacks on social welfare programs like health care. Fairclough's (2015) third dimension of the model of discourse as a social practice denotes that language can, in turn, impact social conditions and help make social changes. Obama's speech envisions the hope of positively changing and reshaping society toward an ideal American society characterized by equality, freedom, and racelessness, which is

evident in his use of pronouns, metaphors, and other lexical items as well as the strategies of representing social actors as discussed in the above sections.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the analyses of the strategies of social actor representation, use of metaphors, choice of personal pronouns, and lexical selections reveal that the key principles of social liberalism (individual liberty and social justice) are evident in Obama's (2004) DNC keynote speech. This analysis also sets an example of Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). His consistent use of optimistic language about a better American society and his calls for unity over division transform this speech into a positive discourse, thereby making this analysis a Positive Discourse Analysis (Martin, 2004). Also, Obama's emphasis on the need for positive changes in the social conditions in which his speech was produced resonates with the theory of discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 2015).

The strength of this analysis lies in its solid approach, which uses four different CDA tools to answer a single research question, making its findings both reliable and valid. However, these findings are limited to a single speech by Obama, delivered under specific social conditions in the USA in 2004. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the speech in question and its social context. In other words, based on this analysis of Obama's (2004) DNC keynote speech, it cannot be claimed that Obama is a consistent advocate of social liberalism. It can only be said that elements of social liberalism are present in this particular speech. Further research across multiple speeches by Obama is needed to make a broader claim about his political ideology. Additionally, to improve the reliability and generalizability of the identified linguistic patterns, future research could combine the qualitative CDA with quantitative corpus-based discourse analysis. For example, analyzing the frequency and co-occurrence of the CDA tools (such as specific metaphors, personal pronoun usage, or lexical clusters related to individual liberty and social justice) across large corpora like the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) or specialized political speech corpora, would provide robust empirical evidence to support or challenge the findings from close textual analysis.

## References

- Bartlett, T. (2017). Positive discourse analysis. In *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp. 133–147). Routledge.
- Berry, M. F., & Gottheimer, J. (2016). *The story behind Obama's keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention*. Beacon Press.
- Beitz, C. R. (1999). Social and cosmopolitan liberalism. *International Affairs*, 75(3), 515–529. <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/75/3/515/2434569>
- Charteris-Black, J. (2009). Metaphor and political communication. In *Metaphor and discourse* (pp. 97–115). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Degani, M. (2015). *Framing the Rhetoric of a leader*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137471598>
- Fairclough, N. (2015). Discourse as social practice. In *Language and power* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Routledge.
- Frank, D. A., & McPhail, M. L. (2005). Barack Obama's address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, compromise, consilience, and the (im)possibility of racial reconciliation. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 8(4), 571–593. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/26/article/195609>
- Fairclough, N. (2000). Discourse, social theory, and social research: The discourse of welfare reform. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 4(2), 163–195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00110>
- Horváth, J. (2009). Critical discourse analysis of Obama's political discourse. In *Language, literature and culture in a changing transatlantic world. International conference proceedings*. pp. 45–56). University of Presov. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=4a95ae016f963cef2d3aa60254e82b664240fec6>
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2023). *How to do critical discourse analysis: A multimodal introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sage.
- Martin, J. R. (2004). *Positive discourse analysis: Solidarity and change*. <https://riull.ull.es/xmlui/handle/915/29390>
- Obama, B. H. (2004). *Keynote address at the Democratic National Convention*. Retrieved September 29, 2024, from <http://obamaspeeches.com/002-Keynote-Address-at-the-2004-Democratic-National-Convention-Obama-Speech.htm>
- Orazi, F. (2023). *Social Liberalism and Liberal Socialism: Tensions and Compatibility* (p. 59). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41233-2>
- Shypunov, H. (2018). Liberal socialism and social liberalism: the principles of correlation. *Evropský politický a právní diskurz*, (5, Vyd. 2), 125–130.
- Simhony, A. (2005). A Liberalism of the Common Good: Some Recent Studies of T. H. Green's Moral and Political Theory. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 7(1), 126–144. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2005.00170.x>
- Seaman, J. W. (1978). L. T. Hobhouse and the Theory of "Social Liberalism." *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, 11(4), 777–802. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423900046606>
- Tyler, C. (2007). T.H. Green, advanced liberalism and the reform question 1865–1876. In *T.H. Green*. Routledge
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical Discourse Analysis. In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (pp. 466–485). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch22>

Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. SAGE.

Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). The representation of social actors. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard & M. Coulthard (Eds), *Texts and practices: Readings in critical discourse analysis* (pp. 32-70). Routledge.

## Appendix 1

**Table -1**

*Obama's (2004) Strategies for Representing Social Actors with Examples*

<b>Social Actor Analysis in Obama (2004) speech</b>		
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Examples Identified</b>	<b>Total Instances</b>
<b>Collectivization</b>	Americans(6 times); One people(2); We (36 times, e.g., we are connected as one people.); together as a single American family; "E pluribus (out of many one); Us (9 times; e.g., all of us);our (24 times, e.g., our children; our military, and our young men and women); the soldiers; Democrats; Republicans; Independents; the workers; 900 service men and women; thousands more like her; men and women; sons and daughters; husbands and wives; friends and neighbors; patriots; immigrants; middle class; people (8 times); this nation; parents; patriots(2); middle class; working families; gay friends; the jobless; the homeless	100 (including repeated instances)
<b>Individualization</b>	I; my grandfather; my father; my mother; Shamus (An American Soldier); a child on the south side of Chicago; a senior citizen; my civil liberties; a young naval lieutenant; a millworker's son; a skinny kid with a funny name; a black youth; the father I met; the young woman in East St. Louis; John Kerry.	15
<b>Impersonalized</b>	Negative ad paddlers; Pundits; Spin master	3

## Appendix 2

**Table 2**

*Obama's Use of Metaphors*

<b>Source Domain</b>	<b>Metaphors</b>	<b>Target Domain</b>
Kitchen	Slice-and-dice our country	Social justice (e.g., unity, homogeneity, equal opportunity for all)
Road intersects	Crossroads of a nation. The crossroads of history	
Hard Surface	Bedrock of this nation	



Door/ Path	Doors of opportunity A road to opportunity	
Physical Barrier	No barrier to success	
Light/ Lighthouse	Beacon of freedom	Liberty
Weather/ climate	Political darkness Brighter day	Hope (as opposed to pessimism)
Physical disability	Not blind optimism	
8	11	3

### Appendix 3

**Table 3**

*Pronouns: Obama's (2004) Use of Personal Pronouns*

Types	I	Me	We	Us	They	Them
Number	27	7	35	9	21	2
Referent	Obama	Obama	Americans (33) Democratic Party (2times)	Americans	Enemies of America (2 times) Obama's parents (7 times) People of America (12times)	The people who divide as opposed to unite the nation (2)

### Appendix 4

**Table 4**

*Lexical Analysis of Obama's (2004) Speech*

Lexical Items	Theme	Total
Not a liberal America; not a conservative America; not a black America; not a white America; not a Latino America; not a Asian America; the United States of America; A common dream; a solemn obligation; American saga; E pluribus unum/ Out of many, one; the same energy; the same passion; the same hopefulness; the same urgency; the same passion; pledging allegiance; tax breaks; creating jobs; same health coverage; health benefits; health coverage opportunity; jobs to the jobless; homes to the homeless; tolerant America; generous America; open to all; ideals of community; faith, and sacrifice; don't have to be rich to achieve your potential;	<b>Essene of Social Justice</b> (e.g., equality, racelessness, homogeneity, Unity, Collective Welfare/ Common Good, State intervention)	<b>30</b>

Liberty; constitutional freedoms; basic liberties; civil liberty; famous individualism; freedom songs; no barrier to success. individual dreams; civil liberties	<b>Individual Liberty</b>	<b>9</b>
Dream (6 times); Hope (11 times, e.g., the audacity hope); pursuit of happiness; small miracles; a magical place: America	<b>Hope and optimism</b>	<b>20</b>

## Appendix 5

### Transcript

The transcript of Obama's Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004, from the archive of Source: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/keynote-address-the-2004-democratic-national-convention>

*“Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Thank you, Dick Durbin. You make us all proud.”* On behalf of the great state of Illinois, crossroads of a nation, land of Lincoln, let me express my deep gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention. Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant.

But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place: America, which stood as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before. While studying here, my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas. Her father worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the Depression. The day after Pearl Harbor he signed up for duty, joined Patton's army and marched across Europe. Back home, my grandmother raised their baby and went to work on a bomber assembly line. After the war, they studied on the GI Bill, bought a house through FHA, and moved west in search of opportunity.

And they, too, had big dreams for their daughter, a common dream, born of two continents. My parents shared not only an improbable love; they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or “blessed,” believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success. They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential. They are both passed away now. Yet, I know that, on this night, they look down on me with pride.

I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents' dreams live on in my precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible. Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

That is the true genius of America, a faith in the simple dreams of its people, the insistence on small miracles. That we can tuck in our children at night and know they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door. That we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe or hiring somebody's son. That we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted - or at least, most of the time.

This year, in this election, we are called to reaffirm our values and commitments, to hold them against a hard reality and see how we are measuring up, to the legacy of our forbearers, and the promise of future generations. And fellow Americans - Democrats, Republicans, Independents - I say to you tonight: we have more work to do. More to do for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now are having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay seven bucks an hour. More to do for the father I met who was losing his job and choking back tears, wondering how he would pay \$4,500 a month for the drugs his son needs without the health benefits he counted on. More to do for the young woman in East St. Louis, and thousands more like her, who has the grades, has the drive, has the will, but doesn't have the money to go to college.

Don't get me wrong. The people I meet in small towns and big cities, in diners and office parks, they don't expect government to solve all their problems. They know they have to work hard to get ahead and they want to. Go into the collar counties around Chicago, and people will tell you they don't want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency or the Pentagon. Go into any inner city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white. No, people don't expect government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that with just a change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all. They know we can do better. And they want that choice.

In this election, we offer that choice. Our party has chosen a man to lead us who embodies the best this country has to offer. That man is John Kerry. John Kerry understands the ideals of community, faith, and sacrifice, because they've defined his life. From his heroic service in Vietnam to his years as prosecutor and lieutenant governor, through two decades in the United States Senate, he has devoted himself to this country. Again and again, we've seen him make tough choices when easier ones were available. His values and his record affirm what is best in us.

John Kerry believes in an America where hard work is rewarded. So instead of offering tax breaks to companies shipping jobs overseas, he'll offer them to companies creating jobs here at home. John Kerry believes in an America where all Americans can afford the same health coverage our politicians in Washington have for themselves. John Kerry believes in energy independence, so we aren't held hostage to the profits of oil companies or the sabotage of foreign oil fields. John Kerry believes in the constitutional freedoms that have made our country the envy of the world, and he will never sacrifice our basic liberties nor use faith as a wedge to divide us. And John Kerry believes that in a dangerous world, war must be an option, but it should never be the first option.

A while back, I met a young man named Shamus at the VFW Hall in East Moline, Illinois. He was a good-looking kid, six-two or six-three, clear-eyed, with an easy smile. He told me he'd joined the Marines and was heading to Iraq the following week. As I listened to him explain why he'd enlisted, his absolute faith in our country and its leaders, his devotion to duty and service, I thought this young man was all any of us might hope for in a child. But then I asked myself: Are

we serving Shamus as well as he was serving us? I thought of more than 900 service men and women, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors, who will not be returning to their hometowns. I thought of families I had met who were struggling to get by without a loved one's full income, or whose loved ones had returned with a limb missing or with nerves shattered, but who still lacked long-term health benefits because they were reservists. When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they're going, to care for their families while they're gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to never ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world.

Now let me be clear. We have real enemies in the world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued and they must be defeated. John Kerry knows this. And just as Lieutenant Kerry did not hesitate to risk his life to protect the men who served with him in Vietnam, President Kerry will not hesitate one moment to use our military might to keep America safe and secure. John Kerry believes in America. And he knows it's not enough for just some of us to prosper. For alongside our famous individualism, there's another ingredient in the American saga.

A belief that we are connected as one people. If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandmother. If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties. It's that fundamental belief - I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper - that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family. "E pluribus unum." Out of many, one.

Yet even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America - there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the Red States. We coach Little League in the Blue States and have gay friends in the Red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and patriots who supported it. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

In the end, that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope? John Kerry calls on us to hope. John Edwards calls on us to hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism here - the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't talk about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. No, I'm talking about something more substantial. It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. The audacity of hope!

In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation; the belief in things not seen; the belief that there are better days ahead. I believe we can give our middle class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs to the

jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair. I believe that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices, and meet the challenges that face us. America!

Tonight, if you feel the same energy I do, the same urgency I do, the same passion I do, the same hopefulness I do – if we do what we must do, then I have no doubt that all across the country, from Florida to Oregon, from Washington to Maine, the people will rise up in November, and John Kerry will be sworn in as president, and John Edwards will be sworn in as vice president, and this country will reclaim its promise, and out of this long political darkness a brighter day will come. Thank you and God bless you.”