

Political Communication Final Paper: Herschel Walker's Concession Speech

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Since the advent of American democracy, there has been a winner and loser. Victory and concession speeches have also been a staple, a formal declaration of triumph or defeat. These speeches serve a political and rhetorical purpose for the candidate, a tool for candidates as they embark on the next phase of their political journeys. These speeches typically follow an established format that covers all the key aspects candidates need to touch on. This is true of Herschel Walker's concession speech, who lost the Senate race in Georgia in the 2022 midterm elections. Since these speeches follow such a set format, there are consistent patterns of content, strategy, style, and content. Each of the six elements, laid out by Ritter and Howell in their paper, is present in Walker's effective concession speech.

As mentioned above, Ritter and Howell lay out six themes/functions that all concession and victory speeches are supposed to address. Each of these functions works to share with the American people a certain narrative, and reflect positively back on the candidate, even if it is a concession speech. The six functions include a formal declaration of victory or defeat, a call for national unity, a tribute to American Democracy, affirmation of the candidate's campaign, suggest to the transformed role of the candidate and thanking the supporters.

The first theme is a formal declaration of victory or defeat. This is precisely what it sounds like— it is the formal statement of success or failure. Corcoran talks about this in relation to concession speeches stating that it is a “formulaic and performed as an awkward, perfunctory gesture at a time of devastating personal stress” (Corcoran, 1994). Despite being a loser, the candidate still must formally acknowledge their loss. Concession is a framing device; by admitting defeat, the candidate puts on the appearance of being honorable and chivalrous. It is a dignified action to take. It often plays into themes of heroic sacrifice for the sake of the nation.

Speaking of for the sake of the nation, the next element is a call for national unity. This is looking at acknowledging that though their side may have lost, they are still one nation. Above all else, there is a commitment to the country. Ritter and Howell expand on this idea, remarking that, “defeated candidates often promise to continue to ‘fight’ for closely held principles or values” (Ritter & Howell, 2001). They call for respect for these principles that unite across all people, across the whole country.

On that same note, the next function is a tribute to American Democracy. This is about highlighting that the people have spoken and the respectable system of the American republic has held up. This reaffirms voters’ faith in the system, even if they were on the losing side. It is about paying homage to the democracy that serves its people.

Another function is affirmation of the candidate’s campaign. This is about basically reassuring the voters that their efforts were not in vain, often including a piece about how they will continue to fight and hold true to their values. Although the purpose of the speech is to admit defeat, it is also a reminder that their work does not completely end there.

The fifth theme considers the transformed role of the candidate, playing off of the idea that their work is not over. Since the candidate obviously was not elected to the office they sought to hold, they share with the audience what they hope to do going forward. Usually, it is something to the nature of how they wish to continue serving and fighting for what they believe.

Going forward, the last key function of these types of speeches is to thank supporters. Candidates rally those who spent their time and energy making their campaign possible. They thank the voters, their family, their staff and anyone else who contributed to their run. Each of these themes/functions of victory/concession speeches plays an important role in establishing the political message the candidate is conveying, and deviation from these set components is rare.

Herschel Walker's concession speech is no exception to this— he fulfills each of the six elements throughout his speech. His speech was a short three and a half minutes, but still covers the ground necessary to have what is said be effective and hit all the components.

As mentioned earlier, the first theme is a formal declaration of victory or defeat. In Walker's case, it was defeated. This is done in the first few lines of the speech, when he states, "We've had a tough journey, have we not? But one of the things I said when they called the race was that those numbers look like they're going to add up". Through sharing this statement, Walker reveals that he knows he lost, the race is officially called. He accepts defeat and therefore can be perceived as venerable to the American public.

The next theme he fulfills is the call for national unity. Walker announces, "Most of all, stay together. Don't let anyone separate you, don't let anyone tell you that we can't because I'm here to tell you we can. I went ahead and tell you we can." Walker is sharing that despite losing and the other side's beliefs prevailing, separation and alienation will not benefit the country. He encourages them to "stay together", calling for this element of unity among the American people.

He also repeatedly shares his respect for American Democracy. He remarks that, "I don't want any of you to stop dreaming in America. I want you to believe in the Constitution and believe in our elected officials. Most of all, continue to pray for them because of all the prayers you've given me, I felt those prayers." He literally tells the audience to have continued faith and confidence in the Constitution and those in elected office, crediting the system. Despite failing, he still establishes an admiration for the nation's political system.

Walker also goes on and affirms his campaign. This is evident when he states, "There's no excuses in life and I'm not going to make any excuses now because we put up one heck of a fight and I said that's what we got to do [...] I've done a lot of stuff— Heisman Trophy, athletic

awards, business awards. But the best thing I've ever done in my whole entire life is run for the senate seat right here. The reason I'm going to say that is that I got a chance to meet all of you and hear what you guys feel about this country." Here, he is once again acknowledging the success of his campaign, despite him not getting the seat in the senate. He still nods to the fight and journey, reassuring the public that their efforts were not futile.

The next element is the transformed role of the candidate. Whilst not being super explicit in the speech, Walker hints at his transformed role when he talks about the best thing he ever did being run for Senate. This suggests somewhat of a continued role in public service. He also shares that, "I'm never going to stop fighting for Georgia. I'm never going to stop fighting for you, because you're my family." This suggests he wants to continue seeking some sort of office, or at least keep on this path that he's begun.

The final theme is thanking supporters. Walker hits on this a lot throughout his speech, just as Ritter and Howell point out in their research. They talk about how candidates express gratitude for the support of families, friends, campaign workers and God, which are all people that Walker thanks in his speech. He thanks them repeatedly for their support and all they have done for him and the campaign. Even more so, he continues to thank God, saying that he is good and it is all a part of a plan. Walker more than definitely fulfills this function of thanking supporters.

When reflecting on this speech, it is evident that Walker fulfilled each of these functions/themes that a typical concession speech should contain. For this reason, I believe that his concession speech for the Georgia Senate seat was effective. It does precisely what he needs it to do: it accomplishes his political narrative. He looks honorable in admitting defeat, highlights the value of their fight and reassures the American people of the strength of their democracy.

I also believe that this speech is ethical, due to the fact that he is to the point. He knows that he has lost, and he doesn't misconstrue that in any way. He just offers a humble thanks to the audience and his supporters, also giving a nod to the fact that the system did what it was supposed to do. Although all victory/concession speeches are performative, he conducts his in a way that is honest, admitting defeat and moving forward.

Comprehensively, the six themes/functions of concession and victory speeches are fulfilled by Walker in his speech. Each of these functions works to share with the American people a certain narrative, and reflect positively back on the candidate in some way. The six functions include a formal declaration of victory or defeat, a call for national unity, a tribute to American Democracy, affirmation of the candidate's campaign, suggest to the transformed role of the candidate and thanking the supporters. Walker hits on each of these components while also sharing his speech in a way that is effective and ethical.

References

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