What Makes Buttigieg’s Message Different?

By Richard Cherwitz

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America’s political culture may never have been more rancorous, bitter and polarized. As a communication scholar, I believe there are those moments when it is instructive to bracket our partisan views in favor of analyzing the rhetorical strategies and messages of political candidates. Doing so might help us understand why some politicians are persuasive and others aren’t.

Consider a very recent example. Watching Monday’s CNN town hall, I became even more intrigued by Mayor Pete Buttigieg’s unique rhetorical style. While his discourse is reminiscent of the positive and hopeful demeanor of Presidents Barak Obama and Ronald Reagan, not to mention echoing their faith in America’s great political experiment, there is something far more distinctive about Buttigieg’s rhetorical message—something that transcends his political ideology.

The best way to make this case is to reflect upon Buttigieg’s response to ongoing allegations by the media and pundits that he fails to offer enough specific public policy proposals to separate him from the rest of the Democratic field. Rather than being defensive or advocating that particular policy positions are a litmus
test of one’s fitness to be elected, Buttigieg’s message implies that a President is an executive, not a legislator or policy wonk.

Why is this significant?

Most political observers agree that a presidential candidate should have a deep knowledge and history of the domestic and foreign policy issues facing the nation, as well as an overall philosophy about how to address these issues. Clearly Buttigieg does. Yet he also recognizes that perhaps the most important attribute of an effective chief executive is possessing a philosophy—and record—of leadership demonstrating an ability to be flexible enough to change one’s mind, work collaboratively with those who disagree, and get things done especially at the local level.

But this is just one example documenting Buttigieg’s unique rhetoric.

Unlike typical presidential campaigns against an incumbent, arguably the 2020 race may buck historical norms and traditional campaign strategies. Buttigieg seems to be cognizant of this. His rhetoric—perhaps more than other Democratic candidates—reflects a keen awareness and political shrewdness that from a message standpoint 2020 must not become primarily an anti-Trump election. To his credit, Buttigieg resists a natural, knee-jerk tendency to become negative and take on the President at every turn. He refrains from communicating obvious responses to the Trump tweet and absurd statement du jour.

In fact, Buttigieg rarely mentions Donald Trump’s name and infrequently launches explicit and direct attacks against him—all of which would play directly into Trump’s rhetorical playbook, motivate his base and turn off undecided voters who are tired of politics as usual.

To be clear, what I am contending does not constitute an endorsement of Buttigieg; I do not yet have a preference and want to learn more about the other presidential aspirants. However, as a professor of rhetoric who studies messages, I do believe Buttigieg might be that once-in-a-lifetime presidential candidate who enters the scene at precisely the right moment with a potentially persuasive, positive, and bipartisan message—a message avoiding attack and calling for
genuine change (where “change” is more than a clichéd and tired rhetorical trope) to extricate the country from a dangerous time in history.

Whether or not Buttigieg succeeds in winning the nomination remains an open question. Nevertheless, his message might offer a positive rhetorical path forward—one allowing us to escape the muck and mire of our current divisive political climate.

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