

# My Three Dads: The Rhetorical Construction of Fatherhood in the 2012 Republican Presidential Primary

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*This essay examines the rhetorical constructions of fatherhood of three of the 2012 Republican presidential primary candidates. We analyze how Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum personify fathers, both in the literal and figurative sense. We examine the candidates' announcement speeches, the messages found on the candidates' official websites, and the websites of the super PACS who support each candidate. These texts represent the most complete expression of their core identities. First, we evaluate each campaign's rhetorical construction of the candidate as a literal father. Second, we analyze how each candidate assumes the persona of a metaphorical father to the nation and to future generations of Americans. Finally, we consider the power of fatherhood as a rhetorical strategy in the political sphere and the need to identify and challenge this hegemonic construct.*

**Keywords:** Fatherhood, Masculinity, 2012 Presidential Political Campaigns, 2012 Republican Presidential Primaries, Rhetorical Construction of Gender

In January 2012, Republican presidential primary candidate Rick Santorum temporarily suspended his campaign to be with his youngest daughter, Isabella, who was being treated for pneumonia at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The three-year-old was born with the genetic disorder Trisomy 18, which causes physical and cognitive disabilities; opportunistic infections can pose a grave danger to such children. Santorum's actions raised a number of questions about the responsibilities of parents who are in the public eye. Is it appropriate for a father to take on the demanding task of running for president when he has a child with such special needs? Should a father in public service use a special needs child as part of a policy argument? Would a mother in a similar situation be expected to behave according to different norms? Did Santorum's experience as a father give him special insight into or ability to make claims regarding policy issues? These questions point to some of the tensions inherent in the rhetorical constructions of fatherhood and some of the ways in which male political figures contribute to, exploit, and sometimes contest those constructions.

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This essay examines the rhetorical constructions of fatherhood of three of the 2012 Republican presidential primary candidates. We analyze how Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum personified fathers, both in the literal and figurative sense. We selected Gingrich, Romney, and Santorum from the Republican field because each demonstrated his viability as a presidential candidate by winning at least one state during the Republican presidential primary. The texts we analyze are each candidate's presidential campaign announcement, each candidate's official website, and each candidate's primary Super PAC website.<sup>1</sup> The announcement statements and the websites provide a snapshot of how each candidate wanted to present himself to voters. Additionally, due to the 2010 controversial *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* ruling (558 U.S. 08-205) the 2012 presidential election cycle was the first to operate with unlimited sums of money from independent expenditure committees, dubbed "Super PACs." In essence, the ruling established that the government could not restrict political expenditures by individuals, corporations, unions, and other collectives. As a result, billions of dollars have been given to these committees to support their respective candidates. Although we are still learning about the impact these Super PACs will ultimately have on the election process, it is safe to say that they shape both their candidate's image and the nature of public participation. Thus, this essay also examines literal and figurative messages concerning fatherhood on the super PACs' websites.

### **Gender Roles, Motherhood, and Fatherhood**

Expectations about the roles and responsibilities of fathers and mothers are rooted in hegemonic gender norms. Much rhetoric scholarship has examined how political rhetors—women and men—discursively negotiate gender expectations. Researchers have traced the rhetorical strategies of historical and contemporary female political rhetors to understand how they persuade and compete in the often male-dominated public sphere.<sup>2</sup> This scholarship has given rise to the identification of "feminine" and "masculine" rhetorical styles and the ways in which women and men claim, use, challenge, and subvert these styles.<sup>3</sup> Broadly outlined, the masculine rhetorical style is based on easily identifiable logical structures, objective evidence, and the willingness to attack counterarguments. Feminine rhetorical style privileges narratives as argument, the use of personal experiences as evidence, and strong identification between rhetor and audience. One of the

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<sup>1</sup> The super PACS "Restore Our Future" (restoreourfuture.com), "Red, White, and Blue Fund" (rwbfund.com), and "Winning Our Future" (winningourfuture.com) support Romney, Santorum, and Gingrich respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1998): 1-19; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Phyllis M. Japp, "Esther or Isaiah? The Abolitionist-Feminist Rhetoric of Angelina Grimke," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985): 335-348.

<sup>3</sup> See Campbell, "The Discursive Performance of Femininity"; Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, "'Feminine Style' and Political Judgment in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 3 (1993): 286-302; Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, "Gendered Politics and Presidential Image Construction: A Reassessment of the 'Feminine Style,'" *Communication Monographs* 63, no. 4 (1996): 337-53; Katie L. Gibson and Amy L. Heyse, "'The Difference Between a Hockey Mom and a Pit Bull': Sarah Palin's Faux Maternal Persona and Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity at the 2008 Republican National Convention," *Communication Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2010): 235-56.

ways in which female public speakers have made inroads in the political sphere is by using the feminine style to emphasize how they can contribute traditionally feminine experiences and perspectives to public policy issues. Campbell notes, "Feminine style does not preclude substantive depth and argumentative cogency."<sup>4</sup> Some critics have challenged the ongoing utility of the feminine rhetorical style, arguing that it can severely limit women's discursive practices.<sup>5</sup> Dow and Tonn argue that the use of feminine style not only gives women a platform for their discourse but also shows how "feminine values might be integrated into politics."<sup>6</sup> While, as Jamieson points out, men may also use the feminine style to expand their rhetorical repertoire, for many female rhetors, the feminine style has provided the most accessible strategy for entering the public conversation.<sup>7</sup>

One topic within the examination of feminine style has been the rhetorical constructions and uses of motherhood. That women are mothers or desire to be mothers is a strong assumption about the feminine persona and women are often evaluated in terms of their maternal experiences and competencies.<sup>8</sup> As Wood notes, the role of the mother "has both indirect and literal forms."<sup>9</sup> Female political actors are far from immune to these expectations. Women in public life routinely face judgment of their maternal role, both literal and figurative. Mothers of minor children must demonstrate that they can be "good mothers" while carrying out their public duties. And all women, regardless of their motherhood status, are presumed to bring maternal or motherly values, concerns, and skills to their professional life. In fact, many mothers in politics have used this expectation as a trope to frame their political agenda. In 1992 Patty Murray (D-WA) ran for Congress as a "mom in tennis shoes."<sup>10</sup> And in 2010 Sarah Palin endorsed a number of conservative female candidates who were running for offices around the country, calling them "mama grizzlies."<sup>11</sup> Women politicians who run for office or govern by calling attention to their motherhood have often found this strategy successful. It provides a ready source of identification with many voters and it also offers a frame for a woman's political role and contributions. The frame of motherhood, however, also presents limitations for the women who rely on it.<sup>12</sup> Carlin and Winfrey observe that both Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin utilized the motherhood frame during the 2008 election. Because of this rhetorical choice, "there were undoubtedly voters who were attracted to both women because they saw

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<sup>4</sup> Campbell, "The Discursive Performance of Femininity," 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Campbell, "The Discursive Performance of Femininity"; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, "Gendered Politics and Presidential Image Construction."

<sup>6</sup> Dow and Tonn, "'Feminine Style' and Political Judgment," 285.

<sup>7</sup> See Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*.

<sup>8</sup> See Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Wood, *Gendered Lives*, 263.

<sup>10</sup> Les Blumenthal, "Patty Murray: From Mom in Tennis Shoes to Influential Lawmaker," *The Olympian*, October 17, 2010, <http://www.theolympian.com>.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Elliot, "Sarah Palin's 'Mama Grizzlies' Have Tough Summer: Is She Losing Her Touch?" *Christian Science Monitor*, August 20, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com>.

<sup>12</sup> See Ann. E. Burnette, "Who's Framing Whom? Michele Bachmann and the (Primary) Politics of Motherhood," in *Media Depictions of Women as Wives, Brides, and Mothers*, ed. Alena Amato Ruggerio, 181-193 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Gibson and Heyse, "'The Difference Between a Hockey Mom and a Pit Bull.'"

them as supermoms who also understood real people's issues."<sup>13</sup> The researchers also point out, though, that this frame invited the media to question the competence of both women.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, because of the strong gender assumptions that equate women with mothers, the use of this rhetorical construction is common.

Scholars have also studied how male politicians negotiate their gender roles. Research on male political rhetors has highlighted the hegemonic assumptions about gender norms for men and how they influence public debate.<sup>15</sup> Trujillo defines "hegemonic masculinity" as including five characteristics: "(1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality" and argues that the mass media widely circulate this construction of masculinity.<sup>16</sup> Gibson and Heyse observe, "The celebration of these particular hegemonic values is deeply woven into our political culture."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, they contend that this "masculinist script" also "defines our expectations of political leadership."<sup>18</sup> In their analysis of Sarah Palin's 2008 speech to the Republican Nominating Convention, they illustrate how entrenched this masculinist script is by arguing that Palin's motherhood appeals served to reinforce rather than challenge assumptions of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the scope of masculinist assumptions, scholarship on the rhetorical expression and value of fatherhood is not as rich as scholarship on the rhetorical dimensions of motherhood. Trujillo includes familial patriarchy as one of the elements of hegemonic masculinity and defines it as the expectation that men are the heads of their families and thus protect their families, provide for them economically, and serve as the authority figure within their families.<sup>20</sup> This study takes these roles as a starting point and examines how the contemporary rhetorical construction of fatherhood has built upon these roles. Trujillo also concludes that the modern definition of fatherhood, which has expanded to include nurturing and sensitivity, ultimately reinforces hegemonic masculinity. This essay also considers how this more sensitive or compassionate expectation of fatherhood confirms the masculinist role of father.<sup>21</sup>

Lakoff provides the most thorough treatment of fatherhood as rhetorical construct that drives political debate in his identification of the "Strict Father" metaphor.<sup>22</sup> "Conservatism," Lakoff contends, "is based on a Strict Father model" of the family.<sup>23</sup> According to Lakoff, the strict father model "posits a traditional nuclear family, with the father having

<sup>13</sup> Diana B. Carlin and Kelly L. Winfrey, "Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (2009): 335.

<sup>14</sup> See Carlin and Winfrey, "Have You Come a Long Way, Baby?"

<sup>15</sup> Nick Trujillo, "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8 (1991): 290-308; Gibson and Heyse, "The Difference Between a Hockey Mom and a Pit Bull"; John W. Howard, III, and Laura C. Prividera, "Gendered Nationalism: A Critical Analysis of Militarism, Patriarchy, and the Ideal Soldier," *Texas Speech Communication Journal* 30, no. 2 (2006): 134-145.

<sup>16</sup> Trujillo, "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound," 291.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson and Heyse, "The Difference Between a Hockey Mom and a Pit Bull," 237.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>19</sup> See Gibson and Heyse, "The Difference Between a Hockey Mom and a Pit Bull."

<sup>20</sup> Trujillo, "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the authority to set overall policy, set strict rules for the behavior of children, and to enforce the rules.<sup>24</sup> The model of the strict father is more than a useful metaphor to understand conservative political beliefs; it also serves as persuasive appeal to voters who identify with this vision of family order. As Lakoff explains:

For example, blue-collar workers who may previously have voted with liberals because of their union affiliation or economic interests may now, for cultural reasons, identify with conservatives and vote for them, even though it may not be in their economic interest to do so.<sup>25</sup>

For conservative male politicians, the persona of father has far-reaching implications. It helps them define who they are, how well they are performing the gendered role of father, and how well they represent the vision of the conservative worldview.

### **Purpose of Study**

This study seeks to expand and sharpen the critical literature on the rhetorical use of fatherhood in American political discourse. The father persona was important for Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, and Newt Gingrich as they competed with one another for the mantle of Republican presidential nominee and leader of the Republican Party. Because we are interested in the strategic use of literal and figurative expressions of fatherhood, we examine the candidates' announcement speeches, the messages found on the candidates' official websites, and the websites of the Super PACs who support each candidate. We have selected these texts because they should represent the most complete expression of their core identities. First, we evaluate each campaign's rhetorical construction of the candidate as a literal father. This theme has two components: (1) the description of each candidate as a father to his own family, and (2) the framing of each candidate's relationship as a son to his own father. Second, we also analyze how each candidate assumes the persona of a metaphorical father to the nation and to future generations of Americans. This rhetorical stance of the metaphorical father includes three dimensions that express the role of fathers: (1) fathers are defenders of the family, (2) fathers are the leaders or guides for the family, and (3) fathers are caregivers for the family.

### **Literal Fatherhood: Candidates as Literal Fathers**

One of the most simple and immediate ways to demonstrate the fatherhood persona is through messages about each candidate's experience as a literal father. We start the analysis of this theme with two observations. First, while candidates may speak of their fatherhood, they often leave it to others, whether family members or political supporters, to praise their performance as *good* fathers. Second, the rhetorical constructions of these candidates as literal fathers do not have as much variety as the rhetorical constructions of these candidates as figurative fathers.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 16.

Romney and Santorum had the most straightforward narratives of literal fatherhood. Both were married to their first wives and had fathered relatively large broods; Romney had five sons and Santorum had three daughters and four sons. Their intact nuclear families and multiple children (not to mention their conventionally attractive wives) presumably give them instant credibility as fathers. Both of their websites introduced their families to the audience. Romney's website told the story of how Mitt and Ann Romney have known each other since they were in elementary school and concluded, "Between them, they have five sons and sixteen grandchildren, who are the center of their lives."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Santorum's website proclaimed, "But of all his accomplishments, Rick is most proud of his role as a husband and father. Rick and his wife of 21 years, Karen are the parents of seven wonderful children."<sup>27</sup> Both of these descriptions of the family were in the third person. The Red, White, and Blue Fund (RWBfund.com) which supported Rick Santorum was the only super PAC to include literal appeals to fatherhood on their website. In at least two places, the RWBfund website positioned Santorum as a literal father. Santorum was referred to as "Father. Husband. A champion for life. The leader with a bold plan to restore America's greatness."<sup>28</sup> Although these descriptors did not identify his specific fathering style, they made fatherhood central to his identity.

Romney's website also included a testimonial—again, in the third person—of how dedicated a husband and father he is. The site detailed Ann Romney's 1998 diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and her battle with breast cancer and noted, "She credits her husband's unwavering care and devotion to her for helping her through these ordeals."<sup>29</sup> Santorum spoke fulsomely of his family in his announcement speech, thanking them for "being involved in a public life."<sup>30</sup> He noted, "We all know that is not an easy life. And they have stood behind me every step of the way and not only have they stood behind me, but they have actually led me and encouraged me and fought with me side by side."<sup>31</sup> Santorum acknowledged the support of his family and here portrayed himself as a grateful father who is generous in giving credit for the support of his family.

Gingrich's narrative as a father was more complicated. He was twice divorced, married to a significantly younger woman, and had two daughters from his first marriage. His website elided his marital history, merely noting that Gingrich was married and describing the business ventures that "Newt and his wife, Callista" run.<sup>32</sup> It also noted that "their family includes two daughters and two grandchildren."<sup>33</sup> The website briefly attempted to establish Newt's paternity even if he has violated the traditional family structure.

### Candidates as Literal Sons

All three of the candidates stressed the power of patriarchy in a literal sense by extolling their fathers or grandfathers. Romney, in his announcement, observed, "Over the last thir-

<sup>26</sup> "About Mitt," *Mitt Romney for President*, <http://www.mittromney.com/learn/mitt>.

<sup>27</sup> "Why Rick?" *Rick Santorum for President*, <http://www.ricksantorum.com/why-rick>.

<sup>28</sup> "Press Releases," *Red, White, and Blue Fund*, <http://www.rwbfund.com>.

<sup>29</sup> "About Mitt," *Mitt Romney for President*.

<sup>30</sup> Rick Santorum, "Rick Santorum 2012 Presidential Announcement Speech," *4President.org*. <http://blog.4president.org/2012/2011/06/rick-santorum-2012-president>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> "Meet Newt," *Newt 2012*, <http://www.newt.org/meet-newt>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

ty years, I can't tell you how many times I've heard a situation is hopeless."<sup>34</sup> He then invoked his father's optimism and determination, saying, "But I've never been very good at listening to those people and I've always enjoyed proving them wrong. It's one of the lessons I learned from my Dad."<sup>35</sup> Romney added that his father "could have given up or set his sights lower," but the elder Romney "always believed in America; and in that America, a lath and plaster man could work his way up to running a little car company called American Motors, and end up the Governor of a state where he once sold aluminum paint."<sup>36</sup>

Romney was thus able to promote the myth of American social and economic mobility while also positioning himself as a faithful son. Likewise, Gingrich's website invoked "Newt's experiences as the son of a career soldier" which "convinced him at an early age to dedicate his life to his country and to the protection of freedom."<sup>37</sup> Again, Gingrich's role as devoted son reinforced the importance of patriarchal lineage while also celebrating the American values his father passed down to him. Gingrich's performance as a son was not problematic in the way his performance as a husband and father was.

Santorum's father did not appear as a distinct character in his announcement speech, website, or on the Red, White, and Blue Fund website. His grandfather did, however. Santorum devoted a significant portion of his announcement address to describing his grandfather's decision to leave his native Italy to "give his children . . . the opportunity for freedom."<sup>38</sup> While Santorum focused on the generation before his father, it is notable that he used another patriarch of the family to tell his version of the American dream. The super PAC in support of Santorum, "Red, White, and Blue fund," echoed this appeal. In one brief statement, they blended elements of literal and figurative fatherhood together:

They fled tyranny and came to America to live their dreams, instilling their grandson with the values of hard work, integrity, and conviction of character. Those values drive Rick Santorum as he fights the Obama agenda, to stop runaway spending and get our great nation back to work.<sup>39</sup>

Of the three candidates, only Romney's mother appeared in his biography. Her appearance was brief and the Santorum and Gingrich biographies did not mention mothers (or grandmothers) whatsoever. This is an interesting contrast to Barack Obama, who, while campaigning in 2008, frequently told stories about his mother to illustrate his ability to identify with the American people.

### **Figurative Fatherhood: Candidates as Figurative Defenders of the Family**

One of the duties of a father is to defend and protect the family.<sup>40</sup> The candidates did this in two ways: they assumed the role of defender of the family structure and family values,

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<sup>34</sup> Mitt Romney, "Mitt Romney Launches Presidential Campaign," *4President.org*, <http://www.4president.org/speeches/2012/mittromney/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> "Meet Newt," *Newt 2012*.

<sup>38</sup> Santorum, "Rick Santorum 2012 Presidential Announcement Speech."

<sup>39</sup> "Press Releases." *Red, White, and Blue Fund*.

<sup>40</sup> See Trujillo, "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound."

and they also were presented as protectors of other American families. Santorum, for instance, was cast as a protector of the family structure in his website: “Rick has fought to protect families and the unborn. He’s been a consistent proponent of preserving traditional marriage.”<sup>41</sup> In his announcement, Santorum contrasted himself with Obama, saying that Obama “devalued our culture” because of his position on the Defense of Marriage Act and “through the federal funding of abortions.”<sup>42</sup> Santorum, on the other hand, protects the sanctity of family.

Santorum not only defended the concept of the family, he protected other actual families. His website listed legislation he supported, including the “Born Alive Infants Protection Act,” the “Unborn Victims of Violence Act,” the “Combating Autism Act,” and the prohibition of “partial birth” abortions.<sup>43</sup> Santorum was such a conscientious father that he could protect the most vulnerable members of other people’s families. The RWBfund also included this message on their website by saying that Santorum was “a champion for life,” “defender of the unborn,” and has “never wavered in defense of the unborn.”<sup>44</sup>

“Restore Our Future,” the super PAC that supported Mitt Romney, featured a story that positioned Romney as an ultimate protector. The story was told by one of Romney’s former business partners whose daughter had gone missing. The thankful father reported:

My 14-year-old daughter had disappeared in New York City for 3 days. No one could find her. My business partner stepped forward to take charge. He closed the company and brought almost all our employees to New York. He said I don't care how long takes, we're going to find her. He set up a command center and searched through the night. The man who helped save my daughter was Mitt Romney. Mitt's done a lot of things that people say are nearly impossible. But, for me, the most important thing he's ever done is to help save my daughter.<sup>45</sup>

This story presented Romney as resourceful and dedicated, a father-by-proxy who would take charge when a family is threatened. The closing two sentences of this story argued that although Romney may have accomplished a great deal as a political leader, his dedication to protecting one child was what made a lasting impression.

### Candidates as Figurative Leaders of the Family

Hegemonic masculinity holds that fathers be the leader of the family; it is their job to ensure the success and longevity of the family and its line. The candidates stepped into this role by assuring voters that they will help preserve and pass down American values to future generations. Romney stated this explicitly in his announcement, saying, “My generation will pass the torch to the next generation, not a bill.”<sup>46</sup> Later in his announcement he lamented the effects of the first years of the Obama administration and promised,

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<sup>41</sup> “Why Rick?” *Rick Santorum for President*.

<sup>42</sup> Santorum, “Rick Santorum 2012 Presidential Announcement Speech.”

<sup>43</sup> “Why Rick?” *Rick Santorum for President*.

<sup>44</sup> “Press Releases,” *Red, White, and Blue Fund*.

<sup>45</sup> “Home,” *Restore Our Future*.

<sup>46</sup> Romney, “Mitt Romney Launches Presidential Campaign.”

“While we’ve lost a couple of years, we have not lost our way.”<sup>47</sup> He proclaimed, “I know we can bring this country back.”<sup>48</sup>

Restore Our Future established Romney’s capacity to lead by first explaining why they believed Obama failed to create financial security and positioning Romney as the corrective. They claimed President Obama failed to devise solutions “to address the problems facing workers, job creators, and the American financial system,” but that Romney “can put our country back on the right path.”<sup>49</sup> They continued this line of argumentation when they asked, “How many jobs did Barack Obama create as a community organizer or law professor? The answer is zero. Mitt Romney turned around dozens of American companies and helped create thousands of jobs.”<sup>50</sup> They followed up these claims by emphasizing that Romney had a plan, although they did not provide details of that plan anywhere on the site.

Stuart Roy, an advisor to the RWBfund, tried to suggest that there were only two possible candidates in the race, and positioned Santorum as the stronger patriarch by focusing on financial conservatism to create contrast between Romney and Santorum. He reported that one of the new advertisements produced by the RWBfund “demonstrates the difference between Mitt Romney—a supporter of bailouts and government spending sprees—and Rick Santorum who is a conservative who wants to cut spending and create jobs.”<sup>51</sup> Roy also emphasized Santorum’s readiness to lead and ability to guide America when he wrote, “President Obama’s energy policies have been a disaster but Rick Santorum has an energy plan to not only bring down the price at the pump but also to create the jobs we need at home.”<sup>52</sup>

Gingrich also positioned himself as a strong patriarchal leader. In his announcement he admonished, “Let’s get together, look reality in the face, tell the truth, make tough choices and get the job done.”<sup>53</sup> Here Gingrich was the tough father who called upon his family to show discipline and sacrifice for their own good.

Winning Our Future, the super PAC in favor of Newt Gingrich, positioned Gingrich as a leader who could bring America back from the brink of despair, and as someone who has the vision to plan for future generations. In his own words, Gingrich discussed his energy plan: “This magic bullet is not fantasy. It’s far more accessible than SDI was for Reagan or the moon for JFK and energy’s impact is far more foundational. Simply taking the first steps would dramatically improve almost everything almost immediately.”<sup>54</sup>

Winning Our Future represented Gingrich not only as someone who would save America from despair, but also as a visionary who had concern for future generations. They argued that nominating Gingrich meant “nominating a man who can clearly lay out the failures of the big government statist vision for America . . . a man who has actually led a conservative revolution in his past.”<sup>55</sup> Winning Our Future also linked literal and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> “Home,” *Restore Our Future*.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “Press Releases,” *Red, White, and Blue Fund*.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Newt Gingrich, “Video Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President,” *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

<sup>54</sup> “Media Center,” *Winning Our Future*, <http://www.winningourfuture.com>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

figurative fatherhood on Gingrich's behalf to emphasize his visionary qualities when they argued "His track record of implementing tax cuts, reining in spending and balancing the budget is a fact, not fiction and makes him the best candidate by far to getting things done for our children, grandchildren and the entire country once he has dispatched the current resident of The White House."<sup>56</sup>

To solidify their argument about Gingrich's ability to lead in the future, *Winning Our Future* chose to use an apocalyptic narrative to argue that Gingrich was the only option:

Thus we are on a precipice—a dangerous tipping point that will define our future. There is a bureaucratic entitlement society that is threatening to spend us into oblivion to support the entitlement class and the bureaucrats hired to serve them. This might swallow us whole. Frighteningly, these two classes are almost big enough to vote us down that destructive road. They threaten—in their ignorance—the golden goose that enables them today.<sup>57</sup>

The nation needed Gingrich to lead its citizens and rescue them from their previous ineffectual and dangerous leadership, which threatened to ruin the family.

Finally, *Winning Our Future* borrowed the credibility of another famous father, Ronald Reagan, when they included an endorsement by Michael Reagan, President Reagan's eldest son, who argued that Newt was the only candidate who could "fundamentally change the course that Barak Obama has set for America."<sup>58</sup> His testimony was powerful and made a familiar appeal to the target audience who holds President Reagan in high esteem as a literal and figurative father. Michael Reagan concluded with the direct assertion, "Newt exemplifies the conservative principles my father championed."<sup>59</sup>

### Candidates as Figurative Caregivers for the Family

Lakoff compares the conservative political philosophy to that of the "Strict Father."<sup>60</sup> The Republican candidates demonstrated their strictness in their zeal to protect and lead their figurative families. Even strict fathers, though, admit to at least some compassionate qualities that enable them to be caregivers to their families. Gingrich's website asserted that he had a "commitment to a better system of health for all Americans" and described in detail the legislative and committee work that he did to try to ensure this for American citizens.<sup>61</sup> One of the responsibilities of a father is to take care of their children, including their health needs. Gingrich could fulfill that fatherly role.

Santorum demonstrated his capacity for caregiving in a different way: through his ability to empathize with family members and convince them that he has confidence in them. In his announcement, he said that he began his campaign by "listening to people, trying to get a sense as to whether what I was feeling inside, the anxiety and concern I had for the future of our country was something that was shared."<sup>62</sup> He also characterized

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See Lakoff, *Moral Politics*.

<sup>61</sup> "Meet Newt," *Newt 2012*.

<sup>62</sup> Santorum, "Rick Santorum 2012 Presidential Announcement Speech."

his campaign by saying, “I believe that Americans are not looking for someone that they can believe in; they’re looking for a President who believes in them.”<sup>63</sup> While Santorum was a strict father in many regards, he was also a caring father who wanted his children to be fulfilled. He was also contrasting himself with President Obama, who was a bad father who wanted Americans to be dependent on federal programs like “Obamacare.” Red, White, and Blue Fund also echoed the claim that Obama created dependency when they argued, “Every single American will be dependent on government, thanks to ObamaCare.”<sup>64</sup> Santorum thus combined his compassion and care with a desire to make his children more independent, which is one of the goals of the strict father.<sup>65</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusions

The use of fatherhood in a political sense is very old. Renaissance writers often referred to kings as the fathers of their people.<sup>66</sup> They also explored the connection between literal and figurative constructs of fatherhood. In the literal sense, kings pass down their political power through their male heirs. They also enact the role of father to all of their subjects. Filmer writes, “As the Father over one Family, so the King as the Father over many Families extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct and defend the whole Commonwealth.”<sup>67</sup> Lakoff uses the metaphor to describe contemporary politics when he describes the conservative political view as that of the “Strict Father.”<sup>68</sup>

Our study illustrates that these literal and figurative rhetorical constructions of fatherhood had great rhetorical power in the 2012 Republican presidential primary campaign. We find that the largely traditional narrative of fatherhood was the strongest. Romney and Santorum sought to capitalize on their status as literal fathers of large clans. Gingrich also tried to adopt the persona of a conventional patriarch, despite his literal departure from the persona. This poses provocative questions: Does the political sphere call forth more traditional expectations of gender roles? Is this because of the heterogeneity of the audience and the need to adapt to as many potential voters as possible? Or is this the way citizens prefer to think of their leaders—as removed by role and wisdom?

Because the Republican Party often appropriates religious—specifically Christian—tropes, it is worth noting that none of the texts we analyzed featured rhetoric describing a Christian god as “father.” Indeed, the texts we examined made no substantive religious references. One reason for this could be that the metaphor of God as Father might have detracted from the candidates’ figurative construction of political fathers as powerful, authoritative characters. Another reason, though, may well have been the increasingly heterogeneous American electorate and the need for political candidates to appeal to as diverse an audience as possible. Appeals based on Christian descriptions of “God the Father” had associative and dissociative potential. While many voters would have found these appeals persuasive, others would have rejected them. During its history, the Republican Party has had to reexamine and adjust its use of religious arguments, as it did during

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> “Press Releases,” *Red, White, and Blue Fund*.

<sup>65</sup> See Lakoff, *Moral Politics*.

<sup>66</sup> See Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings* (London: Richard Chiswell, 1680). Available from [http://files.libertyfund.org/files/221/Filmer\\_0140\\_EBk\\_v6.0.pdf](http://files.libertyfund.org/files/221/Filmer_0140_EBk_v6.0.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>68</sup> See Lakoff, *Moral Politics*.

the 1980s when evangelical Christians became a powerful force within the party. The 2012 Republican candidates reflected the expanding religious voices of the Republican Party and the challenges this diversity poses: Romney was a Mormon, Santorum was a Roman Catholic, and Gingrich was a convert to Catholicism. The religious expression of the party is no longer univocal. The texts in this study were all intended to introduce the candidates to as wide an audience as possible, and this presumably reinforced the need to eschew specific religious appeals.

Some rhetorical scholarship has examined the extent to which constructions of fatherhood have changed. Vavrus, for instance, reviews media coverage of stay-at-home dads in the wake of the 1988 movie *Mr. Mom*, and concludes that while the rhetorical construct of fatherhood has expanded to include more domestic priorities, this expanded representation of fatherhood in the end legitimates the hegemonic definition of fatherhood.<sup>69</sup> We find a similar dynamic in the way these Republican candidates conveyed their fatherhood. While it is acceptable to be a kind father concerned about the feelings of his families, the father who would be president must be sure to convey the more traditional dimensions of fatherhood including strength and authority.

We found that the candidates used the ethos of literal fatherhood to build arguments that they could figuratively serve as father of their country. By positioning personal accounts of their own experiences as fathers next to arguments about their abilities to lead Americans and future generations of Americans, the candidates invited audience members to consider the dedication they have to their own families and vote accordingly. In other words, they relied on enthymematic reasoning to conclude that, because a father is a strong protector and leader, these candidates' performances as fathers made them viable presidential candidates.

Because the norm of political patriarchy is so old, we forget that patriarchy is a line of argument. But, as Gibson and Heyes argue, "Rhetorical scholars have a responsibility to track the changing guises of hegemonic masculinity and bring them to light."<sup>70</sup> If rhetorical critics do not monitor the construct of masculinity, it becomes invisible by virtue of being the unquestioned norm. The unquestioned norm reifies that political leaders are male and fit the traditional patriarchal role of a heterosexual, strict father. If we want to open the political process to a more diverse vision of leadership and the people who can serve as leaders, we must identify the political construct of fatherhood in order to challenge it.

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<sup>69</sup> See Mary Douglas Vavrus, "Domesticating Patriarchy: Hegemonic Masculinity and Television's 'Mr. Mom,'" *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no 3 (2002): 352-375.

<sup>70</sup> Gibson and Heyes, "'The Difference Between a Hockey Mom and a Pit Bull,'" 253.