

# Why Obama Won a Grammy

**Barack Obama won the 2008 Grammy Award for the Best Spoken Word Album  
Where will his speaking skills take him next?**

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Since 1959, the Grammy Awards have included a category for the spoken word. Actors usually win this category, which is why Obama's win this year is noteworthy. The handful of politicians who were well-spoken enough to win a Grammy in the past have also found success in their political aspirations. Toastmasters International looked at presidential candidate Barack Obama, as well as some past politically-inclined winners, to define elements of their speaking techniques that helped each win a Grammy.

Obama follows in the footsteps of other well-known politicians who have been awarded the Grammy. In fact, fellow candidate Hillary Clinton won for her book, *It Takes a Village*, in 1997. Also, Republican U.S. Congressman and Senator from Illinois, Everett Dirksen, highly regarded for his resonant voice, won in 1968 for a recording of *Gallant Men*. All these lawmaker-speakers share some aspects of public speaking technique. "Obama makes powerful use of the rhetorical device, repetition, building messages that resonate with the cadence of speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King," says Chris Ford, Toastmasters International President. As it happens, Dr. King won the same award in 1971, posthumously, for a recording of *Why I Oppose the War in Vietnam*. Obama and Dr. King repeat key words and phrases for effect.

Toastmaster Patrick McClure of Coto de Caza, California, says Obama uses "good vocal variety," and that he "varies the volume and pace to draw the audience in and then push them back."

McClure says that Obama "waits for applause instead of rushing on," which shows a "good use of pauses in the speech." In fact, Obama is known for his use of strategically-placed pauses. "Each pause adds emphasis to both the message that precedes it and the words that follow," says Ford. "It's like watching an Olympic gymnast march across a balance beam, then pause before flying into an impressive leap."

"Obama's speaking performance shows simple but eloquent and powerful language, and a strong yet optimistic, friendly delivery," says Ford. This style proved valuable in winning the Grammy despite competition from two former presidents, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter. Bill Clinton's presentation skills contain a similar affable style that helped him win the award in 2005 for his audio book, *My Life*.

If others have gone from the Grammys to the White House, will Obama follow in their footsteps? Time and votes will tell.

For Toastmasters evaluations of speeches by politicians, actors (ie Oscars) and others, contact Suzanne Frey at [sfrey@toastmasters.org](mailto:sfrey@toastmasters.org) or call 949-858-8255x231  
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