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The promises of a president

By: Lissandra Villa

On a crisp, fall night in downtown Des Moines, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took the stage to address a room filled with more than 6,600 people.

The atmosphere of the room resembled a concert- glow sticks were waving, lights were flashing and even pop stars were present. Just the year before, nearly everyone that attended the Jefferson-Jackson dinner was seated at a table and fed dinner.

But with only months separating Clinton and her fellow Democratic presidential candidates from the Iowa caucus, the event required bleachers to seat the fans of Clinton, former Gov. of Maryland Martin O'Malley and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders.

"We will overturn Citizens United once and for all," Clinton told the cheering crowd, just one of the promises she made to those listening.

By no means is Clinton the only candidate to have campaigned on a promise as big as this, and by no means is this phenomenon exclusive to the Democrats.

On the Republican side, promises that parallel this one in size also run rampant.

For example, news outlets reported Donald Trump starting his campaign with ideas that included building a wall between America and Mexico and letting Mexico pick up the tab.

The problem is that there can be a disconnect between the promises made while on the campaign trail and the understanding voters have of the realities of holding office.

Kate Kenski is an associate professor of communication, public

opinion and research methods at the University of Arizona's Department of Communication. Prior to teaching there, she was a senior analyst at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Kenski said that what happens is that sometimes voters may expect the president to do more than he or she has the potential of doing based on the limitations of the office. A lot of people underestimate the constraints that any president, regardless of party, is going to face.

But at this point in the race, candidates may just be brainstorming out loud instead of making concrete promises.

"Maybe at this point the candidates haven't made as many promises [so much] as they've floated ideas," Kenski said. "Right now, they're floating ideas."

In terms of Trump's comments on immigration, Kenski applied that same line of thought.

But regardless of whether a candidate is making a promise he or she can hope to keep, the message still matters.

"Messages are important for mobilizing voters," Kenski said.

While the candidates may finally find themselves officially in an election year, at this point in the election, experts said it is too early to expect that a candidate's rhetoric will stay consistent after he or she becomes their party's nominee.

Kenski said that in the early phases of the race through the beginnings of the primary, the media is the most important and most influential factor. If the media decides to focus consistently

on a certain candidate, in the voters' minds those are the candidates that stand a chance.

So one of the things the candidates do to get media attention is to send out hyperbolic messages, she added.

"You're talking to your base," said Bruce Hardy, an assistant professor at the Department of Strategic Communication at Temple University. "You're not worried about the independent voters."

This is the point where the public can only focus on whatever the media focuses on.

"The public attention span is fractured between all these different voices," Kenski said, meaning that the electorate relies on the information—often those extreme campaign messages—picked up by the press.

But once a candidate moves on to the general election, the game changes.

"Everything that they say right now is not going to transfer over to the general election," Hardy said.

Hardy said a much more mainstream approach is generally taken by candidates

the further on they move in the game.

"Think of politics as a city with a main street," Hardy said.

Picture then a McDonald's and a Burger King next to each other. When they are lined up side by side, a customer can choose his or her preference without having to go all the way across town. If the two restaurants were farther apart, they would only appeal to people already near them.

That is how candidates line up as Election Day draws nearer, especially as they try to appeal to people beyond their core, and that's also when rhetoric continues to have heavy play.

Two candidates may have the same position on an issue (for example, President Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain on supporting stem cell research), but the campaign advertising may not reflect that, Hardy said.

Advertising typically has the strongest effects on those immersed in the issues. In terms of being persuasive, advertising is probably most effective on people who vote because of their sense of duty but who are not

politically knowledgeable, Kenski said.

"To them the kinds of messages they get right before they get into the voting booth is really important," Kenski said.

What does the power of rhetoric sometimes mean for some voters?

"A large significant number of people are duped," Hardy said. "It's an ongoing cycle of promises."

Hardy said that even fact-checking is only useful to a point: People hear the facts, but then they go back to remembering the original message they heard.

On the other hand, Kenski said once elected, presidents usually do try to fulfill the promises they make to the electorate. But due to the limitations of the office, some may not be as aggressively fulfilled in comparison to others.

"Maybe at this point the candidates haven't made as many promises [so much] as they've floated ideas," Kenski said. "Right now, they're floating ideas."