Florida political scientists give Obama speech mixed marks

By John Lantigua
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President Obama’s 39-minute acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte Thursday night was enthusiastically received by the conventioners, as expected. But in the estimation of many other political observers, Obama, known for his eloquence, was not at the top of his oratorical game, and while some praised the content of the speech others found it short on detail.

“I thought it was a good speech, but not exceptional,” said Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner. “Given the problems the country still faces, soaring rhetoric would not have worked well, the way it did four years ago. He was more pragmatic and pragmatism doesn’t make for great oratory. I thought Clinton was better and so was Michelle,” he said, referring to former President Bill Clinton and to Obama’s wife, both of whom spoke earlier in the convention.

“And Joe Biden served as a good character witness,” Wagner said, referring to the vice president’s speech shortly before the president’s.

Wagner said Obama’s speech was aimed, as anticipated, primarily at his base. But references to the need for greater cooperation and compromise in Washington were an attempt to reach out to undecided voters, especially those frustrated by political gridlock in the capital, Wagner said.

University of Miami political scientist Joseph Uscinski disagreed with Wagner and said Obama sounded not all that different than he did in 2008. “He talked about a lot of the same goals he spoke about four years ago and that’s because he wasn’t able to reach those goals during this first term,” Uscinski said.

Meanwhile, Sean Snaith, economist at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, found the speech lacking the main information undecided voters were looking for.

“He needed to talk more about specific things he will do to help turn around the economy,” Snaith said. “I think that’s the linchpin on which this election will be decided. I think it would have enhanced the speech and his campaign if he had been more specific. The weak recovery is not a philosophical problem, it is concrete problem.”
What caught the attention of Charles Zelden, Nova Southeastern University historian and political scientist, was Obama’s quoting of Abraham Lincoln.

“While I’m proud of what we’ve achieved together,” Obama said, “I’m far more mindful of my own failings, knowing exactly what Lincoln meant when he said, ‘I have been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had no place else to go.’”

At another point Obama said, “Our challenges can be met. The path we offer may be harder, but it leads to a better place.”

Zelden thought Obama’s speech “strong” and that he was asking Americans to do what Lincoln asked voters to do when he ran for reelection in the midst of the Civil War in 1864 – to stick with him in tough times.

“Lincoln was a Republican who was criticized not only by the Democrats but by members of his own party,” Zelden said. “His positions weren’t popular, but Lincoln was a counter-puncher. Obama isn’t faced with as big a crisis as Lincoln, but what he said was, we are in a crisis and this a painful task. We need to do it. We haven’t gotten where we want to go yet, but, like Lincoln, he said we will do it if we stick together.”