December 2015

Survival Strategies in Solidly Partisan States An Analysis of Centrist Appeals in 2012 U.S. Senate Debates

Matthew L. Spialek
University of Missouri, mls4m7@mail.missouri.edu

Stevie M. Munz
Ohio University, sm382412@ohio.edu

Survival Strategies in Solidly Partisan States
An Analysis of Centrist Appeals
in 2012 U.S. Senate Debates

Matthew L. Spialek & Stevie M. Munz

Abstract

With the growing number of centrist senators diminishing on Capitol Hill, the next few election cycles will be crucial to the survival of this moderate group of lawmakers. Campaign debate scholars should investigate how vulnerable incumbents construct a centrist issue agenda and image to *connect* with voters in states ideologically incongruent with the incumbents' parties. In doing so, debate scholars will also fill the lack of lower-level debate research. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, this analysis examined the debate appeals of Sens. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Scott Brown (R-MA). Findings suggest McCaskill's issue agenda was congruent with a centrist image in contrast to Brown's contradictory issue and image messaging. Additionally, centrist incumbents were more likely to acclaim a centrist image than attack their opponents' partisanship.

Keywords: Campaign Debates, Centrist, Issue Ownership

Introduction

The centrist decline became apparent in May 2010. After voting for the Toxic Asset Relief Program (TARP), Senate veteran Bob Bennett lost his party's nomination because he was not conservative enough (Johnson, 2010). Just weeks later, the *New York Times* headline, "In the Middle in Arkansas, and Hit from Both Sides," encapsulated the struggle of Sen. Blanche Lincoln (McKinley, 2010). Less than two years after the 2010 elections, moderate Sens. Ben Nelson, Joe Lieberman, and Olympia Snowe announced their retirements. These retirements and electoral repudiations of moderate legislators from both major parties prompted *Politico* to claim, "The center won't hold in Washington—in fact, it's fleeting," (Allen, 2012, n.p.).

This recent centrist exodus merits the attention of communication scholars for two primary reasons. First, from a normative democratic perspective, the decline of moderate legislators from both major political parties poses a threat to the policymaking process. Even as Democrats occupied the White House and held majorities in both legislative chambers, the successes and failures of Barack Obama's first term remained dependent on the cooperation of the centrist wings within both the Democratic and Republican parties. For instance, centrist Republicans assisted in the passage of a stimulus bill (Herszenhorn, 2009) and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (Toeplitz, 2010), while centrist Democrats stymied their party's attempts to enact immigration legislation (Herszenhorn, 2010). The 2013 government shutdown, an exemplar of the current era of divid-

ed government, further compounds the necessity for Republicans and Democrats to work cooperatively in order to maintain government operations.

Second, from a scholarly perspective, political communication research has explored how residential balkanization (e.g., Mutz & Martin, 2001) and selective exposure possibly lead to a polarized citizenry (e.g., Sunstein, 2007; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). However, communication scholars have neglected to understand how non-polarized individuals, particularly lawmakers, respond and communicatively navigate themselves in a polarized electorate that has greater choice to exclude heterogeneous political views. Research should understand how candidates strategically employ centrism to create openings for a less regionally dominant political party to remain electorally viable.

The 2012 elections offered an opportunity to investigate centrist campaign strategies. Two of the marquee U.S. Senate races featured embattled centrist incumbents, Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and Scott Brown (R-MA). Both McCaskill and Brown faced an uphill battle in states that have traditionally or recently been ideologically incongruent with these senators' party affiliations. While entire campaigns are debates over issues and image, campaign debates provide an extended period of time for candidates to articulate the images and policy positions discussed along the campaign trail (Carlin, 1992). In doing so, campaign debates become focal points through which to analyze the central arguments of the overall campaign. Campaign debates are particularly useful in exploring candidates' construction of centrist appeals given candidates' debate discourse tends to offer more evidence and reasoned arguments to delineate themselves from their opponents (Ellsworth, 1965). Thus, the McCaskill and Brown debates gave the incumbents an unfiltered vehicle to reinforce the centrist image being projected in ads and interviews.

Although debates provide a framework to explore political campaigns' persuasive messages, a paucity of debate research exists on lower-level races such as Senate debates (McKinney & Carlin, 2004). Through the theoretical frameworks of issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996) and the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998), this content analysis of the Scott Brown and Claire McCaskill debate performances addresses the lack of U.S. Senate debate scholarship while also examining the important issue of centrists' communicative attempts to adapt to a more partisan electorate. Specifically, a coding scheme for centrist debate cues was inductively derived and then joined with the existing functional coding scheme of attacks and acclaims (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998).

Review of Literature

The limited research on senatorial and gubernatorial debates suggests these debates influence voters' perceptions of candidates' policy positions and image. Considering more coverage is given to presidential campaigns (Stempel, 1994), Senate debates may provide an opportunity for voters to gain more information about lesser-known candidates (Benoit, Brazeal, Airne, 2007). For instance, Philport and Balon (1975) determined John Glenn's image was affected by a

Democratic primary debate. More recently, results from a case study during the 2004 South Dakota Senate race indicated the debates influenced not only voter perceptions of the candidates' character and issue stances but also vote choice (Robertson, 2005).

By acknowledging Senate debates' influence in shaping both image and issue perceptions, it is critical to understand how Senate candidates use the verbal dimensions of debate content to appeal to voters. Issue ownership theory (1996) and the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998) provide a framework for analyzing Senate debate content.

Petrocik (1996) developed issue ownership theory, which asserts the major parties have distinct issue handling reputations. In order to develop a strategic advantage, candidates should frame their messages around owned issues. Simply put, Democrats will reference Democratic issues more and Republicans will speak more often about Republican issues. Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003-2004) found Democratic issues include jobs, poverty, healthcare, education and the environment. Republican issues consist of the deficit, taxes, defense, and foreign policy. Trespassing into the opposing party's issue territory is perceived as a high risk (Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992). However, challengers can poach an issue from an incumbent if that person has handled their party's issue inadequately (Petrocik, 1996).

At the Senate level, there are conflicting findings regarding issue ownership. Benoit, Airne, and Brazeal (2011) found Democrats discussed Democratic issues more and Republicans spoke about Republican issues more. In contrast, Kaufmann (2004) concluded Senate candidates trespassed onto an opposing party's issue if their own legislative record provided evidence of owning that issue.

However, centrism does not suggest ideological purity with the respective party's platform. Consequently, research should examine whether promoting a centrist image also results in a violation of the assumptions underlying issue ownership theory regarding the specific policy issues mentioned. To determine the issue agenda of the centrist incumbents, the following question is posited:

RQ$_1$: Do centrist candidates discuss their own party's issues more than the opposing party's issues?

In addition to parties' reputations of handling issues, Doherty (2008) and Hayes (2005) argued political parties have established a specific reputation for values and traits. Specifically, Republicans speak more often of limited government while Democrats address egalitarianism. However, there are variations in which party mentions morality more often. (Doherty, 2008). Unlike issue ownership theory, candidates will not completely avoid values and traits championed by the opposing party.

Additionally, in the minds of voters, Democratic presidential candidates are perceived as more compassionate and empathetic; Republican presidential candidates are typically viewed as more moral (Hayes, 2005). These voter respons-

es have suggested that candidates not only discuss certain values more (Doherty, 2008), but past analysis has shown that candidates are perceived to have a distinct image reputation. Thus, it is important to consider if centrists can also have a distinct image reputation consisting of certain values and traits.

Considering centrism is sometimes conceptualized as a middle-of-the-road or even unprincipled approach (Hill, 2009) but is employed for strategic purposes (de Velasco, 2010), centrist candidates must thoughtfully determine how they frame centrism. Thus, the following question is examined:

RQ$_2$: How do moderate senate candidates describe themselves as centrists in their debate performances?

Political candidates communicate their issue stances and image in a variety of ways. Benoit, Blaney, and Pier (1998) developed the functional theory of campaign discourse to describe how candidates can distinguish themselves from their opponents. Specifically, candidates can acclaim policies and character traits that are desirable or candidates can attack their opponent's policies and character traits that are undesirable. One additional function includes defenses; however, for the purpose of this analysis, defenses will not be considered because research consistently shows defenses comprise the smallest frequency of debate functions (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007). Through an analysis of over 20 U.S. Senate debates, acclaims were found to be the most common function, followed by attacks, and then defenses (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007). With limited research on functions of Senate debates, the following question will be asked:

RQ$_3$: What is the frequency of acclaims and attacks in centrist candidates' debate discourse?

Benoit, Blaney, & Pier (1998) outlined six topics for acclaiming and attacking. Policy considerations include past deeds, future plans, and general goals. Topics centered on character include personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals. By providing a framework for the content of acclaim and attack messages, debate scholars should now specifically consider how centrism is woven into the debate functions of acclaiming and attacking. Therefore, the following questions will be asked:

RQ$_{3a}$: What frequency of centrist candidate acclaims is devoted to presenting a centrist

RQ$_{3b}$: What frequency of centrist candidate attacks is devoted to portraying opponents as extreme or too partisan?

Method

Procedure

This analysis examined the verbal content of two high profile Senate races where two criteria were met. First, the incumbent candidates portrayed themselves as centrists. Second, the incumbents were running in states seen as more ideologically opposite than the incumbents' parties. Under these criteria, the Massachusetts Senate race between Sen. Scott Brown (R) and Elizabeth Warren (D) and the Missouri Senate race between Sen. Claire McCaskill (D) and Rep. Todd Akin (R) were selected for analysis. Specifically, we prepared a verbatim transcript of the first two Massachusetts debates and the only two Missouri debates from YouTube.

Coder Training and Reliability

Training took place over a four-week period, with each weekly session lasting approximately one to two hours. These sessions consisted of the researchers reviewing and practicing the coding scheme on several of the centrist candidates' debate responses. Following the training, the researchers separately coded a random 20% of all the centrist candidate debate responses to determine intercoder reliability.

Krippendorff's alpha was used to calculate reliability. For RQ_1, $\alpha=.93$. For RQ_3, $\alpha=.90$. An alpha coefficient of .80 or higher is considered sufficient (Krippendorff, 2004); thus, the coding between the two researchers reached consistency. To ascertain the overall results, the primary researcher coded all of the centrist candidates' debate responses.

Data Analysis

This analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the research questions. RQ_1 asked whether centrist candidates discuss their own party's issues more than the opposing party's issues. In addressing RQ_1, we simply counted the number of issues in each response and placed them in their respective category based on a twenty-two category presidential campaign issue typology used in previous campaign debate research (e.g. Banwart & McKinney, 2005). Issues were only counted once per response even if the issue was mentioned multiple times within each response. Recognizing Senate campaigns may be more localized than presidential campaigns, categories were inductively created during the training phase that did not fit the already pre-determined categories.

RQ_2 asked how Senate candidates describe themselves as centrists. To address RQ_2, the candidates' statements were first unitized into utterances. Benoit and Harthcock (1999) explained in their functional analysis of the 1960 presidential debates, "discourse is inherently enthymematic" (p. 346). Thus, utterances varied in length from phrases to multiple sentences. For example, in the first Missouri debate, Claire McCaskill said:

In the United States Senate where I have worked with many Republicans to do important things like cutting spending, putting a cap on federal spending, like banning earmarks, like cutting taxes over a trillion dollars for small businesses and working families, cleaning up war contracting and promoting American jobs.

We identified seven utterances in this statement: work with Republicans, cut spending, cap federal spending, ban earmarks, cut taxes, fix war contracting, and promote jobs. Essentially, responses were broken into separate utterances if that portion of the statement would have been considered a coherent utterance if it had appeared alone.

Although previous research has considered issues and images associated with the Republican and Democratic parties, debate scholars have not developed a centrist image typology. Therefore, to answer RQ_2, elements of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were employed in order to create a centrist image construct. We inductively derived categories emerging from the transcripts of the four debates, which allowed the typology to be firmly rooted in the debate texts. After close readings of the texts, we created categories based on related units. Codes were then created to link the textual units to the specific categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), units were continually reevaluated to ensure the data were assigned to the appropriate category. Categorical codes were adjusted as necessary.

Finally, we utilized the coding scheme for the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998) to complete a quantitative content analysis for RQ_3, RQ_{3a}, RQ_{3b}:

Utterances that portrayed the candidate favorably in regard to policy considerations or character were coded as acclaims. Policy considerations included past deeds, future plans, or general goals. Character consisted of personal qualities, leadership ability, or ideals.

Utterances that portrayed the opposing candidate or political party unfavorably in regard to policy considerations or character were coded as attacks.

Each utterance classified as either an acclaim or an attack was then further analyzed to explore the functional approach focused on centrism. Acclaims were coded into either acclaims highlighting a moderate record or acclaims not highlighting a moderate record. Attacks were categorized into attacks portraying opponents as extreme and/or highly partisan or attacks not portraying opponents as extreme and/or highly partisan.

Results

Issue Agendas

RQ$_1$ asked what issues centrist candidates mention. Using a coding scheme developed by Banwart and McKinney (2005), we counted the issues mentioned during the debates and placed the issues into pre-determined categories. The centrist candidates differed in the issues that were most salient in their debate dialogue (See Table 1). Claire McCaskill spoke most often of the deficit and debt, followed by senior issues such as Medicare and Social Security, education, and dissatisfaction with government. Taxes topped Scott Brown's issue agenda, followed by lack of jobs, the deficit and debt, and energy.

Table 1
Centrist Candidates' Issue Agenda/Top Four Issues

Issue Rank

	McCaskill	Brown
1 Deficit/Debt		
2 Senior Issues		
	Lack of Jobs	
3 Education		
	Deficit/Debt	
4	Dissatisfaction with Government	
		Energy

Image

RQ$_2$ asked how centrist candidates describe themselves. Inductive analysis produced three categories of the centrist image—the Atypical Politician, the Compromiser, and the Challenger. The centrist candidates drew upon these descriptions most often when acclaiming their past deeds and future goals.

The Atypical Politician. One category that emerged from the data was the Atypical Politician. Both Scott Brown and Claire McCaskill described themselves as the antithesis of the typical D.C. politician. Centrist candidates distance themselves from Washington culture by emphasizing their politically inconvenient positions, their reliance on depth rather than talking points, and their connection to their state.

After being asked a question regarding what best prepares her to be a senator, Claire McCaskill responded, "It's not about me and a fancy job or a big title. It's about Missourians and who's protecting them and the programs that matter to them." McCaskill suggested her role as a senator is other-oriented in contrast to the self-oriented perception of politicians. In that same debate, McCaskill continued to shred the typical political image by discussing an issue considered taboo. "One, we need to do some more aggressive means testing. I know it's political season and I know I'm not supposed to say we're going to do anything like that but I believe in it."

Compromiser. A second category to emerge was the Compromiser. As a compromiser, the centrist listens to ideas, works with people from the opposing party, and eventually compromises. This category runs on a dimension of specific to general.

General examples mostly mentioned bipartisanship as when Scott Brown acclaimed in the first Massachusetts debate, "I am the second most bipartisan senator in the U.S. Senate."

General examples of compromise were also prescriptive. Centrist candidates would suggest actions to take in the next Congress. For example, Brown stressed in the second Massachusetts debate, "The key is in order to get these initiatives passed you have to work together to do it."

Specific examples referred to either legislation or colleagues from the opposing party the centrist has worked with to adopt new policy. For example, Claire McCaskill highlighted, "I have worked with a long list of Republican senators. Sen. Thune. Sen. DeMint. Sen. McCain. Sen. Blunt. Sen. Ayotte. Sen. Sessions." In the second Massachusetts debate, Scott Brown explained, "I was honored to stand by the President and the White House when we passed the insider trading bill to prohibit members of Congress from doing insider trading. I was also proud to stand with him when we did the Hire a Hero veterans bill. Of course I'm going to be proud to stand with the president. He is our president and when he does something well I praise him."

The Challenger. The final category to emerge was the Challenger. As a challenger, the centrist is independent and challenges their party's expectation to be a reliable vote. The centrist is willing to stand up to leaders in their own party and risk being seen as unpopular for those decisions. Scott Brown described his independence provided a sense of freedom. In the second Massachusetts debate, Brown said:

> When it comes to dealing with the majority or minority leader, I've already let it be very clearly known to Mitch McConnell that I'm completely disgusted with what's going on down there. And he has a lot of work to do to earn my vote because I don't work for him or Harry Reid. That's the beauty of being independent. When I walk in I can vote however I want.

Claire McCaskill not only expressed a similar sentiment in the second Missouri debate, but she also explained how her centrism was not well received. McCaskill explained, "I don't worry whether the leader of the Democratic Party is mad at me. I've had time out in my caucus many times."

Functions of Centrist Debate Discourse

RQ$_3$ examined the frequency of acclaims and attacks in centrist candidates' debate discourse (See Table 2). Defenses were not considered. Consistent with previous functional literature (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007; Airne & Benoit, 2005), centrist candidates acclaimed more than attacked. Overall, 64% of cen-

trist candidates' total attack and acclaim utterances consisted of acclaiming with 36% devoted to attacking. Of Claire McCaskill's total attack and acclaim utterances, the Missouri senator devoted 66.6% to acclaiming and 33.3% to attacking. Scott Brown's percentage of acclaims was slightly less at 61.5% with attacks at 38.5%.

Table 2
Acclaims and Attacks in Centrist Senate Candidate Discourse

		N	
	%	McCaskill	Brown
Acclaims	64	148	121
Attacks	36	74	76

RQ$_{3a}$ asked what frequency of centrist candidate acclaims were focused on projecting a centrist image (See Table 3). Of all of the incumbents' acclaims, 41% related to one's centrist image as an Atypical Politician, Compromiser, or Challenger. The remaining 59.5% of acclaims referenced other issues and images intended to enhance the candidates' reputations.

Table 3
Acclaims in Centrist Senate Candidate Debate Discourse

	N		
	%	McCaskill	Brown
Centrist Image Acclaims	40.5	72	37
Other Acclaims	59.5	76	84

RQ$_{3b}$: asked what percentage of centrist candidate attacks were devoted to portraying opponents as too partisan (See Table 4). Centrists devoted 20% of attacks to portraying their opponent as highly partisan. 80% of attacks suggested other images meant to damage their opponents' reputation.

Table 4
Attacks in Centrist Senate Candidate Debate Discourse

	N		
	%	McCaskill	Brown
Partisan Image Attacks	20	22	8
Other Attacks	80	52	68

Discussion

Limited Senate debate research exists (McKinney & Carlin, 2004), and this research has not considered Senate candidates' ideological positioning in debate content. By addressing a lack of Senate debate research, this analysis has three main implications for the continued study of centrist debate appeals. Theoretically, the findings suggest that as centrists embrace certain aspects of the opposing party and distance themselves in some ways from their party, the centrist issue agenda challenges the assumptions of issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996). This centrist issue agenda helps reinforce the centrist image. Thus, the combination of an issue and image agenda provides a foundation to build a centrist typology in future studies. Finally, the findings indicate the issues and images associated with centrism are perceived as strengths that should be acclaimed. The three main implications are discussed in the context of the 2012 Missouri and Massachusetts Senate debates.

Centrist Issue Agendas

First, the issue agenda can reinforce a candidate's image. Issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996) argues candidates will speak more often about issues owned by their party and their party's constituents. However, Kaufmann (2004) noted Senate candidates may trespass into opposing party issues if their own legislative record suggests a strong reputation. Consequently, candidates could speak about their reputation regarding issues commonly owned by the opposing party to provide evidence for the claim they are "moderate" or "in the middle."

In this analysis, Claire McCaskill used her issue agenda to perpetuate her centrist image. McCaskill's issue agenda included both Republican and Democratic issues. Specifically, McCaskill's top issue, the debt and deficit, was traditionally viewed as a Republican issue (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Although McCaskill's top issue was owned by Republicans, the Missouri Senator demonstrated her moderate legislative approach by frequently referring to her reputation and vision for Democratically-owned issues like Medicare, Social Security, and education (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Finally, McCaskill's fourth most referenced issue, dissatisfaction with government, is a

uniquely centrist issue because both major parties could own frustration with the current political climate.

In contrast, Scott Brown's frequent references to taxes and the debt and deficit portrayed a Republican issue agenda (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). When speaking about other top issues (e.g., lack of jobs), Brown attempted to address the performance issues plaguing the incumbent Democratic president. Thus, Brown's partisan issue emphasis was contradictory to his centrist image emphasis. This contradiction may have prevented the Massachusetts Republican from making a strong case as a centrist.

There are two potential explanations as to why McCaskill conveyed a more centrist issue agenda while Brown reiterated mostly Republican-owned issues. First, Republican issues tend to be more national in scope than Democratic issues (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Thus, it may be easier for a Democrat running for federal office to shift their issue agenda to Republican issues. We speculate another potential argument regarding Brown's failure to craft a centrist issue agenda rests with the current state of the Republican Party. As former Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE), who lost in a Senate primary to Tea Party-backed conservative Christine O'Donnell, noted, control by an ideological faction "is a more extensive problem right now in the Republican Party than in the Democratic Party," (Dionne, 2010, n.p.). While we argue both political parties have moved away from the center, perhaps, the presence of an identifiable ideological wing like the Tea Party creates a looming litmus test for which Republicans must maintain constant vigilance.

Centrist Image

Inductive analysis of centrist image acclaims has provided more depth to an amorphous term like centrism. As Hill (2009) noted, this inability to define centrism has often led to unflattering characterizations of moderate politicians being unprincipled. However, Claire McCaskill and Scott Brown framed centrism beyond serving as a swing voter on legislation. While it is correct, centrists act as compromisers who work across the aisle; centrists are also challengers who prevent groupthink among party members. Finally, centrists also distance themselves from D.C. culture—even if the sheer fact of incumbency indicated they belong to that culture.

Centrist Functions

Finally, centrist candidates chose to highlight their own centrism rather than attack their opponents as too partisan. Specifically, centrists devoted 40.5% of all acclaims to highlighting their centrist image. As incumbents, both Claire McCaskill and Scott Brown often acclaimed legislation they championed with colleagues from across the aisle. When discussing the Simpson-Bowles Commission, McCaskill explained, "We are working on a bipartisan basis in the Senate every day to try to cobble together a plan that would require $4-$5 trillion in debt and I'm part of that group." Brown highlighted his centrism through his

voting record by saying, "My 3rd vote was voting for Harry Reid and the president's jobs package. I have a history of working across the aisle."

In contrast, centrists devoted only 20% of all attacks to portraying their opponents as extreme or too partisan. For example, McCaskill attacked her opponent for being part of an extreme minority regarding Middle East foreign aid. During the second debate, McCaskill said:

Cong. Akin has joined a very small group in the Senate on this position. Not one member of the Armed Services Committee supported this extreme amendment. Every single Republican said this would make our country in danger. This would not make us safer. This will not make the Middle East safer. There were only 10 senators that voted for this amendment. This is the position he wants to take to the U.S. Senate. Once again, being on the extreme edge. Not being thoughtful. Not being reasonable.

Throughout both debates Brown frequently referenced his opponent being "lockstep" and voting "100 percent" with her party. In the second debate, Brown seized upon his opponent's response earlier in the debate. Brown argued, "With regard to working with any person on the opposite side of the aisle, she couldn't reference one person except someone who's retiring, a true bipartisan gentleman, Sen. Lugar."

Ultimately, for nearly every four acclaims of centrism, there was one attack against partisanship. There are several potential explanations for this finding. First, centrists can define their image by suggesting they are not as partisan or extreme as their opponent. However, debates allow for imminent rebuttal or the notion opponents can directly respond to accusations made during the debate (Ellsworth, 1965). Therefore, in attacking their opponent as highly partisan, centrists risk providing an opportunity for their opponent to offer evidence that argues the partisan characterization is inaccurate. Instead, centrists may choose to direct that attack through other forms of campaign communication, such as television ads or campaign surrogate interviews, where opponents cannot defend themselves immediately. Additionally, the centrist incumbents under investigation in this analysis were running in states that were ideologically opposite of the incumbents' parties. Connecting with the voters was critical to an electoral victory. Suggesting their opponents were highly partisan may have reinforced the opponents' shared values with a solidly partisan electorate. Additionally, the electorate may be turned away from mudslinging (Stewart, 1975). Thus, acclaiming centrism fulfills two objectives. First, for a candidate whose party affiliation is ideologically incongruent with a majority of the electorate, the centrist acclaim function highlights policy and character topics where the candidate and the voters can find common ground. Second, the centrist acclaim function is a safer alternative than the potential negative effects when candidates attack their opponents.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The researchers recognize the current analysis has limitations. First, due to a limited number of centrist Senate incumbents in the 2012 election cycle, only

four debates were analyzed. Second, this analysis only considered centrist incumbents and excluded centrist challengers. Finally, debates are only one of several channels through which to communicate a campaign's message.

Despite these limitations, our initial findings suggest centrists are not only aware of their ideological position but also view their centrist record as a strength to highlight in their debate messages. Although only four debates were analyzed, these initial findings offer a foundation for debate scholars to expand upon as more centrist incumbents like Sen. Kay Hagan (D-NC), Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA), and Sen. Mark Begich (D-AK) seek re-election in ideologically opposite states in 2014. Additionally, this analysis focused on the debate messages from centrist U.S. Senate incumbents. Future research should expand upon ideological positioning in debates by considering the messages of centrist challengers, highly partisan Senate candidates, and centrist candidates in other western democracies beyond the U.S. In addition to the analysis of debate content, future studies should also examine the effects of centrist messages on debate viewers.

Conclusion

On Election Night, Claire McCaskill defied the defeat that awaited many centrist senators, while Scott Brown joined the growing list of defeated moderates. Although the center may be fading away on Capitol Hill, future elections will decide whether this voting bloc goes from endangered to extinct. An analysis of centrist incumbent debate performances has provided a glimpse of how moderates attempt to survive in increasingly partisan states. While McCaskill and Brown utilized the debates both to project a centrist image and to cautiously attack their opponents' partisanship, the two incumbents differed in their issue agendas. McCaskill constructed a centrist issue agenda consisting of Republican, Democratic, and uniquely centrist issues. In contrast, Brown's issue agenda contained predominately Republican-owned issues. Now the election is over, there will be numerous reasons given for McCaskill's victory and Brown's loss. However, one point is certain. Both centrist incumbents saw their debates as one more opportunity to say the ideological middle still matters.

References

Allen, K. (2012, February 29). With Olympia Snowe's retirement, the center crumbles. *Politico.* Retrieved from http://www.politico.com

Airne, D. & Benoit, W.L. (2005). 2004 Illinois U.S. senate debates: Keyes versus Obama. *American Behavioral Scientist, 49,* 343-352.
      doi: 10.1177/0002764205279721

Banwart, M.C., & McKinney, M.S. (2005). A gendered influence in campaign debates? Analysis of mixed-gender United States senate and gubernatorial debates. *Communication Studies, 56,* 353-73.
      doi: 10.1080/10510970500319443

Benoit, W.L., Airne, D., Brazeal, L. (2011). Determinants of issue emphasis in gubernatorial and senate debates. *Human Communication, 14,* 127-136.

Benoit, W.L., Brazeal, L.M., Airne, D. (2007). A functional analysis of televised U.S. senate and gubernatorial campaign debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 44,* 75-89.

Benoit, W.L., Blaney, J.R., & Pier, P.M. (1998). *Campaign '96: A functional analysis of acclaiming, attacking, and defending.* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Benoit, W.L., & Harthcock, A. (1999). Functions of the great debates: Acclaims, attacks, and defenses in the 1960 presidential election. *Communication Monographs, 66,* 341-357. doi: 10/1080/03637759909376484

de Velasco, A. (2010). *Centrist rhetoric.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Dionne, E.J. (2010, September 16). Mike Castle's defeat—and the end of moderate Republicanism. *The Washington Post.*
Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com

Doherty, D. (2008). Presidential rhetoric, candidate evaluations, and party identification: Can parties "own" values? *Political Research Quarterly, 61,* 419-433. doi: 10.1177/1065912907308095

Ellsworth, J. W. (1965). Rationality and campaigning: A content analysis of the 1960

presidential campaign debates. *Western Political Quarterly, 18*, 794-802. doi: 10.2307/445855

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago: Aldine.

Hayes, D. (2005). Candidate qualities through a partisan lens: A theory of trait ownership. *American Journal of Political Science, 49,* 908-923. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00163.x

Herszenhorn, D.M. (2010, December 18). Senate blocks bill for young illegal immigrants. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com

Herszenhorn, D.M. (2009, February 10). Senate approves stimulus plan. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com

Hill, J.L. (2009). *The political centrist.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K.S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of Communication, 59,* 19-39. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x

Johnson, K. (2010, May 8). Utah delegates oust three-term G.O.P. senator from race. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com

Kaufmann, K.M. (2004). Disaggregating and reexamining issue ownership and voter choice. *Polity, 36,* 283-299.

Lindlof, T.R., & Taylor, B.C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McKinley, J.C. (2010, May 16). In the middle in Arkansas, and hit from both sides. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com

McKinney, M.S., & Carlin, D.B. (2004). Political campaign debates. In L.L. Kaid (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication research* (pp. 203-234) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.

Mutz, D.C., & Martin, P.S. (2001). Facilitating communication across lines of political difference: The role of the mass media. *American Political Science Review, 95,* 97-114.

Norpoth, H., & Buchanan (1992). Wanted: The education president. Issue trespassing by political candidates. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 56,* 87-99. doi: 10.1086/269297

Petrocik, J. (1996). Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study. *American Journal of Political Science, 40,* 825-850. doi: 10.2307/2111797

Petrocik, J.R., Benoit, W.L., & Hansen, G.l. (2003-2004). Issue ownership and presidential campaigning, 1952-2000. *Political Science Quarterly, 118,* 599-626. doi: 10.1002/j.1538-165X.2003.tb00407.x

Robertson, T. (2005). A perfect storm: A case study analysis of the defeat of Tom Daschle by John Thune in the 2004 South Dakota Senate race. *American Behavioral Scientist, 49,* 326-342. doi: 10.1177/0002764205279431

Stempel, G.H. (1994). Print media campaign coverage. In G.H. Stempel (Ed.), *The practice of political communication* (p. 40-49). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Stewart, C.J. (1975). Voter perception of mud-slinging in political communication. *Central States Speech Journal, 26,* 279-286. doi:10.1080/10510977509367854

Sunstein, C.R. (2007). *Republic.com 2.0.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Toeplitz, S. (2010, December 19). Eight republicans back 'don't ask' repeal. *Politico.* Retrieved from http://www.politico.com

Matthew L. Spialek, University of Missouri, and Stevie M. Munz, Ohio University.