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A Functional Analysis of 2008 and 2012 Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses

William L. Benoit

Abstract

This study investigates the presidential candidates' nomination acceptance addresses in 2008 and 2012. This study applied Benoit's (2007) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to the four Acceptances (one from McCain, two from Obama, and one from Romney). Traditionally the conventions kick off the general election campaign and the nominees' acceptance addresses are highlights of these events. This work extends previous research on acceptance addresses speeches from 1952-2004. The speeches in 2008 and 2012 used acclaims (73%) more than attacks (27%) or defenses (0.5%). Incumbents acclaimed more, and attacked less, than challengers, particularly when they discussed their records in office (past deeds). They discussed policy at about the same rate as character (52% to 48%). General goals and ideals were used more often as the basis of acclaims than attacks in these speeches.

Key Terms: Presidential Acceptances, Functions, Topics, 2008, 2012, Incumbents, Challengers

Introduction

The political party nominating conventions no longer select the nominees – today delegates selected in primary and caucus elections determine the nominee before the conventions and sometimes months before – but the party conventions are still important symbolic events. Designed for television, the candidates' acceptance addresses address millions of voters. These speeches are the highlight of the convention, when the candidate formally becomes the party's nominee for president. The candidates have a chance to re-introduce themselves, to spark supporters, sway some undecided voters to their side, and appeal to voters with weak ties to the opponent. Holbrook estimated that about a quarter of the electorate decides how to vote during the party nominating conventions (1996). Clearly, these speeches merit scholarly attention.

Recent work has updated Functional Theory research on presidential TV spots and debates (Benoit, 2014a, 2014b). Past research has investigated the content of these speeches from 1952 to 2004; this study extends that work by investigating the content of nominees acceptance addresses from the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. The 2008 election was unusual in that it was the first contest since 1952 that did not feature a “real” incumbent (neither President Bush nor Vice President Cheney ran). These elections also deserve study because they featured the first African-American president, Barack Obama. Next, we review the pertinent literature in this area. Then, the theory driving this research, the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, will be explicat-

ed and hypotheses and research questions for this study will be advanced. This is followed by a description of the method and presentation of the results.

Literature Review

Benoit (2007) reports data on Acceptance Addresses from 1952-2000 (see also Benoit, Wells, Pier, & Blaney, 1999, and Benoit, Stein, McHale, Chattopadhyay, Verser, & Price, 2007). In those elections acclaims (positive statements about the candidate speaking) accounted for 77% of the statements in acceptances; attacks (criticisms of the opponent) constituted 23% of utterances, and defenses were 0.7% of the statements in these speeches. Although all candidates were inclined to acclaim; incumbent party candidates acclaimed even more and attacked less than challengers. These contrasts were heightened when the candidates discussed their records in office or past deeds: Incumbent party candidates acclaimed far more (74% to 17%) and attacked much less (26% to 83%) than challengers. Acceptance addresses leaned toward policy (55%), with fewer utterances on character (45%). General goals and ideals were used more often as the basis of acclaims than attacks. This study investigates acceptance addresses from 2008 and 2012 to determine whether these relationships continue.

Theoretical Foundations

This study is based on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit, 2007). Functional Theory argues that political candidates use campaign messages to distinguish themselves from opponents. A candidate need not disagree with opponents on every issue; however, a candidate must be perceived as preferable to opponents on some points and doing so requires establishing some distinctions between opponents. Candidates use three functions (acclaims: positive statements about the candidate; attacks: criticisms of an opponent; defenses: refutations of attacks) and these functions occur on two topics (policy: governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action; character: the candidates' personality).

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) argues that acclaims (although not necessarily accepted by the audience) have no inherent drawbacks. Attacks should be less common than acclaims because voters say they dislike mudslinging (Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975). Defenses should be the least frequent function because they have three potential drawbacks. Defenses must identify an attack to refute it, which could remind or inform the audience of a potential weakness. Second, defenses are likely to target a candidate's weaknesses, which means that responding to it could take a candidate off-message. Third, using defenses could create the undesirable impression that a candidate is reactive rather than proactive.

H1. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will use acclaims more than attacks and attacks more than defenses.

Functional Theory argues that the best evidence of how one will perform in an elected office is how one has performed in that office in the past. Both incumbent party candidates and challengers are therefore likely to discuss the incumbent's record more often than the challenger's record. Of course, when incumbents discuss their own records they acclaim; when challengers discuss the incumbents' record they attack. In 2008 there was no true incumbent: President George Bush was term-limited and Vice President Dick Cheney decided not to run. John McCain was the incumbent party candidate.

H2. Incumbent party candidates from 2008 and 2012 will use acclaims more and attacks less than challengers in Acceptance Addresses.

H3. Incumbent party candidates from 2008 and 2012 will use acclaims more and attacks less than challengers when discussing past deeds (record in office) in Acceptance Addresses.

Functional Theory predicts that, in general, candidates will discuss policy more than character. Presidents implement governmental policy; some may view them as a role model (which would make character important) but they are probably not in the majority. Furthermore, research has established that more voters report that policy is the most important determinant of their vote for president and that candidates who stress policy more than their opponents – and character less – are more likely to win elections (Benoit, 2003). These considerations lead us to predict:

H4. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will discuss policy more than character.

Functional Theory divides policy utterances into three forms. Past deeds concern a candidate's successes (acclaims) or an opponent's failures (attacks) in office – record in office. Future plans are specific proposals for governmental action (means) whereas general goals are the ends sought. Some goals, such as creating jobs or keeping American safe, cannot readily be criticized. This means that general goals will be used more frequently as the basis for acclaims than attacks. So, we predict:

H5. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will use general goals as the basis for acclaims more often than attacks.

Functional theory divides character comments into those concerned with personal qualities (character traits), leadership ability (executive or administration ability), and ideals, which represent values such as freedom or equality. As with general goals, some ideals are simply difficult or impossible to attack. Who could attack an opponent who seeks equality or justice? Therefore, we predict:

H6. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will use ideals as the basis for acclaims more often than attacks.

As just explained, Functional Theory divides policy utterances and character utterances into subforms (see, e.g., Benoit, 2007 for illustrative examples). We also answer two research questions about the distribution of these forms of policy and character:

RQ1. What are the proportions of the three forms of policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses?

RQ2. What are the proportions of the three forms of character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses?

Together, the tests of these hypotheses and the answers to these research questions will extend our knowledge of these important convention speeches.

In 2008, Barack Obama secured the Democratic nomination in 2008, giving his Acceptance Address in Denver, Colorado, on August 28, 2008. John McCain obtained the GOP nomination, presenting his Acceptance Address in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 5, 2008 (the challenging party has its convention first). The Republican nominee in 2012 was Mitt Romney. His Acceptance Address was given on August 30, 2012 in Tampa, Florida. Only rarely is a sitting president challenged for his party's nomination; consistent with most past history, Obama was not challenged in 2012. On September 6, 2012, Obama delivered his Acceptance Address in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Method

To ensure comparability of data between this study and previous research, we followed the same procedures used for other Functional analyses generally and the previous research on Acceptance Addresses from 1952 to 2004 specifically (Benoit, 2007; Benoit, Stein, McHale, Chattopadhyay, Verser, & Price, 2007, and Benoit, Wells, Pier, & Blaney, 1999). Functional Theory unitizes the texts of campaign messages into themes, which are complete ideas, claims, or arguments; a single theme can vary in length from one phrase to an entire paragraph (see, e.g., Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969). The coders first identified themes present in these speeches. Then each theme was categorized by function: acclaim, attack or defense. Next, coders categorized the topic of each theme as policy or character. Then coders identified the form of policy or character for each theme.

Two coders analyzed the speeches. Inter-coder reliability was calculated with Cohen's (1960) *kappa*. 10% of each speech were analyzed by two coders to calculate inter-coder reliability. *Kappa* was .89 for functions, .86 for topics, .93 for forms of policy, and .86 for forms of character. Landis and Koch (1977) indicate that *kappas* of .81 or higher reflect almost perfect agreement between coders, so these data have acceptable reliability.

Results

This section presents the results of this analysis of 2008 and 2012 acceptance addresses. Tests of each hypothesis and answers to the two research questions will be presented next. Texts of these speeches were obtained from the Internet (McCain, 2008; Obama, 2008, 2012; Romney, 2012).

Functions of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

Overall, acclaims were most common function (73%) in these speeches. For instance, Obama in 2012 declared that “I’ve cut taxes for those who need it, middle-class families, small businesses.” Reducing taxes is likely to be perceived as a laudatory accomplishment. Attacks were the second most common function in these acceptances (27%). Governor Romney attacked President Obama in 2012 when he said “his promises gave way to disappointment and division.” These accusations clearly criticize his opponent. Defenses were very rare in these speeches (0.5%). Only one of these four speeches (Obama in 2012) used defenses. The President offered excuses for the travails of his first term: “That hope has been tested by the cost of war, by one of the worst economic crises in history, by political gridlock.” These three factors are used to excuse disappointing performances over the previous years. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit test* reveals that these three functions occurred with different frequencies ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 506.48, p < .0001$). The first hypothesis was confirmed; see Table 1 for these data.

Table 1
Functions of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Obama 2008	118	61	0
McCain 2008	136	12	0
Obama 2012	125	46	3
Romney 2012	80	50	0
2008-2012 Total	459 (73%)	169 (27%)	3 (0.5%)
1952-2004	2193 (77%)	652 (23%)	20 (0.7%)

Incumbency and Functions of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

In these four speeches, incumbent party candidates acclaimed more and attacked less than challengers. A *chi-square* analysis reveals that these two functions occurred with different frequencies for incumbents and challengers ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 25.02, \phi = .2, p < .0001$; defenses excluded from this analysis). All four candidates acclaimed more than they attacked but the two incumbent party candidates were even more positive than challengers: Incumbents acclaimed more than challengers (81%, 64%) and attacked less than challengers (18%, 36%). These data confirm H2. This relationship is even stronger when the analysis focuses on past deeds or record in office ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 38.90, \phi = .61, p < .0001$). Incumbent party candidates primarily acclaimed on past deeds (77% acclaims, 23% attacks) whereas challengers mainly attacked (84% attacks, 16% acclaims)

when the candidates discussed their records in office. See Table 2 for these data. So, H3 was confirmed with these data.

Table 2
Incumbents versus Challengers in Acceptance Addresses

	Ac-claims	Attacks	Defenses	Acclaim PD	Attack PD
2008-2012					
Incumbents	261 (81%)	58 (18%)	3 (1%)	34 (77%)	10 (23%)
Challengers	198 (64%)	111 (36%)	0	10 (16%)	51 (84%)
1952-2004					
Incumbents	1273 (82%)	259 (17%)	16 (1%)	387 (74%)	100 (26%)
Challengers	920 (70%)	383 (30%)	4 (0.3%)	44 (17%)	213 (83%)

Topics of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

Overall, policy utterances (52%) occurred at virtually the same rate as character utterances (48%) in these acceptances. An example of a policy utterance can be found in this statement in Romney's 2012 Acceptance: "This Obama economy has crushed the middle class. Family income has fallen by \$4,000, but health insurance premiums are higher, food prices are higher, utility prices are higher, and gasoline prices have doubled. Today more Americans wake up in poverty than ever before." Income, health insurance, inflation, and poverty are clear examples of policy. In contrast, Obama in 2012 offered this example of a discussion of his character: "You elected me to tell the truth." Honesty is a clear example of a character topic. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test establishes that there is no significant difference in the frequency of these two topics ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 1.43, p > .2$). The fourth hypothesis was not confirmed here; Table 3 reports these data.

Table 3
Topic of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Policy	Character
Obama 2008	96	83
McCain 2008	75	73
Obama 2012	99	72
Romney 2012	59	71
2008-2012	329 (52%)	299 (48%)
1952-2004	1558 (55%)	1287 (45%)

Forms of Policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

The first research question concerned the distribution of the three forms of policy in these nomination acceptance speeches (examples of acclaims and attacks on the forms of policy and character are provided in Benoit, 2007). In this sample general goals (63%) were the most common form of policy, followed by past deeds (41%), and then future plans (13%).

H5 expected that general goals would be used more often as the basis for acclaims than attacks. In these data, candidates were significantly more likely to use utterances about general goals to praise themselves (78%) than to attack their opponent (22%). Statistical analysis using a *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test confirmed that this difference was significant ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 66.13, p < .0001$). See Table 4.1 and 4.2 for these data.

Table 4.1

Forms of Policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Past Deeds		Future Plans	
	Ac-claims	Attacks	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	44	61	10	7
	105 (32%)		17 (5%)	
1952-2004	331	313	168	41
	644 (41%)		209 (13%)	

Table 4.2

Forms of Policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	General Goals	
	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	162	45
	207 (63%)	
1952-2004	649	56
	705 (45%)	

Forms of Character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

On character, these campaign messages most often discussed ideals (59%), followed by personal qualities (32%) and then leadership ability (9%). H6 expected that candidates would use ideals, like general goals, more to acclaim than to attack. This hypothesis was confirmed in these data: 86% of ideals were acclaims and 14% were attacks. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test confirmed that these frequencies were significantly different ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 65.32, p < .0001$). These data are displayed in Table 5.1 and 5.2.

Table 5.1
Forms of Character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Personal Qualities		Leadership Abilities	
	Ac-claims	Attacks	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	111	22	25	17
	133 (44%)		42 (14%)	
1952-2004	313	94	86	34
	407 (32%)		120 (9%)	

Table 5.2
Forms of Character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Ideals	
	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	107	17
	124 (41%)	
1952-2004	646	114
	760 (59%)	

Discussion

The presidential candidates’ acceptance addresses used acclaims most often, followed by attacks, and least often defenses. This is consistent with Functional Theory’s predictions (Benoit, 2007) and the data from 1952-2004 acceptances (Table 1). Acclaims may not always persuade voters, but they have no inherent drawbacks. Attacks risk alienating voters who dislike mudslinging. Defenses are the least common function for three reasons: Defending usually takes a candidate off-message, may remind or inform voters of potential drawbacks, and can create the impression that the candidate is reactive rather than proactive. Incumbents are even more positive than challengers (in 2008 and 2012 as well as from 1952-2004); this relationship is especially pronounced when they discuss past deeds or record in office. Past deeds are arguably the best evidence of how a candidate will perform if elected so both incumbents and challengers discuss the incumbent’s record more than the challenger’s record – and incumbents acclaim when they talk about their own record whereas challengers attack when addressing the incumbent’s record. These candidates discussed policy and character at about the same rate; in the past policy had an edge. Benoit (2007) reports that debates, TV spots, and direct mail brochures discuss policy more than acceptances; these convention speeches are designed to celebrate the candidate which explains why acceptances discuss character more than other message forms. In fact, only Romney in 2012 discussed character more than policy; he focused more on character than most acceptances (including McCain’s speech in 2008). In these speeches, general goals were the most common form of policy, followed by past deeds and then future plans. This distribution is consistent with

past speeches. On character, candidates discussed personal qualities and ideals at about the same level; leadership ability was discussed less often. In previous elections, leadership were also the least frequent form of character. Both general goals and ideals were used more often to acclaim than attack. It is easier to praise than attack such goals as creating jobs and keeping America safe or such ideals as justice or equality.

Conclusion

This study extends previous scholarship on the functions and topics of presidential nomination acceptance addresses. Past research has used Functional Theory (see Benoit, 2007) to analyze acceptances from 1952-2004; this study adds the four acceptances from 2008 and 2012. The basic situation present for these speeches – candidates trying to persuade voters that they are preferable to opponents – results in similar content on certain dimensions: functions, functions and incumbency, functions for general goals and ideals. The results reported here were in the main consistent with past speeches. The only prediction not confirmed was that policy would be discussed more frequently than character: No significant difference occurred in these speeches. The emphasis on character was strongest in Mitt Romney's 2012 Acceptance Address. It must be noted that traditionally policy is more common in TV spots and debates than Acceptances, so it is not altogether surprising that this hypothesis was not confirmed in the data reported here. In general, these speeches, the culmination of the two political parties' celebration of their nominees, reach more voters than other speeches and merit scholarly attention.

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