

# CORNERSTONE

 MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY MANKATO

## Speaker & Gavel

Volume 44 | Issue 1

Article 3

January 2007

# Newspaper Coverage of U.S. Senate Debates

William L. Benoit

*Ohio University*, [benoitw@ohio.edu](mailto:benoitw@ohio.edu)

Corey Davis

*University of Wisconsin, Whitewater*, [davisc@uww.edu](mailto:davisc@uww.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/speaker-gavel>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Benoit, W., & Davis, C. (2007). Newspaper Coverage of U.S. Senate Debates. *Speaker & Gavel*, 44, 13-26.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Speaker & Gavel* by an authorized administrator of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

## **Newspaper Coverage of U.S. Senate Debates**

William Benoit  
Corey Davis

### Abstract

Political debates are important message forms, capable of informing and influencing voters. However, news coverage of debates informs and influences both those who watch, and those who do not watch, the debates. This study compared the content (functions and topics) of 10 U.S. Senate debates from 1998-2004 with the content of newspaper articles about those particular debates. Newspaper coverage of debates was significantly more negative than the debates themselves, reporting a higher percentage of attacks and a smaller percentage of acclaims than the candidates employed. The newspaper articles also stressed character more, and policy less, than the candidates. This journalistic emphasis may facilitate the impression that the candidates are more negative than they really are and that candidates are more concerned with character – and less with policy – than their messages indicate. We also discovered that newspaper coverage of senatorial debates stresses defenses more, policy less, and character more than news coverage of presidential debates.

### Introduction

There can be no doubt that political debates are a very important campaign medium (McKinney & Carlin, 2004; Racine Group, 2002). A media effects perspective is justified by the results of a recent meta-analysis: Debates have been found to increase knowledge of the issues and change preference for candidates' issue stands, debates are capable of producing an agenda-setting effect, debates have been shown to alter perceptions of the candidates' personality, and debates can also affect vote preference of viewers (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). Clearly, political debates merit scholarly attention.

Accordingly, scholars have developed an extensive literature on presidential debates (books on the topic include Benoit & Wells, 1996; Bishop, Meadow, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Carlin & McKinney, 1994; Coleman, 2000; Friedenberg, 1994; Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992; Hinck, 1993; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Kraus, 1962, 1979, 2000; Lemert et al., 1991; Martel, 1983; Racine Group, 2002; Swerdlow, 1984, 1987). However, political debates in campaigns for other offices besides that of the president are becoming increasingly common in modern campaigns. For instance, almost twenty years ago Ornstein (1987) observed that "These days debates are the norm, not the exception, in congressional, mayoral, and gubernatorial politics" (p. 58). Debates for non-presidential elective office have reached higher levels of visibility in recent years because of the national attention they receive from C-SPAN, which televised over 100 debates in 2002 and 2004. Research indicates that presidential primary debates have

larger effects on viewers than debates in the general election campaign (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003), it seems likely that viewers know less about contenders in the primary campaign than about the two party nominees in the general election phase. It is possible that these non-presidential debates also have relatively large effects because the candidates for these offices also tend to be less well-known than the Democratic and Republican nominees for president.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that millions of people watch political debates and they may be influenced directly by these campaign events. However, Kendall (1997) noted that news coverage of the debates is also very important to voters: "Not only do they see the debates, but they also see the commentary about those debates on television news, as well as in other media. Many more people who have not watched the debates also hear or read analyses of them" (p. 1). So, news coverage of debates has the potential to influence both voters who watch, and voters who do not watch, political debates. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that news coverage of debates has important consequences for the electorate. Chaffee and Dennis (1979) argue that "It may well be that the press's interpretation of the debate. . . is more important in determining the impact on the electorate than is the debate itself" (p. 85; see also Lowry, Bridges, & Barefield, 1990; Steeper, 1978). Accordingly, this study investigates news coverage of campaign debates for U.S. Senate.

#### Literature Review

Several studies have investigated news coverage of presidential campaigns (for a review, see Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). A number of other studies have examined news coverage of non-presidential campaigns (e.g., Atkeson & Partin, 2001; Becker & Fuchs, 1967; Graber, 1989; Kahn, 1995; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Kelley, 1958; Ostroff & Sandell, 1984; Serini, Powers, & Johnson, 1998; Simon, 2002; Tidmarch, Hyman, & Sorkin, 1984; Vermeer, 1987; West, 1994). None of this work on non-presidential election coverage, however, has looked specifically at news coverage of political debates. Other studies have investigated non-presidential debates (Bystrom, Roper, Gobetz, Massey, & Beal, 1991; Conrad, 1993; Hullett & Loudon, 1998; Just, Crigler, & Wallach, 1990; Lichtenstein, 1982; Ornstein, 1987; Pfau, 1983; Philport & Balon, 1975). However, these studies also have not examined news coverage of those debates.

A few studies have examined news coverage of presidential debates, comparing the content of debates with content of the news coverage of those debates. The key variables – function and topic – are derived from Functional Theory (Benoit, in press; Benoit et al. 2003). Political campaign messages have three distinct functions: acclaims, which praise the candidate; attacks, which attack the opponent; and defenses, which refute attacks. This discourse can occur on two topics: policy (governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action) and character (the qualities and abilities of the candidates). So, statements by candidates (in the debates and quoted or paraphrased in news stories about the debates) have two dimensions: functions (acclaims, attacks, and defenses) and topics (policy and character).

Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2004; see also Benoit & Currie, 2001) content analyzed newspaper coverage of presidential campaign debates from the general election, 1980-2000. They found that the news stories on debates were significantly more negative than the debates covered in the stories: Attacks comprised 50% of the statements from candidates reported in the news but only 31% of the statements candidates made in the debates; acclaims appeared less frequently in coverage than debates. Similarly, Benoit, Hansen, and Stein (2004; see also Reber & Benoit 2001) analyzed newspaper coverage of presidential primary debates from 1980-2004. Once again, attacks were exaggerated in stories about these debates (52% in stories, 20% in debates), whereas acclaims were under reported. So, news stories about both presidential primary and general debates have been found to be much more negative than the campaign messages themselves.

This line of work has also examined the topics of news coverage of general presidential debates. In the general campaign, policy was discussed significantly more in the debates than in the stories about the debates (74% to 69%) whereas character was emphasized more in the news than in the debates themselves (31% to 26%; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004). Once again, this pattern occurred in newspaper stories about presidential primary debates as well. In the debates, the candidates devoted significantly more of their comments to policy than did stories about the debates (65% to 60%); the stories stressed character more than the debates (40% to 35%). Kendall (1997), who wrote about news coverage of the 1996 presidential debates, reported a similar pattern:

Media interpretations have been found to follow a pattern: They devote little time to the content of the debates and much time to the personalities of the candidates and the process by which they make the decision to debate, prepare to debate, and “spin” the stories about expectations for and effects of the debates. (p. 1)

In short, the news appears to have a tendency to overemphasize character coverage at the expense of policy.

So, newspaper coverage of both primary and general presidential debates reveal two patterns: (1) news stories discuss attacks more frequently than they occur in debates and (2) stories emphasize character more, and policy less, than the debates. However, we do not know whether these patterns also occur in non-presidential debates. Accordingly, this study will replicate existing studies of newspaper coverage of general (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004) and primary (Benoit, Hansen, & Stein, 2004) presidential debates, extending that work to investigate news coverage of U.S. Senate debates. Based on the findings just reported, we propose two hypotheses:

- H1. Newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates will cover attacks more frequently, and acclaims less frequently, than they occur in the debates.
- H2. Newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates will cover character more frequently, and policy less frequently, than they occur in the debates.

Finally, existence of data on newspaper coverage of presidential debates (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004) allows us to test for differences in emphasis of functions or topics between presidential and senatorial news coverage:

- RQ1. Does newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates emphasize the same functions as coverage of presidential debates?
- RQ2. Does newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates emphasize the same topics as coverage of presidential debates?

This study will extend our knowledge of news coverage of political campaign debates to contests for other political office.

### Method

We analyzed newspaper coverage of 10 U.S. Senate debates from 1998-2004. These debates featured 10 Democrats and 10 Republicans including 7 incumbents, 7 challengers, and 6 open-seat candidates, a nice balance of candidates (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006). For the current study, we employed Lexis-Nexis to locate newspaper stories about each of these debates. We searched for articles published after the debates (rather than articles about preparation for or expectations about the debates) so we could compare the content of the debates with the content of articles reporting on the debates. We ignored articles that did not focus on the debate, were very short, or were transcripts of the debates. These procedures obtained a sample of 17 newspaper articles about this sample of debates (note that these articles were written about these particular debates, not about Senate debates generally). The sample is described in Table 1.

The content – functions and topics – of these debates is known from previous research (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006),<sup>1</sup> which will facilitate comparison of our (new) content analysis of news coverage of these debates with (existing) content analysis of the debates themselves. Similarly, we can compare the data on newspaper coverage of presidential debates (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004) with the new data on newspaper coverage of senatorial debates produced here. The content analysis in this study of news coverage employed three steps, utilizing the same procedures employed to analyze these Senate debates. First, we located statements in a newspaper story that described the candidates' comments in the debate (either direct quotations or paraphrases). Other comments, such as descriptions of the debates and evaluative statements from the reporters, were excluded. Second, the statements in the stories about the candidates' comments were unitized into themes or utterances that address a coherent idea (in our discussion, we use the terms "utterances," "comments," and "remarks" synonymously with "themes"). Berelson (1952) defined a theme as "an assertion about a subject-matter" (p. 138). Holsti (1969) explained that a theme is "a single assertion about some subject" (p. 116). So, a theme is an argument (an argument<sub>1</sub> in O'Keefe's [1977] terminology) about the candidates or their issue positions. Because discourse is enthymematic, themes can vary in length from a

phrase to several sentences. Third, as in the research on debates, each theme in the newspaper stories was coded for the two variables under investigation here: functions (acclaims, attacks, defenses) and topics (policy, character).

Table 1. *Newspaper Stories on Senate Debates*

Year	Stories	State	Candidates	Incumbent	Challenger	Open
2004 9/19	2	SD	Daschle Thune	1	1	0
2004 10/30	1	UT	VanDam Bennett	1	1	0
2004 10/3	1	OK	Carson Coburn	0	0	2
2004 10/12	2	IL	Obama Keyes	0	0	2
2002 9/22	2	CO	Strickland Allard	1	1	0
2002 10/24	2	MO	Carnahan Talent	1	1	0
2000 9/13	2	NY	Clinton Lazio	0	0	2
2000 10/24	2	CA	Feinstein Campbell	1	1	0
2000 10/22	1	MI	Stabenow Abraham	1	1	0
1998 10/19	2	FL	Graham Crist	1	1	0
Total	17	10	20	7	7	6

First candidate is a Democrat; second candidate is a Republican.

We then compared the data about news coverage produced by these content analytic procedures with the results of previous content analysis of these Senate debates. In other words, we began with the content analysis of the debates already available in the literature, and replicated those procedures to content analyze newspaper stories about the debates, and then compared the results of the existing content analyses of the debates with the new content analyses of the news coverage of these debates. The data from content analysis of debates and newspaper coverage of those debates are comparable because they were generated with identical procedures.

Two coders performed content analysis on these texts. Reliability was assessed with a subset of approximately 10% of the texts. We employed Cohen's (1960)  $\kappa$ , which accounts for agreement by chance.  $\kappa$  for function (acclaim, attack, defend) in coding the debates was .93;  $\kappa$  for topic (policy, character) was .88. In the analysis of newspaper stories  $\kappa$  for functions in newspaper stories was .95 and for coding topic was .91. Landis and Koch (1977) indicate that  $\kappa$ s between .61-.80 reflect "substantial" agreement and  $\kappa$ s between .81-1.0 represent "almost perfect" inter-coder reliability (p. 165). This means the reliability of these data are acceptable.

Because the content analytic procedures produce frequency data, we will test the two hypotheses with *chi-square* analyses. We report the significance level and the effect size (Cramer's *V* for 2x3 *chi-squares* and  $\phi$  for 2x2 *chi-squares*).

### Results

The first hypothesis predicted that newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates would be more negative than the debates themselves. This prediction was upheld in these data: the most common function in news coverage was attacks despite the fact that the most common function in the debates was acclaims. Specifically, attacks comprised only 29% of the debate utterances but were 48% of the statements from candidates in the articles; acclaims, on the other hand, constituted 60% of the statements made by candidates in the debates but only 39% of the statements from candidates in the news articles. For example, a story about the 1998 Graham-Crist debate reported that Charlie Crist charged that Bob Graham "has voted for more taxes" (March & Kennedy, 1998, p. 1). This illustrates an attack because most voters prefer lower, rather than higher, taxes. On the other hand, the story also reported that Graham boasted that he voted "to bring us to a balanced budget and the strongest economy we've had in this century," a clear illustration of acclaiming. A story on the 2000 Feinstein-Campbell debates reported that Tom Campbell accused the Democrat of having a conflict of interest. The story reported that "Feinstein dismissed the allegations as a desperate tactic by a losing candidate" (Ainsworth, 2000, p. A3), an example of a defense. A story on the Strickland-Allard debate of 2002 reported that Allard accused Strickland of "misstating Allard's positions in television ads" (McAllister, 2002, p. A1). Because the actual policy positions are not discussed, this is an attack on Strickland for dishonesty in his campaign. These differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 [df = 2] = 80.17, p < .0001, V = .18$ ; the frequency of acclaims versus attacks [excluding defenses] was also significantly different:  $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 82.96, p < .0001, \phi = .19$ ) and the data are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. *Functions of U.S. Senate Debates and News Coverage, 1998-2004*

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	$\chi^2 (df = 2)$
Debates	1346 (60%)	597 (29%)	219 (11%)	80.17, $p < .0001$
News Stories	163 (39%)	200 (48%)	57 (14%)	$V = .18$

*Note.* The *chi-square* for acclaims versus attacks (excluding defenses) is also statistically significant: 82.96,  $p < .0001, \phi = .19$ .

Hypothesis 2 anticipated that newspaper articles about U.S. Senate debates would stress character more, and policy less, than the debates themselves. This prediction was also confirmed. Although both debates and newspapers discussed policy more than character, the emphasis on policy was greater in the debates (71%) than in the news stories (57%); conversely, newspaper articles discussed character more than the debates (43% to 29%). For example, the story on the

Feinstein-Campbell debate reported that Feinstein said “she had worked with Republicans to produce major bills like the Desert Protection Act, the Tahoe Restoration Plan, and the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban” (Ainsworth, 2000, p. A3). This statement is an example of policy discussion. These differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 26.02, p < .0001, \phi = .11$ ) and the data can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. *Topics of U.S. Senate Debates and News Coverage, 1998-2004*

	Policy	Character	$\chi^2 (df = 1)$
Debates	1307 (71%)	536 (29%)	26.02, $p < .0001$
News Stories	210 (57%)	156 (43%)	$\phi = .11$

The first research question concerned the distribution of the three functions in news coverage of senatorial and presidential debates. There was a statistically significant difference in functions ( $\chi^2 [df = 2] = 7.97, p < .05, V = .05$ ). Inspection of the means reported in Table 4 shows that senatorial debate coverage reports fewer acclaims and attacks and more defenses than presidential debate coverage. Further analysis using only acclaims and attacks reveals that there is no significant difference in use of these two functions ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = .05, p > .82$ ), which means that the difference in function inheres only in defense.

Table 4. *Functions of News Coverage of Presidential and U.S. Senate Debates*

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	$\chi^2 (df = 2)$
Senate	163 (39%)	200 (48%)	57 (14%)	7.97, $p < .05$
Presidential	969 (41%)	1160 (50%)	214 (9%)	$V = .05$

Note. The *chi-square* for acclaims versus attacks (excluding defenses) is not significant:  $.05, p > .82$ .

Research question two investigated the emphasis on the two topics in senatorial and presidential debate news coverage. Here again a significant difference emerged: Senate debate coverage discussed policy less, and character more, than presidential debate coverage ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 18.34, p < .05, \phi = .08$ ). See Table 5 for these data.

Table 5. *Topics of News Coverage of Presidential and U.S. Senate Debates*

	Policy	Character	$\chi^2 (df = 1)$
Senate	210 (57%)	156 (43%)	18.34, $p < .05$
Presidential	1542 (69%)	702 (31%)	$\phi = .08$

### Discussion

This study investigated the accuracy of newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates. Rather than perform fact checks (e.g., [www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org)) on the truth of reporters' statements, we looked to see if newspaper articles about debates



accurately reflected the tone and topics of the debates themselves. As with news coverage of presidential primary and general debates (Benoit, Hansen, & Stein, 2004; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004), newspaper accounts of Senate debates accentuate the negative. Attacks comprised less than one-third of the statements made by candidates in these debates; however, almost half of all statements attributed to candidates in these articles were attacks. Positive statements were correspondingly under represented (60% of candidate debate statements were acclaims but only 39% of the comments quoted or paraphrased from candidates were positive). Clearly, these newspaper articles fostered the impression that these Senate debates were more negative than they were in fact.

A negative tone in political campaign coverage should not be surprising. Hart observed that “political news is reliably negative” (p. 173). The *New York Times*’ coverage of general election campaigns is more negative (57%) than positive (39%; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Similarly, Jamieson, Waldman, and Devitt (1998) observed that “reliance on news reports for information about the campaign would lead one to conclude that it contained a far higher level of attack than was in fact the case” (p. 325). So newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates is substantially more negative than the campaign messages themselves.

This emphasis on the negative in news articles is easy to understand. Attacks, clash, or conflict is likely to be more interesting than platitudes. Surely journalists want to arouse and maintain their readers’ interest and a focus on attacks might well be thought to serve this goal. Furthermore, voters must know the differences between candidates in order to decide whom is preferable. If voters only hear positive statements (“I’m for more jobs,” “I’m also for more jobs,” “I want to protect Social Security,” “I will also preserve Social Security”), there is little basis for preferring one over the other. Criticism or attacks – if truthful and accurate – can help distinguish candidates and give voters a reason to prefer one over another. So, attacks are not necessarily undesirable in and of themselves.

The potential problem lies in the fact that newspaper coverage of debates could easily create the impression that the candidates were more negative than was actually the case. Although some questions have been raised about their study (see, e.g., Finkel & Geer, 1999), Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) argued that negativity in political advertising adversely affects voter turnout. It is possible that high levels of negativity – or high *perceived* levels of negativity – in political debates could also depress voter turnout. It is worth noting that, as Finkel and Geer point out, one of Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s studies content analyzed negativity in news about the campaign (rather than negativity in television spots). That means their research actually found that higher levels of attacks in *news* was associated with lower turnout. Therefore, there is a possibility that the fact that news coverage of U.S. Senate debates is so negative could have a tendency to depress voter turnout on election day.

Our findings also indicate that newspaper accounts of Senate debates emphasize character more, and policy less, than the debates themselves. News coverage of presidential campaigns generally emphasizes horse race the most (40%

of themes in stories); after that, character is more common than policy (31% to 25%; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). This emphasis on character is also consistent with studies of news coverage of presidential primary and general debates (Benoit, Hansen, & Stein, 2004; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004). Similarly, Sears and Chaffee (1979) commented on the 1976 presidential debates: “the debates themselves were heavily issue-oriented, but the subsequent coverage of them decidedly less so” (p. 228). As with presidential debates, newspaper coverage of Senate debates stressed policy less, and character more, than the debates themselves.

Why would journalists stress character more than the candidates themselves? Patterson (1994) explained that “Policy problems lack the novelty that the journalist seeks. . . . The first time that a candidate takes a position on a key issue, the press is almost certain to report it. Further statements on the same issue become progressively less newsworthy, unless a new wrinkle is added” (p. 61). So, the search for the “new” in “news” may incline journalists to slight policy. Furthermore, Clarke and Evans (1983), who surveyed 82 reporters who covered U.S. House of Representative races in 1978, observed that:

Candidates are above all recognized for speaking out on particular policy positions.... Strikingly, issue-related topics recede when reporters turn to analyzing the strengths and weaknesses that they think will determine the election.... On the whole, candidates do not dwell on these [personal] characteristics in their appeals to voters. Yet journalists believe that they are important factors in determining the outcome of a congressional race. (pp. 39-42)

If journalists believe that character is more important than policy, it makes sense that they would stress that topic in their articles about debates.

However, the journalists’ tendency to privilege character over policy is not consistent with voters’ express wishes. Brazeal and Benoit (2001) report public opinion data from five different years in which voters reported that state, local, and national issues were a more important determinant of their vote for Congress than candidate character. Similarly, a Princeton Survey Research Associates poll from 1999 (on presidential elections) found that only 8% of respondents thought that news organizations should pay the most attention to “what a candidate is like as a person”; in sharp contrast, 27% said the news should devote most attention to “what a candidate has accomplished in the past” and 63% thought the news should spend most time on “what a candidate believes about important issues.” An emphasis on character over policy in stories about Senate debates may be detrimental to voters’ interests.

### Conclusion

This study investigated newspaper coverage of U.S. Senate debates from 1998-2004. Political debates have become more popular as time passes and research has established that they are capable of influencing voters. However, news coverage of debates can influence those who watch these debates as well

as those who do not watch them. The newspaper articles in our sample did not accurately reflect the content of the debates on two dimensions. First, the frequency of attacks in news coverage was much higher than the frequency of attacks in the debates themselves. This emphasis may foster the impression that campaigns are more negative than they are in fact. Second, the news stories discussed character more, and policy less, than the debates. This journalistic emphasis may do a disservice to voters, who report that policy is more important to them than character.

This study also discovered that although the general emphasis is the same (newspaper coverage of debates at both levels stresses attacks and character more than the debates themselves), nevertheless there are differences in news coverage of senatorial and presidential debates. Senate debate coverage stresses defenses more than presidential debate coverage. Senate races have a more limited audience than presidential debates because the candidates' constituency in senate campaigns are statewide rather than nationwide. Presidential candidates need to address a wider range of issues to address the national electorate, compared with senate candidates. This could mean that the news coverage stresses defenses to highlight differences on the issues that matter most to voters. The other difference – more coverage of character and less of policy in senate than presidential coverage – may be related to the fact that a senator is 1 among 99 other senators – and one among 534 other members of congress. When the president signs a bill or implements the law, he (all presidents so far have been male) appears to be solely responsible and is therefore clearly associated with the policy. Because responsibility for legislation is so diffuse (535 law makers in congress), it is more difficult for senators to become identified with particular policies. Thus, news coverage may stress character of senatorial candidates more than presidential candidates. Note that we do not argue the president *in fact* is solely responsible; clearly the entire executive branch is involved.. Our point is that the president is more likely to be *perceived* as responsible for a policy than a senator.

Future research could consider both other news media – such as television or Internet coverage of debates – and political debates held for other offices besides the U.S. Senate. Debates for governor, U.S. House, as well as other offices have been held. Political debates have also been held in other countries (including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Israel, New Zealand, Scotland, South Korea, Sweden, Poland, Taiwan, and the Ukraine) and news coverage of those events merit scholarly attention. Although the results reported here are consistent with presidential primary and general news coverage of debates, we do not know if the findings would replicate with other kinds of political debates. Furthermore, research on the effects of watching debates, comparing those exposed to news reports and those who are not, could add to our understanding.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Benoit, Brazeal, and Airne content analyzed 15 Senate debates; however, we were only able to locate newspaper stories about 10 of those debates. In order to make the data for debates and news directly comparable here, this study only includes data from the 10 debates for which we could locate newspaper articles. Accordingly, the data on Senate debates for functions and topics vary between their results and the data we report here (the frequencies are smaller and the percentages are slightly different here).

## References

- Ainsworth, B. (2000, October 25). Campbell rips Feinstein over China ties. *San Diego Union-Tribune*, p. A3.
- Ansolabehere, S., & Iyengar, S. (1995). *Going negative: How attack ads shrink and polarize the electorate*. New York: Free Press.
- Atkeson, L. R., & Partin, R. W. (2001). Candidate advertisements, media coverage, and citizen attitudes: The agendas and roles of senators and governors in a federal system. *Political Research Quarterly*, *54*, 795-813.
- Becker, J., & Fuchs, D. A. (1967). How two major California dailies covered Reagan versus Brown. *Journalism Quarterly*, *44*, 645-653.
- Benoit, W. L. (in press). *Communication in political campaigns*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Benoit, W. L., Brazeal, L. M., & Airne, D. (2006). *A functional analysis of televised U.S. Senate campaign debates*. unpublished manuscript.
- Benoit, W. L., & Currie, H. (2001). Inaccuracies in media coverage of presidential debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *38*, 28-39.
- Benoit, W. L., Hansen, G. J., & Stein, K. A. (2004). News coverage of presidential primary debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *40*, 246-258.
- Benoit, W. L., Stein, K. A., & Hansen, G. J. (2005). *New York Times* coverage of presidential campaigns, 1952-2000. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *82*, 356-376.
- Benoit, W. L., Hansen, G. J., & Verser, R. M. (2003). A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing U.S. presidential debates. *Communication Monographs*, *70*, 335-350.
- Benoit, W. L., Stein, K. A., & Hansen, G. J. (2004). Newspaper coverage of presidential debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *41*, 17-27.
- Benoit, W. L., Pier, P. M., Brazeal, L. M., McHale, J. P., Klyukovski, A., & Airne, D. (2002). *The primary decision: A functional analysis of debates in presidential primaries*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Benoit, W. L., & Wells, W. T. (1996). *Candidates in conflict: Persuasive attack and defense in the 1992 presidential debates*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Bishop, G. F., Meadow, R. G., & Jackson-Beeck, M. (Eds.). (1979). *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives*. New York: Praeger.

- Brazeal, L. M., & Benoit, W. L. (2001). A functional analysis of Congressional television spots, 1986-2000. *Communication Quarterly*, 49, 436-454.
- Bystrom, R., Roper, C., Gobetz, A., Massey, T., & Beal, C. (1991). The effects of a televised gubernatorial debate. *Political Communication Review*, 16, 57-80.
- Carlin, D. B., & McKinney, M. S. (Eds.). (1994). *The 1992 presidential debates in focus*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Chaffee, S. H., & Dennis, J. (:1979). Presidential debates: An empirical assessment. In A. Ranney (Ed.), *The past and future of presidential debates* (pp. 75-106). Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
- Clarke, P., & Evans, S. H. (1983). *Covering campaigns: Journalism in congressional elections*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Cohen, J. (1960). A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20, 37-46.
- Coleman, S. (Ed.). (2000). *Televised election debates: International perspectives*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Conrad, C. (1993). Political debates as televisual form. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 30, 62-76.
- Finkel, S. E., & Geer, J. G. (1998). A spot check: Casting doubt on the demobilizing effect of attack advertising. *American Journal of Political Science*, 42, 573-595.
- Friedenberg, R. V. (1994). Patterns and trends in national political debates: 1960-1992. In R. F. Friedenberg, (Ed.), *Rhetorical studies of national political debates, 1960-1992* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 235-259). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Graber, D. A. (1989). *Mass media and American politics* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.
- Hart, R. P. (2000). *Campaign talk: Why elections are good for us*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Hellweg, S. A., Pfau, M., & Brydon, S. R. (1992). *Televised presidential debates: Advocacy in contemporary America*. New York: Praeger.
- Hinck, E. A. (1993). *Enacting the presidency: political argument, presidential debates, and presidential character*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Holsti, O. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. New York: Free Press.
- Hullett, C. R., & Loudon, A. D. (1998). Audience recall of issues and image in congressional debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 34, 189-202.
- Jamieson, K. H., & Birdsell, D. S. (1988). *Presidential debates: The challenge of creating an informed electorate*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson, K. H., Waldman, P., & Devitt, J. (1998). Mapping the discourse of the 1996 US presidential general election. *Media, Culture, & Society*, 20, 323-328.
- Just, M., Crigler, A., & Wallach, L. (1990). Thirty seconds or thirty minutes: What viewers learn from spot advertisements and candidate debates. *Journal of Communication*, 40, 120-132.

- Kendall, K. E. (1997). The 1996 Clinton-Dole presidential debates: Through media eyes. In R. V. Friedenberg (Ed.), *Rhetorical studies of national political debates – 1996*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Kahn, K. F. (1995). Characteristics of press coverage in senate and gubernatorial elections: Information available to voters. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 20, 23-35.
- Kahn, K. F., & Kenney, P. J. (1999). *The spectacle of U.S. Senate campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kelley, D. (1958). Press coverage of two Michigan congressional elections. *Journalism Quarterly*, 35, 447-449, 503.
- Kraus, S. (Ed.). (1962). *The great debates: Background, perspective, effects*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kraus, S. (Ed.). (1979). *The great debates: Carter vs. Ford, 1976*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kraus, S. (2000). *Televised presidential debates and public policy* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrika*, 33, 159-174.
- Lemert, J. B., Elliott, W. R., Bernstein, J. M., Rosenberg, W. L., & Nestvold, K. J. (1991). *News verdicts, the debates, and presidential campaigns*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Lichtenstein, A. (1982). Differences in impact between local and national televised political candidates' debates. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 46, 291-298.
- Lowry, D. T., Bridges, J. A., & Barefield, P. A. (1990). The effects of network TV "instant analysis and querulous criticism" following the first Bush-Dukakis debate. *Journalism Quarterly*, 67, 814-825.
- McAllister, B. (2002, September 23). Senate rivals joust on TV: Allard, Strickland take neck-and-neck race to U.S. audience. *Denver Post*, p. A1.
- 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: Erlbaum.
- March, W., & Kennedy, M. (1998, October 20). Crist pressures Graham in debate. *Tampa Tribune*, p. 1.
- Martel, M. (1983). *Political campaign debates: Issues, strategies, and tactics*. New York: Longman.
- O'Keefe, D. J. (1977). Two concepts of argument. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 13, 121-128.
- Ornstein, N. (1987). Nonpresidential debates in America. In J. L. Swerdlow (Ed.), *Presidential debates 1988 and beyond* (pp. 52-61). Washington, D. C.: Congressional Quarterly.
- Ostroff, D. H., & Sandell, K. (1984). Local station coverage of campaigns: A tale of two cities in Ohio. *Journalism Quarterly*, 61, 346-351.
- Patterson, T. E. (1994). *Out of order*. New York: Random House, Vintage Books.

- Pfau, M. (1983). Criteria and format to optimize political debates: An analysis of South Dakota's election '80 series. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 19, 205-214.
- Philport, J. C., & Balon, R. E. (1975). Candidate image in a broadcast debate. *Journal of Broadcasting*, 19, 181-193.
- Princeton Survey Research Associates. (1999). Accessed 10/5/03 via Lexis-Nexis.
- Racine Group. (2002). White paper on televised political campaign debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 38, 199-218.
- Reber, B. H., & Benoit, W. L. (2001). Presidential debate stories accentuate the negative. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 22, 30-43.
- Sears, D. O., & Chaffee, S. H. (1979). Uses and effects of the 1976 debates: An overview of empirical studies. In S. Kraus (Ed.), *The great debates: Carter vs. Ford, 1976* (pp. 223-261). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Serini, S. A., Powers, A. A., & Johnson, S. (1998). Of horse race and policy issues: A study of gender in coverage of a gubernatorial election by two major metropolitan newspapers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 75, 194-204.
- Simon, A. F. (2002). *The winning message: Candidate behavior, campaign discourse, and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Steeper, F. T. (1978). Public response to Gerald Ford's statements on eastern Europe in the second debate. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 81-101). New York: Praeger.
- Swerdlow, J. L. (1984). *Beyond debate: A paper on televised presidential debates*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.
- Swerdlow, J. L. (Ed). (1987). *Presidential debates 1988 and beyond*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc.
- Tidmarch, C. M., Hyman, L. J., & Sorkin, J. E. (1984). Press issue agendas in the 1982 congressional and gubernatorial election campaigns. *Journal of Politics*, 46, 226-242.
- Vermeer, J. P. (1987). Congressional campaign coverage in rural districts. In J. P. Vermeer (Ed.), *Campaigns in the news: Mass media and congressional elections* (pp. 77-89). New York: Greenwood Press.
- West, D. M. (1994). Political advertising and news coverage in the 1992 California U.S. Senate campaign. *Journal of Politics*, 56, 1053-1075.