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Abstract

Despite the fact that political debates are increasingly common at all levels of government, relatively little work investigates the content of non-presidential debates (and work on primary debates is even less common). This study breaks new ground by analyzing four non-presidential primary debates. Two Democratic gubernatorial debates, one Republican U.S. Senate debate, and one Republican U.S. House debate were content analyzed using the framework of the functional theory of political campaign discourse. Overall, these debates were mainly positive, with 71% acclaims, 22% attacks, and 7% defenses. The Democratic (and gubernatorial) debates had more attacks and defenses and fewer defenses than the Republican (congressional) debates. Overall, these campaign messages focused more on policy (60%) than character (40%). The Democratic (gubernatorial) debates emphasized policy even more (65% to 55%), and character less (35% to 45%), than the Republican (congressional) debates.

Key Terms: non-presidential primary debates, gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, functional theory

Introduction

Political debates have been proliferating in recent years. The first presidential debate, between Republican contenders Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen in 1948, was broadcast on radio during the Oregon primary campaign (Benoit et al., 2002). However, in the past several election cycles the number of presidential primary debates has increased sharply, with 18 debates occurring in the 2004 Democratic primary campaign alone. The first general presidential debate was held in 1960 between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999). After a hiatus, general debates resumed in 1976 when President Gerald Ford confronted Governor Jimmy Carter and debates have been a fixture of the general campaign ever since. Vice presidential debates were held in 1976 and from 1984-2004 (Benoit & Airne, 2005). Other countries have also seen presidential debates in recent years (see, e.g., Coleman, 2000). Debates are also being held for candidates running for other elective offices in the United States, such as senator and governor.

Considerable research has investigated presidential debates (books on this topic include Benoit & Wells, 1996; Bishop, Meadow, & Jackson-Beeck, 1978; Bitzer & Rueter, 1980; Carlin & McKinney, 1994; Friedenberg, 1994, 1997; Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992; Hinck, 1993; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988;

Kraus, 1962, 1979, 2000; Lanoue & Schrott, 1991; Martel, 1983; and Schroeder, 2000). Although there are many useful ways to study debates, one approach is to employ content analysis to understand the nature of these important campaign messages. Some research has also focused on presidential primary debates. Benoit et al. (2002) reported that presidential debates from the primary phase of the campaign employed more acclaims (63% to 55%), fewer attacks (32% to 35%), and fewer defenses (4% to 10%) than general debates. They also reported that primary debates stressed character more (37% to 25%) and policy less (63% to 75%) than general debates. Research (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006) has begun to examine non-presidential debates from the general phase of the campaign; as yet we have no data on non-presidential primary debates.

We have studied primary and general presidential debates. Research has found that presidential primary debates have more acclaims and defenses, and fewer attacks, than general debates: Primary debates have 63% acclaims, 32% attacks, and 4% defenses; general debates have 55% acclaims, 35% attacks, and 10% defenses (Benoit, in press). The topic emphases of these debates also differs. Presidential primary debates stress character more (37% to 25%) and policy less (63% to 75%) than general debates (Benoit, in press)

Few studies have investigated non-presidential debates. Pfau (1983) was concerned with debate format, Bystrom et al. (1991) and Lichtenstein (1983) looked at the effects of non-presidential debates, and Edelsky and Adams (1990) studied gender differences. Two recent studies have investigated the content of non-presidential debates. Banwart and McKinney (2005) content analyzed two U.S. senate and 2 gubernatorial debates from 2000 and 2002. They reported that these debates included more positive (79%) than negative (21%) comments and emphasized policy (82%) over character (18%). Airne and Benoit (2005) content analyzed the 2004 Senate debates between Obama and Keyes: 59% of the statements were acclaims, 37% were attacks, and 4% were defenses. They found policy was discussed more often than character (65% to 35%). So, what research is available has found them to be mostly positive and about policy, but it has not examined non-presidential primary debates.

Debates are political campaign message forms that are clearly worth studying. As noted earlier, they are increasingly common in political campaigns at different levels of government. They have several advantages over other message forms. Debates feature the leading candidates, side-by-side, addressing the same issues. This format helps voters make a choice between those contenders. Debates are more extended message forms than other media such as television spots. Furthermore, debates have been shown to have significant effects on viewers. Meta-analysis demonstrates that presidential debates have several effects on viewers: increasing issue knowledge, affecting agenda-setting, altering character perceptions, and vote preference. Furthermore, the effects are larger with presidential primary debates than general election debates (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003), presumably because voters have less knowledge of the candidates during the primary. Although none of this research on debate effects has investigated non-presidential primary debates, it seems plausible that they could influence viewers as well.

One legitimate approach to studying political debates is to systematically analyze their content. Accordingly, this study will employ content analysis to investigate three non-presidential primary debates; these findings will be contrasted with the results of prior research on non-presidential general campaign debates. First, we will describe the theory which informed the study. Then we will report the method employed to analyze the debates. This will be followed by presentation of results and discussion of implications.

Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

Functional Theory provided the underpinning for this study. This approach to political campaign communication begins with several assumptions about this kind of discourse (1999, in press; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit et al. 2003). First, people cast their votes for the candidate who seems *preferable* based on what is most important to each voter. Their opinions about which candidate is better are perceptions developed from messages they receive from the candidates, from the news, and from other sources including political discussion with friends and family. Candidates can attempt to influence these perceptions by enacting three functions in their messages. *Acclaims* (Benoit, 1997) are positive statements intended to make the candidate appear more desirable. *Attacks* are criticisms of an opponent, designed to make that candidate appear less desirable. Finally, *defenses* are refutations of or responses to attacks, meant to reduce the undesirable effects of an attack. Together, these three functions work like an informal form of cost-benefit analysis. Acclaims, if accepted by the audience, should increase that candidate's benefits (make the source of an acclaim appear more desirable). Attacks, when persuasive, should increase the costs of an opponent (making the opponent look less desirable). This should increase the attacking candidate's net favorability. Finally, when attacked, an effective defense should restore lost desirability by minimizing costs. Notice that Functional Theory does not assume that voters actively seek out information about the candidates or engage in mathematical calculations; the point is that acclaims have a tendency to increase the perceived desirability of a candidate, attacks are prone to reduce the apparent desirability of an opponent, and defenses can help restore lost desirability.

Functional Theory posits that these three functions can occur on two topics. *Policy* utterances concern governmental action and the consequences or outcomes of governmental action. *Character* remarks address the personality or leadership of the candidates. Each topic is further subdivided, policy into *past deeds*, *future plans*, and *general goals*; character is comprised of *personal qualities*, *leadership ability*, and *ideals*. The Appendix provides an example of an acclaim and an attack on each of these forms of policy and character.

Specifically, this study will test six hypotheses using data from these two primary debates based on the research on presidential campaign messages. Acclaims have no drawbacks, attacks may create some backlash from voters who dislike mudslinging, and defenses have three disadvantages (a response to an attack may take a candidate off-message, it may remind or inform voters of a candidate's alleged weakness, and it may create the impression that the candi-

date is reactive rather than proactive. Research on presidential primary debates found that acclaims are the most common function whereas defense is the least frequent function (Benoit, et al., 2002). Accordingly, we predict that:

> H1. Acclaims will be more common than attacks, and defenses will be the least common function of non-presidential primary debates.

More voters say that the most important determinant of their vote for president is policy rather than character (Benoit, 2003); some evidence suggests that this preference may carry over to other political offices (Brazeal & Benoit, 2001). In fact, past studies of presidential primary debates reported that policy was discussed more often than character (Benoit et al., 2002). So, we predict:

> H2. Policy themes will be more common than character themes in non-presidential primary debates.

It is easier to acclaim than attack on principles, values, and goals. Research has also established that candidates in presidential primary debates are more likely to acclaim than attack on both general goals and ideals (Benoit et al., 2002).

> H3. General goals will be employed more to acclaim than attack in non-presidential primary debates.

> H4. Ideals will be employed more to acclaim than attack in non-presidential primary debates.

Benoit (in press) found that in primary debates and primary direct mail brochures (albeit not in primary television spots) Democrats attacked more than Republicans. For this reason, we expect that:

> H5. Democrats will attack more, and acclaim less, than Republicans in non-presidential primary debates.

Benoit (2004) reports that Democratic presidential candidates emphasize policy more than do Republicans. He explains that this may occur because Democrats have a proclivity to suggest governmental solutions to public problems. Republicans are more prone than Democrats to encourage private solutions to these problems. Therefore, we predict that:

> H6. Democrats will discuss policy more, and character less, than Republicans in non-presidential primary debates.

Testing these hypotheses with non-presidential primary debates will extend our understanding of political campaign debates.

Sample and Method

This study investigated four non-presidential primary debates. In order to balance political party affiliation, four debates were analyzed for this study. Two Democratic gubernatorial primary debates from Missouri in 2004 (Bob Holden versus Claire McCaskill, July 19, 20), a Republican U.S. Senate primary debate from Iowa in 2002 (Greg Ganski versus Bill Salier, May 31), and a Republican U.S. Senate debate from Utah in 2004 (Tim Bridgewater versus John Swallow, June 10) comprised the sample.[1] We were unable to locate texts of any other gubernatorial or congressional primary debates. This sample is limited, but the fact that this is exploratory research justifies this inquiry.

The method employed to analyze the content of these non-presidential primary debates has four steps. First, the candidates' utterances were unitized into themes (remarks by the moderator and questions were not analyzed, although they were part of the context unit employed to interpret the candidates' remarks). Berelson (1952) defined a theme as "an assertion about a subject" (p. 138; see also Holsti, 1969). Thus, a theme is essentially an argument about one of the candidates (an argument$_1$ in O'Keefe's terms; 1977). Because discourse is enthymematic, themes vary in length from a phrase to several sentences. Second, each theme was categorized by function, according to these definitions:

> *Acclaims* "portray the candidate in a favorable light"
> *Attacks* "portray the [opposing] candidate in an unfavorable light"
> *Defenses* "attempt to repair the candidate's reputation (from attacks by the opposition)." (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999, p. 346)

Third, the topic of each theme was categorized, using these definitions.

> *Policy utterances* "concern governmental action (past, current, or future) and problems amenable to governmental action"
> *Character utterances* "address characteristics, traits, abilities, or attributes of the candidates" (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999, p. 346)

Finally, the form of policy or character in each theme was identified.

Coders were trained with a codebook. This document defines the coding unit (the theme) and the context unit (questions and remarks by the candidate or opponent which help interpret a theme). It describes the steps involved in the method outlined above and provides definitions and textual examples of each category. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's (1960) κ, which corrects for agreement by chance. κ for classifying themes for function was 89. κ for identifying the topic of an utterance was .91. κ for categorizing themes into the forms of policy was .86 and κ for forms of character was .94. Landis and Koch (1977) explained that κs between .81-1.0 represent "almost perfect" inter-coder reliability (p. 165). Accordingly, these figures give confidence in the reliability of these data.

Results

Testing the hypotheses posed earlier will illustrate how content analysis can be used to study the nature of political debates. The first hypothesis predicted that acclaims would be more common than attacks and defenses would be the least common function. The first hypothesis was supported: Acclaims in these

primary debates constituted 71% of their utterances, attacks were 22% of their statements, and defenses comprised 7% of their remarks; this ordering of function occurred in each of the four debates. For example, Holden reported that "83,000 new jobs have been created in the state of Missouri," which is clearly a desirable record (an *acclaim*). McCaskill provided an example of an *attack* when she charged that "You signed budget cuts for education." Candidates in a Democratic primary would be expected to support funding for education. Holden *defended* against this accusation by shifting the blame: "If there is a problem about tuition, we ought to be talking about Republicans and how they cut funding for education." A one-way χ^2 confirmed that this distribution was significantly different from chance (χ^2 [$df = 2$] = 671.53, $p < .0001$; *chi-squares* calculated on each set of two functions were also significant). These data are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Functions Non-Presidential Primary Debates

	Acclaims	**Attacks**	**Defenses**
Gubernatorial	343 (67%)	126 (25%)	46 (9%)
Senate	78 (50%)	59 (38%)	19 (12%)
House	249 (90%)	25 (9%)	3 (1%)
Total	699 (71%)	211 (22%)	68 (7%)

Hypothesis two predicted that policy comments would occur more frequently than character remarks. In fact, together these debates addressed policy in 60% of their themes and character in 40%; policy was more common than character in each individual debate. For example, Holden discussed *policy* when he argued that "I was one of the four governors in the entire country that actually was able to do something about outsourcing" of jobs. Clearly, employment is a policy topic. McCaskill provided an example of a *character* utterance when she questioned Holden's leadership ability: The governor and the legislature "can't come together even on the things they agree. That is why we need new leadership." This utterance does not discuss any particular policy but instead concerns the governor's ability to govern the state. A one-way χ^2 confirmed that these two topics occurred with different frequencies (χ^2 [$df = 1$] = 37.22, $p < .0001$). These data are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Topics of Non-Presidential Primary Debates

	Policy	Character
Gubernatorial	303 (64%)	168 (36%)
Senate	81 (59%)	56 (41%)
House	147 (54%)	127 (46%)
Total	531 (60%)	349 (40%)

The next hypothesis predicted that general goals would be used more often to acclaim than attack. In these data, there were 208 acclaims and 13 attacks on general goals. A one-way *chi-square* confirms the obvious, that this is a significant difference (χ^2 [$df = 1$] = 170.3, $p < .0001$). The third hypothesis was supported. See Table 3.

Table 3
Forms of Policy and Character in Non-Presidential Primary Debates

	Policy						Character					
	PD*		FP		GG		PQ		LA		ID	
Gubernatorial	128	61	21	3	89	1	32	40	27	22	45	0
	189 (62%)		24 (8%)		90 (30%)		72 (43%)		49 (30%)		45 (27%)	
Senate	14	23	5	0	30	9	7	18	9	3	13	6
	37 (46%)		5 (6%)		39 (48%)		25 (45%)		12 (21%)		19 (34%)	
House	7	9	39	0	89	3	41	8	26	5	47	0
	16 (11%)		39 (26%)		92 (63%)		49 (39%)		31 (24%)		47 (37%)	
Total	149	93	65	3	208	13	80	66	62	30	105	6
	242 (46%)		68 (13%)		221 (42%)		146 (42%)		92 (26%)		111 (32%)	

*acclaims/attacks

Hypothesis four expected that, like general goals, ideals would be used more often to acclaim than attack. The two candidates used ideals to acclaim in 105 themes and to attack 6 times. *Chi-square* confirms that these are signifi-

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cantly different (χ^2 [df = 1] = 86.52, p < .0001). The data are displayed in Table 3.

The sixth prediction expected that Democrats would attack more in primary debates than Republicans. This was confirmed as Democrats acclaimed less (66% to 76%), attacked more (25% to 19%), and defended more (9% to 5%) than Republicans. Statistical analysis revealed this to be significant (χ^2 [df = 2] = 10.62, p < .01, V = .11; significant differences also occurred between acclaims and attacks). See Table 4 for these data.

Table 4
Political Party and Functions and Topics of Non-Presidential Primary Debates

	Functions		
	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Democrats	342 (66%)	127 (25%)	46 (9%)
Republicans	327 (76%)	84 (19%)	22 (5%)

	Topics	
	Policy	Character
Democrats	303 (65%)	166 (35%)
Republicans	228 (55%)	183 (45%)

The last hypothesis predicted Democrats would stress policy more, and character less, than Republicans in non-presidential primary debates. This prediction was also supported, as Democrats emphasized policy more (65% to 55%) and character less (35% to 45%) than Republican candidates. Statistical analysis reveals this to be significant (χ^2 [df = 1] = 7.63, p < .01, φ = .09). These data are displayed in Table 4.

Discussion

We now have learned something about political debates in a new context: non-presidential primary contests. Although the sample is limited, it includes gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House debates from the primary phase of the campaign. We now know something about non-presidential debates and factors that influence the content of these messages (e.g., campaign phase).

The analysis reported here indicate that these non-presidential primary campaign messages have certain features in common with presidential primary campaign messages. Acclaims were the most common function of these de-

bates, followed by attacks and then defenses. Acclaims have no drawbacks, so it makes sense that they would be the most common function. Voters consistently report that they do not like mudslinging (Merritt, 1975; Stewart, 1984), so there is a reason for attacks to occur less frequently than acclaims. Finally, defenses have three potential drawbacks. First, one must identify an attack to refute it. Doing so risks reminding or even informing the audience of a potential weakness. Second, attacks are most likely to occur in a candidate's areas of weakness. Defending against an attack would usually take a candidate off-message. Third, the act of responding to an attack may create the impression that the candidate is reactive rather than proactive. For these reasons it is reasonable to expect that defenses will be relatively uncommon.

Furthermore, these debates were more positive (more acclaims, fewer attacks) than either presidential primary debates or general presidential debates (Benoit, in press). Although we do not have data for US House or gubernatorial debates from the general campaign, a study of 15 US Senate general debates from 1998-2004 found that these general debates were not as positive as these primary debates: 61% acclaims, 29% attacks, and 10% defenses (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006). Thus, these data indicate that, as in presidential debates, non-presidential primary debates are more positive than non-presidential general debates. Benoit et al. (2002) explain why primary debates are less negative than general debates at the presidential level:

> First, candidates will want their opponents in the primary season–and perhaps even more important, their opponents' adherents–to support them in the general campaign. . . . Second, candidates from one party will recycle attacks made in the primary season against their fall opposition. . . . Thus, a second reason to moderate attacks in the primary is to avoid providing fodder for the other party's attacks in the general campaign. A third reason to expect somewhat fewer attacks in the primary than in the general campaign is that, presumably, there are more grounds for attack in the fall (more differences between parties than within a party). (pp. 121-122)

These factors should be at work in non-presidential races as well as in presidential contests. So, non-presidential primary debates use acclaims more than attacks, and attacks more than defenses–and they are less negative than general campaign debates.

The candidates in these non-presidential primary debates discussed policy more than character. Public opinion poll data reveals that more voters say that issues (policy) are a more important determinant for their vote for president (Benoit, 2003) and for congress (Brazeal & Benoit, 2001) than character. We were unable to locate similar public opinion poll data for the most determinant of gubernatorial votes, but it is plausible to speculate that more voters consider policy to be most important and that candidates respond to these voter preferences when they emphasize policy over character.

A greater emphasis on policy than character is consistent with past research on presidential debates from both phases of the campaign (Benoit, in press).

Furthermore, general presidential debates emphasize policy even more than primary presidential debates (Benoit et al., 2002). Consistent with this finding, general debates from the U.S. Senate discussed policy even more (70% to 60%) than the non-presidential primary debates in this sample (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006). Benoit et al. (2002) explain that candidates in the primary phase are generally less well-known than candidates in the general campaign, which is a reason to stress character more in the primary than the general election. Furthermore, candidates from the same political party (i.e., those competing in primary debates) should have fewer policy differences than candidates from opposing parties (i.e., those competing in general debates). This means that it is easier to distinguish two candidates on character, and more difficult to distinguish them on policy, in primary than general debates.

Certain forms of discourse lend themselves more readily to acclaims than attacks. In these debates, general goals were used more frequently as the basis for acclaims than for attacks. Similarly, ideals were used in many more acclaims than attacks. More jobs, more affordable college education, help for seniors' prescription drug costs are goals that are easy to support but difficult to attack. Similarly, such values as fairness and equality are easy to embrace in an acclaim but more difficult to attack. The same tendencies (990 acclaims and 144 attacks on general goals; 155 acclaims and 42 attacks on ideals) were found in presidential debates (Benoit, in press) and in U.S. Senate debates (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006).

We found that Democrats attacked more, and acclaimed less, than Republicans in these non-presidential primary debates. The relationship between political party affiliation and function of campaign discourse is not entirely consistent. At the presidential level, Democrats are more negative than Republicans in primary and general debates, but not in primary TV spots or in Acceptance Addresses. General U.S. Senate debates (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006) show little difference between the functions of Democrats and Republicans (Democrats acclaim in 62% of debate utterances, Republicans in 61%; Democrats attack in 30% of themes and Republicans in 28%). So we do not think we should read a great deal into the finding that Democrats are more negative than Republicans in primary debates.

On the other hand, the relationship between topic and political party is more consistent. At the presidential level, Democrats discuss policy more than Republicans in primary TV spots and debates and in general TV spots and debates (Benoit, in press; in Acceptances the difference is in this direction but does not reach the level of significance). On the other hand, general U.S. Senate debates do not show this relationship (Democrats discuss policy in 69% of utterances and Republicans in 70%; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2006). Benoit (2004) suggests that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to recommend governmental solutions to societal problems, which may lead them to discuss policy more in campaign messages. However, given the fact that this relationship was not found in general U.S. Senate debates, we must be cautious here.

All studies have some limitations and this one is no exception. In particular, the sample we were able to obtain is limited: one U.S. Senate, one U.S.

House, and two (Missouri) gubernatorial primary debates. This limitation is particularly acute for the analyses of the relationship between political party affiliation and campaign discourse. The Democratic data came exclusively from gubernatorial debates (and the same two candidates); the Republican data came from congress. So, we cannot rule out the possibility that the differences observed here are due to office (gubernatorial versus congress) rather than political party (Democrat versus Republican). Unfortunately, no other gubernatorial or congressional primary debate transcripts were available. Still, the patterns found here (except for political party differences) were consistent with patterns found in presidential primary and general debates. This study of non-presidential primary debates is a step forward, but we must keep in mind the limitation imposed by the nature of the sample of debates that were available for analysis.

Endnote
[1]We express our appreciation to David Airne, University of Alabama, for sharing the congressional primary debate transcripts with us.

Appendix
Acclaims and Attacks on the Forms of Policy and Character
Policy
Past Deeds
    Acclaim. Dean: "99 percent of all our kids under 18 have health insurance in my state, all our low-income working people, and a third of our seniors" (WI 2/15/04).
    Attack. Dean: "George Bush is systematically looting the American treasury and giving it to his friends -- the pharmaceutical companies, the HMOs and the insurance companies" (WI 2/15/04).
Future Plans
    Acclaim. Kucinich: "I'm the only one up here so far who's been willing to say that I'll cancel NAFTA and the WTO. That's specific action that will regain real power for the American workers and for workers everywhere" (WI 2/15/05).
    Attack. Clark: "this 30th of June date" to turn over civilian authority in Iraq is a "politically motivated timetable" (SC 1/29/04).
General Goals
    Acclaim. Kerry: "I think a president needs to put America back to work, and that's what I intend to do" (WI 2/15/04).
    Attack. Dean: "In the State of the Union, the president promised another $1 trillion tax cut. Where does he think he's going to get the money on top of the $500 billion deficit?" (NH 1/22/04).

Character
Personal Qualities
    Acclaim. Edwards: "I think it has to do with your own personal experience, what you've seen, what you'll get up every morning fighting for as presi-

dent of the United States... But I think it matters to have lived [a working class life], and I have lived it" (WI 2/15/04).

  Attack. Kucinich: "The president lied to the American people" in his justification for war in Iraq (WI 2/15/04).

Leadership Ability

  Acclaim. Lieberman: "I'm going to be a leader who will do what's right for America, whether it's politically popular or not. That's what a commander in chief should do" (MA 11/4/03).

  Attack. Clark: "It's just about leadership. And that's what this president doesn't show in Washington on our economy" (SC 1/29/04).

Ideals

  Acclaim. Lieberman: I'm "strong on civil rights... strong on values" (SC 1/29/04).

  Attack. Dean: "But if we start giving up our fundamental liberties as Americans because terrorists attacked us, then we have a big problem. I honestly don't believe that John Ashcroft and George Bush... view the Constitution the way... most American citizens do" (SC 1/29/04).

All examples taken from 2004 Democratic presidential primary debates.

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