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A Functional Analysis of 2013 Mayoral Campaign Web Pages

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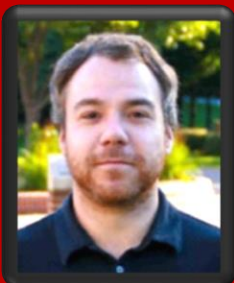
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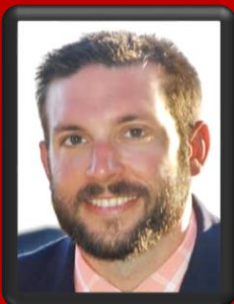
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This study adopts The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to content analyze political campaign web pages produced by mayoral candidates in six large American cities in 2013. Specifically, this analysis examines online campaign communication from Boston, Charlotte, Detroit, Houston, New York, and Seattle. Results of this analysis found that mayoral candidates used their websites to acclaim themselves more often than to attack their opponents or defend themselves against previous attacks. Additionally, these web pages addressed policy topics more often than they spoke about character concerns. The data also reveals important differences between the way incumbents and challengers use their websites in local elections. Differences also exist between the communication choices of winning mayoral candidates and losing mayoral candidates.

Keywords: Functional Theory, Campaign Websites, Mayoral Campaigns, Political Communication

Praised for its "potential to invigorate electoral politics" (Davis, Baumgartner, Francis, & Morris, 2009, p. 13), the Internet continues to attract the attention of both political candidates and political communication experts. Today, political campaigns for all levels of government use websites to inform, involve, connect, and mobilize voters (Schneider & Foot, 2006). However, most research about online political campaigns has relied exclusively on presidential politics for information and insight (Germany, 2014; Hendricks, 2014; Tedesco, 2011). Although candidates for local positions also use political campaign websites to communicate their messages, such discourse has attracted woefully little attention from scholars.

Much is at stake in mayoral elections. Chief executives of large American cities are responsible for managing enormous economies that often rival the size and influence of entire countries (Simpson, Nowlan, & O'Shaugnessy, 2011). Foreman (2014) argued, "the sheer size and governing challenges of municipalities mean that large-city mayors often become national or international figures" (p. 3). It is little wonder then that mayoral campaigns are attracting high-profile candidates and that fundraising and spending for mayoral campaigns is on the rise. Still, there is much more to local government than money and celebrity. In noting the many crucial functions that local government can and must serve, Barber (2013) referred to American cities as

"democracy's best hope" (p. 11). Given the undeniable importance of the position, it is imperative that scholars understand the communicative processes that determine who is elected to the mayor's office.

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The purpose of this study is to analyze the campaign messages from web pages produced by U.S. mayoral candidates in 2013. More specifically, this content analysis examines messages from mayoral campaigns in Boston, Charlotte, Detroit, Houston, New York, and Seattle. This project addresses a rather large gap in the research pertaining to mayoral campaign messages in general, and mayoral campaign messages on the web more specifically. Shaker (2011b) has argued that understanding online election information is essential for ensuring "the strength and vibrance of local democracies" as traditional sources of local political information, such as newspapers, disappear from the media landscape (p. 53). Ultimately, the results also build upon Benoit's (2008) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse by testing its application to local campaigns' websites.

Functional Theory is based on six basic assumptions about the nature of political campaigns and elections. First, "voting is a comparative act" that requires voters to choose between two or more candidates (Benoit, 2014a, p. 13). Second, candidates must therefore distinguish themselves from their opponents if they hope to win election. Third, use of political messages lets candidates distinguish themselves. Fourth, candidates establish preferability via three specific types of messages – acclaims, attacks, and defenses. Fifth, campaign messages can occur on two topics – policy and character. Sixth, candidates must win a majority of votes in an election. In elections with more than two contenders, candidates must win a plurality of votes (Benoit, 2014b).

A major advantage of the Functional approach to political campaign communication is its applicability to messages from many different media at any level of political campaign. Therefore, Functional Theory presents opportunities to compare and contrast large amounts of data from many different political campaign situations. A functional analysis of mayoral campaign web pages allows for comparisons between this message form and others previously conducted by Benoit and his colleagues, therefore contributing to our understanding of how political messages differ according to medium and level of office. Thus, the research presented here addresses important gaps in political communication research while simultaneously contributing to a well-established research tradition that can only be strengthened by the introduction of new data and conclusions.

Review of Literature

Two bodies of literature are particularly pertinent to the study of mayoral campaign websites. First, this section reviews literature about mayoral campaigns.

Second, this section examines research about campaign websites, with special attention to studies that have used functional analysis.

Mayoral Campaigns

Most of the scholarly literature concerning mayoral campaigns focuses on how "old media," such as newspapers, influence campaigns. For instance, Shaker (2011a) demonstrated community newspapers play a significant role in informing voters about local elections. Benoit, Furgerson, Seifert, and Sagardia (2013) found, compared to senate and gubernatorial campaigns, mayoral contests generate more newspaper coverage of character-related themes and less about horse race coverage or policy reporting. Clearly, newspapers have played an important role in informing voters. However, it is crucial to recognize that the political media environment has changed. Daily newspapers are disappearing, forcing citizens to look elsewhere for their political information (Johnson, Goidel, & Climek, 2014). With this trend in mind, Shaker (2011b) noted how the web has become a vital source of political information about local campaigns and elections that is still "far from maturity" (p. 21).

Functional analysis has not yet been applied to mayoral campaign websites, but is has been applied to mayoral campaign debates. Benoit, Henson, and Maltos (2007) studied debates from 10 different mayoral elections between 2005 and 2007. Candidates used those debates to acclaim themselves 75% of the time, attack 19% of the time, and defend 7% of the time. Where topic is concerned, candidates spoke about policy (70%) significantly more often than they spoke about character (30%). General goals statements were the most common form of policy utterance, and personal qualities statements were the most common form of character utterance.

> *...the Internet is now an integral and indispensable part of political campaign communication.*

Political Campaign Websites

Praised for being a "master medium" capable of incorporating all other forms of media (Sellnow, 1998, p. xxiii), the Internet is now an integral and indispensable part of political campaign communication. In today's political environment, a candidate's website functions as a database for all of a candidate's communicative attempts. Given all the advantages the Internet offers political candidates, this should be little surprise to researchers. Relative to other media forms, websites attract large audiences and offer candidates maximum control over their message, but with far less expense than television ads (Benoit & Benoit, 2005). Political communication scholars are wise to ask what sort of messages political candidates produce under these unique circumstances.

Most of the published research about the content of campaign websites examines presidential elections. Because mayoral candidates must address different audiences and

different issues than presidential contenders, it is reasonable to suspect their websites may be different as well. Moreover, many studies of political websites are now over a decade old. Therefore, earlier studies do not address recent developments in how campaigns design and use websites. Benoit's (2000) study of non-presidential websites from 1998 offers a rare glimpse at the earliest uses of the Internet in local elections. The study revealed that utterances on candidate web pages were overwhelmingly positive (99%), occasionally negative (1%), and did not include any defenses. Candidates used their websites to discuss character (69%) more often than policy (31%). Notably, these results are markedly different from recent studies of presidential campaign websites, which tend to find more policy discourse than character utterances. Researchers have been left to ask whether these unique results are a product of the local campaign environment or simply reflect the peculiarities of the earliest political campaign uses of the Internet. The project discussed here was designed to clarify this inconsistency by providing a more contemporary examination of how political campaigns use websites.

Although most functional analyses of political campaign websites have focused on presidential discourse, they are nonetheless instructive for the purposes of this study. Both presidential primary elections and some 2013 U.S. mayoral races feature multiple candidates from the same party. For instance, the top two vote earners in Seattle's election were listed as Democrats.

In the 2000 presidential primary, candidates' web pages acclaimed (95%) far more than they attacked (5%), and barely included any defenses (0.1%). Where topic of discourse is concerned, the web pages discussed policy (79%) more often than character (21%). General goals statements were the most common form of policy discourse in the primary web pages, while ideals statements were the most common category of character rhetoric. In the general campaign phase of 2000's presidential election, which pitted Democrat Al Gore against Republican George W. Bush, candidates' web pages acclaimed 98% of the time, attacked 2% of the time, and featured no defenses. These general campaign web pages included more discussion of policy (90%) than character (10%). Past deeds utterances dominated the policy discussion, and ideals were once again the most common form of character discourse (Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, & McGuire, 2003).

Presidential primary campaign web pages in 2004 featured more positive utterances (88%) than negative utterances (12%) and included very few defenses (0.1%). Primary candidates used their websites to discuss policy (72%) more often than character (28%). Past deeds claims were the most common form of policy discourse. Statements about ideals were most common form of character utterance in the data set. The 2004 general election campaign for president featured Democratic challenger John Kerry against Republican incumbent George W. Bush. These candidates' web pages acclaimed in 87% of the utterances, attacked in 13% of the utterances, and defended themselves in 0.2% of the discourse. General campaign candidates used their pages to discuss policy most of the time (90%), but also featured some character discourse (10%). Past deeds

statements were the most common type of policy discourse and ideals discourse was the most common type of character discourse (Benoit, Stein, McHale, Chattopadhyay, Verser, & Price, 2007).

According to Benoit, Henson, Davis, Glantz, Phillips, and Rill (2013), candidates' websites during the 2008 presidential primary acclaimed (85%) more than they attacked (15%) and featured relatively few defenses (.04%). Furthermore, these pages discussed policy (81%) more often than character (19%). Where subtopic of discourse is concerned, candidates tended to focus on general goals when discussing policy on their web pages and ideals when discussing character in the same medium.

Although functional analyses of presidential campaign web pages created after the 2008 primary are unexecuted or unpublished, a number of clear trends emerge from the available research. First, acclaims are the most frequent function of presidential campaign web pages. This is probably because defenses and attacks have drawbacks or disadvantages, while acclaims do not (Benoit & Stein, 2005). For example, candidates who attack their opponent risk generating a backlash effect against their own campaign. A second trend is policy is the most common topic of presidential campaign web pages. This is consistent with analyses of several other campaign media, including television ads (Benoit, 2014a) and televised debates (Benoit, 2014b).

Hypotheses

Based on existing literature, this paper posits a number of hypotheses about the content of 2013 mayoral campaign web pages.

H1: 2013 mayoral candidate web pages will acclaim more than they attack.

H2: 2013 mayoral candidate web pages will discuss policy more than they discuss character.

Taken together, H1 and H2 essentially predict that mayoral candidate web pages will function similar to presidential candidates'. Because the frequency of subtopics of policy and character discourse is less consistent in previous research, this project poses research questions regarding the specific content of each topic.

RQ1: What is the frequency of past deeds, future plans, and general goals in 2013 mayoral candidate web pages?

RQ2: What is the frequency of personal qualities utterances, leadership abilities utterances, and ideals statements in 2013 mayoral candidate web pages?

Previous political communication research has found that incumbents and challengers differ in their message production. Specifically, incumbents are more positive than, and discuss policy more frequently than, challengers (Benoit, 2008).

H3: Incumbents will acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers in 2013 mayoral campaign web pages.

H4: Incumbents will discuss policy more, and character less, than challengers in 2013 mayoral campaign web pages.

Research regarding differences in the tone or functions of messages from winners and losers is inconclusive (Benoit, 1999; Benoit, 2003; Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt, 2010), and mayoral web pages have never been studied using this methodology. Hence, a third research question is posed.

RQ3: What is the difference in frequency of acclaims, attacks, and defenses between winners and losers in mayoral campaign web pages?

A number of studies have suggested winners and losers differ in regard to which topics they choose to address (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit, 2008; Benoit, 2007; Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt, 2010).

H5: Mayoral campaign winners will emphasize policy more, and character less, than losers in campaign web pages.

Although previous functional analyses of political communication have often probed how party affiliation influences message choices (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999), such a query is not warranted here. Most of the 2013 mayoral campaigns scrutinized here did not feature a traditional two-party standoff. As noted previously, Seattle's race featured two Democrats. The top two finishers in Houston's race were also Democrats. In other cities, such as Boston and Detroit, candidates ran as "non-partisan," listing no official party affiliation.

Method

This content analysis adopted the same sampling, coding, and analytic procedures used in previous functional analyses of political campaign web pages. The details of this methodology are presented below. Benoit (2014a, 2014b) presents a comprehensive explanation of all codebook procedures for those who wish to replicate these methods.

Sample

Using the U.S. Conference of Mayors website, researchers chose the corresponding mayoral elections from the six largest American cities that held mayoral elections on November 5, 2013. As a result, this study examines Boston, Charlotte, Detroit, Houston, New York, and Seattle. It is not uncommon for mayoral elections to feature more than just two candidates. Therefore, this study is limited to those candidates who earned more than 10% of the vote. The researchers accessed and archived all relevant mayoral campaign web pages on the evening of November 4, 2013. In total, an estimated 208 unique web pages were archived for this study. These web

> *Using the U.S. Conference of Mayors website, researchers chose the corresponding mayoral elections from the six largest American cities that held mayoral elections on November 5, 2013.*

pages were converted to portable document format and printed, resulting in an estimated 1,256 physical pages for analysis.

Coding Procedures

Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998) instructed, "No matter what content form an analyst selects to study, content must be reduced to units in order to measure it" (p.68). Accordingly, researchers began by unitizing the text of each web page according to themes, which typically range in length between one phrase and an entire paragraph of discourse. Benoit (2014b) explained, "a theme is the smallest unit of discourse capable of expressing a coherent idea" (p. 28). The 13 mayoral campaign web pages analyzed here were unitized into 6,046 unique themes.

Each theme was then coded according to its function. Candidates can *acclaim* a candidate's positive attributes, *attack* an opponent's negative attributes or *defend* a candidate against previous attacks. As Popkin (1994) wrote, "each campaign tries hard to make its side look better and the other side worse" (p. 232). Acclaims can increase a candidate's perceived benefits or advantages in an effort to make them appear preferable to opponents. Attacks on the other hand, attempt to decrease an opponent's relative advantages. Defenses refute a rival candidate's previous attacks, and may therefore reduce harm to a candidate. The inclusion of defenses is a major advantage of Functional Theory, as other methods of content analysis tend to ignore this function.

Next, themes were further classified according to topic (policy or character). Policy assertions address what a candidate *does*. Character assertions address who a candidate *is*. These topics can each be broken down into three subtopics. Policy discourse consists of messages regarding past deeds, future plans, and general goals. Character discourse consists of messages about personal qualities, leadership abilities, and ideals.

Three researchers coded the data. Intercoder reliability was determined using approximately 10% of the sample and calculated with Cohen's (1960) *Kappa*. *Kappa* was .79 for functions, .84 for topics, .93 for subtopics of policy, and .85 for subtopic of character discourse. In sum, these data have acceptable reliability. Landis and Koch (1977) indicate that a *Kappa* of .81 or greater reflects almost perfect agreement. A *Kappa* of .61 or higher suggests substantial agreement. The coders' high level of agreement, and the regularity with which the Functional codebook produces acceptable intercoder reliability, eliminated a need to reject or recode disparities in the coding process.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that 2013 mayoral candidates would acclaim more than they attack. Consistent with this expectation, candidates acclaimed in 93% of their messages. For instance, Detroit mayoral candidate Mike Duggan's website used an acclaim when it quoted a supporter as saying, "Mike is just a people person, and I love him." In 2013, mayoral candidates attacked in just 7% of their messages. Eric Dick, a

candidate for Mayor of Houston, used an attack when he wrote that incumbent mayor Anise Parker "has no respect for the citizens vote [sic.]." Finally, defenses were particularly rare in this body of discourse, totaling just 0.5% of the data. Boston candidate John Connolly's website included several defenses, including this one regarding his relationship with Boston's labor force:

> Labor PACs have leafleted the city with claims that Connolly does not understand working-class people. But Connolly, a father of three who grew up in Roslindale and earns roughly $100,000 per year…understands well enough.

A chi-square goodness of fit test confirmed the difference among these frequencies is statistically significant (χ^2 [df=2]=9,639.14, p<.0001). Frequency and proportion of functions for all candidates are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Functions of 2013 Mayoral Webpages

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Walsh	2029 (98%)	35 (2%)	0 (0%)
Connolly	341 (89%)	25 (7%)	16 (4%)
Boston Total	2370 (97%)	60 (2%)	16 (0.7%)
Cannon	75 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Peacock	168 (97%)	6 (3%)	0 (0%)
Charlotte Totals	243 (98%)	6 (2%)	0 (0%)
Duggan	318 (89%)	39 (11%)	0 (0%)
Napoleon	314 (99%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)
Detroit Totals	632 (94%)	41 (6%)	0 (0%)
Parker	202 (99%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
Hall	275 (54%)	220 (43%)	17 (3%)
Dick	52 (65%)	28 (35%)	0 (0%)
Houston Totals	529 (67%)	249 (31%)	17 (2%)
de Blasio	526 (98%)	13 (2%)	0 (0%)
Lhota	338 (89%)	40 (11%)	0 (0%)
New York Totals	864 (94%)	53 (6%)	0 (0%)
Murray	373 (98%)	8 (2%)	0 (0%)
McGinn	617 (99%)	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)
Seattle Totals	990 (99%)	9 (1%)	0 (0%)
TOTALS	5628 (93%)	418 (7%)	33 (0.5%)

The second hypothesis predicted that mayoral candidates would discuss policy more than character. The mayoral web pages studied here discussed policy in 71% of utterances and discussed character in 29% of messages. The website of incumbent candidate for Seattle Mayor, Mike McGinn, focused on policy when it boasted that he had, "increased road maintenance spending by 37% over 2010 levels." New York mayoral candidate Joe Lhota discussed his character by including a message on his website that noted, "Joe was born and raised in the Bronx to two hard-working parents." A chi-square goodness of fit

test affirmed the statistical significance of H2 (χ^2 [df=1]=1039.54, p<.0001). See Table 2 for data regarding topics.

RQ1 asked about the relative proportion of subtopics of policy discourse in 2013 mayoral campaign websites. Candidates spoke about general goals in 45% of their policy

Table 2. Topics of 2013 Mayoral Webpages

	Policy	Character
Walsh	1399 (68%)	665 (32%)
Connolly	158 (43%)	208 (57%)
Boston Totals	2421 (73%)	873 (27%)
Cannon	41 (55%)	34 (45%)
Peacock	44 (25%)	130 (75%)
Charlotte Totals	85 (34%)	164 (66%)
Duggan	310 (87%)	47 (13%)
Napoleon	270 (85%)	46 (15%)
Detroit Totals	580 (86%)	93 (14%)
Parker	130 (64%)	73 (34%)
Hall	258 (52%)	237 (48%)
Dick	23 (29%)	57 (71%)
Houston Totals	411 (53%)	367 (47%)
de Blasio	506 (94%)	33 (6%)
Lhota	302 (80%)	76 (20%)
New York Totals	808 (88%)	109 (12%)
Murray	257 (68%)	124 (32%)
McGinn	579 (94%)	33 (6%)
Seattle Totals	836 (84%)	163 (16%)
TOTALS	4277 (71%%)	1769 (29%)

utterances, past deeds in 29% of their policy utterances, and future plans in 26% of their policy utterances. These differences are statistically significant (χ^2 [df=2]=289.91, p<.0001). The website for Patrick Cannon, mayoral candidate for Charlotte, spoke of past deeds when it noted that in his role as mayor pro tem, Cannon "supported the one-half cent property tax reduction for taxpayers." Cannon's opponent, Edwin Peacock, discussed general goals in the following utterance: "Charlotte deserves a Mayor that will work with his Council to pass a capital plan that focuses on more effective spending and public-private partnerships, rather than relying on a property tax increase." Here, Peacock states a goal, but does not include specific information about reaching that goal. Note that New York candidate Bill de Blasio's website was more specific in the following utterance, which, therefore, counts as a future plans utterance:

> de Blasio will increase the city's income tax on earners over $500,000, from 3.86 percent to 4.41 percent. This five-year surcharge would yield $530 million in new

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revenue to pay for universal pre-K for all 4-year-olds and fund after-school programs for all middle school students.

This utterance is very particular about how much the tax increase would cost, how much revenue the tax increase would generate, and the education project on which that revenue would be spent. Table 3 includes topics of policy discourse from all campaigns studied here.

Table 3.
Subtopics of Policy in 2013 Mayoral Webpages

	Past Deeds		Future Plans		General Goals	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks
Walsh	251	24	388	2	734	0
		275 (20%)		390 (28%)		734 (52%)
Connolly	19	8	70	0	57	4
		27 (17%)		70 (44%)		61 (38%)
Bos. Total	270	32	458	2	791	4
		302 (19%)		460 (30%)		795 (51%)
Cannon	41	0	0	0	0	0
		41 (100%)		0 (0%)		0 (0%)
Peacock	3	3	0	0	38	0
		6 (14%)		0 (0%)		38 (86%)
Char. Total	44	3	0	0	38	0
		47 (55%)		0 (0%)		38 (44%)
Duggan	65	38	150	0	102	1
		103 (29%)		150 (42%)		103 (29%)
Napoleon	16	1	202	0	4	1
		17 (8%)		202 (90%)		5 (2%)
Det Total	81	39	352	0	106	2
		130 (22%)		352 (60%)		108 (18%)
Parker	100	1	9	0	20	0
		101 (78%)		9 (7%)		20 (15%)
Hall	3	85	83	7	59	21
		88 (34%)		90 (35%)		80 (31%)
Dick	2	13	1	0	6	1
		15 (65%)		1 (4%)		7 (30%)
Hou Total	118	99	93	7	85	22
		217 (51%)		100 (23%)		109 (26%)
de Blasio	132	12	91	0	270	1
		144 (28%)		91 (18%)		271 (53%)
Lhota	9	21	21	0	244	7
		30 (10%)		21 (7%)		251 (83%)
NY Total	141	33	112	0	514	8
		174 (21%)		112 (14%)		526 (65%)
McGinn	345	1	28	0	205	0
		346 (60%)		28 (5%)		205 (35%)
Murray	25	6	51	0	175	0
		31 (12%)		51 (20%)		175 (68%)
Sea Total	370	7	79	0	380	0
		377 (45%)		79 (9%)		380 (45%)
TOTAL	1024	213	1094	9	1914	36
		1237 (29%)		1103 (26%)		1950 (45%)

The second research question asked about the relative proportion of character utterances on mayoral campaign web pages. Differences among the three types of character discourse analyzed here were statistically significant (χ^2 [df=2]=89.11, p<.0001), as candidates discussed personal qualities in 38% of their character discourse, leadership abilities in 26% of their character utterances, and ideals in 37% of their character claims. Boston mayoral candidate Marty Walsh's website employed a personal qualities utterance when it bragged, "Marty understands what it's like to fall down and get back up." Ed Murray, a candidate for Seattle Mayor, attacked the incumbent mayor's leadership when he noted that many of Seattle's problems, "reflect failures of leadership at the top." An example of an ideals statement came from Houston mayoral candidate

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Table 4.
Subtopics of Character in 2013 Mayoral Webpages

	Personal Qualities		Leadership Abilities		Ideals	
	Acclaim	Attack	Acclaim	Attack	Acclaim	Attack
Walsh	169	3	193	1	294	5
	172 (26%)		194 (29%)		299 (45%)	
Connolly	72	7	66	5	57	1
	79 (38%)		71 (34%)		58 (28%)	
Bos. Total	241	10	259	6	351	6
	351 (36%)		264 (27%)		357 (37%)	
Cannon	31	0	2	0	1	0
	31 (91%)		2 (6%)		1 (3%)	
Peacock	89	0	7	3	31	0
	89 (68%)		10 (8%)		31 (24%)	
Char. Total	120	0	9	3	32	0
	120 (73%)		12 (7%)		32 (20%)	
Duggan	8	0	10	0	29	0
	8 (17%)		10 (21%)		29 (62%)	
Napoleon	27	0	4	0	15	0
	27 (59%)		4 (9%)		15 (33%)	
Det Total	35	0	14	0	44	0
	35 (38%)		14 (15%)		44 (47%)	
Parker	9	0	28	0	36	0
	9 (12%)		28 (38%)		36 (49%)	
Hall	38	52	34	47	58	8
	90 (38%)		81 (34%)		66 (28%)	
Dick	17	9	4	1	22	4
	25 (45%)		5 (9%)		26 (46%)	
Hou Total	64	61	66	48	116	12
	125 (34%)		114 (31%)		128 (35%)	
De Blasio	8	0	3	0	22	0
	8 (24%)		3 (9%)		22 (67%)	
Lhota	32	11	11	0	21	1
	43 (57%)		11 (14%)		22 (29%)	
NY Total	40	11	14	0	43	1
	51 (47%)		14 (13%)		44 (40%)	
McGinn	15	0	5	0	19	0
	15 (38%)		5 (13%)		19 (49%)	
Murray	67	0	30	2	25	0
	67 (54%)		32 (26%)		25 (20%)	
Sea Total	82	0	35	2	44	0
	82 (50%)		37 (23%)		44 (27%)	
TOTAL	582	82	397	59	630	19
	664 (38%)		456 (26%)		649 (37%)	

Ben Hall's website. The site said, "We applaud our respective heritages and are all made better by the great span of our cultures and diversity."

Only mayoral campaigns in which there was a true incumbent candidate could be used to address H3, which predicted that incumbent's web pages would be more positive than challengers' web pages. Therefore, the sample was limited to just Seattle and Houston, as all other elections examined here were for open seats. This narrowed sample consisted of 1,794 unique utterances, which was enough to generate a reliable calculation. Previous functional analyses have examined incumbent-challenger differences by using even fewer races and even fewer themes (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Based on the Seattle and Houston mayoral campaigns, H3 was confirmed. Incumbent candidates acclaimed more (99% to 72%), and attacked less (0.2% to 27%) than challengers on their 2013 campaign websites (χ^2 [df=1]=248.44, p<.0001). See Table 5 for more information about difference in functions of discourse between incumbents and challengers.

Table 5.
Functions of 2013 Mayoral Webpages According to Incumbency

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Incumbents	819 (99%)	2 (0.2%)	0 (0%)
Challengers	700 (72%)	256 (26%)	17 (2%)
TOTAL	1519 (85%)	258 (14%)	17 (1%)

H4 predicted incumbents would discuss policy more, and character less, than challengers. Calculating only the data from mayoral elections that featured a true incumbent, this hypothesis was confirmed (χ^2 [df=1]=189.53, p<.0001). Incumbents discussed policy more (86% to 56%) and character less (14% to 44%) than challengers in relevant 2013 mayoral campaign web pages. These data are presented in Table 6.

Table 6.
Topics of 2013 Mayoral Webpages According to Incumbency

	Policy	Character
Incumbents	709 (86%)	112 (14%)
Challengers	538 (56%)	418 (44%)
TOTALS	1247 (70%)	530 (30%)

RQ3 asked whether candidates who won mayoral elections used different message functions than those who lost elections. The winners of these elections were Marty Walsh (Boston), Patrick Cannon (Charlotte), Mike Duggan (Detroit), Anise Parker (Houston), Bill de Blasio (New York), and Ed Murray (Seattle). The losers were John Connolly (Boston), Edwin Peacock (Charlotte), Benny Napoleon (Detroit), Ben Hall (Houston), Eric Dick (Houston), Joe Lhota (New York), and Mike McGinn (Seattle). Winning candidates acclaimed significantly more than losing candidates (χ^2 [df=1]=252.69, p<.0001). A full comparison of the function results for winners and losers is presented in Table 7.

Table 7.
Functions of 2013 Mayoral Webpages According to Outcome

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Winners	3523 (97%)	96 (3%)	0 (0%)
Losers	2105 (86%)	322 (13%)	33 (1%)
TOTALS	5628 (93%)	418 (7%)	33 (0.5%)

The final hypothesis presented in this paper anticipated that winners and losers would focus on different topics on their web pages. This prediction was supported, as winners discussed policy significantly more than losers (χ^2 [df=1]=22.57, p<.0001). The topic data for winners and losers is presented in Table 8.

Table 8.
Topics of 2013 Mayoral Webpages According to Outcome

	Policy	Character
Winners	2643 (73%)	976 (27%)
Losers	1634 (67%)	793 (33%)
TOTALS	4277 (71%)	1769 (29%)

Discussion

Mayoral candidates and their campaign staffs are in complete control of the messages they post on their websites. Under these circumstances, messages on the mayoral candidates' sites are overwhelmingly positive. Occasionally they attack their opponent and very infrequently they defend themselves against prior attacks. One potential explanation for the emphasis on acclaims is that voters typically report that they do not like mudslinging (Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975). Therefore, candidates may try to

reduce any potential backlash by using mostly positive messages. In mayoral elections, such as those studied here, it makes sense candidates might perceive even greater negative consequences for sharply attacking members of their own community. The result is mayoral campaigns treat their websites as repositories of positive information about their candidate. This may be a wise choice, as it seems consistent with the needs and goals of voters who intentionally seek out information from candidates' websites. Still, attacks are present in this sample for the same reason they are present in other forms of campaign discourse; because candidates understand the necessity of highlighting their opponent's weaknesses.

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Defenses were very rare in the mayoral websites examined here.

Defenses were very rare in the mayoral websites examined here. Benoit (2014a) has outlined the numerous drawbacks of defenses. Defenses can take candidates off-message, forcing them to speak about topics on which they may not appear strong. Defensive messages also run the risk of reminding voters of candidates' perceived weaknesses. Finally, defenses can make a candidate look reactive rather than proactive. One final reason there were so few defenses in mayoral campaign web pages is because there were relatively few attacks (Benoit, 2007).

Incumbents discussed policy even more than challengers.

Incumbent candidates were even more likely to acclaim than challengers. The simple explanation for this finding is that their chances of re-election typically rest on their ability to remind voters of all the positive things they accomplished while in office. Conversely, challengers must devote more time, energy, and space on their websites to attack an incumbent's record and convince voters they need a change in leadership. Another notable finding related to the function of political discourse is winners acclaimed more than losers. This, of course, is not to say those candidates won because they acclaimed more. In fact, it is just as likely these candidates acclaimed more because polling data informed them they had a lead on their opponent and, therefore, did not have to risk attacking their opponent.

Policy was more prevalent than character in the mayoral web pages analyzed here.

Policy was more prevalent than character in the mayoral web pages analyzed here. These findings are consistent with previous functional analyses of messages from other media and at other levels of political office (Benoit 2014a; Benoit, 2014b; Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt, 2010; Benoit & Stein, 2005). However, the sharp division between spaces for discussing character and policy makes campaign websites unique. On the web, candidates often save the bulk of their character claims for the biographical sections of their respective websites, including information about where they grew up, whom they married, and where they went to college. Political issues, such as education policy, traffic safety, or parks and recreation, typically receive attention in separate sections of the websites.

Perhaps more than other forms of political communication, websites demand clear and cogent organizational schemes.

This division of individual political issues into unique subsections of a website follows current design principles to reduce the amount of thought users need to employ to find the specific content for which they are searching (Krug, 2014). Designing for mobile devices encourages a reduction in the amount of copy on a site, which allows voters to engage with issues one at a time or only attend to the issues that interest them most. Interestingly, on every mayoral campaign website analyzed here, there were more subpages dedicated to issues than to biography, which partially explains the relative proportions of policy to character discourse. Such designs indicate candidate's preference to discuss their policy plans rather than their character.

Incumbents discussed policy even more than challengers. This is probably because time spent in office presents candidates with policy achievements to boast about during their re-election campaigns. This communication strategy is consistent with theories of retrospective voting, which suggest citizens make voting decisions based on what candidates have done in the past (Popkin, 1994). It is more difficult for challengers to talk about policy because they do not have a record in the office they are seeking. Winning candidates discussed policy more and character less than losing candidates. Bill de Blasio's successful bid for mayor of New York City and Marty Walsh's winning campaign for chief executive of Boston provide excellent examples of effective campaigns that produced copious amounts of policy-themed campaign discourse on a laundry list of different political issues, for the web. Campaign websites do a particularly good job of providing spaces where candidates can address low profile political issues that are important to just a handful of citizens. This is a major advantage of campaign websites over television ads, which tend to be more expensive and must therefore speak to a wide range of voters. These results are consistent with previous functional analyses of campaign discourse (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007).

Despite incumbent candidates' reliance on past deeds messages, general goals utterances were the most common form of policy discourse in mayoral campaign web pages. There are several explanations for this. First, general goals utterances are more common than future plans because they require less effort for campaigns to construct. In fact, campaigns may have little incentive to detail their future plans because policy initiatives often sound better to voters when the details of achieving them are not discussed. For instance, a majority of voters would probably agree with the general goal of improving education. However, a specific plan to improve education by allocating funds for ten new charter schools would likely receive less support. Despite a relative lack of limits on how much policy detail campaigns can include on the web, politicians still prefer to keep their utterances general. Another reason general goals are more common on these web pages than past deeds is because most candidates studied here were not incumbents. Only two candidates studied here had relevant past deeds to discuss.

Where subtopic of character discourse is concerned, personal qualities was the most common form of utterance. Websites provide a unique opportunity to discuss personal qualities that would seem strange if introduced in other campaign media. For instance, it seems unlikely that Edwin Peacock of Charlotte would have found a way to mention that his favorite movie is "Casino Royale, the 2006 Daniel Craig version of James Bond" during a political ad or a televised debate, but the statement appeared on his website. Despite the emphasis on personal qualities, there were substantial numbers of both leadership abilities utterances and statements about ideals. Overall, the difference among these three categories was statistically significant, but relative to other media, and other campaigns, the distribution of subtopics of character discourse was relatively balanced (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 2000; Benoit & Henson, 2009; Brazeal & Benoit, 2001).

The results discussed here extend the applicability of Functional Theory to campaign situations that had not yet been studied. Local political campaigns appear to be much different than national campaigns. Mayoral candidates must appeal to different audiences, address different issues, and work within a very different media environment than presidential candidates. The fact that mayoral candidates often run for office without declaring their political party affiliation would also seem to make local campaigns unique. However, despite the apparent differences between local and national campaigns, the content of mayoral campaign web pages is relatively similar to that of presidential campaign web pages. The basic patterns identified in the discourse of presidential candidates' websites were also present in the discourse of mayoral candidates' websites.

Conclusion

This essay has successfully filled several troubling gaps in the research concerning mayoral campaign messages. More specifically, this study addressed a lack of research about mayoral campaign messages and a lack of research about campaign websites. The 2013 mayoral web pages examined here exhibit important similarities to web pages from campaigns for other levels of elected office. Like presidential candidates, mayoral candidates' websites were mostly positive and focused primarily on political issues rather than character concerns. Consistent with previous functional analyses, this study also revealed that incumbent mayoral candidates acclaim more and discuss policy more, than challenger candidates. Similarly, winning mayoral candidates were found to acclaim more and discuss policy more than losing candidates.

Winning mayoral candidates were found to acclaim more and discuss policy more than losing candidates.

With the exception of results related to the subtopics of policy and character, which are notably less predictable, this analysis has found the content of mayoral campaign web pages to be very similar to that of campaign web pages for presidential candidates. In other words, this study offers support for the

Functional Theory of Political Campaign Communication. Despite apparent differences between local and national campaigns, candidates used their websites very similarly.

Given the importance of policy discourse on mayoral campaign websites, this area deserves more attention from scholars of political communication. For instance, researchers should systematically examine the particular policy topics that are covered on mayoral websites. Until then, we can only speculate that local campaigns address different political issues than presidential, gubernatorial, or congressional campaigns. Attention to specific political issues would also be useful for determining how closely local candidates' platforms match the public's agenda. Information about the specific issues that local politicians choose to discuss may be of additional interest in contests where those politicians are not required or not permitted to identify their party affiliation. A final suggestion for future study of mayoral websites relates to how they work, rather than what they say. Studies of the interactivity of local campaign websites could present very useful information about how new media engages voters in ways that other political media forms do not or cannot.

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